

Thinking up a Hurricane

Martinique Stilwell

STLMAR011

A dissertation in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of
Master of Arts in Creative Writing.

Faculty of Humanities

University of Cape Town

2009

Declaration:

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signature

Signed by candidate

Date

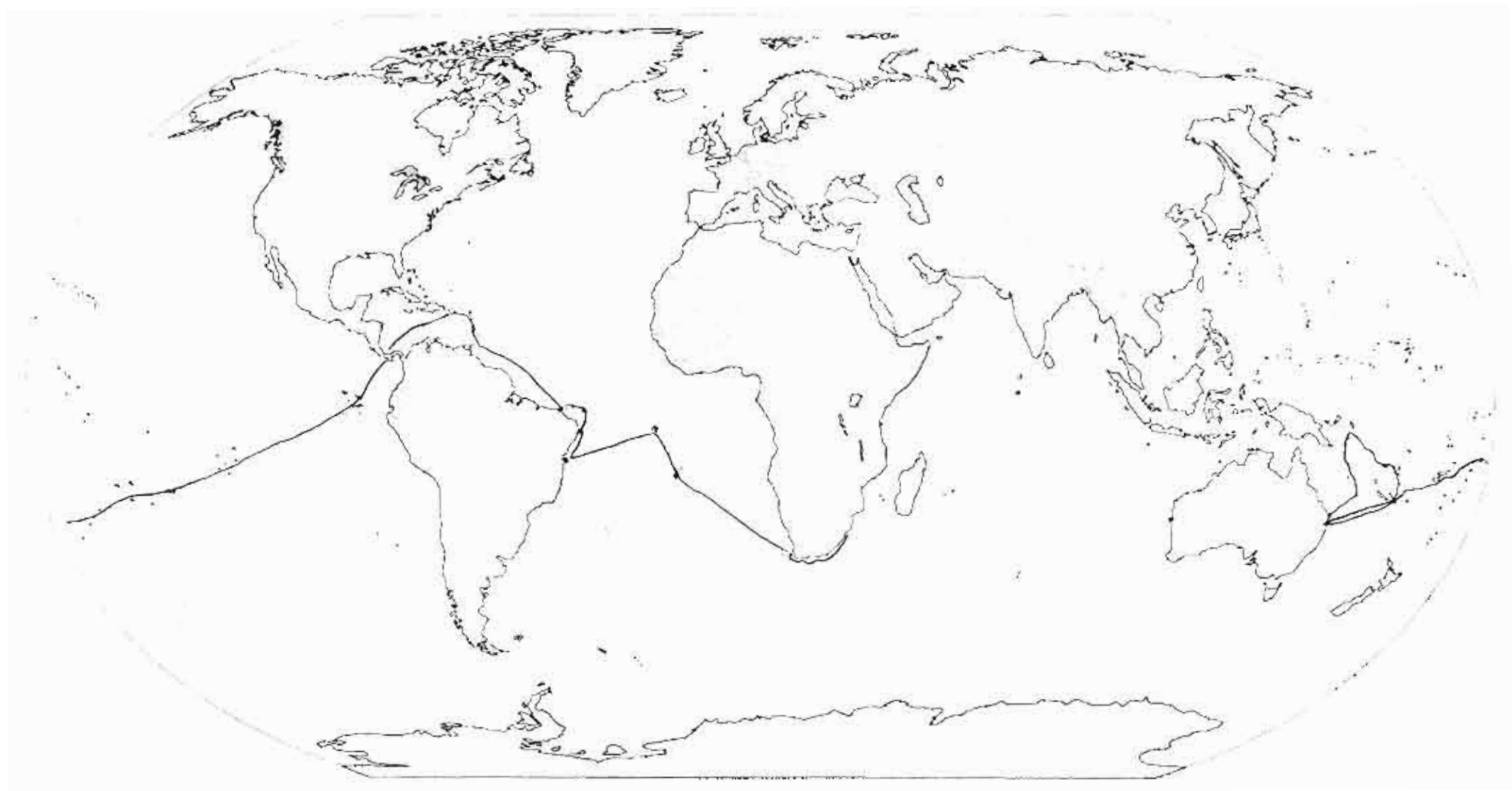
4/2/2010

The copyright of this thesis vests in the author. No quotation from it or information derived from it is to be published without full acknowledgement of the source. The thesis is to be used for private study or non-commercial research purposes only.

Published by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in terms of the non-exclusive license granted to UCT by the author.

Contents

Part 1 South Africa	Ch 1 Alberton.....	4
	Ch 2 Benoni.....	15
	Ch 3 Durban.....	26
	Ch 4 Cape of Storms.....	40
Part 2 Atlantic	Ch5 Cape Town.....	57
	Ch 6 St Helena.....	73
	Ch 7 Ascension.....	87
	Ch 8 Salvador.....	100
	Ch 9 Brazil.....	111
	Ch 10 Doldrums.....	122
Part 3 Caribbean	Ch 11 Caribbean.....	140
	Ch 12 Panama.....	162
Part 4 Pacific Ocean	Ch 13 Ecuador.....	178
	Ch 14 Tahiti.....	196
	Ch 15 Society Islands.....	227
	Ch 16 Penrhyn.....	236
	Ch 17 Suwarrow.....	251
	Ch 18 Samoa.....	274
Part 5 Coral Sea	Ch 19 Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands.....	283
	Ch 20 Coral Sea.....	306
Part 6 South Africa	Ch 21 Alberton.....	330



Part 1

South Africa

Chapter 1

Alberton

During the days before I was admitted to hospital I lay on my old bed in Nana's house with my eyes closed and a jack-hammer pounding in my head. Dreams swirled in and out of my drifting consciousness. I felt my hands swell to enormous proportions, filling the room, and then my teeth grew. My jaw extended beyond the foot of the bed, gigantic – but strangely light, the cusp of each tooth rising as if it were filled with the breath of hot-air balloons. Then my body floated off the bed, enormous and weightless. My old dolls, remnants of my childhood tended so carefully by Nana, rose from the spare bed to hover alongside me. They bobbed in unseen currents, their frilled dresses and frocks – hand sewn by my grandmother – shimmering and waving as if they were underwater. It would have been peaceful if wasn't for the anvil in my head.

'You really must try to pull yourself together,' my mother said, coming into the room and forcing me to sit up. Above the rims of her glasses I saw, from a great distance, that her habitual frown had deepened. Her cousin was visiting for tea.

'Omnia will think you're rude,' she said, 'try to get up, please.'

When my feet touched the floor, my legs crumpled and swirly amoebae danced across my vision. I sank beside the bed and buried my face in the hanging sheets, tears sliding down my cheeks. Mom sighed and pushed her glasses back onto the bridge of her nose. She was thin and her skin still bore traces of a Coral Sea suntan almost three months old. The bruises, though, had faded.

'Oh be like that then, if you have to,' she said.

She helped me back into bed and left me alone. I closed my eyes to find myself at sea. We were becalmed beneath a hot, tropical sun. Its rays reflected off smooth-skinned waves, through thickening air. The yacht plunged and wallowed, and the movements of my breath began melting into the motion of the water, a ponderous, sickening roil. Then the boat, the ocean and my respiration fused into a slowly rotating ball. I felt my skin turn black. I opened my eyes to find, with faint surprise, that I was in a bed in Nana's house and my arms were still their old putty colour and freckled, but with new lemon tones beneath the tan.

After a while I heard the sounds of Omnia leaving. My mother's voice drifted down the passage.

'Sorry you didn't see more of Nicky, I don't know what's got into her.'

The principal of my new school, Alberton High, knew what had gotten into me. This was 1984 in South Africa, and for some people things were still very clear. A few days earlier I had presented myself to his office with reports of a headache, shivering and blue finger nails. I felt awful, I said, and I wanted to go home.

He looked at me sadly, shaking his head. I'd been in school for less than two months.

'You know what your trouble is my girl, don't you?'

I squinted at him through light which had suddenly and unaccountably grown brighter. He was bald, with a pink face and white hairs growing out of his ears. He looked as if he should be friendly, but he wasn't. The objects in the room receded and his voice reached me as if from the bottom of a jar.

'My girl,' he said, 'your trouble is that you're just not used to having walls around you for a change.'

When I got home, my grandmother suggested I see a doctor. She had great faith in doctors and called her GP. The receptionist told us he was fully booked although they could squeeze me in with somebody else, if I was prepared to wait. I tried to remember when last I'd seen a doctor. There had been one in the Marquesas Islands when I was 11 and skin peeled off my hands in layers, and then another time when I went to the clinic in Australia, complaining of infected sores before they found out we were illegal and asked us leave. Two doctors in seven years and now, possibly, a third. Dad thought doctors were a waste of time. Either they weren't around or they were too expensive, he said, and usually they didn't know what they were doing. A dentist, at least, could take a tooth out.

Mom drove me to the surgery in Nana's brown beetle, the car my grandmother had owned since my twin brother and I were small enough to fit in its dog-box together. Now when my mother opened the door I wasn't sure I would fit in the front seat, my head had grown so enormous and buoyant. I folded myself origami-like, body parts shrinking and expanding, to collapse on the seat. My mother started the car and it hummed like an angry insect, the buzz penetrating my eardrums to ricochet around inside my throbbing head. Each time we took a corner it felt as if my brain shifted in my skull. I wanted to fly out the window and escape into the sky and I had started to believe it was almost possible when my mother stopped the car and announced that we had arrived.

While I wobbled on unreliable legs, a receptionist wrote my name in a book and then ushered us into a waiting room filled with beige chairs and broken magazines. Although it was summer, the place was packed with people, most of them coughing and blowing their noses into paper handkerchiefs. They looked up at our entrance and examined us with dull, expressionless faces. We found seats and waited. After a while my head drooped and dark-

ness encroached on my vision. Conversation advanced and receded around me like waves breaking on a beach. A paralysing fatigue crept up my limbs. When the pot plant in the corner reached through the murk with a curling tendril, I asked Mom if I could lie down in the car. Stumbling outside I collapsed across the back seat. My mother woke me about an hour later.

‘Quick,’ she said, ‘come on, it’s your turn now.’

The chills had vanished after my nap, along with much of the headache, but I felt tremulous and exhausted. My cheeks flamed. When I closed my eyes I saw the ocean simmering beneath a burning sun. I stepped cautiously into the building over liquified ground.

The doctor was a big man with thick fingers and rolls of skin on the back of his neck. A smouldering cigarette protruded from fleshy lips and the quartz ashtray on his desk was filled to capacity. He took a drag and exhaled, squinting through the smoke as I told him my story. Every second day, I said, I started shivering. My nails turned blue. I had headaches and I had vomited. There were pains in my legs. I’d been in a malaria area some months back, and had taken prophylaxis. His smoke stung my eyes.

‘So,’ he said, ‘do you have a sore throat?’

‘No.’

‘Runny nose?’

‘No.’

‘Cough?’

‘No.’

‘Oh well,’ he sighed and took another drag of his cigarette, ‘I suppose flu affects different people in different ways.’

He lifted the ashtray to reach for his script pad.

'Here,' he said, 'take these antibiotics. You can pay at the door, thanks.'

He did not get up.

The following day I said to my mother.

'My pee looks like Coca-Cola.'

'Ag,' she said, 'it's probably the antibiotics.'

She was about to return to Australia where her poodle Pepe waited for her on the yacht with my brother and father.

'Why don't you come back with me?' she said. 'You can do correspondence school. At least you'll be with us there. Go to high school later.'

I shook my head. Going back to Australia would be an admission of failure. I couldn't do it. I would stay with my grandmother and go to Alberton High School where the principal believed that I needed to grow more accustomed to walls.

I overheard my mother talking to Nana. 'What if Nicky's putting this whole thing on,' she said, 'to make me feel guilty about leaving?'

I couldn't eat. My urine darkened even more.

'I'm getting worried about Nicky,' Nana said the next day, 'phone the doctor again.'

Mom called the GP who had seen me.

'Listen,' she said, 'I think my daughter's got malaria.'

'Take her for a test then, if you want,' he replied.

I pictured smoke curling over the telephone's mouthpiece as he spoke and imagined the smell of stale breath and greasy plastic and dead cigarettes.

The pathology service office was a subterranean cave at the end of a winding passage beneath the local private hospital. There were no windows for light, only a single fluorescent strip which cast a pall on the pair of slovenly attendants.

'You look pale,' one of them said as she placed a tourniquet languidly around my arm. I blinked to stop her face wavering. She screwed a needle into a clear plastic barrel. Slipped in a glass tube. Uncapped the needle.

Her voice, and dim contours of the cave, blurred into the imaginary. The steel needle tip piercing my skin drew me back to reality, but the connection felt tenuous. I watched dark blood spray and bubble into the glass tube.

'Malaria test, eh?' the attendant said to my mother.

Mom nodded.

'We don't see a positive often.'

The sting intensified to a burn as she withdrew the needle from my vein.

'Here,' she said, applying a puff of cotton to my inner elbow, 'push on this. Somebody will call you with the result.'

Blood stained the cotton red. My hands were trembling so much I couldn't hold it properly.

Over the weekend, my mother said she thought I looked better.

'I believe you can go back to school on Monday,' she said.

My shivering and headaches had eased and I felt too weak to argue. We hadn't heard anything from the lab.

Monday morning at school, a group of girls in my new class looked me over with detached curiosity.

'You're so thin,' said one.

'Ja,' said another, 'and so pale. What's wrong with you?'

They regarded me for a moment as if I were somehow unclean, before turning their backs to reform a small, tight group. I sat on my bag, waiting for the bell and listening to exclusionary giggles bubble over their shoulders. The day stretched out elastically. I walked from class to class watching teachers move their lips as they chalked incomprehensible symbols on blackboards. After several years the bell rang, signalling the end of lessons, and I prepared to walk home. That morning Nana had driven me to school against my mother's wishes. She had also wanted to pick me up again afterwards but Mom said no, a walk would do me good and strengthen me up. I picked up my bag which had grown incrementally heavier since the morning, and I made for the school gate. Take it slowly, I thought, you'll be okay. The air was humid with an impending thunderstorm, the grass vivid against patches of exposed orange earth. The distance home seemed immense. Slowly, I mumbled, slowly.

Outside the school, I saw my grandmother's beetle. The driver's door burst open and she trotted over on stumpy legs.

'Your test results are back,' she said, 'the lab lost them, that's why it took so long. They confused your first name with your last and filed you under Martinique.'

Leaning against the car for support, her words swam across turbid air.

'Your test's positive. You've got malaria and the doctor wants to see you right away.'

'The same doctor who saw me last time?'

'No, not him. My usual one. You'll like him, he's very nice. Come on, jump in. We'll pick up your mother on the way.'

At the surgery, the receptionist ushered Mom and me past the choked waiting area, directly into a consulting room where another doctor sat smoking. When we entered, he stubbed out his cigarette.

‘So,’ he said, ‘what have we got here?’

I lay on the examination couch with my school dress pulled above my waist. He stuck a thermometer under my tongue and kneaded my abdomen.

‘Any headaches?’ he asked.

I nodded.

‘Shivering?’

‘Yes.’

‘Fever?’

‘Yes.’

‘Dark urine?’

‘Not anymore.’

He turned to my mother.

‘I see you don’t have medical aid.’

‘No we don’t. We never expected anything like this.’

‘She needs admission. I know an infectious disease expert in Rietfontein, he’s very good. It’s a government hospital but a good one. I’ll give him a bell and we’ll see what we can do.’

I slumped in my chair as he dialled. Malaria was bad, wasn’t it? I had heard that people died from malaria. I thought about dying and wondered if I should feel shocked, or

scared. All I felt was tired. I looked at the certificates on the wall behind his desk. There weren't many. From the waiting room came the faint sound of coughing.

'Get Dr Murray at Rietfontein Fever hospital on the line, please.'

While he waited, the GP doodled on a pad bearing the picture of a bloated frog with a straw in its mouth. Through my stupor I thought the upside-down words spelled 'Spasmocanulase'. Could that be right, I wondered. Why would anyone call a medicine Spasmocanulase, and what could it possibly be used for. It sounded more mechanical than medicinal.

'Hello, is that Dr Murray? Look I'm a GP phoning from Alberton. Yes, Alberton, on the East Rand and I've got a little girlie here, about 14,'

Mom shook her head at him and mouthed 16.

'Sorry, 16. Small for her age. Anyway, her malaria smear's come back positive.'

Silence.

Then, 'From last week.'

The voice of infectious disease specialist buzzed in the receiver like a trapped wasp. The GP rubbed his temples with his non-doodling hand.

'Yes, I know,' he said, 'the lab lost the result. Most unfortunate. She's with me now though. Very anaemic. Splenomegaly and a little bit of a liver. Low grade fever. No medical aid. Think you can you see her? Thanks very much. I'll send her over. You'll wait? Good, I'll tell them to get a move on.'

He put down the phone. 'He'll see you today.'

'Where is he?'

'At the fever hospital, Rietfontein. I'll draw a map.'

When we got home Mom talked to Nana while I lay on the couch. Its cushions, covered in thick, granular fabric, seemed to be growing.

'She'll need pyjamas,' my grandmother said, 'I've noticed that since she came from the yacht, I haven't seen any.'

I opened my eyes, fighting against the couch which was trying to swallow me, its cushion a giant sucker, rough as the underside of a sea cucumber. I closed my eyes, prepared to be consumed.

'Wake up, Nicky,' Mom said. 'Come on, sit up. Pay attention.'

I opened my eyes with considerable effort. 'I don't own any pyjamas, Nan. I sleep in my T-shirt.'

'That old T-shirt with the holes in it? You can't wear that and a pair of pathetic panties in hospital, little girl. What are the doctors going to think? That you're some poor orphan annie, that's what. They're going to laugh at you.'

She glared at Mom.

'Doesn't Chummy have an old pair we can borrow?' my mother said. She didn't own pyjamas either; none of our family did. For hospital though, it looked as if they were compulsory. We searched my grandfather Chummy's cupboard. Nana's wardrobe wasn't an option, she was much shorter than me, and very heavy in the thigh and bosom. Besides, she wore pink frilly nighties which I would rather have died than worn. We found a suitable pair of faded blue pyjamas.

'He hasn't worn these for years.'

I tried them on, pulling in the drawstring at the waist. They flapped around my skinny limbs.

'You've lost weight,' Mom said. 'If they didn't have a drawstring, those pants would fall off.'

'Nan's scale read 43 kilo's this morning,' I said, 'four less than normal.'

'What about slippers?' Nana said.

'Nicky doesn't have any,' Mom said. 'She'll just have to wear slops.'

Chapter 2

Benoni

I didn't want my dad to buy *Vingila*. When we first saw her, she smelled bad, like mushrooms in a cardboard box. Her hatches and portholes were covered by a tarpaulin that blocked the light below decks and turned us all to ghosts as we explored her cabins. She was painted old swimming pool blue and her decks had been sprinkled with sand and coated with epoxy to create a cheap non-slip surface. Her scuppers wept rust. Later I learned that she had terrible lines: her prow was stubby and far too high, her stern too broad. Her cabin-top sat clumsily on her decks, perforated by three windows of milky plexi-glass.

A photographer named Vincent, with a dream to circumnavigate the world, built her and named her after his three children: Vinca, Gita and Lars. Perhaps the attention he lavished on the boat had led to the breakdown of his marriage but after the lawyers had settled, Vincent's ex-wife had a yacht to sell.

The evening after we went to inspect *Vingila*, my mother asked me if we should buy the boat. I was seven years old and in grade two at the time.

'No, I don't want it,' I said.

'Why not?'

'I don't like the washbasin.'

'You don't like the washbasin? Why not?'

The basin filled me with horror. It was turquoise, and lumpy with dried globs of dusty glue that ran and oozed like worms working their way up from the outflow. Just looking at it

induced a surge of nausea and the texture of rough bumps on smooth porcelain took me back to bilious dreams of fevers and tonsillitis. I tried to explain this to my mother.

‘The washbasin’s so dirty,’ I said, ‘it makes me feel funny.’

‘I tell you what,’ she said, for my father had already bought *Vingila*, ‘when we get the boat you clean the basin, all right?.’

My father’s friend Charlie Kingma had found *Vingila* in the classified ads, but she wasn’t Dad’s first choice. He wanted a Hinckley, a yacht he had seen in the magazines cluttering our house. Hinckleys were sleek vessels, thoroughbreds with racing lines, gleaming white topsides and decks of caulked teak. But they came from America and were beyond the reach of a Benoni electrician. There were yachts to be found closer to home. People, fearing the end of apartheid and South Africa’s imminent collapse, were building ferro-cement boats in their back yards. Dad didn’t want a hull of what he called concrete. Although they were inexpensive and easy to make, he said they were ugly and weak. He wanted style and strength in a boat and if he couldn’t afford both, he’d choose strength. So for him it was a Hinckley, or steel, or nothing. Steel boats were scarce, but Dad was good with his hands; he could weld and fix almost anything with the contents of his toolbox and he was seriously considering building a yacht of his own when Charlie phoned him one weekend to tell us he’d found the right boat.

*

Charlie and Trish, my parents’ friends, were going sailing with us. They had pageboy hairstyles like Purdy from *The Avengers* and they dressed in matching outfits which Trish laid out every morning. Charlie, with a wide smile and a gap between his front teeth, was big, and the outline of his underpants showed through the seat of his pale slacks. Trish blow-

dried his hair for him. They had no children or pets and their house was decorated with fluffy white carpets and vases of pampas grass. Charlie was so artistic, my mother said, that he had made the coffee table from a glass door which he painted green. After he came back from an army camp one year, he carved my brother a faultless replica of an R1 service rifle from pinewood and stained it black. Each time Robert went on the street with it, Mom received calls from the neighbours warning her that her son was in possession of a firearm.

Trish had an orange fondue pot and a lava lamp. We had nothing like that in our house. We had dogs. The linoleum in our kitchen was cracked and the carpet tiles covering the remainder of the floors were a shade of brown that Mom said didn't show dirt. My mother had bought the tiles on special and had laid them herself. They were so scratchy that even the most minor of falls in the passage resulted in carpet burns and oozing abrasions. I felt so unsuited to my surroundings I often wondered if I was adopted. I pictured my real parents as slick and stylish with a house full of lava lamps and fluffy carpets.

My father first met Charlie in the reception room of the local foundry. Ignoring the calendars with their pictures of girls in bikinis advertising ball bearings and heavy machinery, they focused instead on the marine equivalent: a photograph of a white yacht flying a spinnaker across an impossibly blue sea. The minutes passed. My father cracked.

'See that?' he said, pointing a grime ingrained finger at the yacht. 'I'm going to have one of those someday.'

Charlie, a sales rep in white shoes, looked my dad over, taking in the oil-stained workman's clothes and a pair of intense eyes behind practical glasses.

'Actually,' he said, 'me too. I'm also going to have one.'

On his next visit to the foundry Charlie brought atlases and maps, and my father, after washing his hands as best he could, sat with him, poring over sailing routes and destinations. Before long they were friends. Candles flickered late into the night, casting shadows in the pampas grass while my parents sat at the green glass coffee table eating morsels of fried beef from Trish's fondue pot and talking about sailing. The plan was that my mom and dad would buy or build a boat and Charlie and Trish would help them sail it for a while before getting one of their own.

For two years after he bought her, Dad kept *Vingila* at my aunt and uncle's place on the outskirts of Benoni. Uncle George, Aunty Enid and their five children lived on a plot, which in different hands might have been a small farm but instead it was a stretch of grassy land with a swimming pool, a tennis court and a single sheep tethered to a tree stump. The sheep's name was Braaivleis and she'd been bought to be eaten, but when nobody had the heart to kill her, she'd become a low-grade pet.

Robert and I were introduced to boat-work, which was compulsory; we couldn't play with our cousins until we had finished a list of tasks. We learnt to sand and varnish wood, to scrape and paint and to clean our hands with turpentine. We discovered that epoxy tar and anti-fouling stung and left red marks on our skin. I learnt to clean marine glue from wash-basins. Our fingernails split and our hands roughened as *Vingila* gradually grew sea ready.

She was sandblasted to bare steel and covered with seven coats of paint. Dad laid cork decking. He assembled rigging and one thrilling day we raised her beautiful gold masts. He bought winches, sheets, halyards, blocks and anchors. At night he read books with titles like *Essentials of Seamanship* and *Teach Yourself Sailing the Easy Way*.

He ordered sails from Hong Kong and enough canvas arrived to fill the vast sail locker in *Vingila's* roomy stern. We would never learn to use the mizzen trysail, or the staysail. The genoa, spread out on the lawn, was immense, a frothy wedding dress for a giantess. The cloth of the storm jib was so heavy we couldn't fold it. The idea that wind could tear a sail so thick was inconceivable.

At the end of her second year at the plot, a crane arrived and lifted *Vingila* onto a truck. Men strapped our boat into the cradle with her gold masts trussed together like a pair chopsticks. Then they tied 'abnormal load' signs to her stern. When the truck pulled out of the yard, heading for Durban and the sea, Dad went with it. It was 1977 and I was nine years old.

*

There is a reef in Benoni, but no sea. Instead of beaches there are mine dumps: piles of yellow sand brought up as ore from shafts drilled into the earth and ground fine to extract the gold. While my father worked in the foundries, my mother took us to play on the dumps which to us were as good as any beach. On weekends we water skied behind Chummy's runabout on Germiston Lake: a weedy pool of stagnant water surrounded by picnic sites, a mini-golf course and the highest concentration of gold refineries in South Africa.

Apart from 10 days my parents spent on a yacht in Mozambique, we had no sailing experience. Unless you counted the time that Mom and Dad took us to the drive-in, with the dogs in the back seat, to watch *Dove*, a film about a bronze teenager with messy blonde hair who sailed around the world by himself. He had lots of cats, and when one fell overboard and was eaten by a shark, I cried. I hoped when we went sailing that Pepe, our poodle, would be okay, but Mom told me not to worry.

After Dad got on the truck and rode away with *Vingila*, Mom moved into her parents' house in Alberton. We had a week before my father and the yacht arrived at the coast and she needed to settle a few final matters before driving to Durban for the boat launching. On the morning that we left Nana and Chummy's house, Mom sent me to say good bye to my dolls. They were sitting propped in a row against the pillow of my bed in the spare room. I picked up Patsy, my favourite, and cradled her in my arms. She was moulded from hard pink plastic and her bald head was as big as a real baby's. She was a birthday present from Nana who had sewn her dress and bonnet from an opalescent, slightly gritty blue fabric and trimmed it with lace. When I tilted Patsy backwards her glassy eyes closed and her eyelids, with their soft nylon lashes, made a clicking sound. I was kissing her good bye when my mother, wearing a pair of cut-off jeans and a jersey over her tank top, came into the room. She had tears in her eyes and I knew the time was right to make a play for what I wanted.

'Please Mom,' I said.

'Your father won't like it, you know.'

'Please. Just one, just Patsy.'

'All right, just her. We'll try to make room.'

Mom's powder-blue Peugeot 404 was in the carport loaded up and ready to go. Robert and Pepe sat in the back seat, waiting. Nana, her hair freshly set in a permanent wave, stood in the passage wearing a polyester pantsuit and an unhappy smile on her face. Chummy was in the kitchen brushing off his sports jacket for work. They didn't want us to go. They had never liked my father and didn't approve of his plan to sail around the world with their grandchildren.

Nana kissed me good bye. 'Be a good girl, now,' she said. Then she kissed me again and hugged me hard enough for it to hurt. 'I'm waiting for you to come back.'

On the drive to the coast my mother was chatty. We played I-Spy and stopped often to let Pepe have a drink and lift his leg. Laura, our other dog, couldn't come with us because she was too big. She'd gone to live on a farm. As we drove, the silvery winter sky and blond mealie fields of the highveld gave way to pine plantations and green sugarcane. It grew warmer, and the winter air which made my nose bleed, became more humid as we descended from the escarpment. My mother pulled off her jersey and drove in her tank top, saying how exciting it was that we were going to live on a yacht. I whispered in Patsy's ear, telling her stories about the boat and the cabin in the stern we would share.

It grew steadily hotter in the car and Robert, bored and jealous of the attention I was paying my doll, dug a bony elbow into my rib, starting a squabble. Mom drew a line across the back seat with her finger to separate us. From opposite windows we glared at each other while Pepe lay in the front foot well, panting. My mother – sensing mutiny – looked into the rear view mirror and said, 'At least you'll have someone to play with in Durban.'

'Who?' said Robert.

'Those kids on the junk,' Mom said.

'Oh them.'

'They seemed very nice,' my mother said.

Maria Jose, the junk, came from Bangkok but flew a Swiss flag. On a previous holiday while visiting the yacht club, we'd seen her tied to the dock. She was painted black, with wide, mysterious-smelling hatches, and sails the colour of dried blood. The white eyes on her bow – to see where she was going my mother said – had an eastern slant. As we

stood staring at her, a bearded man with a great square forehead and a nose like a misshapen potato, climbed out of a hatch. He was followed by two boys of about 12 or 13. They ignored us completely, talking amongst themselves in what sounded like German.

‘Excuse me,’ said Dad.

The man looked up, but did not return my father’s smile.

‘Do your children go to school?’ Dad asked.

The man pointed at the older of the two boys who continued to ignore us. ‘See him? Over there? I’ll tell you now that he is 13-years-old and he can sail and navigate. So you tell me, why does he need to go to school?’

In spite of some imperfections in the man’s logic, this was exactly the answer my father wanted to hear. In later years when Hans, the boy who could navigate, was in his 20s, he would apply to study marine biology at the University of Hawaii. His application would not be considered – navigational qualifications weren’t a prerequisite for the course, or any other university course for that matter. Instead of becoming a marine biologist, he would be relegated to a life of yacht deliveries, vanilla trading, orchid smuggling and intermittent stints working as a postman in his native Switzerland.

‘I don’t know if I want to play with them,’ said Robert, ‘they didn’t seem very friendly to me.’

When we drove into Durban, Mom stopped at the first petrol station with a public phone and called the *Natal Witness*, a city newspaper. She told the news desk we’d be launching a yacht in a few hours if they wanted to send a reporter. Over the preceding months my mother had developed a taste for appearing in the newspapers. We had made the third page of the *Rapport* several times, but only in black and white. At the height of our

fame, a few months before leaving Benoni, we hit the jackpot; front page of the *Citizen*, a popular English daily. The photograph, in full colour, showed us assembled on the stern of our landlocked boat, happily waving goodbye to the photographer. Robert, his hair nearly as white as mine, wears army camouflage and we both have guns slung in holsters around our waists. (The photographer had asked us to please put down the pine R1 service rifle and the broken shotgun.) My father is unsmiling; he hated reporters and newspapers, but my mother, who holds Pepe in her arms, makes up for it by laughing. The caption explained that Frank and Maureen Stilwell, together with their twins Robert and Martinique, and a seafaring poodle named Pepe, would be sailing around the world. The voyage, including a circuit of the Mediterranean Sea, was expected to take two years.

