

## The Island

Emma Harris

Mo tucks her orange backpack in beside the pohutukawa's gnarled trunk. Stripping down to her faded blue togs that bag at the bum, she dives straight into the glittering sea. At last - her daily tonic for her daily hangover. With toes skyward and eyes closed, her breathing soon matches the sea's own rhythm; lulling her into a weightless, dreamy state. Juliet's cherub face floats above her. She looks older somehow, more like eight than six; her green eyes now brown, her curly hair now straight and black.

'Who's Juliet?'

"What?" Mo snaps upright. Chest deep in the water stands a thin, red togged girl.

'My names not Juliet, it's Hana.'

Mo rubs water from her face, 'Where did you come from?'

'My Nan's.' Hana nods vaguely towards a line of flax bushes at the far end of the bay.

'She lets you come to the beach by yourself?'

'As long as I don't go in the water alone.' She shrugs, smiling up at Mo's frowning face,

'What? I'm not alone, you're here.'

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She doesn't see the girl running down the beach. She's too busy watching a school of tiny, silver fish darting over the sea's sandy bottom. Only when they scatter helter-skelter does she look up. Hana, red togs painted on, splashing over the waves like a Labrador puppy. 'Hey!

What are you doing?'

'Nothing. Why aren't you at school?'

'Teacher only day. Yes!' Hana punches the air. Scowling, Mo dives under; resurfacing to find the girl has followed her.

'Do you mind?' Mo says.

'Mind what?'

‘Forget it.’ Mo floats on her back, eyes closed.

‘Hey, can you do handstands in the water? I can, watch me.’

Mo opens one eye. Two bamboo-pole legs spear the water’s surface, ten small toes point to the sky. Seconds later the girl’s grinning face bursts out of the sea, glistening wet. ‘How’d I do?’

‘Not bad. You could have been straighter.’

Hana scowls. ‘No, I couldn’t.’

‘If you knew you were straight then why’d you ask me?’

‘Why did you say I wasn’t then?’

‘Are you always so annoying?’

Hana giggles. ‘Nan says it’s my superpower. Do you have any superpowers?’

Mo shakes her head.

‘You must have one.’

Mo’s mind goes to her stash of vodka under the kitchen sink.

‘I guess I’m pretty good at making bad stuff disappear.’

‘How?’

‘I kind of wash it away.’

‘Like in the sea?’

‘Something like that.’

Hana smacks her palms thoughtfully on the sea’s flat surface. ‘Hey guess what? I’ve got two friends now.’

‘Yeah?’ Mo eyes flick to the comforting bulk of her backpack under her tree.

‘Rhea is my new best school friend and you’re my new best beach friend.’

‘You still talking?’ Mo wades towards shore, Hana follows, snapping her knees high over the small waves.

‘Rhea has this birthmark on her face. It’s kinda the shape of Australia, so the kids in my class call her Ozzie.’ Hana jogs beside Mo up the sloping beach.

‘That’s nice.’

‘It’s not nice, it’s mean! Rhea hates it!’

Mo shrugs, unzips her full backpack, takes out a towel and a stainless-steel drink bottle. She takes a long draw of vodka, wipes her mouth, wraps her towel around her waist and lifts her pack over her shoulder.

‘You haven’t even told me your name.’ Hana pouts.

‘It’s Mo.’ She pushes her feet into her jandals.

‘Bye Mo!’ Hana calls out as Mo disappears over the dunes. Mo doesn’t turn around.

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Juliet’s ninth birthday is spent in bed, under her daughter’s Dora the Explorer duvet. Mo ups her meds by a half and then another. She contemplates swallowing the lot.

She wakes the next day to the rancid smell of vomit, a cracking headache and an empty vodka bottle on the floor. Biliious hours later, Mo finds herself blinking in the wind and glare of a slate grey sky. She ducks under the pohutukawa to hide her backpack. Only when she is fully submerged in the frothing ocean does the jack hammer in her head quieten.

‘Hey Mo!’ Hana swims straight out to her through the chop with neat little strokes.

‘You wagging?’

‘It’s Easter holidays silly!’

Mo scowls at the thought of holiday makers.

‘Hey, watch me do a star-fish.’ Hana spreadeagles, her hair floating kelp. ‘Did I tell you Rhea is coming for a sleepover?’

‘You tell me a lot of things.’ The churning water is making Mo seasick.