*

‘Are you sure this’ll hold the boat?’ My brother spoke above the zap and flash of welding machines. A crash of metal came from the dry dock where a throng of dockworkers was overhauling a cargo ship. We were squatting on *Vingila*’s trailer in the shade of her hull, watching the crane men slide canvas slings beneath her keel. The air smelled of anti-fouling, diesel and dead barnacles.

‘It’ll hold much heavier boats than this,’ a man said, tightening a strap.

Vingila, with a full keel, was made of 11-millimetre steel plates welded together and she weighed 17 tons. I tried to keep all that weight between me and my father because I didn’t want him to see me. When we arrived at the yard, I had run to him. We had parked the Peugeot beside the dry-dock where he was talking to the crane driver and looking important – in the centre of things – and I wanted to be with him, to hold his hand and for people to know that I was his daughter. I ran with Patsy on my hip, her glossy dress glinting in

the sun, her eyelids clicking each time my foot hit concrete. I planned to throw myself into his arms, but when I got near him, I slowed and stopped. His eyes, fixed on Patsy, were hard blue stones and his top lip, thinned to nothing, had curled into an tight, upside down smile.

‘What the bladdy hell is this?’ he said, pointing at Patsy.

‘Oh Frank, it’s just a doll,’ my mother said from behind me. ‘I said we could make room for it. Please.’

‘No. We’re not having that bladdy thing on the yacht. Okay?’ And he turned his back on us to continue talking to the crane driver.

Patsy sat in the car while the men secured *Vingila* for launching. I hoped to smuggle her aboard later; it would be difficult – she was very big – but I would manage, somehow. If that didn’t work, we would have to run away together and live on the Durban docks, or try to make our way back to Nana in Alberton. I pictured Dad’s face when he found out that I’d gone. I thought of him searching the harbour and asking people if they’d seen me. Then he’d realise what a mistake he’d made.

A crowd of dockworkers on a tea break gathered to watch the launching. They laughed among themselves, smoked and offered mocking advice to the crane men, who responded by treating *Vingila* casually; kicking out the props and flicking her ropes as the crane took up slack and she rose from her cradle. Through the gap beneath her airborne keel, I saw my mother trying to introduce a *Natal Witness* reporter to my father.

Our boat hung in mid-air, immobile, dark and solid. Then the crane swung her over the wharf and lowered her into the oily water. As she touched the sea, the dockworkers fell solemn and silent. A cheer broke out. She was floating – more than floating really – she was alive. Tugging at her warps, her bow nosed the dock. Patsy forgotten for the moment, I

climbed aboard and helped my parents put out fenders, stumbling at the unfamiliar movement of the deck under my feet. Pepe watched from the wharf until a helpful bystander scooped him up and handed him to us. He came over cringing, like a furry black comma.

Dad, with his smile the right way up, handed Mom a bottle of Cold Duck sparkling wine and a heavy duty welding glove. We assembled on the bow. The reporter with his camera stood on the dock as my mother, flanked by her twins and confident in her welding glove, smashed the bottle hard against *Vingila's* blunt prow, showering us all in sticky wine and shattered glass. The next day our photograph appeared in black and white on page three of the *Natal Witness*. The reporter had got both my and *Vingila's* names wrong, and wrote that the Stilwell family hoped to leave for Mauritius within five weeks.

Chapter 3

Durban

Dad hunched in the dim passage beneath *Vingila's* centre cockpit, the upper part of his body lodged in the cubby hole we called a radio room. In his right hand, he held the microphone of our new VHF radio. Behind his shoulder, a porthole opened into the cockpit, through which I saw my mother's foot as she stood at the helm. By shifting my position on the main saloon floor I could look along her bare leg and torso, right up to her anxious face.

Dad twiddled the radio knobs, swallowed and exhaled audibly. Then, squeezing the button on the microphone, he cleared his throat and said: 'Port control. Port control. Port control. Over.'

Static hissed in the void and was replaced for an instant by a curt voice.

'This is port control. Come in. Over.'

Dad swallowed again and took another breath.

'This is yacht *Vingila*, *Vingila*, *Vingila*. Do you copy us? Over.'

'Yes, *Vingila*. We copy you.' The voice sounded bored.

'We request permission to leave the harbour. Over.'

'Granted. Over and out.'

Outside my mother was still anxious.

'What did they say, Frank?' she asked.

'They said we could leave the harbour.'

‘Really, are you sure? We can leave the harbour and go out to sea?’

‘Of course. That’s what boats do, you know, they go to sea.’

Dad took the helm and we motored out. It was September and our boat had been afloat for three months. Twice a week, in light winds and with the engine running, we had raised her sails and tacked back and forth in the sheltered waters of the port between the container terminal and the granite wharf. The first time the wind had caught the great white wing of *Vingila*’s mainsail and pushed her over, my mother screamed. We shelved plans for a jaunt to Mauritius and concentrated our efforts on learning to sail in the harbour. With passing weeks we had come to accept heeling over as a normal and even as a necessary component of sailing. We weren’t always sure which direction the wind was blowing, but we came about and gybed anyway, with varying degrees of success. We learned the basics. Beating: wind just off the nose. Tacking: zig-zagging into a head wind by coming about. Reaching: wind on the side. Running: wind on the stern. Broad reaching: something between reaching and running. On calm water among the tugs and pilot boats, we relaxed and began to enjoy ourselves. Pepe crept from beneath Mom’s feet in the cockpit and strutted the decks, barking at seagulls, while a gentle wind blew up tiny wavelets amid the oil slicks.

Then my father decided we were ready for the open sea. With Mom at the helm we motored down a narrow straight between a line of jumbled dolosse. At the mouth we met a few swells and the wind picked up. Further out, the sea didn’t look quite as tranquil as water we were accustomed to, but Dad and Robert went ahead and raised not only the mainsail but the jib too. Once past the shelter of the bluff, conditions changed quickly: the sea turned milky-looking, stirred up, the wind strong and gusty. A series of breakers advanced, steep and topped with froth.

'Frank,' said my mother from the wheel, 'Look there...'

A hefty swell approached our bow. Directly ahead the water tilted from the familiar horizontal to an incline so steep the summit began collapsing on itself. Looking at the wave brought back memories of a roller coaster ride I had taken once; and how, when the coach began its slow, horrible ascent against gravity, I knew with absolute certainty that begging my mother for a ticket had been a terrible mistake – all I wanted to do was get off. And I couldn't.

Vingila reared up as if she had been whipped, displaying a surprising new capacity for vertical motion. Climbing the slope, she balanced on the sharp edge of the crest before falling. At the bottom of the trough she collided with unexpectedly solid water. Stunned, she lay on her side; scuppers submerged and her cockpit flooded. As she fell, I grabbed at a hand rail, but missed and slid across the non-skid deck, losing skin on the way. Dislodged objects clattered in the cabins below. Then the jib sheet – ineptly cleated – pulled free, sending the sail thrashing and the sheets streaming into the water – horribly close to our rudder and spinning propeller.

'Cut the engine before we foul the prop!' Dad pushed his way to the bow and began wrestling the sail. 'Release the halyard,' he yelled at my brother who was standing dumbstruck on the cabin top, mesmerised by the chaos.

Abandoning the helm, Mom joined Dad to tackle the sail at the bow while Robert, jolted from his trance, loosened the halyard. Pepe, wet and wild-eyed, clawed his way from the flooded cockpit and tried to jump overboard. Mom snatched a passing leg to pull him back.

'Get inside Nicky!' she said, 'and take the dog with you.'

The main saloon looked as if it had been ransacked. Cushions were strewn about, cups and plates scattered the floor and the latch on the shoe cupboard had loosened and the door was swinging open, discharging a volley of footwear. The curtains hung at an unnatural angle, lifting up occasionally to touch the ceiling. Wedging myself into a corner between the table and Dad's fishing tackle box, I sat and cried while Pepe vomited repeatedly into a cushion.

After bringing the sails down without fouling the prop and wrecking *Vingila* on the breakwater, Dad turned our boat around and we motored back to the calm of the yacht club and our moorings.

*

The administrators of the Point Yacht Club allocated boat moorings according to a strict social hierarchy. Sleek racers and expensive cruisers lay in the basin nearest the clubhouse; foreign yachts were meshed together like prey in a spiders in a web at the international jetty; and stretching out into the harbour, shabbier boats and newcomers like ourselves bobbed on moorings. Wedged between a pair of lumpen ferro-cement vessels, we held the second last position. We didn't see much of the man on *Elusive*, but Glen and Margie on *Chummy* were friendly. They had built the boat themselves in their backyard in Brakpan and were planning to sail to Australia with their two children.

'There's no future here in South Africa,' Glen said.

'We're thinking of the kids,' Margie added. 'At least this way we can get our money out.'

They never did get their money out. Two years later we would hear that *Chummy* had sunk on a reef off Costa Rica.

Back on *Vingila* that night, my father said to my mother as they undressed for bed:

‘I’m not running away from South Africa, Maureen. You know that, don’t you?’

‘I know, Frank,’ she replied. ‘I know.’

‘Anyway,’ he said, standing in his underpants and socks, ‘the blacks are never going to get this country. If I need to come back and fight for it, I will.’

Thrust together in the isolation of our remote moorings, we saw a lot of the *Chummy* family. Getting ashore was difficult, we didn’t have an outboard engine for the dinghy and we weren’t good enough to row far. The club employed a Zulu ferryman called James, whom we summoned by horn, but he was old and hard of hearing and the Seagull engine he tended was temperamental. People on the boats around us called him using aerosol cans topped with red plastic funnels which produced, with minimal effort, yelping sounds of a startling intensity, but Dad said they were wasteful and expensive and made us blow a brass horn instead. It produced a strangled yodel which was never quite loud enough. It was generally easier to just play with the kids on the boat next door than get to land.

*

In October of 1977 Robert and I turned 10 and with my birthday money from Nana, I bought a small microscope. It came with a kit which included a prepared slide labelled ‘silver berry scaly hairs’. They may have been pollen, plankton or parasites and they were stained in dreamy shades of purple and pink. I spent hours looking at them. When I got tired of that I caught the fleas on Pepe’s tummy to squash onto slides. Magnified, they were horrible creatures with segmented abdomens, spiky legs and huge fanged mouths.

Hans and Alex, the Swiss boys from the junk *Maria Jose*, came to visit, but they weren't interested in my microscope and the silver berry scaly hairs. They stomped through the boat, from bow to stern, staring at our curtains and bedspreads.

'Why are you doing that?' they asked Robert, who was washing lunch dishes. 'That's woman's work. Your sister should be doing it.'

The boys were sinewy and had their father's large hands; they would both grow very tall. Alex was better looking than Hans, and both were excellent sailors. I was invited aboard *Maria Jose* just once. Below decks it was quite empty, except for two barrels; one filled with dried beans, the other with rice. It was all the family could afford to eat. Ernest, their father, had been a member of the French Foreign Legion and had fought in Vietnam. He showed my dad the guns he carried on *Maria Jose* and told him stories of sailing in Thailand and escaping pirates in the Philippines. He said it was essential to be armed and Dad said he knew that already; we had shotguns and a high powered hunting rifle on *Vingila*. Back on the boat Dad asked Mom to start cooking more beans and rice.

In November foreign yachts arrived from across the Indian Ocean. Following the trade winds, they came via Christmas Island, Mauritius and Madagascar; bringing friends for Robert and me. Boys with skateboards.

David was an only child, an American, who sailed with his family on *Resolve*, a Hinckley. He was as pale and blonde as his beautiful long-haired mother. His dad's name was Simon, but both David and his mother called him 'Sigh'. David wore a Rolex and rumours had it in the yacht club that the family owned an international tyre company. David invited me to his yacht to make key-ring ornaments. We poured perspex into moulds in

which we arranged small toys, stones and shells, and I tried not to spill any on the gleaming wooden floors.

Urbine and his family had sailed from Sweden across three oceans on *Saga*, a sturdy Nordic ketch with a shiny red hull that reminded me so much of a boiled sweet I sometimes had an urge to lick it. Urbine was 13 and spoke perfect English. His Bermuda shorts hung perilously from his hips when he tick-tacked and did 360s on his skateboard. But in spite of his long sun-bleached hair and good looks, he was shy, with a smile that was always friendly and sweet. From the moment I first said hello to him, I wanted a skateboard of my own and began nagging Mom. She was still feeling bad about Patsy, my doll, who had been returned to Nana in Alberton, and so she surrendered without too much resistance.

When a letter arrived from Nana with the news that Patsy was safe and waiting for me on the spare bed, I barely had time to answer it my days were so full. Mornings we had school work, from books sent by Mom's sister Annette, a teacher at Alberton Primary School. My mother taught us only maths and English, having decided we could learn other subjects like geography, biology, and history informally as we went along. School finished, we did boat work and in the afternoon, once we had eaten lunch, we were allowed ashore to skate, which was the part of the day I waited for.

*

'What's wrong with your food?' my father asked me.

It was a hot day in December and we sat around the lunch table with the sun coming through *Vingila's* curtains. Summer in Durban was humid – sweat ran down the back of my knees and my bare legs stuck to the vinyl cushions. My mother chose vinyl because it was easy to keep clean. In addition to re-upholstering the cushions of the main saloon, she'd

covered the plywood floors of my cabin with brown carpet tiles left over from our house in Benoni.

I looked at my sandwich – dyed orange cheese and a slice of tomato on government brown bread. The same thing we ate every day. I usually liked it; now I couldn't take a bite. I had other symptoms too: I was dreamy, moody and more irritable than usual with my brother.

'Nothing's wrong with the food,' I said, 'I'm just not hungry.'

From across the table I felt Dad's gaze focus on me through the lenses of his glasses, like sunlight through a magnifying glass. I felt like an ant.

'I know what your problem is,' he said, 'you're in love.'

Robert sniggered. I gave the matter some thought and decided my father was probably right. My feelings took the form of daydreams, which were all of boys on skateboards, and one boy in particular: Urbine. I rescued him from dangerous, but poorly defined situations involving trains, trucks, deep water, fire and skateboards. After I'd saved him, I would cradle his head in my lap until he regained consciousness. When his brown eyes finally opened they would brim with respect, gratitude and love.

'Are you ever going to finish eating?' Robert said. 'We don't have all day, you know,'

In the cockpit our skateboards lay on their backs, inert as dead bugs. The previous day Urbine had said he'd show me how to do 360s and I wanted to get ashore, to feel my board scuttle to life under my feet, but I wasn't allowed to go anywhere until I'd eaten. I took a bite of my sandwich, which turned to crumbs and sawdust in my mouth. I forced it down with a sip of water.

'Can't we go and play now?' I asked.

'Not before you've washed the dishes,' said Mom.

Robert smirked at me. I couldn't hit him because my mother was watching, so I kicked him hard under the table instead. As he jerked his legs away the vinyl seat covers made a sucking sound, like a gasp of surprise.

'It's your turn to dry,' I said.

*

My parents planned to leave Durban in early January. Since our initial unsuccessful attempt at open-water sailing, we'd joined forces with Glen and Margie from *Chummy* and, alternating between the two boats, had sailed several times a week.

We would motor past the breakwater and, depending on the wind direction, tack to the ships lying at anchor several miles from the coast, wave at the staring crewmen on the rails who were yearning for land, and then go about and run back. If the wind blew from the north-west we ran to the ships and tacked back. Very rarely, in a true westerly, we reached in both directions. Our confidence improved.

Mooring, however, remained a problem: *Vingila*, 17 tons of steel without brakes, was difficult to stop, particularly in a crosswind. We seldom got it right first time and that made us nervous. The advantage to our mooring site lay in its distance from the yacht club, away from the eyes of sailors who spent more time drinking beer in the bar and providing commentary on others than they did sailing. Given a chance, they would no doubt have had much to say about us.

As the year drew to a close we made ready to leave for Cape Town. From conversations with our fellow sailors, it became apparent that the Cape of Storms is considered the most dangerous leg of the standard circumnavigation route. We heard talk of frequent gales;

the strongest of which pushed northwards against the south-flowing Agulhas current to create rough, unsettled seas and the occasional rogue wave up to a hundred feet high.

When I borrowed a South African history book from the library, my anxiety deepened. The Portuguese, who came by sea and were the first Europeans to discover South Africa, found the rocks of our coast to be as sharp as needles. Agulhas means needle in Portuguese. They also discovered that the vicious reefs and shoals had an insatiable appetite for ships and spat out their broken hulls like fish bones, littering the shore with wrecks. The early explorers were constantly blown back by tremendous fronts and, because they didn't have charts, were riddled with anxiety that they'd reached the end of the world and were about to fall off the edge. Bartholomew Diaz was the first European to get past the southern tip of Africa and, having been fortunate enough to survive, went back for more and died. A particularly rough patch of coast – which sailors later came to call The Ship's Graveyard – was thought to have claimed his vessel and his life. I searched through the books on the shelf above Mom and Dad's bed, looking for more recent accounts of sailing The Cape of Storms and hoping to find encouraging news but each account was the same: storms, high seas, strong currents and reefs. And – unlike us – Robin from the *Dove*, Bernard Moitessier and Joshua Slocum were all experienced sailors. It was just our bad luck to begin our circumnavigation by tackling a coast that had given sailors far better than us a good thrashing and taken more than a few lives.

In preparation for the voyage Mom sealed macaroni and rice in plastic canisters with squares of ether-soaked gauze to kill weevils. Following recommendations in a sailing manual, she removed the labels from our tins of corned beef and dehydrated vegetables and varnished them according to a colour coded system. The book said we should do this, so that

when the cans got wet and their labels fell off, the tins wouldn't rust and we would still know what was in them. I tried to imagine how the cans under my bed could get wet enough for their labels to fall off.

Charlie and Trish took leave from work in Benoni and arrived just after Christmas with three big suitcases packed with stylish new foul weather gear, several pastel outfits and their hairdryer.

'I've given you Nicky's cabin,' Mom told them. She only called me Martinique when she was angry. 'She doesn't mind. Really. Do you, Nicky?'

Trish turned to me with a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes and spoke in a false gush, admiring my mother's curtains and thanking me for being so kind.

My cabin, with two narrow bunks separated by a work bench and a vice, lay just fore of the open sail locker in *Vingila's* stern. That night, from the spare bunk in my parents' cabin – my new sleeping place – I watched Charlie shift and turn, trying without success to fit his large frame into my short bed.

The following day we woke to find ourselves surrounded by jungle. There'd been flooding inland and the harbour, brown with mud, was choked with floating islands of vegetation. *Vingila* crawled with life; insects, spiders, dragonflies and giant beetles – survivors of the deluge. A snake lay on the bow, coiled around the anchor winch, perhaps believing it had climbed the mooring lines to safety. Dad identified the reptile at once as poisonous – a black mamba – and, while we watched from the cockpit, beat it to death with the truncheon we used on fish.

I found a young chameleon carefully pacing the toe rail as if he were measuring it out, and I decided to keep him as a pet; I thought he could live on the curtains in the main saloon

and come sailing with us. Charlie agreed that it was a great idea and nobody gave a thought to what he would eat.

On New Year's Eve, the night before our planned departure, we went ashore to the yacht club. While the adults drank on *Betty-J*, an American sloop skippered by Leonard Pratt, an airline pilot, and his wife Betty, I skateboarded in the dark with Urbine and the other kids. As the evening wore on, we broke into successively smaller groups. Late in the evening Urbine and I found ourselves alone in the brown shadows of the boatyard's sodium lights. Beneath the covered yachts on the hard, we sat rocking on our skateboards, chatting and laughing while the humid night air swirled around our shoulders in warm eddies.

'It's nearly midnight,' Urbine said. 'Let's watch the fireworks from *Saga*.'

'What about the others?'

'They went to David's boat, but that's okay. Just us is fine.'

The sound of laughter and clinking glass came across the water from *Betty-J* as Urbine made a nest of sails at the bow. His parents and sister were out and we had the boat to ourselves. Wrapped in folds of white cloth and close enough for me to feel his breath on my cheek, we watched squibs and rockets explode. And, as the last emergency flares drifted gently down from the sky, trailing pink smoke and the smell of cordite, his hand crept slowly over the sails until it was holding mine.

*

The first day of 1978 saw *Vingila* sailing into a headwind over a choppy sea the colour of bile. Foam streaked the waves like white spittle. With their faces turned to the wind Charlie and Trish sat on the weather rail, the bright hues of their new jackets accentuating their ashen skin tone. A steady rain of salt spray, rising from the waves smacking the hull broad-

side, had settled on Charlie's hair, removing its bounce and clumping the strands together to expose receding temples and a thinning pate.

Pepe sat at my mother's feet in the cockpit wearing a new harness, his leash clipped into the life-lines. As a further measure to stop him jumping over board, Dad had tied netting to the guard rails.

In spite of the headwind, low grey clouds and our late return home from the previous night's festivities, we had left our mooring early. After they'd finished drinking on *Betty-J*, Dad and Charlie woke James, the ferryman, by shouting and banging on the walls of his Wendy house in the car park. He took a long time to emerge and didn't return their wishes for a happy new year. When we got to his boat the Seagull engine refused to start. He had to rub it down with handfuls of petrol from a jerry can before it finally coughed to life and puttered us home. The following morning brought pallor and regret, but because Charlie and Trish were on leave and time was limited, we slipped our moorings and sailed out of Durban.

After several hours of pounding into steep waves, the entrance of harbour remained clearly visible off the starboard side. The sails were full and pulling, but we weren't making forward progress because each time *Vingila* surged forward, she met with a wave that stopped her in her tracks. I went below to check my chameleon and found him holding on to a flapping curtain, looking happy enough. After spending some time alone at the stern looking deeply into the water, Charles came inside and asked my mom for headache tablets. Later, when the main saloon table worked free of its latch on the bulkhead and fell to the floor – ripped out by the hinges, Durban was still in sight. Dad decided we couldn't sail to Cape Town without a table, so we turned around and ran back to port where, after coffee for

the adults and Ovaltine with powdered milk for Robert and me, we got into our bunks and fell asleep to the sound of wind whining in the rigging.

Chapter 4

Cape of Storms

Three days after leaving Durban in fair winds, we passed the town of East London. My chameleon, resisting the temptations of tinned meatballs and spaghetti, baked beans or similar delicacies, hadn't eaten since I'd found him. With no cockroaches or flies to catch, he refused to open his mouth to alternatives. He clung to the curtains of the main saloon, growing smaller and darker daily. His skin became dry, wrinkled and ill-fitting. I was feeding him water from an eyedropper when we sailed past East London. Because the skies ahead were so clear and the breeze was so mild, we failed to notice our falling barometer and the growing haze on the horizon behind us.

About 800 sea miles lie between Durban and Cape Town. The journey, in good conditions, should take around a week. Because storms are so common, we expected at least one front, which we hoped to avoid by sheltering in one of the ports scattered along the coast. We didn't want to meet a gale at sea. We'd experienced a few storms in Durban, and on our moorings they were nasty enough. In strong winds the harbour turned white with foam and waves crashed against our hull and broke under our stern while James lashed the ferry to the dock, retiring to his hut and leaving us stranded for days. We learned to read the weather. Southerly gales were presaged by a falling barometer, oppressive heat and a hazy horizon. Almost exactly the atmospheric conditions we failed to notice until after East London had disappeared from view.

In the event of a storm off the coast of South Africa, opinion on sailing strategy was divided. Some yachtsmen believed it best to get close to land, away from the strong current and high waves, but nearer the shoals and rocks. In later years, with GPS providing accurate and frequent information on a boat's position, this advice would make sense. We, however, were sailing a decade before the simplest satellite navigation systems became available. Sextants and manual calculations yielded no more than two sets of co-ordinates per day, dependent entirely on the skill of the operator, a clear horizon and a view of the sun unobscured by cloud. In that case it was safest to keep away from the coast, seaward of the swathe of strong current, the continental shelf and the 200-metre line. But for some reason Dad didn't want to sail into deeper water and kept the coastline within sight. We were sailing where everybody has said we shouldn't, exactly where the waves would be most dangerous in a storm. I also noticed that since leaving Durban my father had not brought out his sextant once.

*

'Take Pepe and go below!' Mom said.

Her glasses were frosted with spicules of salt. Water, dripping from the points of her fringe, dissolved the concretions in curvy trails. Through such a varied gradient of refraction I wondered how she could see at all. She had taken the helm, a position for which good vision didn't seem optional.

The haze that we had failed to notice on the horizon as we sailed past East London, had grown until it engulfed the sky, bringing gusts of wind that abraded the surface of the water in dark patches, whipping up white caps. Ragged clouds approached, their edges trailing sloped veils of rain. The first drops fell, stinging our cheeks.

'I can't worry about you as well,' my mother said. 'Take the dog and get inside!'

In bad weather everybody had a job. Mine, it was becoming apparent, was to look after Pepe. That suited me just fine, I was 10, weedy and bookish, incapable of pulling hard on a sheet and skinny enough to feel I could be blown away in a strong wind. I wanted to go below; I wanted my crochet blanket. My mother, a prolific seamstress, had taken to crochet work in the early 70s, producing dozens of string bikinis, several tasselled ponchos for children and dogs, and a blanket each for Robert and me. Our blankets – multi-coloured, with mustard and brown dominant – were made from easy to wash acrylic wool and, in spite of all the holes, were surprisingly warm. Going below, I scooped a shivering dog into my arms, wrapped my blanket around my shoulders and sat on the floor, making up stories in my mind – day-dreaming myself far away from the pitching and shouting, the clattering of sails and the high-pitched lament of the rigging.

After a while Trish stumbled down the stairs and pushed passed into her cabin. She didn't return my greeting. Soon my brother came inside too.

'Why are you sitting down here with a blanket on your head?' he asked, lifting the edge and peering at me. 'Are you crying again?'

I wiped my eyes.

'No,' I said, 'I'm singing to Pepe.'

Robert was drenched but he looked as calm as ever. He never spoke much; anything I wanted to know could usually only be extracted by careful questioning.

'How's things outside?' I asked.

'Okay,' he said. 'Fine.'

Vingila jolted as if she had collided with a wall. The curtain flew up to the ceiling, my chameleon pinned to it like a brooch. Robert, knocked off his feet, snatched at a grab-rail.

‘Seems a bit wild to me,’ I said. ‘How’s the sea look?’

‘Rough.’

‘Really? That doesn’t sound good.’

‘It’s okay. They put the storm jib up.’

‘The storm jib! We’ve never used that before.’

‘Well, we’re doing six knots with it now.’

‘Never, *Vingila* doesn’t go that fast.’

He looked thoughtful. ‘Mmm, you’re right, she hasn’t.’

But then he lost interest and said, ‘I’m going to sleep.’

Unlike me, he could sleep anywhere. As *Vingila* bashed through waves, he pulled his crochet blanket from the fore-peak, wrapped himself in it, lay down on the floor and shut his eyes. After a while Mom stuck her head down the hatch.

‘How’s Pepe?’ she said.

‘Sleeping,’ I replied.

At the sound of his name, Pepe lifted his head and tried to make his way toward her, claws skating over the wet plywood floor. I pulled him back by a leg and wrapped him in my blanket.

‘Go to sleep.’ I said.

With East London behind us to windward, 80 miles lay between *Vingila* and the next port of safety, Port Elizabeth. Fortunately the gale blew in the same direction of the current; we encountered no rogue waves and could reach with it, which was faster and safer than

beating or running. The following day, still under our storm jib, we sailed into Port Elizabeth and tacked to a high wooden pier. A young woman took our lines and introduced herself as Lynnath Beckley. She told us that she'd seen us tossing on the waves from the balcony of her flat with her telescope. She referred to our storm as a blow and she wanted to know how we had coped and if there was anything she could do for us.

A hot shower and a good night's sleep was what we wanted. For that matter, it's all anyone wants after being at sea. Charlie had additional cravings. Suffering more than the rest of us from my mother's experimental cooking with canned dehydrated vegetables, he wanted a steak, from a steak house, followed by strawberries and cream for dessert. Lynnath thought she could help and started by driving us to the yacht club where she signed us in as guest members. I took my chameleon along. Stick-like and withered, he could barely hold his head up and I left him in the yacht club garden on a dusty shrub, hoping he would catch a fly and live.

Lynnath told us she was a marine biologist. She was sturdy and boyish with cropped hair, unshaven legs and functional frames on her glasses. When I learned that she had personally discovered and named two new species of plankton, I immediately wanted to become a marine biologist myself. She brought me a starter kit: two well-slides wrapped in tissue paper, a box of cover slips and – reeking of formalin – a jar of zooplankton she'd collected in Antarctica. I learned how to use an oil immersion lens and tell the difference between isopods and amphipods. The microscopic crustaceans looked much like Pepe's fleas, but without the awful mouth parts. After a day or two Lynnath expressed a desire to join our circumnavigation. She told my parents, who didn't believe her, that she would meet us again in the Caribbean.

We weren't keen to leave Port Elizabeth. The people were friendly and generous and the showers at the yacht club warm. Also, the weather wasn't right. My father wanted, unrealistically perhaps, to wait for a steady northerly wind, but Charles and Trish were in a rush to get to Cape Town. We left Port Elizabeth the night after Charles had his steak. My father wasn't a gracious dinner guest. He'd decided we could no longer afford to eat in restaurants and, considering our budget of five rand a day for the family, rightly so. Charles, however, had a job and money to spend and wanted to make the best of his holiday, which thus far had been fairly dismal. He was determined to celebrate so Lynnath lent us her car to drive to an expensive steak house. For their evening out, Charles and Trish wore matching baby-blue pantsuits, and their hair – like their mood – was buoyant, for they'd been delighted to discover a socket for their hair drier at the yacht club. The restaurant, with frilled polyester tablecloths and matching napkins, was deserted except for a single waiter, and we took a seat and ordered our steak well done, without a hint of pink.

After the steak Charles asked the waiter for strawberries and cream.

'They're not on the menu,' the waiter said, 'but I'll check with the manager.'

My father flinched. We never bought strawberries; he thought they were frivolous and far too expensive. And we never asked for anything that wasn't on the menu.

'I checked with the manager,' the waiter said when he came back, 'we do have a few.'

'Fantastic!'

Tossing a silky fringe from his eyes, Charles turned a gap-toothed grin on Robert and me.

'I'm sure you two won't say no to some strawberries and cream,' he said.

Robert and I exchanged glances. Of course we wanted strawberries; they were an unimaginable treat, but afraid of my father, we couldn't say yes. Silence stretched between us and Charles's fading grin.

'What will it be?' the waiter asked.

Charlie recharged his grin.

'Strawberries and cream for everyone!' he said.

'Not for me,' Dad said, looking at my mother.

'Or me, thanks,' said my mother, who loved strawberries.

'Well, I want some,' said Trish, 'and I think Nicky and Robert do too.'

Feeling like traitors, we ate our strawberries under the baleful eye of my father. Charlie paid the bill but Dad remained sullen all the way back to *Vingila*.

When we left the next day the wind was blowing on the nose and we had to beat against it. Dad claimed *Vingila* could steer herself to windward if the helm was 'balanced', but in reality our sails were usually stalled. The log may have read three to four knots, but any forward motion we made was probably due to the current. Our jib lacked tell-tales and we hadn't heard of the close hauled groove, much less how to get into it, so *Vingila* jackknifed into the waves and made very slow progress.

Over the ensuing days, tension grew between my parents and Charles and Trish. My father felt that Charles had pushed him to leave, and held him responsible for the bad weather. The constant uncertainty about our position combined with the heavy seas, grey skies, rain and strong winds were not what Trish had in mind when she had agreed to go sailing. In fact, as we spent day after day in our foul-weather gear, the memory of the pic-

tures we had seen of yachts sailing on calm blue sea taunted us. And nothing had prepared us for how much foul-weather gear stank.

My parents spent hours on deck dodging spray and peering at the distant coast through the salty lenses of their glasses, struggling to compare it with the line drawings in the pilot book. As far as they could tell, one series of hills looked much like another. At night, from the top of waves, they struggled to identify lighthouses by the frequency of their flashes.

Two weeks before leaving Durban, my father gave our nautical almanac away. The book, with its tables of the rising and setting times of the sun, moon and navigational stars for different latitudes, was essential for celestial navigation. Only a limited run of copies were printed each year, and in 1978 they sold out. My father, a man who forbade us to borrow or lend, gave our almanac to the skipper of an American yacht, who promised to post it back to us from Cape Town but never did.

Dad had attended several celestial navigation courses; first in Johannesburg, and then in Durban. He had a full set of charts, two beautiful sextants and a gleaming brass chronometer nestled in a velvet-lined mahogany box. He had all the necessary books and tables but he also had a secret. He didn't know how to navigate. Years later he confessed to me, 'I just couldn't get it into my head. I tried and tried but I couldn't.' His family were artisans in foundries and mines; his father was a fitter and turner. Studying was considered a waste of time and reading a pretension, so my father never completed high school. A talented mechanic, he could solve complicated electrical wiring problems, but was lost when it came to maths and formal learning. And he was too proud and insecure to admit it. Mom, with matric and three years of teacher training college was probably better equipped to assume navigational responsibilities, but in our family it had been decided that navigation was a

man's job, and my father's in particular. So when our nautical almanac was not returned, we set off without it, all except my father unaware that it wouldn't have made a difference anyway.

We seldom knew exactly where we were, or how far from the reefs, except on the rare occasion when we met a ship and asked them, on our VHF radio, for their position. Without short-wave, we couldn't receive weather reports and it seemed we sailed aimlessly in a gale that blew from the wrong direction.

When Charles and Trish weren't outside on watch they lay in my cabin, leaving the main saloon to us. Mealtimes were strained. At night I heard them whispering, squashed together in a single bunk, and once I thought I heard Trish crying.

Twice a day, my mother took Pepe outside in his harness for a walk to the stern, to squat with difficulty, before returning to the blankets, where he lay coiled as tightly as a ball of rags. Robert and I, like most children, were resilient; we simply accepted our new reality and endured. If this was the sailing Mom and Dad wanted to do, then we had to do it. It wasn't as if we had a choice. As the sea grew rougher we moved from our cabins at the extremities of the boat to the main saloon floor, where we lay in our crochet blankets with Pepe and our books. I had finished the few children's stories aboard and began working my way through our collection of adult thrillers. My parents didn't censor our reading and, rocking in my blankets to the motion of the boat, I read and reread all the sex scenes I could find, while *Vingila* shuddered and heaved; thrusting and plunging through the waves, blasted intermittently by sudden gouts of white spray.

Between books, I thought of Urbine, wrestled my brother and tormented the dog. As the days passed, it began to feel as if we had all been ill and were trapped in that intermina-

ble phase of convalescence characterised by monotony, broken sleep, weak legs, sweaty bodies, knotted bedclothes, and irritability. It became difficult to remember another way of living and there seemed no reason to believe our state would ever change.

*

My memory of Mossel Bay is hazy. I remember going into town and finding cans of peach flavoured fruit nectar in the supermarket. They were the most exotic drinks I'd ever seen and, although we were still in South Africa, I felt as if I were visiting a foreign land. After some discussion, my parents agreed to break their budget and buy two cans. We returned to find a deserted boat. A letter lay on the table. Charles and Trishia apologised for leaving so unexpectedly, but they had found a last minute flight back to Johannesburg. They wished my parents all the best for the trip to Cape Town and onwards around the world.

We left Mossel Bay alone, just the four of us. Up until then we'd always had other adults aboard; spare hands to tug on lines or take the helm. *Vingila* was not an easy boat to sail – the halyards and sheets for the main and mizzen sails were scattered over the deck, and two people were needed to operate our winches. As we didn't have either a wind vane or an autopilot, my parents would now be forced to share the watches between them. However, with Trish and Charles gone, the time pressure was off and we could wait for a fair wind before leaving. Which we did, sailing away from Mossel Bay with the wind at our beam and not a cloud in sight. For two days we slept in our own cabins and drank fruit nectar on the deck in the afternoon, before the conditions turned and we found ourselves once again beating into a gale over dark green waves and living in foul-weather gear again.

Mom and Dad had red waterproofs of good quality; dungarees with black elastic shoulder straps and jackets with elaborate zippers. Robert and I wore fluorescent apricot

anoraks with a rubber lining that looked and smelled of mustard – adult jackets without zips that my mother had found in the bargain bin at the yacht chandlers. Their hems came to our knees and we wore them like dresses, with the sleeves rolled up. Holding our breath, we pulled them over our heads, trying to avoid the rank, ammoniacal smell that nevertheless puffed up from their necks in warm little blasts whenever we moved.

As the days passed, Mom and Dad didn't get much sleep because of their nights on the helm. Dad suggested Robert and I should take watch during the day, so that he and Mom could rest. One morning, after a night of particularly high winds, Dad handed the wheel to Robert. *Vingila*, wind abaft, was reaching under her storm jib and a reefed main. As he went through the companionway Dad turned to see Robert standing barefoot in his foul weather jacket with a wave as high as the mizzen spreaders behind him. In a rare show of concern – he never did it again – Dad took the wheel and sent Robert below. The swell, at least as big as a house and about as steep, with a toppling crest, bore down on us, but *Vingila* simply rode it and the ones that followed. We were getting to know our boat; she was slow, heavy and unresponsive, but she was strong and dry, and most of all, she was extremely forgiving, for which we probably owe her our lives.

Cape Agulhas, which lay ahead, was reputed to have the worst weather of the entire coast. Shallow sand banks stretch out to sea, marking the confluence of two oceans: the warm Indian and the icy South Atlantic. The collision of currents confuses the waves, stirring up the shallow water. Cold plankton rich upwellings attract fish, birds and, in spite of the danger, fishing boats. I remembered reading that Diaz lost his life somewhere here, on his third voyage around the Cape. In angry seas, pounding waves worked the caulk from between the planks of old ships and the crew members not occupied above deck tending sails

would be below, bailing for their lives. Sometimes, the ship simply fell apart and sank. I found myself wishing I hadn't done quite so much reading. *Dove*, the teenage single-hander's little sloop in the movie, also nearly came to pieces in these waters. Once round the cape Robin, the youthful captain, was able to see daylight where his cabin-top joined the deck and he had to stop at Gordon's Bay for repairs. Even Joshua Slocum, the first person to complete a solo circumnavigation and an excellent seaman, had difficulty passing the point. He wrote in his book *Sailing Alone Around the World* that his beloved *Spray*, spent all day off the Cape trying to stand on her head and, what's more, gave him every indication that she would succeed at it before nightfall.

The trouble with not knowing where we were, was that we didn't know if we'd reached Agulhas or not. In heavy wind and angry swells, we pounded through a group of penguins, wondering when things would get worse. A passing fishing boat, running home for shelter, gave us our position over the VHF radio. We were sailing over the banks of Agulhas. Mom wanted to celebrate, but the sea was too rough and several days of beating still lay ahead before we were able to reach the shelter of Simon's Town.

*

'Baarp!'

Surrounded by fog, *Vingila* rolled on water as glossy as syrup.

'Baaarp!'

'It's getting louder,' Mom said.

We'd left Simon's Town that morning in light north-westerly winds, a clear blue sky and good spirits. After Agulhas we'd taken a rest while the storm blew itself out. Dad said

there was only a day between us and Cape Town and we might as well wait for the right one. We had nothing to worry about, he said, Cape Point would be great, in calm weather.

‘We’re going to have a lovely time,’ my mother said as we weighed anchor. ‘It’ll make up for the storms. We’ll see Cape Point – it’s beautiful– and the Twelve Apostles, and Table Mountain.’

Docking at Cape Town would mark the end of the first leg of our round the world voyage. Neither Robert nor I had been to Cape Town before. It’s gorgeous, my mother said, just wait till you see it. The most beautiful city in the world. We waved good bye to Simon’s Town.

‘This is what it’s about,’ my father said, walking to the fore-deck and stretching out his arms out to take in the placid water of False Bay and its surrounding mountains. ‘What a way to end the trip. On a high note.’

Half an hour later a thick fog rolled in and we couldn’t see a thing. The wind died and the horizon shrank to a white circle a few metres from our hull. We might as well have been immersed in a glass of milk. Except that there were rocks, and kelp beds and ships. Lots of ships. They began blowing their fog horns.

‘Baarp!’

‘That’s close,’ Mom looked panicked. ‘What now, Frank?’

‘Blow our horn back, of course.’

My father brought out the brass trumpet that had consistently failed to summon James the ferryman in Durban. He lifted it to his lips to produce a familiar harsh yodel. We waited for a response. There was silence, a thick foggy hush.

Then: ‘BAAARRP!’

‘Are they answering us, or just hooting?’ Mom asked.

The ship’s horn, much louder now, was joined by the heavy drone of a marine engine and the cutting pulse of a propellor, both of which grew so loud we could barely hear our own frantic return bleating.

‘I wish we had one of those aerosol horns.’ Mom said. ‘And I don’t want to say it, but how long does it take for a ship to turn? Or stop?’

‘Don’t be stupid,’ Dad said, ‘even if they don’t hear us, they’ll pick *Vingila* up on radar.’

I glanced at the radar reflector hanging from our mizzen mast. It looked small, and extraneous, considering our entire vessel was made of steel. Crossing my fingers, I imagined men in peaked white caps on the bridge of the ship, calm and in control, their eyes drifting professionally over banks of screens, searching for blips. Almost immediately, this picture was replaced by a much less reassuring vision of the same men standing in the passage *outside* the control room, taking a smoke break and chatting, or thumbing the pages of a magazine. I forced my mind back to the first image.

The deep intestinal rumblings of the ship grew louder; by all indications it was bearing down on us. My father took the helm – a sure sign of the seriousness of the situation – and sent us to the bow as lookouts. Surrounded by white, I felt helpless and oddly exposed; blind and vulnerable, like a sinner about to be struck by the hand of God. I considered my recent reading material and wondered if this was my punishment: run down and sunk by a ship in the fog. Maybe praying would help. Perhaps, if he knew I was sorry, God would change his mind about killing me. Dear God, I thought, I know I’ve been reading a lot about sex lately but... I was considering the conclusion to my prayer when we met three sharp, un-

expected waves and entered a band of freshly churned water. A multitude of bubbles popped the surface, releasing the smell of diesel. The ship had crossed our bow, leaving us in its wake. It was impossible to know if they had ever been aware of our presence.

We motored on inside a white cocoon, guided by dead reckoning and our compass and almost completely unsure about where we were. After several hours my father noticed a change in the motion of the sea. It was subtle, more a feeling or a suspicion really, than anything specific.

He turned off the engine and listened.

‘What’s that?’ he whispered. ‘Can you hear it?’

Listening hard, we could just make out the faint suck and wash of breakers on rocks although in the fog it was impossible to locate the sound. Dad sent us to the bow again. Slowly *Vingila* felt her way forward, like a blind man groping without a cane. I caught the mineral odour of seashore and decayed marine vegetation, and saw dark shapes floating in the sea. From the bow, we saw the rocks at roughly the same time as we hit the kelp bed. I should have finished that prayer, I thought, because God wasn’t through with me yet for reading those books. For the second time in a day it looked as if we were about to wreck our boat and possibly lose our lives. But Dad thrust *Vingila* into reverse, hauled her head up and – in coils of seaweed 30 feet long with stems as thick as saplings – made a sharp about-turn back into the gloom.

When the wind picked up several hours later, it blew away the fog to reveal the back of Table Mountain, its attendant Apostles and the white beaches and the palm trees of Camps Bay. I knew from the library book that Francis Drake passed here in 1580 on his way home after three years spent pillaging Spanish settlements, collecting spices and establish-

ing trade ties with Indonesia. In spite of losing four of the five boats he had started out with, he was feeling chipper. He even had time to make a snotty entry in his journal. He wrote that he 'found the report of the Portuguese, who affirm that this is the most dangerous cape in the world, never without intolerable storms and present dangers to travellers which come near, to be most false. This cape is a most stately thing, and the fairest cape we saw in the whole circumference of the earth.' So much for those lily-livered Portuguese, but he was right, without the fog the Cape was quite pretty.

When the shroud of fog lifted, the sun came out and the sea shed its grey skin and shone a deep jewel-blue. With her white sails and a lacy bow wave, *Vingila* sailed across Table Bay, looking almost as pretty as a yacht on a calendar. It was the third of February and a full month since we'd embarked on a maiden voyage which we'd hoped would take no more than eight days. In the Royal Cape yacht basin we were ushered to the berths for visiting yachts where we tied up among the blue-water cruisers, some of whom we recognised from Durban. Our status in the sailing community had risen a notch, although I wasn't completely sure we deserved it.

Part 2

Atlantic Ocean

Chapter 5

Cape Town

Wind quality and direction, the nature of the sea, and the motion of the boat combine and interact with a human element – expectations, health, moods and relationships between the people aboard – to form the background of an ocean voyage. Fish caught, whales sighted, bread baked and books read, create the focal points. Once port is reached and the boat safely docked, sailors can stand back and assess the whole. In Cape Town we could confidently say that *Vingila's* maiden voyage had not been good. Slow progress, bad weather, incompetence, conflict among the crew, inedible food and tawdry books formed an experience so unpleasant I couldn't bear to look back at it. But at least we didn't die, and we still had our boat.

With the outcome of sea journeys so random, unpredictable and potentially fatal, it's hardly surprising sailors are a superstitious lot. In the face of unrelenting bad weather and ill luck the seamen of old would start casting their eyes about, searching for a jinx – something or somebody to blame. Over centuries the superstitions piled up. Never leave on a Friday, the first Monday in April, or the second Monday in August. Starting a cruise on 31 December is bad, to which we could add, from experience, that the 1st of January isn't much better. The French forbid mentioning the word '*lapin*' aboard. The English won't say 'drowned' while afloat and refuse to paint a hull green. On *Vingila* we were safe from the misfortunate effects of priests, red heads and green hulls, but Mom presented a problem. Women on a boat are very bad luck, acceptable only if carved from wood and in naked form. So right

from the start, fortune – it seemed – wasn't on our side. But it got worse. Boat names ending in 'a' are bad luck, as are dogs near fishing tackle boxes. A dog vomiting on a tackle box, while not specifically mentioned, could only be bad. Certain sea birds bring good fortune, but penguins aren't among them, as we had learned for ourselves off Cape Agulhas. Some superstitions are more specific: a shark following a ship's wake is a sure sign of death among the crew and looking back as a vessel leaves port ensures it will never return. Once I heard that, I found it impossible to resist backward glances. Fortunately we were circumnavigating.

Superstition aside, certain ocean routes are kinder than others. The tropical South Atlantic, in which hurricanes are unknown, seldom sees a gale and has trade winds that blow steadily and – while nothing is guaranteed – good weather and a pleasant voyage can be expected. After Cape Town my father assured us the sailing could only get better.

*

Eva Fox stood in the cockpit, *Foxtrot*, the sleek ketch she shared with her husband Al, and invited me aboard. I very much wanted to accept her invitation but my last visit to their boat in Durban hadn't gone well and so I was hesitant. Not that Eva had been unfriendly or anything, far from it, she was an accomplished and graceful hostess. The problem, according to my father, had been with me.

Eva gave me an encouraging smile. I was surprised she even remembered me. In Durban they'd been moored at the foreign jetty, while we had been relegated to the riff-raff on the moorings. In Cape Town we'd been given a place with the other visiting yachts and I walked past *Foxtrot* several times a day and often stopped to admire the boat. I peered through her portholes. She looked fast and seaworthy, with a mahogany panelled interior

and Persian rugs in muted tones complementing the tasteful scatter cushions and drapery. Thinking of the orange curtains and brown carpet in my own cabin intensified my suspicion that I had somehow been placed in the wrong family. One day, I decided, my real parents would claim me and introduce me to grandparents like Al and Eva.

The Foxes were considered aristocrats of the cruising world, and in Benoni I'd seen their pictures in the cruising magazines stacked around our house. They were an athletic American couple in their sixties with silver hair and white teeth that contrasted nicely with their golden, unlined skins. More than 15 years of sailing and thousands of sea miles under the keel had left them surprisingly unweathered. They looked airbrushed. Their yacht was unweathered too, like a poster boat for blue-water cruising.

From the time *Foxtrot* first sailed into Durban, my parents were determined to visit. They'd read so much about the Foxes, they almost felt they knew them. Dad suggested we go in small groups to improve our chances of an invitation and chose me to accompany him on the first foray. Our strategy worked. We were invited into the cockpit and offered drinks. We talked about sailing for a while and then Eva asked if we knew anything about seashells. We shook our heads. She took us inside to a polished walnut cabinet and pulled out drawers of beautiful, glossy, spiky, patterned shells. The result of years of dedicated collecting, she said. I had never seen anything so wonderful.

'What's that one?' I asked, pointing out a cone-shell which looked as if someone with a shaky hand had tried to draw a continent on its back.

'*Conus geographicus*, the geographic cone. It's deadly poisonous. One sting from that can kill you.'

Not sure how to respond, I giggled. A simpering, little-girl giggle. Although I wasn't usually like that, I adopted the persona for the remainder of the visit, hoping to charm Eva and make her like me. I tossed my hair and asked questions I thought would make me sound intelligent. I looked at all her shells. I batted my eyelashes and flirted. I desperately wanted to make an impression. Dad watched with narrowed eyes.

Afterwards he told Mom, in front of me, that the visit might have gone well if I hadn't 'acted so stupid'. In our family 'acting stupid' was a crime second only to 'thinking you were clever', something else I was often accused of. Growing up, I constantly stumbled between these two forms of unacceptable behaviour. Robert, quiet, non-committal and as brave as a hero in a Western, didn't have the same trouble. After Dad's comment, my impression of the visit to *Foxtrot* changed. Waves of self-loathing swamped me. It became clear that I'd behaved like a vacuous clown and I was sure Eva hated me. Now here she was in Cape Town several months later, inviting me aboard again. And she'd even remembered my name. I was afraid to accept because I so wanted to be liked by her that I didn't know how to behave.

'Do you eat cookies Nicky?' Eva asked.

I nodded. I knew cookies were only biscuits but the unfamiliar name gave them an exotic appeal.

'Come aboard then. I've got something for you.'

I couldn't say no. Eva poured me a glass of cold milk from their fridge and while I ate my cookie we chatted. She told me their sail from Durban had been peaceful. Watching the weather patterns, they had taken shelter before the storms brewed and so had travelled only

in good winds. They had met interesting and friendly people en route and in East London had found a pair of rare cowries to add to their collection.

‘How was your sail?’ she asked.

My natural inclination was to tell a story, only slightly embellished, of how awful it had been: the howling winds, crashing seas, terrible food and wind shrieking constantly in the rigging. I wanted to tell her that our crew had run away and that I was worried my father couldn’t navigate, but I tried instead to be more like my brother.

‘Fine,’ I said.

She unlatched a cabinet and removed a rectangular object.

‘For you, honey,’ she said, handing me a book.

No one had called me honey before, but I didn’t mind it too much. The book was small and white. Under the title – *Seashells of the World* – were a few amateur looking paintings of shells.

‘And here’s something else.’

She passed me a flat cardboard box. Straw protruded through the perforations on its base and *Cape Grapes* was stamped in green ink across the lid. I wondered why Eva was giving me grapes. Opening the box I found, partially submerged in straw – as if they were living in a strange grassy habitat on the bottom of the sea – textile cones, money and serpent-head cowries, augers and a single spiky murax. All good specimens.

‘You can identify them using your new book,’ Eva said. ‘It’s the start of your shell collection.’

I didn’t know how to thank her without acting stupid.

*

During our two months at the Royal Cape Yacht Club each of us found a private form of happiness. For Pepe, joy lay in getting ashore whenever he wanted. With *Vingila* tethered to a walk-on mooring, he was free to come and go as he pleased, obstructed only by the occasional sun bathing seal which he could bark at. For him the pontoon from our boat lead directly to paradise; a car park filled with tyres where he didn't have to crouch and stagger as he had done at sea, but could lift his leg again like a proper dog. My mother found happiness in a small shop downtown selling dried fruit and bargain cheese. There, in addition to buying wedges of yellow cheddar, she could indulge her life-long – but seldom satisfied – addiction to hannepoot raisins. My father found bliss drinking wine in the afternoons on *Betty-J*, swapping sailing stories with Leonard Pratt, the retired airline pilot he'd befriended in Durban. Now he had stories of his own to tell and, with a sea voyage behind him, a slightly higher status in the yachting community.

One afternoon, warm sun falling in the cockpit and wine glasses filled to the brim from a five-litre cask – for in addition to grapes the Cape had cheap wine – he settled down for another chat with Leonard.

'So I said to the ship, "What's your position?" and they said, "Do you want to know our position or yours?" So I said, 'Well, I really want to know my position.' And when they gave it to me, I asked, "Are you sure this is correct?" They said, yes, we were off Cape Agulhas and we should carry on sailing as we were for a few hours and then turn right.'

Instead of laughing, Leonard just looked at him and said, 'You're having trouble navigating, aren't you?'

I flinched, waiting for the explosion, the expletives, the horrible upside-down smile, but Dad simply looked back at Leonard and said, 'Yes.'

Leonard took my father to the Green Point lighthouse and showed him how to shoot sights. This is where the real skill of celestial navigation lies; using a sextant to measure the angle of the sun to the horizon, a task far easier on solid land than from a pitching deck. After explaining the use of the almanac and sight reduction tables, Leonard helped Dad through the calculations, concentrating on method rather than theory. When Dad, using his parallel rulers and dividers for the first time, drew lines on a chart which intersected roughly over Cape Town, Leonard congratulated him and told him he could navigate.

Ignoring Cape Town's mountains, ancient vineyards and beaches, Robert and I found our happiness on skateboards which we rode in the boatyards and car parks of the docks and yacht club. Using canvas and abandoned railway sleepers, we built a fort in a dusty corner of an empty lot and hung out there with David, the rich American from the *Hinckley Resolve*, and Gary and Hudson, a pair of brothers living on a boat called *Scud*.

'Did you know,' Gary told my mother the first time he met her, 'That when Joshua Slocum came to South Africa he met your president Paul Kruger who told him it was impossible to sail around the world because the earth was flat. How backward is that?'

'Really?' answered Mom without looking up from the bikini she was crocheting. 'Very interesting.'

Gary knew a lot about Joshua Slocum because *Scud*, their sloop, was a replica of Slocum's *Spray* and had been built in the same town and even from the same type of wood. Gary's dad wore his beard in the style of Captain Slocum and, on special occasions, a bowler hat too. *Scud*, just like *Spray*, had no electricity or engine and the family used kerosene lamps for light, and long oars to row in and out of port.

Gary, who was 14, had opinions on everything. Like David's new skateboard. After his old one was stolen, David's parents bought him the best board in Cape Town. It had a body of transparent plastic with a kick tail, and polyurethane wheels with slick bearings that would ride over anything, but Gary didn't like it.

'It's not authentic,' he said. 'Skateboards should be flat and made of wood. With small wheels. My dad says our boards are truer to the spirit of skateboarding.'

I'd skated on Hudson's board before and had been thrown off the pier onto the rocks below when it came to a dead stop after hitting a small stone. I knew David had the better board, but like the others, I said nothing because Gary was older than us and the leader. Even David agreed with him and so found his wonderful new board unsatisfactory and pined for an old skateboard with awful wheels.

We were in the fort one day when Gary showed us his new digital watch. It was an ugly thing, with a cheap plastic strap. We all admired it. David looked at his own watch, a Rolex, and didn't like what he saw.

'I'll sell this,' he said.

'How much?'

'Thirty dollars.' It was worth considerably more.

'Nah,' said Gary, shining the face of his digital timepiece. 'Who wants a watch like that?'

But I did, and I told my mother about it.

'If he wants to sell a Rolex for thirty dollars you should buy it,' she said, showing the first signs of a scavenging habit we would all develop. But when I went back to David with the money, he told me his parents had forbidden him to sell the watch.

There were girls at the yacht club too, although they didn't skate or come to the fort because they said it was too dirty. Belinda and her younger sister Kim on *Antoinette* were South African. Their divorced mother Grace, with wild grey hair and a smoker's laugh, was trailing her ex-husband and his new girlfriend as they sailed their yacht *Odette* to America. Grace always needed crew. Young men applying for the post seldom stayed long and needed continual replenishing from a stream of new recruits. The two girls didn't skate but on Friday evenings, while our parents drank at the bar, Gary and Hudson turned down the kerosene lamps in *Scud's* saloon and ignited joss sticks in the Balinese incense burner. With Robert, David and Kim looking on, Hudson, in his best white shirt, clamped me to his stocky chest and danced through the clouds of incense smoke while Gary kissed Belinda.

*

Stocked to the gills with sacks of potatoes and onions, our lockers packed to the brim with whiskey, we left Cape Town on Easter Friday, the 25th of March 1978. A test lay ahead for Dad's new navigational skills; we were aiming for Saint Helena island, 17 kilometres wide and 1 400 sea miles away in the centre of the South Atlantic Ocean. With a new ham radio aboard and a wind vane called Baruch to assist with the steering, we were hoping for mild weather and an enjoyable sail. On the day of our departure the light southeaster that blew, so light in fact that we could hardly get away and had to motor around Robben Island. Nelson Mandela was probably there at the time, resting after a day spent breaking stones in the quarry with his pick axe, but this was apartheid South Africa, so I had never heard of him. And if I had, I would have been told he was a terrorist.

The night before sailing, my mother fried chicken. We had a gas fridge aboard which didn't work at sea because it wasn't gimballed and Dad decided to switch it off a few days

early to get us used to living without one. Mom kept the chicken pieces in a covered bowl until the following day when she served them to us for a late lunch. In the evening, as Table Mountain grew smaller and at last disappeared from the horizon, leaving *Vingila* beyond sight of land for the first time, the breeze freshened. The Cape of Storms had a parting gift for us: a final good bye gale. The breeze grew into a full-strength blow. Wind astern, we lowered the mainsail and made eight knots under a working jib. By then Robert and I were heaving. We had never been seasick before, but while hanging out in the fort with the kids, sea sickness was a frequent topic of conversation. Both Gary and Hudson were ill at sea and their stories were graphic, with full details. However, while there may have been an element of autosuggestion involved in our illness, I'm inclined to blame the chicken. Whatever the cause, for three long days, the gale blew and Robert and I vomited. As *Vingila* pitched and tossed, the table in the main saloon was again latched against the bulkhead and our family lived on the floor. Although living is probably too lively a word to describe our state. After a while Robert and I gave up removing our foul weather gear. I wanted it off, because the smell was awful and it mixed with the pervasive odour of onions from the sacks in the fore peak, but inertia engulfed me. I was too weak to undress myself and my parents, also unwell, were busy dealing with the storm. So Robert and I lay on the floor wrapped in crochet blankets, wearing our oilskins. We dozed and had fitful dreams and our days melted into night and back into day again. The only constant was the nausea, the crying of the wind in the rigging and the thud of waves breaking against *Vingila's* hull. When we became too weak to climb on deck and be sick overboard, we sat in the companionway and vomited directly into the cockpit, which was full of water anyway. As the wind grew stronger, the

storm jib replaced the working jib, and when the wind grew stronger still, we took down the storm jib and, under bare poles, covered 75 miles in 24 hours.

On Easter Monday, four days after our departure, the wind began to ease and we knew the gale had blown itself out. The main saloon table was set up and we got off the floor and gathered around it. My mother had a surprise for us – Easter eggs. Robert and I stripped off our foul weather gear and ate three eggs each; the type with a squishy yellow marshmallow yolk and a covering of thin, cracked chocolate. They were the first thing I had eaten in days and they tasted delicious. Somehow, they stayed down.

The wind died completely. After rolling on long swells for a few hours, a gentle fifteen knot south-easterly wind sprang up and blew away the clouds. It was a trade wind – a wonderful, mythical, trade wind – blowing from just the right direction. A wind we had read and dreamed about, but had nearly given up hope of ever encountering. Way back in Benoni, however, we had prepared our boat for such a wind; we raised a pair of jibs on *Vingila's* twin fore stays, with whisker poles to hold them out, and we set our new self steering device, Baruch, on course with the wind behind us.

When the weather warmed, we removed our heavy clothing and packed away our foul weather gear. Dad went even further – he shed all his clothes. My mother was aghast.

‘Frank,’ she said, ‘the kids...’