‘She’s coming over tomorrow. Mo, watch!’ Hana back flips, her sharp hip-bones jutting out of the water. ‘Hey Mo, where are you going?’

‘Look kid can you just bugger off?’

‘Why?’

‘Because I said so. I’m going in.’ Mo pushes against the outgoing soup. Up ahead on the beach, a blue hatted old man and a young bearded hipster walk slowly; deep in conversation.

‘Bloody tourists,’ Mo treads water, impatient for them to pass. Behind her, she can hear Hana calling her. When Mo leaves the buoyancy of the sea, the heaviness of her body hits her like a familiar depression.

Wrapped in her towel, the vodka hitting her bloodstream Mo feels almost normal. Suddenly there is shouting down by the shoreline. Hipster man is wading into the surf after someone. Hana. Mo tries to run but her legs refuse to carry her forward. She drops like a stone onto the cold sand. With ragged breaths she draws her knees up under her chin, makes herself as small as possible; closing her eyes to whatever horror is to come.

‘Mo?’ A dripping Hana stands over her, watery snot streaming from her nose. ‘Why’d you leave me?!’

‘I couldn’t...’

‘Why didn’t you wait for me?!’

‘I don’t know... I’m sorry. Did the man... rescue you?’

‘He didn’t *rescue* me, he just helped me a bit.’ Hana’s blue lips tremble. ‘I thought you were my friend Mo, but you’re not. You’re just mean.’

‘Hana. Please. Wait.’ Mo unzips her bag, takes out a rolled-up beach towel. She unrolls it, taking out the pink ceramic urn nestled inside. Without looking at Hana she puts the pottery back in her pack. She stands, holding the towel out wide. Hana glares silently at Mo before allowing herself to be enveloped in its thick cotton.

‘You ok?’ Mo asks. Hana nods, teeth chattering. Mo sits, pulling Hana in close beside her.

‘Fuck here we go.’ She’s spotted blue hat man walking towards them.

‘Hey aren’t you...?’ He points an arthritic finger at Mo.

‘Responsible for this child? No, I don’t even know her.’

Hana scowls.

‘I’m kidding.’ Mo softly nudges her. The man steps closer so the black hairs sprouting from the top of his white toes are visible. ‘Mo. I thought it was you. It’s me Bob. We used to be neighbours? I didn’t know you still lived on the island. I haven’t seen you since little Juliet....’ He breaks off, looks up at the squally sky.

‘She keeps Juliet in here.’ Hana points to the urn’s pink lid.

‘How the fuck do you know that?’ says Mo hastily zipping up her bag.

‘I’ve got eyes, haven’t I?’ Hana replies, ‘Its ok. Nan keeps Grandad in one on the mantelpiece too.’

Bob gives Mo a small smile. She remembers now. His wife Mary left a couple of meals on her porch after Juliet’s funeral. There’s a Crown Lynn dish belonging to them still in her cupboard.

‘How’s Mary?’

‘She died a year ago.’ The man digs his hairy toes into the soft sand. ‘My grandson Tom has come over for her anniversary.’ He falls silent for a moment, ‘Well, best get on before the rain comes. I’ll be seeing you.’ He turns to leave just as the first fat rain drops batter the sand.

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Hana is running towards her through the shimmering heat; her thin brown arms waving wildly.

‘It didn’t work!’ She plonks down breathlessly beside Mo sitting under the pohutukawa.

‘What didn’t?’

‘The sea. We tried washing Rhea’s birthmark away but it didn’t work.’

‘Aye?’

‘You said the sea could wash bad stuff away.’

‘No, I don’t think....’

Yes, you did.’ the girl nods vigorously.

They stare out to sea in silence for a moment.

‘She’s probably not going to get rid of it is she?’ The girl’s brown eyes bore into Mo’s. Mo shakes her head.

‘My Nan says you have to just accept things as they are and move on.’

‘She sounds wise your Nan.’

They look out to sea again.

Hana jumps up, ‘I can do ace cartwheels. Can you do cartwheels, Mo?’

Hana rotates in a series of fast spins along the beach. She races back, drops at Mo’s feet.

‘How’d I do?’

‘Not bad.’

Hana’s face falls.

No, I’m kidding. You did great.’

‘Really?’

‘Really.’

Hana grins her whole face grin.

Mo stands up. ‘So come on then kid, show me how to ace this cartwheel.’ She brushes the fine sand off her baggy backside and walks out from the tree’s shade into the sunlight.