But my father was set. While working in the hot foundries, wearing his dirty overalls, he had thought constantly of the yacht on the calendar, the yacht with white sails on a blue sea. And when, in his sailing dreams, he had pictured himself on that yacht, he was most decidedly naked. This was all new to Robert and me. In Benoni, Dad had been a shadowy figure, arriving home late at night, grimy and smelling of engine oil, to give us a goodnight

kiss. Weekends, he was irritable and focused on *Vingila*. The little I had seen of him before we went sailing certainly hadn't been naked. It looked painful when his soft white buttocks sank into the crevices of the non-slip cork deck as he sat down to take sights, but it didn't bother him. Initially, he suffered sunburn on tender, previously unexposed skin but it soon toughened up. In the evenings when it got cooler and he felt the chill, he slipped on a T-shirt, allowing the tip of his penis to peep out from beneath its hem. I had never seen Dad so content. His unfettered scrotum, swinging happily back and forth to the roll of the boat as he pored over charts at the navigation table, distracted me as I tried to read in the main saloon. But you get used to anything eventually.

At the time we stowed our foul-weather gear away, we vacated the saloon. Robert returned to his bunk in the fore peak where, having grown accustomed to the oniony smell, he slept amongst sacks of vegetables. My parents and I returned to our respective cabins. My hatch was left open; at night the warm wind wafted in and I could lie in my bunk and watch the stars. I had never seen such stars before; they blazed across the dome of the sky and formed great clusters and nebulae, like luminous balls of cotton wool, and streaking vapour trails of light almost bright enough to read by.

Vingila rolled back and forth down the waves and Baruch went twang-thunk, twang-thunk as he steered our boat along, keeping the wind behind her. We weren't sure we liked him yet. We were learning that mechanical self steering devices make capricious, unreliable friends. We named ours after an Israeli man in Cape Town who wanted to accompany us to Brazil. Dad explained that we were expecting a wind vane, and if it didn't arrive, he could join and help out with the night watches. However, if we received our steering device, we'd sail alone, as a family. When the wind vane was delivered the following week we named it

after our would-be crew member. After investigating several commercial wind vanes, Dad had designed Baruch himself. The contraption was composed of a canvas sail spread over a stainless steel frame, which connected, via levers, pulleys and shafts, to an auxiliary rudder suspended from *Vingila's* overhanging stern. To set the device, (which like others of his kind, seemed to have a life and personality of his own), we fixed *Vingila's* own rudder and then tightened a screw, which transferred the responsibility of steering the boat to the auxiliary rudder and maintained the boat on a fixed course relative to the wind. With Baruch set on a broad reach, for example, *Vingila* kept to a broad reach even if the wind turned 180 degrees and she reached in the opposite direction. Setting a wind vane requires some skill to achieve the balance between sails, wind and rudder. We didn't always manage it at first. After a day or two, however, we learned to sleep with Baruch holding course, although it was a light sleep, alert always to changes in the motion of our boat.

At night, on the quiet waters of the South Atlantic, we felt safe with Baruch holding course to a steady wind and we didn't keep a constant watch, trusting the few ships in that empty part of the ocean to avoid us. Although my father and mother awoke intermittently through the night to check the horizon for stray lights before returning to bed, they never saw any. Apart from ships we had no other concerns; the wind direction was not expected to change and no shoals or reefs lay ahead. In the mornings I collected flying fish on the deck. If they were big enough, we fried them for breakfast. They were bony but delicious. We set fishing lines out as the sun rose into the sky. We baked bread. In the cockpit, under an awning, we ate long lunches of fresh fish and boiled potatoes sprinkled with olive oil and dehydrated parsley. Robert and I did school work while Dad navigated; the triangles of intersect-

ing lines on the chart denoting our position became smaller each day and moved further across the ocean, away from the coast of Africa.

We read and had afternoon naps and Dad chatted to other yachtsmen on his new ham radio. Leonard had urged him to buy the apparatus, saying all cruising yachts had them. At first Dad wasn't convinced because an operator's license was compulsory and he'd had enough of tests and exams. But Leonard explained that if Dad was careful and didn't use the radio in busy ports where he could be tracked down, he could become a pirate operator with an illegal call sign, and in this way he could keep up with sailing news. We learned that whiskey was selling in Brazil for ten times the South African duty-free price and that the people of Saint Helena had run out of potatoes and onions because their supply ship had broken down. This explained why *Vingila* left Cape Town laden with hooch and root vegetables.

On the airwaves, Dad met Bill (ZD7 Sliver Dollar) and Sybil (ZD7 Sugar Sugar), an elderly husband and wife who lived on Saint Helena and who had once, from their island, talked to an astronaut on the moon with their ham radio. As the warm wind blew steadily, our skies remained clear, but Bill reported that it was rainin', rainin', rainin' in Saint Helena.

Pepe, who'd found his sea legs, strolled the decks, barking at the flying fish shooting over the waves. At night, the clear PVC tubing of the toilet glowed with green phosphorescence when we operated the pump. Day after day, the sun rose from the sea at dawn and dissolved back into it again in the evening when we hauled aboard our fishing lines to avoid catching the long-toothed, inedible wolf mackerel that came up at night from the depths to feed.

Our perfect existence was marred only by dehydrated vegetables. We had cases of the stuff. Mom had bought them after reading Bernard Moitessier. Bernard was a major contender in the world's first solo, non-stop, around-the-world yacht race. Near England and in the lead, he turned away from the finish line to sail halfway again around the world to Tahiti. His book *The Long Way* describes the voyage and his mystical love of sailing and the sea. From his writing it is apparent that food wasn't a driving force in his life, and that while he may have been an excellent seaman, he wasn't much of a cook. For more than a year he survived on rice, condensed milk and dried vegetables. Inspired by the book, and not thinking that Bernard never stopped to buy fresh food and so was forced to eat what he could, Mom bought ten assorted cases of desiccated vegetables without first tasting any of them. Although Moitessier also drank a can of condensed milk a day, we didn't see any of that. We only got the vegetables and they were horrible. My parents were children of the Second World War, however, and unable to waste food, so we had to eat them, somehow. 'Spinach' was a green powder which turned to a khaki sludge with the addition of water. 'Mixed Vegetables' – nubbins of yellow, green and white flakes – stayed hard no matter how long they were soaked or how vigourously they were boiled, but were nevertheless pronounced 'not bad' by my mother. Which even she couldn't say about the dried tomato paste; brittle maroon coils that tasted simultaneously bitter and sour, and were guaranteed to ruin any food. A better cook might have done something with these substances, like throw them overboard, but we were not good cooks – and on a tight budget besides – so we had to eat them. This was our daily trial.

At eleven o'clock in the morning of the eighth of April, exactly fourteen days after leaving Cape Town, my mother sighted a faint blue smudge on the horizon off our port bow;

it was land, and confirmation that the sights my father had shot and calculations he had made were true, for we had found Saint Helena, and a good thing too. Unlike the Pacific, islands are sparse in the Atlantic, and the next one along was Ascension, seven hundred miles away. After that there was nothing except the North Atlantic ocean. We adjusted *Baruch* a little and approached the windward side of the island; a protruding tip of an ancient volcanic mountain rising sharply from the ocean floor. Slowly, like a polaroid image, the hazy blue smudge developed details and features; the colour deepened, becoming greener, the topography grew mountainous. With steep cliff walls plunging directly into the dark sea, the place had the guarded, unwelcoming appearance of a fortress or medieval castle. Such were the constancy of the trade winds, that we noticed the island was divided into a wet, green windward side and a dry, brown leeward one. At sunset we reached the anchorage – a poorly defined bay – on the leeward side of the island. Ignoring a friendly light flashing from shore, we tacked back and forth all night without sleeping. The next morning, after the sun rose, we motored in directly. A pair of polished basalt ridges rose above us, compressing a small village into the wedge-shaped valley below. It was as if a slow battle was taking place between the rock and human habitation; the dwellings driving a wedge into the heart of the island, the mountains straining to push the buildings into the sea. We dropped anchor in four fathoms of dark blue water and watched our chain snake toward the sea floor and land in a puff of sand, where it was inspected by a few curious fish.

Chapter 6

St Helena

Getting ashore in Jamestown, the capital of St Helena, proved tricky. After rowing to the landing and negotiating the pier – a slick concrete slab awash in surge – we jumped out and hoisted our dinghy clear of the swell. Carrying several bags of potatoes and onions, and Pepe, we climbed a flight of green slime-slicked stairs. A small crowd gathered to watch us and at the top of the ascent we were confronted by a fisherman in plastic boots.

‘Why’d you stay out all night?’ he asked, ‘Aven’t you seen my light flashing to show you the way in?’

Mom and Dad had no easy answer for him because in daylight we could see how embarrassingly easy the approach was.

‘We’re looking for Bill and Sybil, but we don’t know their last names,’ said Mom. ‘The ham radio operators.’

The man waved his hand over his left ear as if he were shooing a fly. ‘Oh yes, on the hill, t’other side of the village.’

Bill and Sybil lived on a hill away from Jamestown, in an area of good radio reception and high rainfall. Dad said that after two weeks at sea, some exercise would do us good, but we didn’t find walking easy. The path was steep and the earth felt strangely unsteady beneath our feet; it swayed and gave way at irregular intervals, making us stagger. Our gait, too, had altered. We walked hesitantly, with our knees flexed, prepared for waves that never came. Slowly, we made our way out of Jamestown and began to climb the hill. Leaving the

sun behind us, we entered a cloud which – as we drew higher – thickened and sagged further under the weight of its vapour. At Bill and Sybil's home it had grown so heavy it could no longer support itself and lay draped over the tangled cables of their radio antennae. A steady drizzle began to fall. The house – a shack really – was painted a startling shade of pink .

A rotund, brown-skinned woman answered our knock. She wore her hair in a greasy bun and streaks of her scalp showed through the carefully combed strands lying flat against her head. Swollen ankles disappeared into sagging wool socks and a pair of misshapen slippers. Her eyes, arranged above a pair of generous cheeks, blinked in the drizzle. She smelled slightly sweet, of yeast and dampness.

'ZD7 Sugar Sugar?' asked Dad.

'Yes,' said the woman, eyeing Pepe, who was dripping wet and showing imminent signs of shaking himself dry.

'It's me, Frank.'

The woman looked blank.

'ZS6 Foxy Fox,' said Dad.

A smile spread across the expanse of her face, beginning at the jowls and finishing around the eyes and forehead, 'ZS6 Foxy Fox!' she said, 'Come on in.'

Pictures of astronauts decorated the inside walls. Most of them had been torn from magazines but one, in a heavy official frame, was an original signed photograph. Lace curtains on the single window restricted incoming light, leaving the damp interior as grey as the cloud outside. Worn paths in the lino led to the kitchen and bedroom. Dominating the living area, a ham radio sat on a pedestal before a pair of empty but attentive chairs.

'Bill,' Sybil called, and an equally rotund man shuffled out of the bedroom. 'It's Frank Stilwell and his family.'

'Who?' said Bill.

'You know, ZS6 Foxy Fox.'

'ZS6 Foxy Fox! Well I never. Good to meet you at last.'

'We've brought these potatoes and onions,' said Dad, handing Bill the sacks. Bill thanked him before stacking them in the corner.

Sybil shouldered her way through a curtain of plastic beads to reach a tiny kitchen where she began to prepare tea; putting a kettle to boil and stacking chipped cups on a melamine tray decorated with space rockets and landing capsules. Dad and Bill admired the ham radio before going outside to inspect the antennae. When they returned, still discussing the benefits of different lengths of cable aerials, Sybil poured tea. I hesitated before reaching for my mug. I had never before drunk tea before with anybody who wasn't white. In both of my grandmother's houses, the maids had their own cutlery and crockery and Dad's 'work boy' who sat on the back of his bakkie wasn't even allowed into our kitchen. I watched Mom and Dad carefully to see what they would do. When, chatting away, they reached for their tea and began drinking, I did the same. The tea tasted no different than usual, and Bill and Sybil's voices were reassuringly familiar. They talked of the weather and the times and radio frequencies of various maritime talk groups where we could find other yachtsmen. They recommended that my father apply in Jamestown for a courtesy call-sign, which he could use in island waters. The people at the radio office, they said, never checked for license papers. The talk was easy and relaxed and I realised that while chatting to Bill and Sybil on the radio, they had simply become our friends.

*

‘Saints’ as the islanders are called, are descendants of British soldiers, whalers, freed slaves, sailors and employees of the English East India Company. They’ve been living on St Helena since 1659 and not always voluntarily. However, over the past hundred years attitudes have changed and at the time of our visit, modern Saints were homebodies, not wishing to leave their island. About 800 people lived in the main village of Jamestown: two rows of Regency houses with verandas and iron fretwork arranged along a main road, flanked by a huddle of smaller dwellings, all squeezed into the narrow valley and in some places crawling reluctantly up its sides. In the centre of town we found the law courts, a miniature jail, a library, and a public park with benches and shady trees. A lady in a straw sun-hat told us the trees were weepuls, from India. A whitewashed castle bearing the arms of the Honourable East India Company, stood opposite the park. We were charmed.

‘This reminds me of England 50 years ago,’ Dad said.

Being in his thirties at the time, I wondered how he would know.

‘Saint Helena is an island full of history,’ said the taxi driver – a withered man in a flat cap – when he drove us to Longwood the following day. He twisted around in his seat to see us better. His mouth, when he smiled, was a dark cave inhabited by a few lonely teeth. ‘Going to Napoleon’s house are you?’

Island speech was distinctive, with remnants of Cockney from the settlers who arrived after the Great Fire of London, the odd word of Malay and Afrikaans and traces of old English too, like the transposition of v and w I would later read in Dickens’ *Pickwick Papers*.

‘No, not today,’ said Dad. ‘We’re going to Joyce and Eric Mercury at the dairy.’

‘That would explain the taters, then,’ said the driver who had inspected the bags closely as he’d loaded them into the boot.

Joyce, a friend of Al and Eva Fox’s, taught at the Longwood School and Al had asked us on the radio to bring vegetables because the school had run out. To reach Longwood we hired one of the island’s two taxis and got a history lesson thrown in for free. The elderly vehicle, guided by an equally elderly driver, juddered up the steep ascent from Jamestown and passed a dry heart-shaped waterfall before reaching green hills. The roads were narrow, winding and bordered by hedges. I had read the place names on the chart before we made landfall and had been delighted: Half Tree Hollow, Deadwood Plain, Barren Ground, the Briar’s and Breakneck Valley. Robert and I had just read *The Hobbit* and the entire island looked and sounded very much like Middle Earth and the Shire. I half expected to see furry-footed hobbits popping from their burrows.

‘Very hilly,’ said Dad, looking out the window.

‘Too hilly for an airport, they tell us, so we rely on the mail ship and now that’s stopped too. But they’ve promised us a new wessel, running once a month from Cape Town here and on to Ascension and England. The *RMS St Helena*. Just don’t know when we’ll get her, ’cause there’s been a delay.’ Our driver turned off the engine and freewheeled down an incline. He winked at Robert and me, ‘Doing what I can to save petrol, I am.’

We rounded a corner.

‘What’s that?’ asked Robert, pointing at a field of grotesque plants sprouting massive distorted flower heads. They looked monstrous and neglected and they lay toppled over, caught in coils of weeds as if they’d been wrestling. Trolls and orcs would probably live here, I thought, or perhaps goblins.

'New Zealand flax,' said the driver. 'Grown to make twine, but after losing the contract we stopped farming.'

He went on to tell us, as he probably told every visitor who hired his taxi, the sad story of Saint Helena's economy. How, for the first few hundred years after its discovery in 1502 by the Portuguese, the island had been an important stop off point for sailing ships, so much so that it was claimed by the English East India Company in 1659 as their first settlement. When sailing ships were replaced by steamers, coal stores were established near the harbour. But over the years, as first sailing ships and then steam ships declined, so too did Saint Helena's importance as a trading post and supply point. Once it ceased to be profitable, the East India Company gave the island to Britain and although the Union Jack flies at the governor's office in Jamestown, the island has slipped gradually into increasing poverty and isolation. In 1907, after several failed ventures, including a mackerel canning plant and an attempt to grow cinchona trees for quinine, not to mention a stab at whaling after the whales had all been whaled, the flax was planted and in 1951 for the first, and sadly last time in history, Saint Helena's exports exceeded its imports. But, the taxi driver told us, a few years after the island's economic triumph, the British postal service, the island's main and possibly only customer, decided to close its post bags with nylon string, thus shutting down the island's flax industry.

'So how do people make money around here?' Dad asked.

The taxi driver grimaced, showing his few last teeth clinging to a rim of red, decaying gum. 'Half of the folks work for the local government and the rest fish or make lace. For some, like me, there's work from tourists, but tha's been scarce since the ship broke down and all. For others there's aid from London. The young fellas, well, they go to Ascension.'

'To the north?'

'Oh yes,' said the driver, 'most of our boys go over to Ascension to work on contract at the cable station or at the air fields for a year or two. But they all come back.'

'They do?' asked Dad.

'Well they don't have much of a choice now, do they? The Union Jack may fly at the governor's office, but we can't live in England.'

'Why not?'

'Don't have English passports now, do we? Or any British citizen's rights either, for that matter. And that's in spite of the Charter. Odd really, 'cos the Falklanders and folks from Tristan de Cunha have passports. London can't explain that, so here we sit, looking for a living. They say there's work in Cape Town and some folks go there, but ...' his voice trailed off.

'You're from South Africa aren't you?' he asked.

Mom and Dad nodded, perhaps imagining life on the wrong side of the colour bar.

'It's a beautiful country, South Africa,' said Mom.

'So I've heard,' he said, looking sideways through the window at the hedges, green hills and ruined fields of flax.

'Yes,' said Dad, 'one of the most beautiful countries in the world.'

In Longwood, the second largest settlement on the island after Jamestown, oak trees shaded a few whitewashed buildings. Joyce Mercury stood waiting for us at the dairy, adjacent the two-roomed school. She was school principle and, before it had closed from lack of funds, her husband had run the dairy. Our taxi driver helped unload the sacks of vegetables, then he doffed his cap, scratched his head and asked for part payment of his fare in potatoes.

*

From the start I knew that I loved Saint Helena. The roads in Jamestown may have been too rough for skateboarding but it had other attractions, like four ancient tortoises from Reunion Island that roamed the grounds of the governor's house, munching his lawn and groaning hoarsely when they mated. The village bakery served fresh bread, barracuda fish cakes and good meat pies and at eleven o'clock each night the local bobby, a member of the island's police force visited the pub to warn the patrons it was closing time. Prisoners in the jail, most of them incarcerated for unruly behaviour and disturbing the peace, were let out each morning for a swim, and later in the day all activity on the island halted for afternoon tea, which was usually served with cucumber sandwiches. It was charming, out of date, very civilised and also oddly familiar. The high teas with cakes and sandwiches, the cobblestones, the castle, the hills and hedges, the way the people spoke, all harked back to the mythical world of Enid Blyton. The children in her books lived in a gentle green country and had never heard of peanut butter, government brown bread or broccoli. In South Africa I was surrounded by Zulu miners wearing wood plugs in their stretched earlobes and women who walked with pots on their heads through waist-high grass in the harsh highveld sunshine, and Enid described a world as foreign and exotic to me as China. I'd read almost everything she wrote and had failed to reconcile any of it with reality until I reached Saint Helena.

Jacob's Ladder might have been lifted directly from the pages of a fairy story. It was a stairway of 699 stone steps (a century of use trod the 700th step into the earth) that led directly up Ladder Hill from Jamestown and looked as if it reached magical, ever changing lands where children could have adventures. In fact it was built by the Royal Engineers for

soldiers to carry ammunition and supplies to the fort on top where there are also barracks, a signal station and an observatory. At the time of our visit the barracks and fort were quiet; lookouts were no longer needed to guard coal supplies once held for passing ships, and Jacob's Ladder served as an occasional tourist attraction and as a giant slide for the local boys and girls who hooked their ankles over one banister and their elbows over the other to glide all the way down from the top. One morning we walked up the endless stairs to see the fort, but when Robert and I wanted to slide down, Mom refused, saying she didn't want to deal with a broken leg.

At Joyce's invitation Robert and I went to school. Robert was relegated to the wood-work shed with the boys, while I spent time in a big room with a coal fire stove, boiling potatoes and learning to bake tea-cake with the girls. Joyce showed me how to knot lace. I liked that. I sat with a special cushion on my lap and, using a pattern, pins, and thread wound around a set of bobbins, I twisted and plaited strands to produce somewhat lumpy looking lace. This, I thought, was how school should be.

*

'What's that?' Robert asked, showing interest at last.

The chalk-white object holding his attention was slightly smaller than a head and bore folded, human features.

'I don't know. It looks like some sort of a face,' I said.

The lady in a droopy floral dress, overheard us. 'That,' she said, 'is the ex-emperor's death mask.'

We were in Longwood, in the house of Saint Helena's most reluctant resident; Napoleon Bonaparte. Although smaller than I imagined, the bungalow was set in a spacious, beau-

tiful garden and was painted the same startling shade of pink as Bill and Sybil's shack. I wondered if there had been an island special on paint. A French flag flew at the entrance.

'Welcome to France,' the lady in the baggy dress had said when we arrived at the front door after walking up the serpentine driveway. I wondered if she'd been watching out for us because we hadn't even had a chance to knock before she'd opened the door.

'France?' said Mom, 'I thought St Helena was English.'

The lady gave her a triumphant smile. 'Not this part. Queen Victoria sold it to France.'

She said she was a volunteer from the local historical society and offered us a tour, leading the way through a series of gloomy wood-panelled rooms decorated with old pictures and busts. Mom and Dad spent forever looking at the display cabinets containing hanks of Napoleon's hair, medals and items of his underwear, while Robert and I, fighting a growing feeling of confinement, fidgeted and longed to be outside. At last we reached the emperor's death bed, which was not grand at all. I had been expecting a four poster, swathed in yards of linen and muslin, and instead we were shown a narrow, knee-high folding metal cot. It looked very uncomfortable.

'Is this really his bed?' I asked, scanning the room for an alternative.

But apparently Napoleon, constantly on war campaigns, had lost the ability to sleep in anything else. I felt strangely disappointed. A great man, I thought, should have a great bed, or at least manage to die in one. I was glad to see that his bath, a stately copper tub with high, curved sides, looked fitting for an emperor.

Then Robert spotted the death mask and was intrigued. 'How did they make it?' he asked our guide.

'After he died, they rubbed his face with a greasy ointment like Vaseline, and then poured plaster of Paris over it. They used the ointment so the plaster wouldn't stick and they could peel the impression off easily.

Robert moved around the cabinet, viewing the object from different angles.

'Did all the people have one?'

'Oh yes, everyone who could afford it had a death mask in those days. You must remember that they didn't have photographs yet, so this was quite the fashionable thing to do. As soon as a person died they called for an undertaker and the mask maker.'

Robert and I leaned closer. In death, Napoleon's crumpled face bore an expression of extreme dissatisfaction.

'He doesn't look very happy.' I said.

'Of course not stupid, he'd just died.' Robert said.

'I know that, Robert. What I mean is, apart from just having died, he looks as if he'd been unhappy for a while.'

I turned to the woman in the floral dress. 'Was he happy?'

'I don't suppose so. He'd been an emperor, you see, the most powerful man in the world, before he lost the war and was brought to this island as a prisoner. Of course we love it, but it's hardly the centre of the universe. It was difficult for him. And he was sick.'

When Napoleon arrived his house had not been ready because the builders had fallen behind schedule. While waiting to move in he'd had to live in a small bungalow in town, where Arthur Wesley, later the Duke of Wellington and the man who defeated him at Waterloo, had once stayed. After such an inauspicious beginning, his situation didn't improve and he spent the final six years of his life soaking in the bath and writing his memoirs, squab-

bling with the governor, who he detested, and searching the island for a suitable place to be buried. Then the governor, fearful the general would escape, forbade him to leave Longwood without an escort. Napoleon retreated to his bathtub. Depressed and in constant pain, possibly as a result of being slowly poisoned, his doctor suggested that a bit of gardening may be beneficial.

‘Napoleon loved his garden,’ said the lady in the floral dress leading us outside.

A system of sunken paths intersected the overflowing flowerbeds. We were told that the emperor, annoyed by the guards – and other people – who peered over the hedges at him, instructed his gardener to dig down so that he couldn’t be seen. Because he was so short, the task wasn’t too difficult, and he was able to take his walks and tend his garden in peace. The lady in the floral dress pointed out the surrounding trees – they had been planted by Napoleon himself, she said, and so too the everlasting flowers which bloomed around us.

*

Saint Helena and her Saints were gentle, friendly and generous. Years later a friend would tell me how he lost his virginity in Jamestown with a prostitute, but as a child I never explored that side of island life. However, before reaching the island, we had heard some other disturbing rumours. Al and Eva Fox warned us on the ham radio – as soon as I heard Al say ‘don’t tell the children,’ he had my attention – but I found his story difficult to believe, because everybody we met seemed so nice and normal. During our final week on the island I decided to broach the subject with Gary, Joyce’s foster son. We were in the dairy’s garden at the time, admiring a shoo-shoo vine and its thorny pale green squash, several of which we had just eaten with melted margarine for lunch.

‘Is it true,’ I said, ‘that you eat dolphins?’

Gary was a plump child of eight, and he turned to look at me with languid brown eyes.

He didn't appear at all shocked or upset by my question.

'If God didn't want us to eat them,' he replied placidly, 'He wouldn't have put them in the sea now, would he?'

Fair enough, but I didn't want to see dolphins slaughtered or eaten. One day, however, towards the end of our stay, we arrived at the concrete landing with our dinghy to find that a group of fishermen had harpooned several dolphins and were butchering them on the pier. Too intelligent to take fishing lures, they had been harpooned. The concrete was awash with bright mammalian blood and I spotted several pairs of lungs set aside to be discarded. One of the dead dolphins had been pregnant because, curled amid the severed heads and entrails like an outsized jelly baby, lay a perfectly formed dolphin foetus. I thought of Gary and how he had gone on to say, 'But why are you so upset anyway? You eat cows, don't you?'

In spite of the slaughtered dolphins, I would have liked to stay longer on St Helena, baking tea-cakes at school, knotting lace and drinking tea in the afternoons. Leaving was difficult, but the actual act of sailing away was ridiculously easy. We simply pulled up the anchor, motored a short distance from the island's lee, and found the south-east trade winds waiting to blow us to Ascension. We raised twin jibs, adjusted the whisker poles and set Baruch on course. After two weeks in port it was easy to slip back into the rhythms of sea life; mom baked bread, my father shed his clothes, and the sun – unimpeded by land – rose and sank each day from the sea. We carried with us parcels and letters for Saints working on Ascension and I had a parting gift from Joyce; a lace-making cushion with a set of bobbins and spools of bright turquoise thread. Mom had given Joyce my Nana's address, and the two women began a correspondence that lasted until my grandmother's death. Long after I fin-

ished sailing I could still catch up on news from Saint Helena: a missing cow, two men arrested for having an altercation over a donkey, and an unusually good catch of tuna for March.

Chapter 7

Ascension Island

‘Waddle it be?’ Beneath a wedge of bristling hair, our waiter’s features arranged themselves into an inquiring smile.

Fortunately, after spending time with American yachties, we understood him and knew exactly what we wanted.

‘Four cheeseburgers and four cokes,’ Dad said with a tone that implied ‘and bugger the expense.’

‘Yawl wand french fries?’

Of course we wanted french fries. This was our big treat. We wanted the lot. We were sitting on plastic seats in an hermetically sealed white box balanced on crushed volcanic rock and, after weeks of tropical trade winds, we found the air conditioning uncomfortably cold. A juke box played pop songs while, beyond the permanently closed windows, a moon-scape baked in the sun. The scorched island of Ascension looked like nothing on earth. In the early days of space travel, astronauts had been sent here to prepare for the visual shock of the lunar landscape. Ascension, like Saint Helena, is formed by the protruding tip of an oceanic volcano. But Ascension – geologically new – arises from the very crest of an abyssal suture line, the Mid-Atlantic Ridge which is the birthing place of South Atlantic islands. Saint Helena, also formed here, has drifted south over the millennia, its cone becoming extinct on the way. Ascension is Mordor to the Shire of Saint Helena, but with clearer skies. Six hundred years ago its dormant cone erupted and the island still slumbers uneasily; prone

to occasional shudders, and belches of hot mud and puffs of steam. Away from the few settlements there are only black volcanic rocks, cinder cones, outlandish lava flows and naked silence. Green Mountain – the highest peak – is barely green although the sprinkling of vegetation which grows on the windward side extends its range each year by a few metres. In several more centuries, if the volcano stays sleeping, Ascension may well become as green as its older siblings to the south.

Al on *Foxtrot* had told us about the cheeseburgers.

‘The best greasy cheeseburgers in the South Atlantic,’ he’d said over the ham radio. He was American and so we trusted his judgement on burgers. These were pre-cooked and flown from the United States on a plane.

On arriving at the island after a week at sea eating nothing but fish, rice, dehydrated vegetables and the last of our potatoes, a longing for cheeseburgers had been instilled in us too. We made our way directly to Cat Hill and the mess hall at the American air base.

Ascension, barely 10 kilometres across, is even smaller than Saint Helena. After rowing across transparent water and beaching our dingy on a strip of salt-white sand that terminated abruptly in black rocks, we began walking along an unexpected broad tarred road. A stroll around the island, however, wasn’t easy. After a week at sea we were prepared for unstable ground and a clumsy flexed knee gait, but we never expected to be stopped by so many Americans in air conditioned vehicles, all of whom insisted on giving us lifts. After several refusals and repeated explanations that we wanted to walk, we finally gave in and accepted a ride to Cat Hill. Besides, Ascension lies seven degrees south of the equator and inland, away from the cooling sea breeze, the sun and heat bounced off the black rocks and had begun to grill us.

From our chilly booth in the canteen we looked out on lava flows and a huddle of cuboid buildings baking in the sun. On this island, it seemed, it was either too hot or too cold. We listened to the juke box and exchanged smiles with young men, mostly Saints by the look of them, who all had cropped hair and drank Coke.

Our cheeseburgers arrived. Dad lifted the top off his and looked inside.

'Don't get much for the price,' he said.

The white bun dissolved in my mouth, leaving nothing but a thin film of sludge with a faint, slightly sweet aftertaste. The cheese, processed into a perfect uniform square, failed to melt, but succeeded in gluing the grey meat patty to the bun. Rolled into balls, I felt certain it would bounce like silly putty, assuming I could ever get permission to play with my food. I took a sip of cola so sweet it made my ears ache, and turned to the french fries which were every bit as greasy as I'd expected them to be.

*

After my encounter with American burgers and fries, I was upset when Mom refused to let me taste either the pina coladas or banana daquiris. We were in a foreign country and I wanted to try everything. My mother refused because she said the drinks contained alcohol. Bonnie offered to make a pitcher of cocktails without rum, which sounded wonderful to me, but Mom told her not to worry, Robert and I preferred water. Then she felt remorseful and offered me a sip of her drink. It was very sweet and tasted slightly oily, with floaty bits of fibre and fruit pulp and underlying aroma of rum which reminded me of diesel fuel. It was definitely the most exotic drink I'd ever tasted and I wasn't sure I liked it. Bonnie told us the canned pineapple juice came from Hawaii and had arrived on a ship from America. Everything in Ascension came on either a ship or a plane: the juice and tinned coconut milk,

Bonnie's three bed roomed ranch-style, and possibly even the strip of grass around it. Mack and Bonnie, a couple from Florida, both had pale skin and sparse eyelashes and looked so alike they might have been brother and sister. She was prettier than he was, with soft blue eyes and a nose garnished with freckles. She really was quite attractive, Dad said later in private, except for those thick ankles of hers. When it came to women's legs, Dad was an expert and frequently provided us with detailed leg reviews of woman we met. We all knew Mom had great legs. She'd once won a Lucky Legs competition on Durban beach and as proof we had a picture of her in a bikini with a satin sash across her shoulder. My mother had more than great legs; she was patient, cheerful, easy-going, resilient and game for adventure. She could catch fish, bake bread, knit and crochet. She taught Robert and me. Only thing was, my father said, sometimes she knew just how to piss him off.

Bonnie's legs didn't seem to bother Mack, her husband. He worked as a supervisor for the undersea cable company which was, in pre-satellite days, the biggest employer on the island. We were discovering that supervisors tended to be British or American, while Saint Helena supplied the workers. Everyone, however, was on contract. Ascension was – and is – an island without natives or permanent residents. We heard that even babies delivered in the tiny hospital couldn't be citizens of Ascension and had to take their parents' nationality. The British who own the island but lease most of it to America, hardly consider it to be a place. In an early inventory of the empire it was classified, along with a few other unpromising marine rocks, as 'a stone sloop of the lesser class' and for the first hundred years children delivered on the island were deemed to have been born at sea.

Mack, our cocktail host, was yet another friend of Al and Eva Fox, and a fellow shell collector. I wondered sometimes if we were taking the Al and Eva Fox tour of the South At-

lantic. Bonnie and he were childless and he treated me uneasily, in the forced, condescending manner of somebody trying without success to like children. He was disappointed, I suspected, to find that I was more interested in conchology than my father but while my parents sipped their sickly cocktails, Mack made the best of it and invited me to see his collection. The shells were kept in a spare bedroom, where a child would have slept if they had had one. Cabinets lined the walls, surrounding a central, sheet enshrouded table. We looked through all the shells in the the drawers but I found myself enticed by the covered table.

‘What’s under here?’ I asked, lifting a corner of cotton cloth.

Mack swept the sheet away like a magician.

‘Just got back from a holiday in the Philippines, where I dived out these beauties.’

On the table were at least a hundred map cowries which I recognised from my shell book. ‘*Cyprea mappa*,’ – I had read in *Sea Shells of the World* – ‘is a large, uncommon cowrie with distinctive markings like the map of a winding river on its dorsal surface.’

‘Wow,’ I said, ‘So many *mappas*.’

And then I added, just in case he hadn’t got the hint, ‘And I don’t even have one.’

He spent some time looking through the shells, picking them over.

‘Well now you do,’ he said. ‘This one’s for you.’

The cowrie he gave me was a juvenile and, from a shell collectors point of view, almost worthless. I couldn’t understand why he had even taken the shell, killing the animal before it had a chance to reach maturity. I took it and thanked him politely, hiding my disappointment. He looked at me speculatively.

‘Come here,’ he said, ‘I want to show you something.’

He opened a book on his desk.

‘Will you remember this?’ he asked, showing me a photograph of a rust-coloured cowrie with white dorsal spots and well-defined orange teeth. I looked at the picture and nodded; I was quite sure I could remember the shell. Under the photograph was a name: *Cyprea surinamensis*.

‘When you sail to a place in Brazil called Fortaleza, find the fishing boats, and look for one of these. If you post it to me, I’ll send you twenty dollars.’

He gave me a sticker with his name and address and made me promise to do as he said, then we returned to the kitchen where Bonnie and my parents were still sipping their pina coladas and banana daiquiris.

*

The sea around Ascension was so clear it looked transparent, an effect heightened by the whiteness of the underlying sand. It seemed perfect for snorkelling, except for a few ragged, mobile stains which, on closer examination, showed themselves to be schools of black-skinned fish roughly fifteen centimetres long. These, we were told, were blackfish. Their appearance was unremarkable but we quickly discovered that they made piranhas seem as docile and well behaved as goldfish. Blackfish were a type of trigger fish, thick-skinned grazers with a trigger-like fin on their back who usually swam in pairs or alone on tropical reefs and nibbled at seaweed. The blackfish of Ascension, however, swam in packs and ate everything. At the slightest splash, they congregated in a heaving mass. They devoured anything we threw overboard, leaping into the air to consume apple-cores, dehydrated tomato whirls, egg shells and onion peels. When we pumped the out the toilet, the water beside the hull boiled with deranged trigger fish fighting for the choicest bits – and they ate every last scrap of toilet paper too. Fishing was impossible. Well, fishing for anything other than

blackfish, that is. As as soon as bait touched water the blackfish swarmed. Their jaws and teeth were so strong they often bit through our hooks. And blackfish were cannibals. Snagged fish not lifted from the sea were torn to shreds by their fellows. They were demonic. When Robert landed one and, on a whim, held an apple to its mouth, it lunged at the fruit, taking frantic mechanical bites, like a battery operated toy. Its jaws only stopped moving when it died.

When Mack offered to show my father how to dive for cowries, and said he would teach us how to clean them without damaging the nacre, I wondered how anyone could swim in the waters of Ascension. Mack said he would fetch Dad at five o'clock. While we waited, Robert and I watched a recently arrived yachtie don a mask and flippers and jump into the water. We saw a dark cloud divert its course and converge on him. Seconds later he leapt out with a blackfish clamped firmly to his lower lip. A woman, alerted by the man's howl, rushed from the companionway to help him. From where we sat, it didn't look as if the fish was letting go.

'I don't know how Dad's going to dive here,' Robert said, dangling his own dead blackfish by the tail as he spoke. The movement dislodged a piece of apple – the creature's dying bite – from its mouth. Idly, my brother lay the fish on the bait board and slit it open. I almost expected to see circuits and tangled wires inside, but within the carapace of thick dark skin lay perfectly white fish fillets.

'What'll we do with this?' he asked.

'Bait?' I said.

'Don't need it. They take a bare hook.'

'We're not eating it, that's for sure.'

'Feed it to Pepe?' I suggested.

Pepe, at the sound of his name, lifted his head. In Benoni he'd been taken every few weeks for a 'lamb chop' trim and he'd looked like a poodle, now his fur, shaggy and matted with salt, hung down in clumps of thick dreadlocks. He peered at us from beneath the rough fringe my mother had hacked above his eyes.

'He won't eat it,' said Robert. 'But he'll enjoy this. Pepe, come here boy.'

And he threw the butchered fish into the water where, in the churning water, it was immediately stripped to the bone by its mates while Pepe barked himself into a frenzy of enjoyment.

Blackfish had one redeeming feature, however, a feature which made it difficult for me not to believe in a god. Between five and half past five every evening, they all swam down to the sea bed, anchored themselves with the trigger-like hook on their dorsal fin, and went to sleep for the night. This was when Mack arrived to take Dad diving, and Robert and I learned that we could throw our fishing lines in to catch some decent fish.

When Dad came back he handed me a pair of live *Cypraea lurida*.

'Mack tells me they're a special variety of the shell, found only here in Ascension. Do you like them?' he asked.

I nodded.

'We can be a team,' Dad said. 'I'll dive shells, you can clean and identify them. I'm not so good with names, you know.'

When my father was affectionate he called me Nicholai Nickolianovich and I sometimes found him staring at me as if he wanted to express something and was unsure how to proceed. I was sensitive, prickly and was quick to bear a grudge. His family were physically

undemonstrative and when he tried to touch me, his attempts were awkward and often inappropriate. He nuzzled my neck or ran his fingers down my spine and around the whorls of my ears. When my mother saw him doing this, she told him to stop. Enough was enough, she said. When he was happy he sometimes also called me his blonde bombshell. I asked my mother what that meant.

‘Someone who’s pretty on the outside, but empty on the inside.’

‘But why *blonde* bombshell?’

‘Because that’s how blondes are: stupid with nothing in their heads.’

*

Ascension, a dependency of Saint Helena, belongs to Britain. They maintain and run the main undersea cable company linking South Africa to England, the radio relay station for the BBC, and the military base and air field that would later come in handy during the Falklands war. The island, a communication hub with a strong military presence, has remained strategically important ever since the English set up barracks during Napoleon’s incarceration on Saint Helena to prevent the French a base from which to free their Emperor. For the same reason a garrison was established on Tristan de Cunha to the south.

Visitors to Ascension, although welcomed and offered cocktails by socially deprived American contract workers, are officially discouraged. There is no hotel. On arrival, British immigration officials informed us we were to stay aboard our vessel from sunset to sunrise. And before we met Mack and Bonnie, and later the boys from Saint Helena, we were led to believe that drinking daquiries well into the night with the locals was strictly forbidden and that going to see nesting turtles was impossible. Apart from the immigration officers, we never met a single Brit. They kept to themselves and never offered us lifts; if we walked the

road to Georgetown and a car passed without stopping, we knew the driver was probably English. The Saints however, were just as friendly on Ascension as they'd been on their own island, and when we put the word out that we had mail and parcels, we soon met Joyce's relatives.

Perry, Hot Bread and Piece-a-Cake were in their 20s and worked for Pan Am at the refuelling station. They had the casual attitude of young men away from home who were somewhat lonely, but nevertheless enjoying their freedom. Hot Bread and Piece-a-Cake smoked incessantly and drank vast amounts of watery American beer from flimsy aluminium cans, but Perry said he hated smoke because it hurt his eyes and he didn't like the taste of beer. They told us it was full moon and we had to see the turtles. When Dad asked about the curfew, they just laughed.

Armed with several six packs of beer, we made our way to a beach on the far side of the island. The Union Jack may fly over Ascension but we were discovering that the island really belonged to the wildlife: the seabirds, blackfish and green turtles. Perry told us that each year thousands of female turtles arrived from Brazil or further off to lay their eggs on the beaches. He said green turtles aren't green at all. Their shells and skin are brown and it's actually their fat that has a greenish tinge. Mariners found their green fat delicious. For a few hours we sat in the dark while Hot Bread and Piece-a-Cake drank and smoked. Then Perry, who'd been listening intently, hushed us. Over the sound of the waves I heard laboured, painful breathing.

'She's here,' whispered Perry.

'Yeeha!' shouted the other two and, turning on their torches, they ran to the ocean where a dark shape inched its way from the sea like a slow moving boulder.

The grand old lady who hauled herself out in front of us weighed about a hundred and fifty kilograms and – by the sound of her – was feeling every one of them as she struggled up the beach. Turtles lack tear ducts and tears that are usually washed away by the sea, stream down their faces when they're out of water. I found our turtle's tears, slow progress and painful breathing heartbreaking.

'Can't we help her?' I whispered, tears welling up in my own eyes.

But Hot Bread and Piece-a-Cake laughed and shone their lights in the turtle's face.

'It's always like this,' Hot Bread said. 'It's nature.'

They offered to turn her over, so we could inspect her underside and when we declined, they did it anyway and then flipped her right way up again and took turns sitting on her back drinking beer as she struggled onwards, leaving a strange tractor-like trail behind her. At last she hauled herself above the high water mark, but her work wasn't done. Still breathing heavily, she used her back flippers and began to dig. As the sand mounted in crumbling heaps, Hot Bread excavated her burrow and wedged his torch under her tail so we could watch shiny, mucous-covered eggs pour from her like a slot machine paying out ping pong balls. When the flow of eggs ceased, leaving only a sliver strand of slime connecting the turtle to her nest, she broke the connection with a covering of sand. Once she had finished covering her eggs, Hot Bread and Piece-a-Cake grabbed her front flippers and head, pulled her around and pushed her back to the sea. She reached wet sand and, when the first wave washed over her, heaved an extended sigh. For a few minutes she lay resting with her head on the beach but when the next wave broke, she pushed off with her flippers and was gone. Even Hot Bread and Piece-a-Cake seemed a little subdued after she left. But not for long. Soon more beers were opened and cigarette ends glowed red in the dark as they

told stories about growing up on Saint Helena and how they had got their nick names and all the naughty tricks they had played on their uncles and aunts when they were younger.

The night was warm, windless and clear. The moon laid a silver path across the sea as tiny wavelets nibbled the shore. The sand on which we sat, still carrying heat from the day's sun, glowed pale in the moonlight. It was long after midnight – the latest I had ever stayed up – and to the east, dawn began to glow. Stirred by the beauty of the place and the turtle's great struggle, we didn't want to leave. When we stood at last, brushing our clothes off, an odd thing happened; the beach beneath our feet began to boil. Dark heads the size of grapes thrust through the sand, followed by flippers attached to little heart-shaped shells. We'd been sitting on another turtle nest and the babies were hatching.

The shell of a fresh hatched turtle is velvety soft and the entire beast, which weighs around 25 grams, fits comfortably in a child's hand. The babies were so perfect it was hard to believe that less than one in a thousand would survive to adulthood. Young turtles make for the reflection of the moon on the sea which is why, Perry told us, they often gatecrashed beach barbecues, lured by the light of the fire. Hot Bread and Piece-a-Cake arranged turtle races using the light of their torches to guide them, thankfully in the right direction, and the hatchlings scrambled and collided with one another like a collection of clockwork animals, as endearing as the blackfish were horrible. I wanted my little turtle to save his or her energy for the big swim ahead and so, probably interfering irrevocably with its global positioning system, I carried it down to the sea where its best chance of surviving to adulthood was almost zero. When I got to the water's edge, I kissed it gently on its soft shell. I was thankful it had hatched at night, when the seabirds and blackfish were sleeping, and as I released it into the dark sea I wished, in the same way you wish upon a shooting star, that my

turtle would survive and – if it was a female – come back again to this very beach as a heaving, sighing adult.

Chapter 8

Salvador

In Brazil I refused to leave the yacht.

‘Nicky, you can’t stay on this boat forever, you know.’

‘Why?’

‘Because we’re in a new country. You have to see it. Anyway, you’re not staying here alone.’ Mom was losing patience with me, ‘Now get your shoes on.’

We were anchored beside the naval base in the fetid small-craft harbour of Salvador. Everything stank: the brown oily water in which we were anchored, the air, and the city itself. A French boat without a toilet lay next to us and in the morning, while officers in ornate uniforms paraded at the naval base, the French yachties hung their bums over the stern rail while drinking bowls of coffee. With their free hands, they waved greetings at us as they shat. Beyond the naval base, the city’s buildings balanced uneasily on a hill mutilated by red mud slides. The multi-storied structures were ramshackle, unpainted and decaying. One building in particular was almost solely responsible for my refusal to go ashore. I tried not to look at it, but couldn’t stop myself. Turning away and closing my eyes, I still saw its dark empty windows regurgitating foul mildew stains that dribbled like secretions down its facade. I pictured floors extending deep underground to passages as coiled as entrails, where, I imagined, unspeakable atrocities were committed. If I went ashore and approached the building, it would suck me in and swallow me. I wanted desperately to go back to Saint Helena or Ascension; I longed for clear blue water and the fresh clean smell of remote, ocean islands.

'I don't want to go ashore. Why can't we go back to Saint Helena?'

'Come on Nicky, we don't have all day. Now get your shoes on.'

Mom and Dad had smuggling to do.

We had arrived in Brazil the previous day, the 15th May 1978, less than two weeks after leaving Ascension. Once again we'd sailed with the trade winds and made good time. Baruch and the twin jibs did their job and we had averaged 130 sea miles a day. When we neared the land mass of South America, the trades had shifted, giving way to variable northeasterlies. The blue of the open ocean became tinged with green, which darkened and grew cloudy. On sighting a thin strip of hazy mauve land taking over most of the western horizon, the sea had become muddy and clotted with rubbish. Dad was a few miles out in his navigation and we made landfall north of Salvador, our destination, and had to sail down the coast to reach the city and its putrid harbour.

'Get in the dinghy now, Martinique Stilwell and I don't want to hear another word from you.' My mother lifted her hand but I knew she wouldn't hit me.

We went ashore. On the crowded streets, black smoke billowed from throbbing vehicles and the open gutters were clogged with iridescent mud and rotting vegetable matter. In side alleys strewn with turds, animals barely recognisable as dogs roamed the pavements. They were emaciated, with pink, callused skin crusted with scabs. What little fur they had, adhered to their bodies in tattered clumps. They cringed and stared at us with beseeching eyes, before backing off to forage in rubbish that people threw directly from the open windows above. Boys my age smoked cigarettes and sold marmoset monkeys from makeshift stands on the street. The tiny primates, with minute clammy fingertips and the white-fringed faces of distraught old men, were tied by the waist and swung through the air on strings to

attract potential buyers. On each corner a woman squatted and fried a sort of corn cake in filthy oil. We watched in horror as my father bought one and ate it. He said it tasted better than it looked and offered to buy us some but we refused.

Everybody stared at my waist length white-blonde hair. They sidled up to me, touching my pigtails and stroking my arms. The build up to the 1978 World Cup had begun and pictures of Brazil's hero Pele and his blonde barbie doll of a wife were plastered on billboards throughout the city, alongside photographs of other blondes selling soap powder and face cream. I, however, seemed to be the only live blonde on the streets, and the first fair child many of the Salvadorians had ever seen. A pair of women with sticky yellow beehives and coarse black hairs sprouting from their forearms asked my mother, in sign language and broken English, what brand of dye she used on me. They looked disbelieving and suspicious when she explained that white hair grew, quite naturally, from my scalp. I shrank from the women's aggressive friendliness. I hated the attention, the smell, the dirt and the crowds.

I wanted to leave for the islands but my parents had illicit business to complete. When we'd cleared into the country, we crossed our fingers and prayed that our boat wouldn't be searched, but we need not have worried. Salvadorian officials never boarded *Vingila*. We were simply directed to the customs office on the quay where Dad was asked to sign a form declaring our vessel clear of contraband. No cases of whisky and certainly no guns. He signed the form. Formalities completed, Mom and Dad were free to proceed with their smuggling.

Salvador fringes a wide bay and away from the congested city centre, overlooking the sea, Bahia's yacht club clung to a cliff face. We reached it by bus. It was an architecturally ambitious building, blindingly white, glinting with stainless steel fixtures and overlooking a

crystalline swimming pool of Olympic proportions. Our French neighbours in the small-craft basin had explained that it was impossible to moor near the club because it lacked a marina. They advised us to avoid the place. There were a few power boats tied to a jetty, they said, and, stowed under a canopy, a pair of smallish sailboats which were never used. Getting through the door might be difficult, they warned, and inside, the unfriendly members spent their time taking saunas or lying beside the pool, inhaling chlorine fumes and honing their sun tans, while white coated waiters served iced coca cola and stuffed crabs.

Disembarking from our bus, we reached the portico of the club. The doorman, protected by a glass cubicle, at first made as if he couldn't see us, but Dad pressed our Royal Natal Yacht Club cards to the glass.

'We want to visit your club,' Dad said. 'Do you have reciprocity?'

The doorman raised a careful hand and spoke into an intercom. After a short wait, a man we took to be the manager arrived and ran his eyes over our best – but slightly wrinkled – jeans, and dirty feet in open sandals. He inspected the cards, shrugged and let us through the door.

'This looks very expensive.' Mom took in the gleaming bar, partially covered pool, the row of sunbathing loungers and the staff picking discarded towels from the tiled floor.

'I suppose we'll have to order something. We can't just sit here doing nothing,' she said.

A waiter walked by, bearing a platter of crabs and frosted drinks tinkling with ice. In his wake he trailed the aroma of shellfish roasted in butter. I wanted everything he had on his trolley and my mother saw it.

'Can't the children share a coke, Frank?' Mom asked. 'I'll just have water.'

Dad nodded, his eyes on the sunbathers.

We sipped our drinks, and while the waiters admired and stroked my hair, Dad strolled the perimeter of the pool. He chose a caricature of a man wearing the tiniest of swimming trunks, with a gold medallion nesting like a bird in the hair of his chest between the oiled hills of his belly and jowls. Dad approached from the side, did the man perhaps want to buy a few cases of whiskey? The answer was an immediate yes.

Once we'd established our contact, Dad packed a pair of duffle bags with bottles every day. Then he carried these bags through the naval base and past the customs office, before catching a bus to the club, where he sold our stock of Chivas Regal and Johnny Walker Black Label for ten times the amount we had paid in Cape Town.

Whiskey sold, we left the city centre and made for Aratu Yacht Club, deep within the bay. Surrounded by mangrove swamps and rain forest, it was accessible only by sea and a rough dirt road that turned to red mud when it rained, which was often. Motoring down the bay we missed a marker buoy and struck a reef. For a few terrifying minutes *Vingila* lurched and crunched on the rocks before Dad reversed her off. If she had been made of ferrocement, it might have been the end of her, but she was strong steel and lost only a few layers of paint. In Aratu we were meeting Ari and his wife Rowena, South Africans of German descent, whom we'd got to know over the ham radio. As we sailed from Ascension, Dad's daily conversations with Ari on the radio had grown progressively more intimate and friendly. Ari told us he was 37, wore a beard and hated cats. Rowena and he liked the name Sygun so much that they'd given it to their single child – a girl of seven – and also to their home-built, hard-chine steel boat. His daughter, he told us, was the most important person in

the world for him and he was sure that Robert and I would love her. They couldn't wait to meet us and when *Vingila* arrived in Aratu, we would have a party.

Among a huddle of other South African ferro-cement boats, many of whom looked abandoned and sported 'for sale signs', *Sygun* stood out in her ugliness. Painted prison grey, with mean piggy-eyed portholes, she rose from the water like a fortress. Ari appeared on deck. His teutonic beard, worn without the benefit of a moustache, sprouted from the outer reaches of his face, emphasising moon cheeks and a tiny lipless mouth, open in greeting. My heart sank.

The party, it was decided, would take place that night on *Vingila*. Robert and I hadn't been invited because Mom had generously suggested we baby sit little Sygun onboard *Sygun*. That way the adults would be undisturbed, she said. Ari's yacht was as ugly below decks as she was from the outside. A single fluorescent bulb trickled out a beam of attenuated light that left much of the cavernous interior in shadow and gave our skins a creepy corpse-like hue and emphasised the circles under our eyes. When we spoke, our voices echoed from bare steel walls. The air smelled of stale frying oil. Little Sygun, however, was pleased to have us. She wanted to talk and play but, young for her age and demanding in a single child way, she didn't interest me. When I asked her if she read, she shook her head. I'd forgotten to bring a book and, searching the shadowy recesses of the saloon, I found no bookcases. Across the water I heard the sound of adults laughing on *Vingila*. The evening stretched endlessly ahead and I wanted to be at home, in my own bunk.

'What time do you think they'll finish?' I asked Robert.

'How should I know?' Robert said.

He slouched on a bunk, picking at the nicks on his fingers. He yawned.

'Don't you have anything to read here?' I asked Sygun, who was swinging on the hand rails and not looking at all sleepy.

'My daddy has magazines,' she said, 'naughty magazines.'

My dad had magazines too. They were called *Scope*, and had pictures of women in panties with gauzy scarves around their shoulders posing with their backs arched to counterbalance the weight of their bosoms. Stars were pasted over their nipples, because naked women were illegal in South Africa. In Ari's magazines there were no nipple stars. My brother and I flicked pages in stunned silence. I felt sick. I knew about sex; I read adult books. The paperbacks I liked had pictures of women on the cover, their eyelashes weighed down with mascara, beige velvet roses drooping from satin ribbons tied around their throats. The women in my books had sex, but only near the end. If they had sex in the first few chapters then somebody would kill them. They sighed a lot, and moaned; it felt so good it was unbearable and sometimes they fought with the men but afterwards they always made up. In Ari's magazines, harsh lighting illuminated cold studios and men with tattoos and goose pimples stuck willies as long and pink as French polony into women with heavy makeup and mottled legs. Sometimes there was just one woman, with a lot of men. Often, it looked painful. Little Sygun, ever helpful, asked us if we wanted to see more, because her father had lots of magazines, some of them with animals.

Much later that night we were retrieved by our parents. Sygun had at last collapsed on her bunk and gone to sleep, and Robert and I had curled up in the cockpit, away from the ghastly fluorescent light. The evening was over but the magazine images and my sense of shock lingered. Robert and I never spoke of the incident and I couldn't tell my mother because I felt that I had done something naughty and forbidden and if I said anything I thought

I'd get into trouble, so for a while I walked around in a daze, looking at all the adults, particularly Ari and his wife, and picturing them in different poses: hanging backwards over the white plastic tables, on all fours in front of the bar, or lying entwined in groups on the rickety sun-loungers by the pool.

I don't think my parents' evening went particularly well either. They never spoke about it but I noticed that after the party, relations were noticeably cool between the yachts. They restricted themselves to drinks at the yacht club bar together, where, when it was Ari's turn to buy beer, he asked the barman to show him a selection of unopened bottles first, so that he could choose the fullest. One day Ari and Rowena caught a lift to the city and came back with a marmoset monkey for Sygun. The animal, which arrived with a strand of twine tied around its waist, was about the size of my hand – small enough to perch on the side of an empty glass without toppling it over. With bleary eyes and a tattered off-white ruff, it cowered and shivered, sometimes showing tiny, yellow teeth. They fed it potato crisps and encouraged it to drink beer from glasses on the bar, which they thought was funny. At night the little animal burrowed into Sygun's hair and they slept together. When she rolled over and squashed it to death a few weeks later, her parents bought her another because, as Ari said, monkeys were really quite cheap.

On weekends, middle-class Brazilians arrived from the city to swim in the greenish pool, eat *churrasco* and watch soccer matches on a television bracketed to a concrete wall. Two brothers from the south ran the place. They were gauchos from the cattle grazing plains and, the Salvadorians told us, practically Argentines. Pleased with his stash of American dollars under the mattress following the whiskey sale, Dad said that we could eat *churrasco* too, but only once. Seated on white plastic chairs in our best jeans, we swung our legs and

waited until sweating gauchos brought swords of meat that had been cooked at an angle over an open fire to give a choice of very rare to completely overdone. They brought chicken first, then sausage and lastly beef. Bowls of manioc, a coarse flour made from cassava roots, were placed before us for sprinkling – Brazilian-style – over the meat to soak up the juices. Almost as an afterthought a table pushed against the back wall held rice, black beans and salads. Pepe especially loved *churrasco* and got to eat it every weekend by begging shamelessly and with great success. Despite spending his mornings chasing crabs through the mud of the mangrove flats, he grew fat.

Vincent and the boys on *Dou-Dou Diop* never ate at the club. The night they invited us to supper, they borrowed most of the ingredients from Mom beforehand. The rest of what we ate, Vincent told us later, had been stolen from the grocery shop by Roland.

Roland was tall and lanky with stringy blonde hair. He'd recently walked away from his wedding reception – and his new bride – with only a purple velvet suit and a pressure cooker. He admitted that the pot had been one of the wedding presents. She got everything else, he said. It was in Roland's wedding pot that the boys cooked our supper of potatoes, onions and bacon. We ate in the cockpit. Over a bottle of *pitu*, the local fire water, Vincent, Roland and Jean-Pierre, who looked to be in their early 20s, told us they had sailed from Senegal via the Cape Verde islands. The boat, Vincent said, was named after his mentor, a Senegalese man who had shown him how to spearfish as a child while his parents taught at the village school. Growing up in Africa had made it impossible for him to go back to France, Vincent said. He had tried and failed, returning later to Senegal to buy *Dou-Dou Diop* with his friends. They planned to sail indefinitely by whatever means they could and had been joined by Soledad and Vincent's girlfriend Nadine. Five adults on a thirty-five foot

gaff-rigged wooden fishing boat was proving to be crowded. Jean-Pierre apparently thought so too because a few days later he left for another yacht.

'Nee-kee, Nee-kee,' Soledad called one morning across the muddy strip of water separating our boats.

'Nee-kee, I have a present for you.'

Soledad knew that I, like Vincent, collected shells and when she came aboard she unwrapped a bundle of cowries and cones, all in very good condition. I recognised them at once as being valuable.

'They come from my country,' she said. 'Venezuela.'

Soledad, short, curvaceous and chocolate-skinned, was the most recent addition to *Dou-Dou Diop's* complement of crew and had joined the boat in Brazil to comfort Roland after his failed marriage. She was wrong about the shells though. *Cyprea negropunctata*, of which there were four in the cloth bundle, are rare cowries from Senegal, not Venezuela.

Later I showed the shells to Vincent.

'Look what Soledad gave me.'

I unwrapped the bundle.

'Zat black beech,' he said. Apparently he and Soledad had had a fight that week, shortly before she visited me. Vincent picked through the shells, turning them over in his fingers. My father, who was with us, stayed mute; he did not suggest I return the collection to Vincent, the rightful owner. The three of us examined the glossy spotted cowries and graceful cones ringed in black and tan. I knew I should give them back and was struggling with my conscience when Vincent shrugged, gave a wry gallic smile and said, 'Now they are yours and I must go and speak with Soledad.'

When we met up with *Dou-Dou Diop* again, on the island of Fernando de Norhana, Soledad was gone, and Jean Pierre had moved back on board.

We left Salvador on the second of July 1978, shortly after Brazil beat Argentina to win the World Cup. We had returned to the small craft harbour to clear out with customs and the night of the final match the city was silent; the streets empty. We were woken from our beds when the city exploded in a storm of fireworks and bleating car horns. People poured into the streets to form crawling samba lines that wound their way up alleys and through public squares. From across the water we felt the excitement and I experienced a fleeting urge to go ashore and join in. Subsequent to my first miserable days in Salvador, my feelings about the city had changed as I'd found places I enjoyed. Like the quiet central *mercado* where paddle fans stirred smells of leather and coffee into the warm air and stalls sold bags and sandals of hard pink cow hide. Outside, on the pavement beside the mercado, men with the bodies of ballet dancers performed *caiporia*, the graceful dance of self defence created by African slaves brought to work in the sugar cane fields. After overcoming my initial shock and disgust at the filth and crowds, I had begun to think I might like Salvador after all but the feeling came too late, as we prepared to leave.

Chapter 9

Brazil

In Recife Mom gave Robert and me away to a stranger for the night. Afterwards, she regretted it. We reached the city, which lay north of Salvador, by sailing up the coast of Brazil for three days in a moderate southeaster. It had become clear to us that we preferred ocean passages to coastal sailing with its variable winds, shipping lanes, shoals and reefs. Before the invention of GPS, travelling within sight of land required constant vigilance. Anxiety, night watches and sleep deprivation replaced the peace and tranquility we'd found in the open ocean. Perhaps the promise of an uninterrupted night's sleep without children swayed Mom in allowing the stranger to take us home.

'At the time it seemed like a good idea,' she said later. 'It was only after you'd gone that I realised what I'd done. I didn't know his name, or where he lived, or anything.'

She didn't sleep much that night. Neither did Robert or I.

Mom met the man at the bar of the Recife Yacht Club and at first declined his offer of a sleep-over, but he insisted, saying we would be company for his son, who was lonely. He wore her down and eventually, without thinking to consult us, she agreed.

His house was in a wealthy suburb. It was modern and appeared to be still under construction. The interior felt barren and desolate and our voices rang from bare concrete walls. A spiral staircase led to nowhere. The man said his wife and daughter were away in Rio. Or perhaps it was only his wife in Rio and she'd gone there to recover from his daughter's sui-

cide or death from cancer. The exact circumstances of his life weren't clear, his English was poor and he was very drunk.

He showed us into our room; a cell of concrete with a strip of high windows beneath the ceiling, and left us alone with a pair of electric fans and two beds starkly made up with a single sheet each. The place had the feel of an abandoned hospital. On *Vingila*, Mom lay awake fearing she would never see us again, but our concerns were more practical.

'Where are the blankets?' I asked Robert. Beneath the sheets we found nothing but bare mattresses.

'Just sleep on the sheet, I think.'

I started to cry. 'I want to go home.'

'Don't be such a sissy, it's not that cold.'

We turned off the light and lay down in our clothes. But a swarm of mosquitoes, with whines like dental drills, bore down on us.

'Are you sleeping?' Robert asked.

'What do you think, stupid?' I was lying immobile on my back, trying to swat each mosquito as it landed. The air above my face was thick with insects all trumpeting their desire to suck my blood. I could feel the husks of their air-borne bodies when I waved my hands in the darkness in front of me. They were hungry and not to be deterred.

'We can't sleep like this,' Robert said.

'What about the fans?'

We tried the fans, but on low they blew the airborne invaders slightly off course and on high they cooled us till our teeth chattered. At last we dozed on bare mattresses, cuddling

our pillows for warmth, with fans turned to medium and mosquitos biting us through the sheets. At dawn we stopped trying to sleep.

‘When do you think we can go home?’ I asked.

‘I dunno.’ Robert’s voice sounded thick, muffled by tiredness, but as the morning light trickling through the strip of windows, I saw that his eyes were a pair of black slits in a swollen bowl of a face. His skin had the texture of oats porridge.

‘Robbie, can you see? Something’s happened to your face.’

Eyes blinking, he ran his hand over taut pebbled skin.

‘It feels funny,’ he said, ‘all hot and tight.’

‘Jeez, you really got bitten. Maybe you’re allergic.’

‘I want to go home.’

‘I hope you don’t die. What will Mom say?’

‘When do you think we can we go home?’

But our host slept on for another two hours. We crouched at his bedroom door and waited for him to wake. His son, tangled in a sheet, lay beside him and together they slumbered to the steady whirr of an electric fan. They were both naked. Twice, the father, who snored, fell from his bed to the floor but each time he climbed back without waking. Later, he opened a single eye, slowly focusing on us, but we took fright and ran away down the passage. He followed and found us in the kitchen where he seemed surprised by our presence, as if he’d forgotten bringing us home the previous night. He made coffee and asked vaguely about Robert’s face. After a breakfast of coco-pops we drove in silence past acres of hovels to the yacht club where Mom was waiting on the jetty. She hugged us far too hard.

‘I’m so glad you’re back,’ she said.

She kissed Robert on the head and held him at arm's length.

'Oh my,' she said, lifting up her glasses and squinting to see better, 'What on earth's happened to your face?'

After that I kept within the boundaries of the yacht club. While my parents shopped for food and explored the city, I swam lengths in the pool until my hair, stained by the water's chemicals, turned lime green and my nose reddened and peeled from the sun. As far as I was concerned, Recife was just another squalid Brazilian city. I wasn't interested.

*

We sailed to Fernando de Noronha with Emelio, Nina, Evandro and Joyce. They were Brazilian university students who Dad met at the Recife Yacht Club one night and, in a burst of alcohol inspired generosity, had invited to join us. With winds on the nose our voyage took longer than expected, and relations aboard soured quickly. The students, who Mom said were spoilt, crowded us out of the saloon. They retreated behind a wall of whispered Portuguese, emerging only to ask for food. They ate constantly but were picky eaters; demanding cheese, quince paste and canned ham. At night, they refused to take watches, preferring instead to sleep. They were surprised to learn that if they wanted to wash, there was a bucket filled with cold sea water at the stern. We'd promised them a two-day cruise, but *Vingila*, was slow and within a day everybody aboard was disappointed. Landfall, some spears of tapered rock pushing from the sea like growing shoots, was met with relief by all aboard and directly after anchoring, we lowered the dinghy and took the students ashore. Without looking back, they disappeared over the ridge of the beach.

Dou-Dou Diop lay at anchor beside us in the turquoise water, between the beach and the rocky islets guarding the seaward side of the bay. Vincent appeared in the companion-

way and waved us over with an open bottle of *pitu*. He said they had sailed directly from Aratu in Salvador, bypassing Recife because they had heard it was horrible. Mom and Dad settled in with Vincent and Robert and I made for the shore where a line of gentle white breakers washed and rewashed sand that was already sparkingly clean. A brown-skinned boy of our age, with bleached saltwater hair and eyes that shone glass-green in the afternoon sun, helped haul our dinghy above the high water mark. He was alone on the beach and said his name was Roberto. He pronounced it 'Hobberty'.

The island was a dusty khaki, with outcrops of reddish rock and flocks of grazing goats roaming its hills. There was a shop, Roberto said, but no village. Some tourists stayed in the hotel, near the beaches. Together we walked along a gravel road past a few scattered bungalows. We climbed the crest of a hill and at the top, burst suddenly into a sprint. I ran until the air burned my throat, my stride lengthening with the slope, until we finished in a draw at the bottom of the hill with the tension of our previous days at sea dissipated and our friendship with Roberto cemented.

According to our family mythology, we spent four months on the island although, in the same way a childhood summer holiday stretches toward eternity, it felt like much longer. When I consult our log book – the official record – I see that we stayed only six weeks. During that time my brother's fate and the watery path of his life was sealed. Each day he and Roberto immersed themselves in the pristine water surrounding the island and went spear-fishing. Robert had an Hawaiian sling; a spear with a rubber loop on one end and a spray of tiny harpoons on the other. Roberto had a trident. At first Robert speared more rocks than fish, but within a few days his skills improved and I was able to order fish I wanted to eat – a fresh sole for breakfast, a squirrel fish to poach for lunch, or a rock cod for supper. Most

of the day's catch went to feed Roberto's eleven brothers and sisters who lived with his parents in a bare-floored, two-roomed house overlooking the bay.

Although Roberto spoke only Portuguese, we began to understand him without effort as the days passed. One morning he told us that the biggest octopus he'd ever seen lived in a hole in the reef near the headland. He'd wanted to catch the animal for some time, he said, but it was too big and clever. Using mime he described its constricted cat's pupils and angry, flushing tentacles. How it lay coiled and brooding within its shell-strewn hole. Roberto and Robert often caught smaller octopi which we stewed with wine and tomatoes in our pressure pot, as Dad had learned from a cook in Mozambique. They were delicious but Roberto wasn't satisfied. The vision of the giant haunted him. He spoke about it constantly, hatching plans for its capture.

Over the decades, my brother's attitude to octopi would change; their intelligence and the naked show of their emotions would begin to move him. In later years, as an adult, and a professional diver, he would lose all desire to catch them. But at the age of 10, he and Roberto used their spear and trident to battle it out with the wily old octopus. He put up a good fight; it took most of the morning until they had him writhing in the dinghy at my feet. Then Roberto showed us how to kill him by turning his head inside out. This was an improvement on the method I had read about in a *Hardy Boys* storybook, which suggested biting the animal on the pea sized swelling between the eyes, which they said was its brain. The big octopus was slow to die. Even after we chopped him into pieces his skin continued to change colour in fluttering arpeggios of violet and brown, expressing, I fancied, the last show of his feelings. And after we'd cooked him, we found suckers stuck to the side of the pot as if he had still tried to escape.

On the rare days that Roberto and Robert didn't dive, we roamed the island together, walking about or catching a lift with the milk delivery man on his donkey cart to visit the tourist beaches on the far side of the island, or the old man who kept a vegetable garden and, for a few cents, let us eat green peppers off the bushes. But mostly our days centered around the sea, which was warm, clear and teeming with fish. Sometimes other boys joined us – friends of Roberto's. Roberto and Robert snorkelled from the rocks, or I took them in the dinghy to nearby shoals. I got cold quickly and was afraid of sharks, so I liked having a boat to escape to. Dad speared fish and dived for shells on the outlying reefs and islets with Vincent, Roland and Jean-Pierre and they often took Roberto and Robert with them. Daily, the men and boys grew leaner and browner. Their hair bleached and stiffened and their skins, when out of water, carried permanent crusts of salt which accumulated in concretions of crystals on their eyebrows and cheekbones.

Our Brazilian visas expired – but Roosevelt, a corpulent man with a passion for samba, assured us it was not a problem. Because he was the islands gendarme we believed him. He arrived on the beach one morning with his friends Bispo and Solange. They had a live goat on a string and several bottles of *pitu* and we sailed together on *Dou-Dou Diop* to the Bay of Dolphins. Waves like sheets of plate glass rose and fell on a crescent of perfect sand. Shoals of coloured fish milled about and chased each other around a massive coral head set in white sand that crawled with winged guernet fish. I got trailed by a barracuda, its open jaw weighed down by a load of jagged teeth. It was almost a foot longer than me and I was terrified it would bite my foot off, but it merely accompanied me to the safety of the dinghy. While I hyperventilated, it waited expectantly at the surface for my return to the water.

In later years that beach would be voted as one of the most beautiful in the world, and the bay declared a world heritage site and off limits to tourists on the basis of its ecological sensitivity. We paid no attention to its ecological sensitivity and speared fish, caught crayfish, made a fire and killed the goat on the beach. After eating the goat we took siestas under the trees. As the sun set, we sailed back to the anchorage and Roosevelt, wedged into the cockpit with red eyes and a bottle of *pitu* in his hand, assured us yet again that there was no reason ever to leave the island.

*

On the 28th of August we left Fernando with our boat, covered in blue blotches, looking as if she had contracted a strange tropical disease. Vincent was to blame; he'd given Dad a packet of blue powder and had told him that adding tiny pinch made white paint brighter. One day after having a tooth pulled out by the island's dentist and self medicating with pain pills and half a bottle of *pitu*, Dad decided to follow Vincent's advice. *Vingila* had a few rust spots that needed touching up and Dad added some blue to our last pot of white paint. Roberto had chosen that day to go to school so Robert and I went with Mom to buy a bag of rice at the island's only shop – a hut with bare shelves that smelled of Baygon – and returned later in the afternoon to find Dad unconscious in his bunk and *Vingila* covered in blue spots.

'If we'd done this,' Robert whispered to me, 'Dad would've killed us.'

Without other paint *Vingila* had to stay the way she was until we reached Fortaleza. Vincent found it funny. Nadine, his naked girlfriend, said nothing but she seldom spoke to us anyway, and usually shut herself in the fore-peak whenever we came aboard. Mom thought Nadine might be friendlier if she had clothes to wear and crocheted a string bikini for her. When it was finished we rowed over as a family to present our gift. At Vincent's re-

quest, Nadine emerged from her cabin in the bow and reluctantly donned the swimming costume but when Roland and Jean-Pierre wolf whistled she dived back into the fore-peak, slammed the door and refused to come out again. Vincent gazed after her fondly, shaking his head.

‘That Nadine,’ he said, ‘her whole body is covered with little blonde hairs, just like a peach.’

The following day she was naked again.

Our expired visas made my father nervous. We said good bye to *Dou-Dou Diop*. We said goodbye to Roosevelt and Bispo, who wanted us to stay another day. Robert and I said good bye to Roberto. He gave us a pair of miniature sandals he’d made from red and blue card. Across their soles he’d written *Remembrance de Fernando de Norhana , Roberto*.

‘*Saudades*,’ he said.

Brazilians speak Portuguese but claim some words, like *soudades*, as their own. *Saudades* are souvenirs or mementos, but the word also describes a feeling; the bitter sweet longing for a something or somebody lost. I still have Roberto’s paper sandals. And the feeling.

*

The immigration authorities in Fortaleza didn’t share Roosevelt’s lenient view about our expired visas. Paging through our passports, they calculated the days since our visas had lapsed and presented us with a hefty fine. The sum was larger than the combined profits of our whiskey smuggling.

‘We can’t pay this,’ Dad said.

The alternative, the officer explained, was jail.

Dad blanched. 'We can't go to jail. Please, we're a family.'

I held hands with Robert and tried to look as if I were part of a decent, happy family. Maybe blond hair would help. Surely in this country, little blond girls didn't go to jail.

'Alternatively,' the officer continued, after looking us over, 'we can make you temporary citizens of Brazil.'

The ensuing paperwork left very little time for sightseeing. We were photographed and fingerprinted, weighed and measured. Portuguese forms were filled out in quadruplicate.

'Jail would have been easier than this,' Robert muttered in my ear.

After three days of bureaucracy we were presented with our certificates of citizenship, valid for two weeks. To celebrate our new nationality we took a bus trip out of the city. We drove past the *favelas* –kilometres of crowded shacks and hovels without toilets, electricity or running water– which were broken only by the spires and domes of disintegrating cathedrals. The bus route terminated at an enormous new soccer stadium which stood stranded in a sea of mud. It had been built, the bus driver explained, for the World Cup and had cost millions. Nobody used it anymore.

Of the Brazilian cities we visited, I liked Fortaleza least. Here the gap between rich and poor appeared even wider than it had in Salvador or Recife. At the yacht club overweight teenagers baked in the sun, ate shellfish and threw their bottles and glasses into the pool for the cleaners to retrieve at the end of each day. Boatmen prepared yachts for sailing and after the members were done they stepped onto the jetty, leaving the boat behind, sails flapping, for the workers to pack away again. There was more crime in Fortaleza too. We were warned about muggings and in later years the situation worsened considerably. When Hans, who grew up on the junk *Maria Jose*, visited the place as an adult on his own yacht,

he was ambushed while anchored in front of the yacht club. He fought the attackers off with a gun. The following night, however, a crew member on the boat anchored alongside him was stabbed by men boarding the boat and bled to death in the scuppers. Although Fortaleza wasn't quite as dangerous when we visited, I still sensed an undercurrent of menace in the way the rows of dark haired men in the streets eyed us and I felt uneasy.

Fortaleza was nearer to the borders of the Amazon jungle and had on its congested streets distressing, open-air pet shops where baby alligators lay tethered in muddy gutters while toucans, marmosets, wild cats, macaws and owls crouched miserably in stacked, overcrowded cages. I saw groups of crusty-eyed wild kittens quivering in canary cages while an otter paced relentlessly beside them in another. The smell of rotting food, dung, and musky fear was intense.

'If I had enough money,' I said, 'I'd buy them all and set them free.'

Mom led me away.

'There's nothing you can do about it, Nicky,' she said.

We set sail from Fortaleza on the 12th of September. In the drawer beneath my bunk, wrapped in cotton wool and enclosed in a small box, was a *Cyprea surinamensis*, the cowrie that Mack on Ascension had asked me to send him in exchange for 20 dollars. Dad and I had visited the fishing boats on the far side of the harbour where, for a few cruzeiros, I'd bought the shell from a fisherman. He told us he'd found it in his nets. With a deep, burnt-orange underside and spots of cream and brown on its dorsum, it was even more beautiful than the specimen I had seen in the photograph on Ascension island. Even then I knew it was worth several hundred dollars. It would remain the star of my collection for years and I had no intention of ever posting it to Mack.

Chapter 10

Doldrums

The day after we left Fortaleza a hurricane slammed into the coast of Venezuela to the north of us. It was the seventh of the season and according to news reports caused 'less deaths than expected.' Because Dad was unable to receive weather warnings on the radio we had no idea that havoc raged a few hundred miles north in our path and so we happily waved the coast of Brazil good bye. As the sea cleared and turned familiar open-ocean blue, we let fishing lines trail in our wake. The Caribbean island of Grenada lay 2 000 miles away and we wouldn't see land again for at least three weeks. Aided by a strong current flowing up the northern coast of Brazil, we were expecting trade winds to help us on our way. Challenges lay ahead, however, we needed to cross the equatorial doldrums where trade winds die and we faced the possibility of hurricanes. Really, we should have reached the safety of the Caribbean before the season even began but our timing was all wrong; we had stayed too long in Brazil. The hurricane season extends from June to November in the North Atlantic and September – the very month we chose to cross the ocean – experiences the most frequent and severe storms. We couldn't have chosen a worse time to sail. Because Mom was unaware that the season usually goes out with a bang, she thought we were safe. Dad was worried, but he didn't let on. We should have worked our way up the coast visiting the Amazon, Guyana and Surinam. That would have been safest, however, Dad still didn't feel confident enough in his navigational skills to visit these countries. Caught between our expired Brazilian visas and his own navigational shortcomings, and aided in his decision by

our inability to receive weather reports, he felt he had no choice except to take a chance. Robert and I, unaware of the danger, had no say. We were in Dad's hands and rightly or wrongly we trusted him.

For the first three days after we left Brazil a 20 knot wind blew on the beam and, with the current behind her, *Vingila* sailed on a broad reach, maintaining an average of one hundred and fifty sea miles per day, a record for her that would remain unbroken. As we approached the equator, the sun at noon took up position directly overhead and Dad found himself unable to shoot midday sights. My father's friend Leonard Pratt of *Betty-Jay*, hadn't prepared him for this situation and he was at a loss. Noon sights gave us our position in latitude and without them we could only guess where we were. One morning we decided that we were crossing the equator. We knew what to do. Back in Cape Town, the brothers of *Scud* had filled us in on equatorial lore. Robert and I were pollywogs – grossly inferior to shellbacks like Gary and Hudson who had crossed the equator by sea. When crossing the line, pollywogs were required to undergo an initiation ceremony performed by a certified shellback. Luckily Dad had crossed the equator several times while in the merchant navy and had been properly initiated. So he dressed as King Neptune, complete with my brother's Hawaiian sling for a trident, and made us perform several humiliating, but essentially good-natured acts. We sipped sea water and were baptised with buckets of the stuff. Unaware of trouble ahead, everybody was happy, and my mother wrote in the logbook that night, 'We are all shellbacks now, including Pepe.'

*

Sea temperature is a critical factor in the development of tropical storms. To provide enough energy to spawn and fuel a full-grown storm, the sea water must be at least 26,5 degrees

celsius, and the warmth must extend to a depth of 50 metres. This usually only occurs at the end of a long, tropical summer. The South Atlantic Ocean, cooled by the Benguela current, never gets hot enough and so is blessed by constant gentle trade winds. But the great swathe of hot, equatorial water in the North Atlantic extending from the coast of South America, through to the Gulf of Mexico and as far east as the Cape Verde islands, provides a vast breeding ground for cyclonic tropical storms. The Caribbean and the coast of North America experience around ten per year, almost all in the June to November period. The storms begin life as tropical depressions – or pressure waves – near the equator, in areas of light breezes where wind shear will not disrupt the deepening low. Invariably these pressure cells move north and westwards, fueled by atmospheric heat, warm water and the forces of the earth's rotation. They grow into tropical storms, without a central characteristic eye, but with the shape of a hurricane and wind speeds of 33 knots or 63 km per hour. On average, six of the ten annual storms develop the central eye and a wind speed greater than 64 knots, or 119 kilometres per hour, thus graduating from tropical storms to hurricanes. The same storms will be called typhoons in the North Pacific and cyclones elsewhere. Of the six annual Caribbean hurricanes, two will be extremely severe, ravaging the islands and coasts of the surrounding countries to cause significant damage, destruction and death. A full grown storm, it is estimated, releases the same energy as 10 megaton nuclear bombs exploding every 20 minutes.

*

Sailing toward the outflow of the Amazon river, the sea was extraordinarily rich in life and we were often accompanied by pods of dolphins who surfed our bow waves and sent Pepe into a barking frenzy with their high pitched whistles. One afternoon more than a thousand

spinner dolphins spent several hours swimming beside the boat, leaping from the water in synchronised groups, somersaulting and tail-walking. I felt as if we were in the centre of an orchestrated marine extravaganza, with cetaceans extending to the horizon on all sides and I sat at the pulpit, with the afternoon sun on the sails, entranced by the show around me and half expecting to hear a suitable soundtrack.

Dolphins weren't the only creatures jumping from the sea. The following day a big Spanish Mackerel startled us – and itself – by launching into the air and nearly landing in our laps. It missed the boat by centimetres to fall back into the water. It must have been part of a feeding school because seconds later we hooked another on the line trailing from the stern.

'Jeez, look at that,' Robert said, after he'd hauled in the fish and Dad had gaffed it.

Bedecked in vertical navy stripes, its gleaming, scaleless body was longer than my father's. Expressionless black eyes gazed from an armoured head as sleek as a jet plane.

'I don't even know why you lot were fishing anyway because we certainly don't need another fish,' Mom said. 'We still haven't eaten the two wahoo you caught yesterday.'

Dealing with quantities of fresh fish posed a problem. We couldn't afford to own or run a deep freeze and, at sea, our gas fridge didn't work because it wasn't gimballed. So the previous day's fish fillets lay in covered bowls in the galley, sweating in the tropical heat. And Dad refused to throw food away.

'Listen here,' he said to Mom, 'we're going to eat the lot, you'll see. We'll make fish biltong.'

'You can't make fish biltong,' Mom said.

'Why not?'

‘Because biltong’s made from meat, that’s why.’

But Dad marinated the wahoo and Spanish Mackerel in salt and spices, and then hung strips of it beneath the mizzen boom like fragrant, bloody washing. We had long stopped using the mizzen sail because Dad said it gave *Vingila* weather helm, pulling her off balance, but we found the mizzen boom and mast useful for hanging things like flags, radar reflectors, radio antennae and now fish. After several days in the sun and wind, the biltong was dry enough to pack into sacks. We stowed the strips in Robert’s cabin, where anyone was free to eat them. Pepe was allowed a piece of his own a day but, after asking permission from my mother, preferred to select it himself directly from the drying lines. In damp weather the biltong tended to mould and the smell intensified although it remained edible, or at least Dad said so. Robert moved out of his cabin and began sleeping in the cockpit.

With the steady wind and strong current we continued to make good time. My parents estimated that about a thousand sea miles lay between *Vingila* and Grenada, but because Dad was still unable to navigate we weren’t quite sure. In the log book Mom simply wrote ‘noon sights not working.’

However the wind was not to last. To begin, it slackened in the mornings, leaving us stranded until lunchtime when it would pick up again for the afternoon. One still morning we awoke to mist and the sound of heavy breathing. A light swell was running, and without wind to fill her sails, *Vingila* wallowed and rolled. Outside, wallowing next to her in the grey ocean, were a group of unusual creatures.

‘What are these things?’ Robert asked.

‘I don’t know if I like the look of them,’ Mom said.

One of the animals turned on its side, fixing her with a round, unblinking eye.

'I think they're whales,' I said.

'But aren't whales supposed to be big things?' Mom pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose to take a better look. The animals were about the size of dolphins, but their glossy black bodies were rounded and their truncated faces lacked snouts. They lay in the water around us, exhaling loudly. I went below for our encyclopaedia of marine mammals. When I returned I found the creatures still in the same position.

'According to this book,' I said, flipping through the pages, 'they might be porpoises.'

'Nonsense,' Mom replied. 'Porpoises are the same as dolphins, only with longer noses. Anyway, dolphins are playful. They don't just lie around like this lot.'

'Well in that case, they're either pilot whales or melon-headed whales.'

'I don't know about that. I only hope they're not dangerous. Keep away from the edge. If you fall in now, we don't know what they'll do.'

The creatures looked more lethargic than dangerous and when a gentle wind rose up and blew away the mist it seemed to breathe some life into our companions too, for they swam lazily away. I felt quite sorry to see them go. But we weren't alone for long. We caught sight of our next visitors from afar. They made straight for the boat, whistling and clicking. There were two of them and although they were the size of small whales, they looked and behaved like dolphins. Their skins were an unusual dusky brown which was splashed with irregular, creamy blotches.

'So if those other things were whales, what are these then?' Mom said with a now-I've-got-you look.

I paged through the book again.

'They might be beaked whales. Or very large dolphins.'

‘Do you always have to be such a smarty pants?’ Robert usually took my side, but not always. He would have carried on but his attention was diverted.

‘Hey look there,’ he said, ‘that one’s got a big remora stuck on its side.’

‘Impossible,’ Dad said, ‘I’ve never heard of a remora sticking to a dolphin.’

Using the suction device on the top of their head, remoras attach themselves to sharks and other large fish, hitching a ride and eating their scraps.

The dolphins circled the boat once and were gone, leaving behind a single lonely remora trying unsuccessfully to attach itself to Baruch’s rudder.

‘They came to scrape the poor thing off,’ said Robert, hanging his head over the stern to get a better look. ‘Shall we catch him?’

‘Why? We can’t eat him and Mom’ll just get mad at us.’

But Robert was already dangling a lure in the water and within seconds had the fish aboard.

‘He must have been hungry,’ he murmured, half to himself.

We played with his sucker a bit, crouching down so Mom couldn’t see us, and taking turns sticking him to our legs. When we tugged at his tail he was impossible to dislodge but he slipped off easily nose first, leaving red marks on our skin like love bites.

‘Those dolphins must have known just how to get him off,’ Robert said, throwing the remora overboard. Keeping close to *Baruch*’s rudder, the fish followed us for the rest of the afternoon, but by evening it was gone.

The next morning we awoke to find ourselves surrounded by thick, mud-brown water. Something was very wrong. Dad scanned the horizon.

‘I can’t see anything,’ he said, ‘bring the binoculars.’

Around us the horizon was clear, unmarked by land or low lying cloud. We were confused. By all accounts we should be in the open ocean where the water was blue and clear.

'I don't like this at all,' Dad said. 'I think it's the Amazon river.'

He went below, switched on the depth sounder and twiddled the knobs. The screen's twitchy light settled with a purr at eight fathoms, or sixteen metres.

Dad came back on deck with his lips compressed and a frown chiselled between his brows.

He turned on the engine, opened the throttle and spun the helm around.

'What's going on, Frank? Where are we going?' Mom stood in the companionway with a sack of half-dried fish she intended to hang in the sun. (At night we took the drying biltong inside to avoid the dew.) Dad didn't answer right away. With the binoculars, he scanned the horizon again. His lips sucked in air.

'We're getting out of here,' he said. 'If a swell picks up at this depth, we'll have breakers.'

Mom lowered her bag of half dried fish.

'What do you mean?' she asked. 'Where are we?'

'Well we don't really know that now, do we? But I know where I don't want to be and that's in the bladdy Amazon River.'

The Amazon, torn by currents and countercurrents and strewn with treacherous shifting mud banks, is so wide it's possible to be in the mouth of the river and be out of sight of land. We were more likely in the river's vast outflow, which stretches far out to sea, but it had been days since Dad had last shot a sight and, as we were sailing in the presence of a powerful coastal current there was no way to be sure. We turned *Vingila* east, away from

where we imagined land – and danger – lay. With sails raised and the motor on full throttle, we made for the open ocean. All that night, and into the next day, we motored through brown water. At noon we turned off the engine to eat lunch without noise and the smell of diesel fumes. To avoid a tangle, we pulled in our trailing fishing lines and while doing so caught a very unusual pair of fish. We often caught dorado in pairs, but we'd never seen fish like these before. Greenish silver and flat as serving platters, they weighed about 20 kilograms each. With green dorsal surfaces and dark spots on their tails, they certainly weren't fish of the deep sea. They looked as if they were overgrown freshwater aquarium specimens and there was nothing remotely like them in our fish book, but we ate them anyway. They were delicious. Their meat was dark and tender and brought to mind fine fillet steak. We gorged ourselves that night and the following day hung up the remainder of our feast to dry with our other biltong.

Over the next days the wind that had blown us to the equator died completely. *Vingila's* daily distances, of which we had been so proud, plummeted from more than 150 miles to less than 40. After nine days at sea, Dad estimated that 800 miles still lay between us and the island of Grenada. He was reluctant to motor because diesel cost money and running the engine was hot and smelly, and somebody needed to take helm because Baruch didn't work without wind. But to make any progress at all, we were forced to spend at least a few hours each day motoring. At night, if the breeze blew strongly enough to fill the sails, we set Baruch on course and left *Vingila* to sail listlessly at one or two knots. In wind too weak to fill canvas, we simply lowered the sails and slept, leaving our yacht to drift with the current.

In the afternoons Mom began to read aloud from a thick paperback with a picture of half a butterfly on the cover. Sprawled on sticky vinyl cushions under the shade of an awning we tried our best to catch the faint cooling breezes. The book was about Devil's Island in French Guyana where Papillon, a man with a butterfly tattoo, was held prisoner. He'd been found guilty of manslaughter in France and had been sent to the worst prison in the world; a tropical island surrounded by man-eating sharks. Of course he was innocent, from the start we all knew it was a case of mistaken identity, and it wasn't his fault he had such bad friends. But for thirteen years he was imprisoned unjustly which was why he never stopped trying to escape. Life on the island was hellish. There were brutal guards, torture and solitary confinement and wicked fellow prisoners with money and drugs stashed in special containers called chargers that they kept hidden in their bums. The food was terrible. To get away, Papillon made rafts which often didn't work and got wrecked in the surf among the sharks. People died but not him. It was gruelling. When we couldn't stand it anymore, he escaped to live in Surinam.

Robert looked out over the ocean. Somewhere to the west, across the glittering water, lay French Guyana, too far away to be seen.

'Is Devil's Island really over there?' he asked. 'Are we sailing past it right now?'

'Yes,' said Mom.

'With sharks and everything?'

'Yes.'

'And prisoners?'

'Maybe, I don't know if they still have prisoners,' Mom said.

'Why can't we go there?'

'I don't think it's very safe,' Mom answered. Actually we couldn't go there because Dad's navigation 'wasn't working'.

Later in the Caribbean we would meet several yachts, with crews more confident in their navigation skills than were, who'd visited Devil's Island to inspect the derelict, abandoned prison and photograph the packs of sharks circling the island.

Robert stood up in the cockpit and stretched. He gazed far over the horizon, in the direction of French Guyana where a cluster of nimbostratus gathered.

'One day I'd like to see that island,' he said.

The sun beat down, blistering the deck. Its rays – directly overhead – were scarcely filtered by the atmosphere. Such intense heat warms the sea and the moist air above it, causing up-draughts which form heavy clouds and deep low pressure systems where trade winds from both hemispheres converge and die. This is the inter-tropical convergence zone, a weather system which extends roughly five degrees on either side of the equator but varies its position according to the season. In September 1978 we found it just north of the line, or guessed we did. Seafarers know this region as the doldrums; miles of light, erratic winds, and sudden squalls and downpours where a sailing boat may find itself fatally trapped for weeks. Sailors dread the doldrums, which saps their strength and spirits and sometimes even took their lives. Over the years, the word has leaked out of sailing jargon and become synonymous with stagnation and depression, the very emotions the region induces. In the doldrums the air is muggy and hot, and the clouds heavy and purple. This is the birthplace of cyclones, hurricanes and typhoons: monstrous storms spinning around a vortex or a central calm eye.

We knew something was wrong. By day, although the sun shone above us, we were surrounded by dark clouds and lines of angry squalls. At night the stars twinkled merrily overhead but we were encircled by flashes of lightning and rumbles of thunder. The barometer began to fall. Our mood followed the line of its descent. Although we didn't speak of it, dread settled on the boat like an unwelcome extra crew member. Dad renewed his efforts at receiving weather reports on the radio and Mom, between taking hourly readings of the barometer and recording the atmospheric pressure in the log, began studying a tome entitled *Sailing in Heavy Weather*. The results of these activities did little to provide reassurance. When the barometer continued to drop, Mom packed the book away. I overheard her telling Dad she couldn't read anymore because it scared her too much. I went to look for myself. Within its pages I found pictures of tiny boats flattened and wrecked by enormous wind-strafted waves. With a thumping heart I read that in severe hurricanes, the exact wind speed couldn't be measured because all equipment was usually immediately destroyed. Heavy spray and driving rain blurred the boundary between air and water, causing zero visibility and making it impossible to breathe. Heaving-to, sea anchors and other survival strategies were generally ineffective in such conditions. One could expect the decks to be swept clean. The paragraph ended on a chilling note. It is best, I read, to avoid these storms by seeking shelter in a safe anchorage and not sailing in open water during hurricane season.

Dad's efforts at the radio produced even more unsettling results. In the evenings we gathered around while he searched the airwaves. Through an evil background hiss that sounded as if it were issuing from a giant cauldron in the very depths of hell, and punctuated by nerve-wracking staccato time bleeps, we occasionally caught fragments of a woman's voice. She sounded cold and stern, and as distant as if she were broadcasting from the

moon. She seemed comfortable being the bearer of bad news and sometimes a certain smugness even crept into her tone, as if she were actually quite pleased that terrible storms were raging in the North Atlantic while she sat in the safety of her cosy broadcasting studio. 'Come out here,' I wanted to say to her, 'and see how you like it.'

Reports were transmitted hourly. Inevitably they began with a severe weather warning which the woman described in fine detail. Hearts in our mouths, we listened to her robotic recital of winds gusting to 90 knots and waves 20 metres high.

'This severe weather warning,' she said, 'extends from –'

Each time she gave the co-ordinates of the storm, her voice would be consumed by a barrage of furious hissing. We knew a deadly gale was raging somewhere. But where? Although, with Dad still unable to take sights, we weren't quite sure where we were either. In frustration, my father would turn off the radio and we'd troop outside to peer anxiously around at the stars twinkling overhead while thunder and lightening encircled us. Sometimes the moon shone through a hole in the sky above, its rays illuminating the dark backs of bedraggled, exhausted-looking sea birds that had started flying from the line of squalls to sleep perched on our stern davits.

My mother gave up on the barometer readings when they stabilized just below 1010 millibars, and took to counting down the miles to Grenada instead. Although we were motoring every day and using up our precious diesel, progress remained painfully slow. On the 19th of September, 670 miles remained. Three days later, working on dead reckoning – as my parents called it – there were still 600 miles to go. We'd made only 70 miles in three days. At this rate Grenada was still weeks away.

Day after day, the weather conditions remained the same; blue skies or stars above us and surrounding squalls of steely clouds so thick they looked like a wall. I found myself imagining that the only way through them was to find a key which would open a massive secret door. Slowly it became clear that we were in the eye of a tropical low-pressure wave, an embryonic hurricane, and like us, and at a similar speed, it was travelling in the direction of Grenada. As the weather system moved it would either pick up speed and develop into a fully fledged hurricane or – if we were lucky – it would run out of power and dissipate.

On the evening of our 13th day at sea, just before nightfall, the situation changed. Four days after we entered the low pressure system and began travelling in its eye, the storm overtook us. Sails slack, we watched black and purple anvil-shaped clouds approach. Until now they'd kept their distance, but spurred suddenly by unknown forces, they rose darkly from the ocean and raced to meet us. The light faded to indigo, irradiated by flashes of lightning that turned the sea a sudden luminous blue and caught our faces in startled flash-bulb freezes. Over the water we could see the wind rushing towards us, turning the sea from smooth grey glass to matt black and then white as it was whipped to foam. We'd taken the jib down and were putting a final reef in the main when the wind hit. The sea foamed and spume stung our faces. *Vingila*, somnolent for the past week, leapt into action. She heeled over, yawed and surged forward, her lee scuppers under water, her rigging groaning. Dad took the helm from Mom and his white face was the last thing I saw as I retreated below with a quivering Pepe. The squalls lasted most of the night and fortunately our heavily reefed main held. The next day when the sun rose and it was as if nothing had ever happened. The sky was blue, the dark clouds gone and we had a 15 knot trade wind from the

north east. That night a bedraggled seabird appeared from nowhere to alight exhausted on our davits.

Our pleasure at meeting the north east trade winds was short lived. They died not long after they arrived and once again we turned back to the motor and the dregs of our diesel. *Vingila* baked like a biscuit in the tropical sun. With no wind to cool us and the sails down and unable to provide shade there was no escaping from the blistering heat. We were, it seemed, still in the doldrums. Out on the deck the sun bored into the tops of our heads and glinted off the glassy sea, dazzling us and inducing headaches as we took turns at the helm, while down below the hot engine throbbed and roared in time to the surge of the swells. A miasma of diesel fumes exuded not only from *Vingila*'s exhaust which was placed directly outside the cockpit, but also from the panels of the engine room itself. It was difficult to decide if the smell was worse above decks or below. On our 14th day at sea, my father who had obviously had enough and wanted to get to Granada, motored for eight hours straight. At last, as the cool of darkness descended, he turned off the engine. Our ears reverberated with silence, broken only by the lapping of wavelets under the stern. Over supper we found ourselves shouting at one another as if we were hard of hearing. But at last Dad's noon sights were giving results, and they showed we were slowly nearing the Caribbean.

As the sun set the following evening, we spied the island of Tobago. Above our heads a mackerel sky turned pink, but on the horizon the hills of Tobago were black and overhung with sullen cumulonimbus. We welcomed the sight of land, but the island didn't welcome us. As citizens of apartheid South Africa we were forbidden to disembark on its shores and so we just sailed slowly past. That night its lighthouse kept us company until the morning when we left it on our beam. Two days later the lavender smudge of Grenada rose from the

horizon and, after a day spent watching it enlarge with frustrating slowness, we anchored at last in Prickly Bay which was well protected, with clear, sun spangled water and a yacht club nestled among gardens of frangipani and hibiscus.

After a shower with astoundingly warm, fresh water, I sat on the club veranda watching the wind play in the palms and revelling in the feel of my salt-free skin while Mom and Dad ordered beers from the bar. A young woman holding a well dressed toddler by the hand walked across the lawn and looked me over. She asked if I lived on a yacht. I nodded.

‘Which boat is yours, then?’

Her hair was silky smooth and fell in a soft wave from her pink cheek. Her sandals were leather and she wore a well-cut dress. In spite of my recent shower I felt sticky again, aware of my salt bleached pigtails, my coarse bare feet and the peeling tip of my sunburned nose. I hesitated before pointing out *Vingila*. Our boat looked even more shabby than usual; her sails were roughly folded, her hull was streaked with rust and strings of drying fish hung above her decks like macabre prayer flags. At least she no longer had blue paint blotches. The woman and I contemplated *Vingila* for a moment in silence. Then she asked where we had sailed from.

‘Brazil,’ I said.

‘That’s awfully far isn’t it?’

‘Yes, it is’ I admitted. I couldn’t possibly explain to her just how far.

The toddler leaned forward to a pick crimson hibiscus flower from a bush while the woman sighed, lightly, in a contented sort of way.

‘Tell me, how was your trip?’ she asked.

‘Okay, I suppose, but we were becalmed a lot and I worried about hurricanes.’

'Yes, hurricanes' she said, gesturing toward a jumble of upended tree roots spoiling the otherwise ordered garden. 'We've had a few. In fact a little baby one came through last week and tore up those trees.'

Part 3

Caribbean

Chapter 11

Caribbean

Robert and I were struck by pirate fever in the Caribbean. Mom tore strips of rags for our bandanas, Robert used his machete from Brazil as a cutlass and the dinghy became our galleon. We attacked a nearby yacht owned by a photographer who, we understood, took pictures primarily of nude women. I'd heard Dad telling Mom that he'd had married one of his models. When we boarded we found her sitting naked on the deck, working at a sewing machine and fixing sails. She had wide blue eyes and freckles sprinkled over her whole body. After admiring her pretty curly pubic hair and deciding that I wanted some just like it when I grew up, I demanded loot. She gave a good performance of being frightened, perhaps because she'd noticed my brother's machete was real, and let out a few gratifying screams before saying that if everybody put down their knives, she'd give us juice and sticky buns.

In Saint George, the capital of Granada, my mother said she expected old pirate ships to sail into the harbour at any time. Luckily we were protected by the battlements and cannons scattered among the surrounding hills. *Vingila* was anchored in Prickly Bay, but we often travelled to Saint George by taxi, to shop at the fresh vegetable market and walk about the cobbled streets of the old town. Before returning to the boat we got into the habit of stopping at an old bar with dark wooden floors and a view over the bay. Mom and Dad drank rum punches and Robert and I were allowed Bentleys; a mix of fresh lime and Angostura bitters. The barman dipped the rims of the glasses in sugar and garnished the cocktails with green leaves and sticky maraschino cherries. My brother said they were naff, but drink

in hand, I felt grown up and sophisticated and it was one of the few times I stopped being a pirate.

I liked Granada. After the filthy cities of Brazil, a quiet island planted with nutmeg, sugar cane and cloves, and overgrown with hibiscus and bougainvillea, was a relief. Part of the British Commonwealth, it had been independent since 1974 and was ruled by an eccentric despot, Sir Gairy, who was obsessed with flying saucers and the occult. Nevertheless, in spite of the crazy leader, the local dogs had fur and the people were relaxed and friendly, literacy rates were high and the supermarkets were well stocked. It was altogether a lovely place that looked nothing like the hotbed of repression and suffering the United States claimed it was when they invaded four years later.

For most of the southern Caribbean, Robert and I remained pirates. We lost interest somewhere around the Antilles when I discovered Jesus and my brother committed his life to spear-fishing, but until that time – when I wasn't sipping cocktails – pirates were all we could think or talk about. Robert was Blackheart and I was Ursula, Terror of the Seas, although when the situation called for it, we sometimes represented a entire crews of blood thirsty buccaneers. We duelled with each other, and we invaded islands and boats. We buried treasure on tiny islets and drew up maps with crosses detailing its position. We copied Jolly Rogers on the corners and burned the paper's edges to make our maps look more authentic. In Granada we turned 11 and playing pirates was the culmination of a series of generally violent and blood-thirsty games we'd begun as pre-schoolers in Benoni: Cops and Robbers, Cowboys and Indians, and War. In those games too, players were armed with guns or knives and people got to chose if they wanted to be a goody or a baddy. I was always a baddy, it was more fun. We got to die horrible, protracted deaths. Dying was an art we prac-

tised by throwing ourselves to the ground, clasping our chests, or bellies, while moaning, writhing and gasping. Sometimes we got to rise up and die again, depending on how many children were in the game. In the Caribbean although we played alone, with our imaginations we swelled our ranks to hoards of salty sea dogs and we possessed a boat and real knives and often had ancient cannons or tiny, deserted islets to ourselves.

*

The days in Granada melted together in a peaceful haze, mellowed in my father's case by bottles of inexpensive rum. After our difficult sea passage we needed rest and a month passed before we felt ready enough to move on. We looked forward to a Caribbean cruise. North of Granada, a string of islands stretched all the way to Florida, each one separated by no more than a day's sail. We need never be out of sight of land again, or doubt our position. We could choose our weather and wait out unfavourable winds. Apart from the rare hurricane, from which we could hide, the weather would be mild and the sea calm. We expected sailing nirvana and so did the thousands of other yachts jostling with us for a place in the anchorages. Some of them – a handful of long term cruisers – we'd met before, but there were also bigger, smarter yachts on jaunts from America and Europe, and haughty racing boats en route to other places and monstrous sail-less gin palaces with on-deck jacuzzis, jet-skis and helicopter landing pads. The most numerous vessels were charter boats, ranging from elegant fully-crewed luxury yachts to Sunsail bare boats with all the soul of a mobile home. We hated the bare boats. Interchangeably identical, with beige topsides and a maroon stripe wrapped around their hulls like a ribbon, they dribbled, in a seemingly endless stream, from an extensive, parkade-like marina in St Lucia. We looked down on them, calling them chocolate boxes and despising the holiday makers, usually American, British or German,

who rented the boats for a week and followed a set program from which few dared not deviate. Their schedule was most apparent on Thursday nights when multiple barbecues were simultaneously fired up in the baskets suspended from the boats' backsides.

Because the boats were leased without a skipper or crew, they were usually sailed by people with no experience and very little skill, and they collided frequently with other yachts, dragged anchor, and didn't keep a polite distance. They were often downright dangerous. Although having sailors more bumbling than ourselves to sneer at was a change.

We would spend five months in the Caribbean and visit more than twenty islands: Granada and the Grenadines, the Windward and Leeward Islands, the Greater and Lesser Antilles, the U.S and the British Virgins, but when I think back I can't remember making a single significant connection with a local person. *Vingila's* visitors book, full of the names of Brazilians and people from the Pacific, contains only a single entry from a Dominican islander by the name of Martin Romain, and I can't even remember who he was. Caribbean society, it became apparent, was sharply divided between tourists and locals. This was most apparent on Union Island, where an opulent hotel was fenced off from the local shacks. When we tried to go for a walk beyond its barricades, a group of locals followed us, hissing 'Honkey' and throwing stones. Even within the tourist group there were divisions, particularly among the yachting community. We sailed and socialised with the cruising clan. The racers wouldn't have us and we, in turn, would have nothing to do with the chocolate boxes.

From Granada we made our way through the Grenadines north to St Vincent, stopping briefly at Tobago Cays, a cluster of uninhabited coral islands. Arriving late in the morning we anchored beside the passage to the anchorage to dive and have lunch. After a few minutes we were joined by a pair of chocolate boxes that anchored close beside us and spent the

next hour, while we ate, anxiously consulting their sailing directions. Then a man on the closer yacht leaned over and snapped his fingers as if my father was a waiter in a restaurant.

'You there,' he said, fanning himself with the folded sailing directions. He had a smear of zinc cream across his nose and wore an Hawaiian shirt over a pair of cotton pyjama pants. His arms were bright red and shiny and a pair of pink sunburned feet stuck out beneath the hem of his trouser legs. He was following another charter boat schedule, one as predictable as the set meal plans. Day one – white skin and bare chest; day two – blistered red flesh and long loose pyjamas. Sometimes by day six a few of the tougher skinned would be tanned and back in bikinis and bermuda shorts for the Thursday night barbecue.

'Is this the anchorage?' the zinc-creamed man called over to us.

Dad shook his head. 'No, it's not,' he said.

'What do you mean, it's not the anchorage?' The man consulted his sailing directions again. I wondered if – in addition to instructions for supper that evening – they included advice on treating sunburn. His face took on a crafty look as if we were keeping something from him. 'If it's not the anchorage, then why are you anchored here?'

Dad didn't have to raise his voice to converse because they were so close we could have handed them a sandwich if we'd wanted to.

'The anchorage,' said Dad, 'is through that passage.'

And he pointed the way to a well-marked entrance.

Giving us looks of betrayal, as if we'd deliberately mislead them, they raised their moorings and left. We hated them more when Robert and I learned that chocolate boxers, unlike regular yachties, had money to spare. When my brother speared a crayfish almost as long as he was, Mom refused to have the creature aboard. It was too big, she couldn't possi-

bly be expected to cook such a thing, we simply didn't have the pots. So after a photograph, Robert took his catch to the chocolate boxes. The people on the first boat were unwilling to deviate from their prescribed meal plan and told him as much, but the next group proved more adventurous and paid Robert 15 US dollars – an unimaginable sum – for the biggest crayfish I ever saw. A source of income established, Robert started selling fish and crayfish regularly to the charter yachts. Vincent and the guys on *Dou-Dou Diop* arrived from Brazil and made money from the chocolate boxes too. They sold them seashells and trinkets they carved from bones and turtle shell. Sometimes, they outright begged. At night, when they weren't swimming into the marine reserves to spear fish, they stole the charter boats' anchors and sold them second-hand to other yachties. They were kind enough not to set the boats adrift and, after releasing the shackles, tied the denuded chains to clumps of coral or rocks.

'It is most important,' Vincent explained, 'to be the first boat to leave the anchorage in the morning.'

Nadine had left him, temporarily, for another man, and Vincent had met a pretty young Swedish girl with magnificent breasts, a good all-over tan and a penchant for brushing her teeth frequently. The relationship was doomed to fail. Vincent didn't even own a toothbrush but initially they seemed happy.

We sailed together with a loose group of fellow yachties, meeting randomly on different islands as we made our way north. Like Vincent and Roland, Dad preferred wilder places, where the snorkelling and spearfishing were better. Our friend Tommy Tucker on *Spectrum* was more interested in history. I'd first seen Tommy's wife Maggie when Urbine pointed her out to me in Durban.

'Have you seen that woman's chest?' he said, smirking and cupping his hands a considerable distance from his own chest and jiggling them up and down as if he were weighing heavy fruit.

Maggie Tucker's back was bowed by the weight of breasts so great that her bra straps, over the years, had cut chasms into the flesh of her narrow shoulders. She was English, fair skinned and in her fifties. She had the profile of a chicken with a beaky nose, narrow lips and an almost completely absent chin. Ten years in Australia had failed to acclimatise her to tropical weather and she was always hot and flushed, and fanning her great glowing bosom. 'Dear, dear, dear...' she would say, flapping her hand ineffectually above the red waves of heat rising from her impressive cleavage. She was an unconvincing circumnavigator. Her husband, a retired major in the British army, a career officer, she called Good God Tucker, although his name was Harold, or something like it. He introduced himself as Tommy. He had a speech impediment and was unable to pronounce the consonant 'f', substituting it instead with 'th'. Pink wattles hung from his chin and quivered when he became indignant, which was usually whenever he talked or thought about 'the Thrench' whom he detested. The Tuckers two sons had been raised in Australia, purging them of all English traits. Jock – tall, rangy and sunburned – had big gnarly hands on the end of his skinny wrists and he liked grabbing Robert's and my ankles in a single paw and sweeping us up to dangle head down over the side of *Spectrum*. We never got to meet Stretch, he had stayed in Australia, but we were told he was even taller, thinner and rangier than Jock, who's real name – by the way – was Andrew.

Tommy, outwardly unmoved by his wife's generously proportioned figure, appeared driven by two forces in life; a dislike of all things French and an appreciation for young

women in bikinis. Dad liked young women in bikinis too, he even invited one to live aboard with us in Salvador, but she didn't last long. Dad thought Bev and her selection of swim wear were great and said she could stay as long as she wanted, but Mom, who'd begun banging pots around a lot in the galley, said she didn't see the point of cooking food for someone who went and vomited it all up in the toilet just to stay thin. That, according to my mother, was a waste. Less than a week after arriving on *Vingila*, Bev declared that she couldn't be happy with us because our boat 'had an atmosphere' and announced her intention to move to *Spectrum*, where she had found Tommy and Jock welcoming and friendly. She was right, they were friendly and if she'd asked around the yacht club she would have soon heard just how friendly they could be. Yolanda, who also wore a bikini, would have told her that Tommy was so friendly he'd offered her rowing lessons which, she discovered, included having her bare legs massaged while receiving instruction on her strokes.

In Granada, when we met up with *Spectrum* again, Bev was gone but the tensions she'd left in her wake lay just beneath the surface of social interaction. We took care to avoid mentioning her name.

'I think Jock got lucky,' Dad said to Mom, 'but not without some stiff competition from the old man.'

*

There is a long history of animosity between the French and the English in the Caribbean; islands of each nation lie side by side and are littered with the forts, emplacements and cannons. The skipper and first mate of *Spectrum* took us to inspect them.

'British, of course,' Tommy Tucker would say, pulling himself up with military pride if the rusty old armaments had the correct pedigree. If not, wattles aquiver and lips pursed in

distaste, he would mutter, 'Bloody Thrench...' To which Maggie, sitting on a nearby cannon and fanning her glowing bosom, would reply with an absent 'Good God, Tucker.'

'This place is bloody unbelievable,' Tommy greeted us in Martinique, my namesake island. 'We've had the damndest time with the bloody crowd at the *poste restante*. You wouldn't believe it. Typical ruddy Thrench.'

They had tried to collect a letter addressed to 'Tommy, Maggie and Jock Tucker, Yacht *Spectrum*' and the woman at the counter had refused to give it to them because, according to their passports, their names were Margaret, Harold and Andrew. She finally agreed to hand over the letter if they could provide the passport of 'Yacht *Spectrum*', confirming everything Tommy believed about the French and providing fodder for endless wattle quivering diatribes.

Nana came to visit us in Martinique, flying from Johannesburg via Rio in a wash and wear polyester pants suit she had bought specially for the flight. Chummy, my grandad, stayed at home to look after the dogs. Anyway, he said, hell would freeze over before he got on a boat. My grandmother's plane was delayed for a day in Brazil, so Nana, in the same pantsuit – which was holding up well – took a trip to see the giant statue of Jesus with his arms outstretched and his back turned on the masses of poor people. She arrived in Martinique bearing a spear gun for Robert and looking very excited and fresh, except for the back of her head, where her hair-sprayed curls had been squashed flat from sitting so long in the aeroplane. She hadn't changed since I'd last seen her in Alberton. She still had the same thick stumpy legs, crinkled smiling eyes and thin, disapproving lips.

Two days later she was lying face-down at the stern of our boat, crying and hugging a bollard with both arms, while I stroked her back. Mom and Dad were racing *Vingila* against

Spectrum to Dominica. As we'd sailed into the lee of the island, wind funnelling through gaps between the mountains pushed up whitecaps and threw our yacht over so far that her scuppers were submerged and water coursed along the decks. Ignoring Nana's sobs, Mom and Dad cheered and whooped when *Vingila* made 10 knots. My father was pushing the boat hard in a way I'd never seen before. Sheets groaning and throwing spray in the air, *Vingila* juddered over the waves like a bus over a dirt road.

Nana wept and prayed to God. Her face turned scarlet and sea water dissolved her laquered helmet into a sticky mass of limp curls. I patted her back and spoke soothing, meaningless words of comfort. She refused to open her eyes or lift her head. She thought we were going to die. I held her arm and told her we probably wouldn't.

My father didn't like my grandmother much; he thought she gave her husband too much lip. One thing he couldn't stand, Dad said, was a woman who gave a man lip. At least his own wife towed the line. Chummy needed to put his foot down and show Nana who was boss. As *Vingila* yawed over again and my grandmother let out a fresh sob, I saw Dad at the helm glance over his shoulder at the prone form clinging to a bollard before turning the wheel further into the wind and forcing the boat to heel over even more. It looked to me as if my father was putting his foot down and showing his mother-in-law who was boss. Making her toe the line.

Afterwards, once her holiday was over and she was safely back in Alberton with Chummy, Nana contacted a newspaper journalist who wrote a dramatic story about our dangerous trip around the world and the perils we faced on a daily basis. It included a big photograph of my Nana, with my young cousin on her lap, staring unsmilingly at the camera

and looking very solemn and brave. She left out the part about fighting with my father afterwards.

Nana's trip to the Caribbean wasn't all bad. She loved the village of St Pierre which had once been the capital of Martinique. She thought it interesting that in 1902 when steam began issuing from the top of Mount Pele, a suspiciously cone-shaped mountain looming above the town, the local authorities confidently assured the residents there was nothing to be concerned about. After a week of grumbled warnings, Mount Pele blew its top, burying the town in hot lava, cinders and ash, and killing all but one of its 30 000 inhabitants. Nana liked the museum full of melted scissors and cutlery, and thought it fascinating that the single survivor of the devastation was a prisoner held in solitary confinement. He'd been locked in a tiny free-standing cell with walls as thick as a clay oven. She was sure there was a moral somewhere in the story, but was uncertain just what it might be. The highlight of her visit to the Caribbean, however, was an encounter with Tommy Tucker's naked buttocks in Dominica.

Dominica is more widely known for its numerous geothermal attractions; it bubbles and seethes with vents, springs and erupting mud pots. Its most spectacular feature is a boiling lake.

'Forget it,' Dad said. 'We're not going to the boiling lake, it's out of the question. They charge entrance fees. And we'd have to hire a car or take a taxi to get you lot there.'

So instead of the boiling lake, we went to a lukewarm pool, which was free and within walking distance. A handful of young boys, eager to earn a tip, led us and the Tuckers up the hill. When we reached the pool they stripped off their shorts and T-shirts and plunged in.

'Bloody warm weather isn't it?' Tommy Tucker wiped his forehead with the back of a hand. He sat on a rock beside me, watching the boys in the water. The rest of our group had elected to rest above the pool, in a patch of shade.

'Hold this a minute, won't you?' Tommy said, handing me his shirt, and a few seconds later not only his khaki shorts but an enormous, baggy pair of Y-front underpants as well. Naked, he sat down to take off his socks.

'Tell me again...' Nana asked me repeatedly in horrified fascination for the rest of her holiday whenever we were alone. 'Tell me again how his bum looked.'

I never tired of telling her. 'It was soft and floppy,' I'd say, pausing for dramatic effect, 'and it looked like an octopus, slithering into the cracks of the rock.'

Nana had only seen Tommy's buttocks from the slope above the pool when Maggie, who'd been sitting in the shade trying without success to cool off, had suddenly blanched and then flushed again, her hand frozen in mid-flap above her bosom. Below in the water the children screamed for joy as Tommy, with his head extended, crawled into several inches of tepid mud. The water, the depth of which he had misjudged, was insufficient for full submersion and left the surface of his milk-white body exposed to the air and our interested stares. A withered turtle neck with a bald head on it, a slump shouldered back and – like an island separated from the mainland – a pair of pale, disembodied buttocks.

'Good God Tucker,' Maggie said, jolting up from her place in the shade and craning her neck over the edge for a better view. 'I don't believe it. He's in the ruddy nuddy!'

My grandmother's holiday passed quickly in a blur of day sails, nudist encounters, geothermal attractions and family turmoil. Near the end of her stay, Nana and my father reached a sort of truce and for a treat she took us out to a restaurant where we tasted butter-

nut soup for the first time and callaloo – a slippery type of spinach. We sailed her back to Martinique two days before Christmas. The night before her flight home to Chummy, she bought a tiny leg of lamb which Mom cooked until it was grey to the bone. Nana told us she could have got a whole sheep in South Africa for the same price.

*

‘Jesus,’ said Jeff, pausing to take a sip of tea from his mug, ‘is with us right now, sitting at this very table.’

A thrill coursed through my body. ‘Really?’ I said.

‘Yes, really. He said so in the Bible: “Whenever two or three people are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” Can you feel his presence?’

At his words I felt a distinct tingle in my limbs, like a trickle of cold water, and I knew right away that it was Jesus, making his presence felt.

I nodded. ‘Yes, yes I can.’ For some reason I found myself whispering.

Jeff smiled. He knew a lot about the Bible; he spent hours every day reading it and could recite entire passages by heart. He wanted to know more, however, and he and his wife Sue and her two grown daughters were en route in their trimaran from South Africa to America to enrol in Bible College. The purpose of their entire voyage, Jeff said, was to know the Lord better and to understand the wisdom of His ways.

Above the rim of his mug, Jeff’s eyes held an air of sweetly sad compassion. Sue’s indistinguishable daughters sat pallidly next to us, strumming guitars and singing what they called contemporary religious songs in low, muted voices.

‘Jesus wants to come into your life Nicky,’ Jeff said, ‘but are you ready to accept him?’

We were in the Virgin Islands and I knew I needed Jesus – or something – in my life. I was suffering the first twinges of nascent adolescence, compounded by acute culture shock which had been precipitated by Nana's visit. After a stable childhood in Benoni where alcohol was usually consumed discretely, if not surreptitiously, and people always kept their clothes on in public, my world had changed. Some of the changes had happened so gradually that, with the flexibility of childhood, I had scarcely noticed them until Nana's arrival. My grandmother, a Calvinist, was an usher in the church and a member of the Alberton Methodist Women's Auxiliary Group. She was on first name terms with the minister and made stacks of pancakes at the church fete each year. She hated drinking and grudgingly allowed my grandfather two small shots of whisky every Friday evening, although it annoyed her. In the Caribbean she was horrified at my parent's behaviour. In South Africa only low-life coloureds smoked marijuana – or *dagga* as she called it – and for that they should be thrown in jail to rot, she said. Although she was too scared to say anything directly to my father, Nana held Dad responsible for our family's state of moral decay. When she and I were alone together she listed the sins my parents and their friends were committing. Failure to observe the Sabbath, immodesty, theft, fornication and although she couldn't be sure, she suspected adultery too.

'The only thing for you to do, my girl,' she would say, 'is to pray to God and ask him to make your parents stop all this nonsense and come home.'

My growing feelings of disapproval and despair climaxed soon after her departure when we sailed on *Dou-Dou Diop* to visit a remote anchorage for the day. All the women, including my mother, went bare-breasted, marijuana smoke filled the air and Roland speared a turtle and then cut its windpipe leaving it to rasp for breath for what felt like at

least an hour in the dinghy before it died. The final result of such protracted reptilian suffering was a single tough steak and a shell which after a quick scrape clean was sold to a passing chocolate box. That evening, overwhelmed by the debauchery and cruelty I had witnessed, I succumbed to a flood of tears and tried to swim into the bay to drown myself, Robert and my mother followed in the dinghy. She told me I was being silly and my brother told me to stop acting like a baby.

My friend Belinda also needed Jesus. Since our first days in Cape Town, when she had kissed Gary on *Scud* while the rest of us looked on, she'd grown into a sensible, slightly spotty fifteen year old. Her mother – the wild-haired Grace and skipper of *Antoinette* – was still in pursuit of the girls' father – the ex-husband who sailed forever out of reach on his yacht *Odette*. Grace had failed to capture her husband or resolve her chronic crew trouble. We'd seen *Antoinette* briefly in Fernando de Norhana but they had been pushing for Grenada with a sulky crew member who insisted they get to the Caribbean so he could leave the boat. As we got to know the family better, it became apparent that Belinda and Kim's happiness depended almost entirely on Grace's fluctuating relationships with the series of young men who joined – and then left – the yacht. In Grenada, we thought the family might achieve some level of stability; their new crew member seemed reasonable, and initially the availability of cheap rum soothed Grace's temper. Even her hair seemed more settled. But as we sailed north through the Grenadines toward the Antilles and Virgin Islands, interpersonal relations aboard *Antoinette* began to deteriorate. As Grace's fondness for rum grew, so did her affection for the young man. When her feelings were not returned, she increasingly sought solace in rum and Belinda was forced to look after not only her younger sister Kim, but often her mother as well.

'Why don't you invite your friend Belinda to visit us sometime?' Jeff asked, putting down his empty mug. 'Jesus is waiting here for her too, you know.'

His step-daughters stopped their strumming for a moment to smile gently and nod in agreement.

A few days later Belinda and I accepted Jesus into our lives after a cup of tea and were reborn on the trimaran. To celebrate, Jeff invited us to share our rapture at the local church by attending an evening service. Our parents agreed to let us go. The church and surrounding houses were a little rundown but the choir in purple satin robes were more impressive than anything I'd seen at the Alberton Methodist church or Sunday school. I noticed that everybody except us was black. Ouma, my dad's mother, wouldn't have approved. She was a strong Christian secure in the knowledge that when she died she was going straight to the whites only section of heaven. When the choir sang, the congregation stood up, swaying their hips. They stamped their feet and clapped. Then the preacher, a sweaty man with unstable eyeballs, stood up and told us we were all going straight to hell, where we would burn in eternal damnation. That wasn't fair, I thought. I could make a whole list of people who should burn in hell before me. And Jeff had told me I was saved. The preacher said that those who sat so smug and safe, believing they were saved, knew nothing. We were wicked. Wicked and evil and God could see right through us, into our black evil little hearts. There was no hope for us but for the love of Jesus. He went on. Most of us were such sinners, not even the love of Jesus was going to help. He insulted the congregation so, I expected them to walk out, but they just nodded their heads and murmured in agreement.

'Amen,' they said. 'Hallelujah!'

I stopped listening to the preacher's words and watched spit spray from his lip. When they caught the light, the droplets looked like tiny shooting stars. The preacher paused only to swab his brow occasionally with a white cloth. After he had at last exhausted himself listing our character flaws and the punishments we were going to suffer for them, he sank into a worn red velvet chair, to a chorus of fervent Amens and hallelujahs. Jeff stood up and asked if his daughters could sing a song. Pale and devoid of make-up they took to the stage with their guitars and tunelessly murmured their way through 'Killing Me Softly With His Love,' which I'd never considered a religious song. I thought it was about sex. The congregation also seemed nonplussed. Then the choir took over again for a few more rounds and after that we all went home. On the way back Jeff looked shifty and refused to meet our eyes at first. After a while he sighed and explained to Belinda and me that Jesus really was very kind and very loving and infinitely forgiving and if we believed in him we were saved and we shouldn't worry too much about burning in hell.

For the time that I remained a Christian I tried to get Robert to see that our family needed saving from their sins, but he refused to be drawn in. He had his own religion: spear-fishing. He worshipped daily at the great altar of the blue ocean with offerings of bloody piscine sacrifices, and he had no wish to waste his time with Jesus.

*

At almost every *poste restante* in the Caribbean we'd received a letter from Lynnath Beckley, telling us to expect her arrival in Puerto Rico. She'd quit her job in Port Elizabeth where she'd been working as a junior lecturer in the marine biology department and now, she wrote, she was free to sail the world for as long as the money lasted. Dad said he wasn't

sure about taking on crew. We'd become self sufficient and crew caused complications and tension. I hoped she wasn't a vomiter like Bev.

We anchored off the coast of Puerto Rico near the town of Fajardo, at Isleta Marina, a scrap of sand dominated by the towering stalk of a condominium. On the ground floor of the sky-scraper there were warm showers, a laundromat and a cramped convenience store which was usually closed. On the rare occasions I found it open, it was presided over by an unfriendly old woman who refused to sell me more than a single loaf of bread at a time, forcing me to hang about the entrance and beg strangers to buy me a second. Outside, on the rim of land not consumed by condominium, there was a patch of unnaturally green lawn and a swimming pool which was usually deserted. On the weekends, however, it filled up with the fattest children I'd ever seen. They lolled in the tepid water like pygmy hippos, emerging only to make trips to the convenience store for cans of pop, packets of chips and endless ice-cream cones.

While we waited for Lynnath to arrive, Dad had time on his hands to watch Robert and me more closely. He said he'd noticed that we had been slacking off. He set us to work sanding the grab rails and as we scraped the blistered varnish, he settled in the shade of the cockpit with a glass of rum and told us what was wrong with us. We were lazy, for a start. Some of us spent all day with their noses in a book. We gave him lip. Anything we did, he always had to come and do over. In that way we were like kaffirs – worse than kaffirs come to think about it – because kaffirs were cheaper to feed. He said there was work to be done on the boat and no excuse for people to lie around reading books. Anytime one of us felt the urge to read they just had to tell him and he would find that person something useful to do. Another thing wrong with us, he said, was that some of us thought we were much smarter

than other people. We might be clever, he said, but we weren't very bright. Our biggest problem was, we didn't know how to think.

On the day that Lynnath had written she would arrive, he and Mom went to the airport in San Juan but she wasn't there. Robert and I were left on the boat with no way of getting ashore. We were given a list of chores to complete; sand and paint the gas bottle; chip the port scupper; lift and clean the duck boards in the cockpit. When Dad returned – without Lynnath – he found the work we'd done in his absence to be lacking and unsatisfactory. There were some grounds to his dissatisfaction, I'd sunk into a book and emerged hours later, to race through my tasks and it showed in the results. But something about Puerto Rico or Lynnath's imminent arrival irked my father, inducing rages and strings of abuse to pour from his mouth. I put my head down and took it. I was used to his insults, I'd been hearing them on and off since Durban and they'd lost the power to hurt me. Robert and I had learned to endure them in the same way we endured beating into a head wind, or other bad weather, as something that would pass. Then next day my parents went to the airport and again returned without Lynnath. This time my father had a cane with him. It was as long as his arm and finger-thin, with knobs marking each bamboo joint. He picked it up and slashed the air. Let me introduce the Whistler, he said. He tucked it into the saloon curtains. Where I can reach it quickly, he told us. And over the following weeks, months and years, Robert and I grew to know the Whistler.

Dad checked the date on Lynnath's letter again.

'Well give her a week,' he said. 'Then it's her tough luck.'

The next day my parents went to San Juan and Mom persuaded Dad to take us with them. And so Robert and I got our first taste of America. On the mainland we wandered

through supermarkets like aliens visiting from another planet, our mouths agape at the aisles of glass fronted deep freezers. I had never seen anything like it. In South Africa I'd first tasted fruit yoghurt in a plastic cup when I was about eight years old. I can still remember the shop where it was on promotion and the lady explaining to my mother that yoghurt was a kind of rotten milk you could eat. With time, it became an exciting addition to our diet of meat, rice and potatoes. We bought no other processed food, unless you counted cheese. On the boat we ate fish, rice and vegetables from the local markets. I'd never seen a frozen TV dinner before, but in Puerto Rico there seemed to be little else. Robert and I pressed our faces to the cold glass doors, reading aloud. Roast turkey with gravy and candied yams, meat loaf and mashed potatoes, crumbed steak burgers. Overwhelmed by the cornucopia of delights before us we approached a sales assistant and stated our hearts' desire (or at least the only one we felt we could afford). We wanted Marmite. They'd never heard of it. We were led up and down vast aisles lined with jars of peanut butter and jars of grape jelly and jars where somehow the peanut butter and grape jelly had been miraculously packed together in great stripy swirls. But no Marmite and no real bread either, only packets of stuff called Wonderbread, a fluffy white substance which was difficult to stomach after our months on the French islands eating crispy baguettes and *pain de campagne*. Away from the American supermarkets, however, there was a Latin flavour to Puerto Rico. People spoke Spanish, and there were old forts and bald scabby dogs that reminded me of Brazil. Along the road to San Juan, in anticipation of Easter, people sold live chicks dyed garish shades of green, orange and pink. My mother bought a dead fowl from a woman who stood selling them from her garage. Mom boiled the bird for most of the afternoon and although the meat tasted good, it was so tough that we found it almost impossible to chew or swallow.

Robert and I were at work scraping the cockpit lockers and giving them a new coat of varnish the next day when a Zodiac buzzed across the channel separating Isleta Marina from Fajardo. A familiar boyish figure sat in the bow.

‘Well look what the cat dragged in,’ Dad said, with a downward twist to his mouth, ‘a new brother for Robert.’

But when the Zodiac and Lynnath came alongside, he took her bag, turned his smile the right way up and welcomed her aboard.

*

A few coconut palms grew on Isleta Marina, but with so many vending machines and the convenience store nobody bothered to collect the coconuts until my brother was sent up the trees by Dad. We filled several sacks with nuts and stashed them in the anchor locker. Then we turned our attention to the amenities. My mother, who had been washing our clothes by hand for months, a chore that involved fetching gerry cans of water in the dinghy, was given money by my father and was told to enjoy the laundromat. Each warm shower I took was such an event that I recorded it in detail in my diary. Then Lynnath and my mother discovered a beauty salon across the channel in Fajardo that gave haircuts for three dollars. Lynnath, boyish to begin with, received an Elvis Presley hairstyle. After a disastrous hair cut in Dominica which made my mother cry, I’d been nominated official ship’s hairdresser, and after first practising on my brother, had been giving my mother what I thought were quite nice haircuts. With my mother now having found a new hairdresser, I turned my attention to the dog. I gave him increasingly elaborate poodle cuts, with a close-trimmed snout and pom-poms where ever I could make them, then my brother got a page boy like Trish and my

father received the same haircut he'd been getting for the previous twenty years. Only my hair stayed the same; waist length and worn in a pair of plaits that started at my ears.

Clean, groomed and having stockpiled a substantial stash of coconuts, we had no further need to linger at Isleta Marina. We raised anchor and set sail for Panama.

Chapter 12

Panama

During the years that we sailed I sporadically kept journals, my style and handwriting changing as I grew from a nine-year-old girl to a teenager of sixteen. My writing tools matured with me. In crayon, pencil, ball point and eventually, fountain pens with pretentious coloured ink, I described the islands we visited, my mother's experiments with Chinese cooking, and my first adolescent sexual encounters. The latter I encrypted, using an elaborate symbolic code that I quickly forgot how to decipher. In the cramped confines of a yacht, privacy is in short supply and I kept my diaries wrapped in plastic and hidden in the secret space beneath my bunk. When I left *Vingila* so suddenly, I didn't pack them. My papers were discovered in due course and read aloud by my family to much mirth, not all of it kind. Then my journals, stripped of their protective plastic covers, were misplaced or simply disintegrated in the wet sea air. Only a few, scattered pages remain.

I salvaged a record of our voyage across the Caribbean sea towards Panama. Sometime in March 1979 I picked up a pencil and wrote in careful round letters: 'I feel as if I am living in a blue sphere. Same thing. Sailing at four knots. Doing school and eating coconuts.' At that time we were midway to Panama. Robert and I had recommenced our school work after a break in Puerto Rico. The weather was wonderful. We had good wind, the sea and sky were clear and our chain locker was full of coconuts.

Lynnath opened nuts by cracking them with the blunt side of a machete, a task that had previously been my father's. She'd found a place in the family. She wore cut-off denim

shorts and liked dogs. She didn't own a bikini but even if she had, I don't think it would have upset my mother very much. She caught and cleaned fish, and was good with the helm and sails. Unlike Bev, our bikini girl, Lynnath ate everything and kept it down, and she never took any notice of Dad's nakedness. Robert and I liked her. She joined us in games and read stories aloud and later, at Mom's request to 'please teach Nicky some marine biology', gave me a series of lectures covering almost the entire syllabus of the first year of a Bachelor of Science degree.

For more than a week after leaving Puerto Rico a beam wind blew steadily at twenty knots, filling our twin jibs as the sun's rays bounced off the surface of the water. *Vingila* seemed somehow lighter than usual, skimming over the sea like large, slightly malformed butterfly. We imagined a string of similarly leisurely days ahead, each melting gently into the other. Seven hundred and twenty glorious miles, lay between us and the San Blas Islands of Panama. With Dad's navigation back on track, we were correct at least about the distance.

On the 25th of March, ignoring a heavy ground-swell building from the north east, we had a party. I helped Mom bake a cake using oil in place of butter and we opened a bottle of bargain wine she'd bought in South Africa.

'Doesn't the sky looks strange?' Robert said to me. 'See those clouds, all whipped up, like the tails on running horses.'

He was right, the upper level cirrus clouds had a certain flayed look to them.

My brother seemed oddly anxious. 'Don't you think the waves are bigger than they should be, considering the wind?'

We were sitting together on the cabin top eating, Mom and Dad had the bottle of wine between them in the cockpit and Lynnath stood at the stern with a slice of cake in her hand, looking into the distance.

Mom's voice floated up to us.

'Another glass of wine?' she was saying to Dad. 'Not too bad for a rand, hey?'

We were so busy celebrating a year at sea since leaving Cape Town that we failed to notice the signs. Mom put a whole fish in the oven to bake with onions and tinned tomatoes. When a big swell tilted *Vingila* on her side, exceeding the limits of the gimbaled stove, the door of the oven flew open and a dish of bubbling hot food shot across the saloon, colliding with the opposite bulkhead. Tomato juice trickled from the cushions. Holding Pepe back with one hand, Mom scraped fish into the baking tray while Dad found a bungee to secure the oven door.

'Why's the sea's so big?' Mom said as she wiped up the residue. 'It doesn't make sense. There's not that much wind.'

Dad, wrestling with the bungee, didn't even turn around.

'The waves are as big as houses,' I wrote in my diary two days later.

Although I was trying hard to be careful, my handwriting wasn't nearly as neat as that of my previous entry. It was difficult to keep a steady hand when *Vingila* kept dropping down waterfalls. I illustrated the page with a row of curlers which I coloured in blue crayon. Looking closely, it's just possible to see the speck of our boat perched on the lip of one of them.

From early the previous evening the wind had grown stronger and we'd spent a turbulent night running under a reefed main sail. By dawn the swells were pushing 30 feet and

Vingila was thumping along at 10 knots on a broad reach. In such heavy seas we knew that our boat's lack of responsiveness put us in danger of pitch poling; running steeply down a trough and nose-diving into the purple bulk of the wave ahead. With the bow dug in, the boat would somersault, thrown over by the following wave. It didn't sound like fun. The momentum of the boat and force of the water scour the decks clean of masts, rigging, steering columns and any humans silly enough to be outside at the time. Less silly humans cowering inside, are thrown about, usually sustaining serious and sometimes fatal injuries. I didn't want to pitch pole.

As the waves pushed her faster, *Vingila* began to hum, emitting a low throaty growl I hadn't heard before. It sounded vaguely threatening. Our placid, dependable slug of a boat seemed to have transformed herself and was charging out of control, hurtling down the swells with the momentum of truck. Dad said we needed to slow her down. Dropping the main and leaving her bare poled wasn't an option; she'd lose steerage and the waves would swamp us. If we wanted to keep our course and stay above water, we had to drop the main and raise the storm jib simultaneously, a task that required co-ordination and seamanship. He wasn't sure we could do it but we were sure as hell going to try.

Mom took the helm and Lynnath and I shared the sheets in the cockpit. The wind made such a racket in the rigging we had to scream to be heard. Gusts drove a sheets of spray against the hull. On the crests of swells we were exposed to the full force of the wind, but in the troughs our sails hung loose and shivered while globs of foam fell from the wave above.

Vingila shuddered and shook, her stays groaned, and I thought I saw her mast bend. Robert and Dad hanked the jib to the forestay and groped their way to the main mast where

they began hauling halyards. As the jib clattered and jerked its way up the stay, Lynnath and I yanked the sheets around the winch and the sail stopped thrashing and caught the wind with a crack. Just as Dad loosened the halyard to drop the main sail, an immense swell came up from behind, lifting our boat into the air and exposing her to the full force of the wind. I held my breath, expecting the sails to go, ripped from clue to tack. They moaned, but didn't give. Sails near bursting, *Vingila* balanced on the summit, giving us a good – if very brief – view of our surroundings. In the dim haze, rods of sunlight broke through fleeing clouds to illuminate a surreal scene of endless breakers, manes of spray rising from their curled necks. I was reminded of a picture that my Ouma – Dad's mom – had hanging in her lounge in Benoni. It was a cheap reprint of swollen cumulonimbus clouds shot through with shafts of light falling onto an intensely troubled sea. The colour scheme of the print was the same as that of our current storm: grey, violet and blue-black – like fresh bruises. But Ouma's picture wasn't only sea and sky, it also had Jesus in a robe standing barefoot on a cloud with sun beams radiating from the back of his head and a sweet smile on his face. Ouma – when she wasn't shooing dogs out of the kitchen – told me that as well as turning water into wine, Jesus could calm stormy seas and rescue sailors and fishermen. As *Vingila* hurtled down an incline that tilted away to infinity, I glanced up at the receding sky, expecting to find Him reaching out a perforated hand to save me.

Our boat's growl intensified. The needle on her knot meter passed 11, her previous speed record, and lodged itself firmly in the bottom right hand corner of the dial, at the 15 knots mark. A plumed wake spread from the stern, similar to the one I'd seen trailing Chummy's speed boat on Germiston Lake. My thoughts flicked from Jesus to water skiing and then back to the chasm below. My white-faced mother stood frozen at the helm. Any

steering *Vingila* needed to escape the trough, she'd have to do herself, I thought. Lynnath was frozen too but her eyes were shining and a smile was stretched across her face. I wondered vaguely if I should do anything when the knot meter and its stuck needle caught my attention again.

'Hey, Robert,' I yelled to my brother on the cabin top, 'check this out.'

He was hanging from a halyard in a cloud of spray and didn't even hear me.

Vingila did not dig her bow into the wave. Without my mother's help, she pulled herself around and we managed to drag the main sail down. I learned later that yachts race like this – sails up, surfing the waves, hull humming. It's called planing and *Vingila* never did it again. To plane, skilled sailors constantly trim the sails while a good helmsman keeps course and guides the boat through the troughs. We decided the whole thing was a bit much for us and hove to under the storm jib. Once we had *Vingila* facing the waves in a reasonably controlled manner, we retired en masse to the main saloon floor where Robert and I were reunited with our crochet blankets. They had been stowed in a locker for more than six months and smelled of mildew but we were pleased to see them again.

'And here's something for you,' Mom said, handing me a new book. I almost never saw new books, ours were all second hand, swopped from the other yachties.

'James Herriott,' I said. 'The best.'

Mom said she'd bought the book in St Thomas and hidden it for an emergency. I was delighted with my present; it was a treat to get something I actually wanted to read. I rolled myself in my crochet blanket, opened my book and within minutes was lying on a cold, cobblestone floor in Yorkshire with a vet who had his hand in a cow and was trying to deliver a stuck calf. I came back from Yorkshire only when especially large waves broke full

force over the deck and sent water spraying through the gaps in the closed hatch and onto the floor. Mom piled old towels to soak up the wet and I returned to the barn. Dad said he reckoned the wind was gusting to 60 knots. Robert didn't have a book to distract him and he wasn't in good shape. Between chapters on calving, old dogs, and cows dying of milk fever, I turned to my diary. I drew a few shaky navy blue waves and wrote, not without a touch of glee, 'I read my new book and Robert was sick every five minutes.'

Strangely enough, even in the midst of a storm that rattled the masts and made the shrouds sing, Dad was much less irritable than he'd been in Puerto Rico. On the ocean his mood improved; he relaxed and no longer found his family so taxing, even as the wind howled and waves crashed about us.

'Today we picked our selves up by the scruff of the neck and put up our sails. We were soon going along at six knots,' read my next diary entry. After lying battened down for two days among the biggest waves we'd yet seen, we were on our way again. Robert recovered once our usual activities recommenced; cooking, schoolwork, catching fish, washing dishes and eating coconuts.

We sighted the San Blas islands a week later. Sandy remnants of an ancient reef, they form a broken offshore chain, south of the Panama canal. The Kuna people build huts of palm fronds on some of the 365 islands, and tend their coconuts on others. They grow vegetables in gardens on the swampy mainland a few kilometres away, which they reach by outrigger canoe. Lynnath's guide book described the inhabitants as Dwarf Kuna Indians. The book has probably been updated to be more culturally sensitive, but the average indigenous adult still stands around five foot tall. And they are not Indians at all, merely another group of South American people who fell victim to Columbus's poor geography.

We made for the main island of Porvenir. It differed from the others in that, in addition to white sand, coconut palms and huts, it had a shop, an airstrip and a clapboard hotel. Our anchor had scarcely touched bottom when *Vingila* was invaded by dugout canoes carrying unusually dressed people all wanting to sell *molas* – hand-stitched reverse appliqué cloths – and demanding to have their photos taken for money. English conversation was strictly limited to matters of finance. A bandy legged man in a white dress-shirt and shorts introduced himself as Mr Morris, took over negotiations on our behalf, and announced that he'd take us on a jungle tour the following day.

'What time tomorrow?' Dad asked

Mr Morris pointed at a spot in the sky on the sun's trajectory and, squinting his eyes, said 'Ten-tirty.'

That night I breathed the scent of palm trees, grass huts, low-tide coral and wood smoke. In spite of the touts, there was something clean and wild about the place. Something that the other islands we'd visited had lacked. These were my first real atolls. I took out my diary and wrote: 'Went to bed happy.' The next day, after an expensive and unsatisfying outing in Mr Morris's dugout canoe which ended in an unpleasant hagggle, we left Porvenir and fled to the outlying islands of the barrier reef.

Lynnath took me snorkelling to look for cleaner shrimps who shared their burrows with gobies. We collected a sea sponge and dissected it to see its structure. From a book she had bought at the souvenir shop on Porvenir, Lynnath taught me some Kuna phrases.

'The Kuna word for American,' she said, 'is Murky.'

'Murky? Can we call them that?' I said.

Lynnath thought for a moment. 'Probably not to their faces, I think,' she said.

We practiced our new language on the people of the outlying islands who were friendlier and seemed genuinely interested in our family. They let Robert and me sail their dugout canoes, took us to the mainland to see their jungle gardens and never forced us to buy *molas*.

After a week in the San Blas islands I came to the conclusion that I didn't want to be a Christian anymore. I wanted to be a Kuna Indian. The men wore old shorts and T-shirts didn't appear that special. The women, however, were breathtaking. Being a Kuna Indian, I thought, just *looked* better than being a Christian. And they were all my size. As a member of the tribe I imagined that I too would wear a *mola* blouse of many colours, with a navy and orange patterned sarong and a red headscarf. I wasn't sure about the pot-cut hairstyles, but the beaded bracelets and anklets encircling my exposed arms and legs would be magnificent. Mostly I loved the black stripes along the length of their noses; beginning at the knife-edge of their fringes and terminating at the heavy gold rings dangling from their nasal septa. As Kuna women aged and accumulated wealth by selling coconuts, the size of their nose rings increased. The weight dragged their noses to meet their lips and interfered with the ability to eat and drink from a cup. I admired everything about the Kunas. Obstacles stood in my way to Kunahood, however. For a start, Mom forbade me outright to even think of piercing my nose. And although the local women on the remote islands were friendly and painted black lines on my face whenever I asked them, the clans were fiercely traditional and not open to outsiders. Marriage beyond the tribe was strictly forbidden. And we heard rumours of albino babies smothered at birth. A blonde like me would not be welcomed. I cobbled together an outfit anyway with a second hand *mola* blouse, scraps of material for a

sarong and headscarf, (I made do without the beads or gold) and on the privacy of the boat, I practised being a Kuna Indian by myself.

*

'I've never read a book in my life,' Stuart said.

I found the concept impossible to believe. 'Not even one?'

'Nothing.'

Stuart sounded proud of his achievement. He was 14 and good looking with dark blonde hair and straight Californian teeth flashing from a tanned face. His smile reminded me a bit of Urbine, my skateboarding first love in Durban. I felt an urge to flirt with him but I didn't know where to begin. He had never read a single book.

'So what do you do in the evenings?' I asked.

'Watch TV.'

'Here? In Panama City?'

'Yup. We're picking up an American signal from the canal zone, so it's just like home.'

Stuart was the youngest member of the family living aboard *Odyssey*. Mom, Dad, three teenagers, a pointer dog and a television set, were all packed onto a single 36 foot sloop. They invited us over one night to watch TV. Crammed into the cockpit we craned our necks to a jumpy bluish image in a snow-storm and strained to hear the buzzing words. I watched Stuart. His mouth hung open a little, exposing his teeth to the glow of the screen. Nobody said anything. They were as silent and round-eyed as owls. When Dad tried to speak he was shushed. Even the dog kept her eyes fixed on the box.

'I don't know how you live without TV,' Stuart said the next day.

Stuart and his family had sailed down from California via Mexico. Stuart's dad Mike was also blonde with a trimmed moustache and hair that always looked neat. More than once I caught him checking his reflection in the portholes.

'Panama is as far as we go,' Mike said, 'we're already too far from home. Time to get back to the good old US of A.'

Dad's eyes narrowed, but he didn't say anything about the US of A which he hated.

We'd just come through the canal from the Caribbean side and Dad was still fuming because we'd had to pay so much for a pilot. No matter the size of the vessel, the man said, the rate is the same, and if you don't like it, feel free to go around Cape Horn.

Our pilot's name was Mr Hastings. He had pocked, greasy skin and soft breasts that moved under his white cotton shirt. He sweated a lot. Shortly after boarding, he made it known that he preferred sailing on larger vessels, like oil tankers and cruise ships.

'The service on cruise ships is always exceptional,' he said, accepting a cup of tea and slice of banana bread from Mom, who'd baked it especially for him. Over the course of the day we negotiated the ascending and descending locks and along the way, washed ourselves and our clothes in the freshwater of Lake Gatun. Dad would have liked to spend a few days on the islands, enjoying the sweet water, but overnight stopping was forbidden.

'Besides,' said Mr Hastings, 'may I remind you that I'm meeting friends in Panama City? Is this really the fastest your vessel can go? I've been on a few boats this size before, and I really don't remember them being so slow.'

In Panama City Mr Hastings completed his paperwork, ate the last slice of banana bread, disembarked on a concrete pier and, with a sour look on his face, shooed us from the harbour.

‘Was he expecting a tip?’ Mom asked.

Beyond the breakwater we anchored near a group of yachts who were huddled together in dirty water a considerable distance from a stained brown beach. We had no sooner anchored when Mike roared over in a Zodiac to warn us that theft was rife and we were not to leave our dinghy unattended on shore. Unfortunately the shore was very far away, which made calling for a ride difficult. Mike showed us his walkie-talkie.

‘I use one of these,’ he said, and showed us how it clipped to his belt. ‘I got it in the States. Maybe if you looked in the duty-free shops...’

‘I don’t need one of those,’ Dad said. ‘I can whistle.’

When Mike went ashore the next day two young boys hit him on the head and stole his walkie-talkie. With blood running into his eyes, he was unable to summon his family who were watching TV on the boat. When the show ended and they turned off the set, the dog heard him.

‘You see,’ said Mom that evening after we heard the story, ‘sometimes it’s better to have nothing. We’ve nothing to steal, so nobody robs us.’

In a way she was right. After more than a year of travelling we were looking a little ragged and Robert suggested that maybe we should start stealing from the locals. When Mom found a place selling factory reject T-shirts from the local sweatshops and we were able, within our budget, to renew our wardrobes. We bought dozens of shirts, enough for ourselves and for trading among the Pacific Islands. Some sported strange slogans that didn’t make any sense. *Dear the Blue, our dreams remain unchanged* and *Love Cows*. In a side street next to the shirt shop Mom discovered a red leatherette edition of Charles Dickens stories which she brought back and hid from me. Not everything went well for us in

Panama City, though. Robert failed to tie the dinghy securely and it was swept away with the tide. Mike, still bruised from his mugging, zoomed out in his inflatable to retrieve it, revving the outboard more than I thought was necessary. Coming back with the wind in his hair, he looked happier than he had in days. We thanked Mike, but once he'd gone, Dad punched Robert in the face and called him a cunt.

'I think it's time to leave,' Mom said, holding a wet face cloth to Robert's cheek.

I wasn't sad to go. Except for the yacht club in the American Zone where you could put as much sauerkraut on your hot dog as you wanted and soak your popcorn in melted butter until it dripped from the bottom of the packet, I hated Panama. I thought Colon on the Caribbean side had been bad, but Panama City was worse; all the filth and crowding of the Brazilian cities but with far more menace. And there were ships everywhere, dirty ships and dockworkers and prostitutes. We left the mainland behind under its haze of smog but the water stayed dirty long after the outline of the city had slipped from sight.

*

The Shah of Iran was in exile at the Tropical Star Fishing Lodge on Isla Contradora in the Las Perlas Islands, together with some drug lords and a few South American politicians having trouble with the law. Our new friend Christian Eckhoff told us that before he set sail for Ecuador. Christian was German by birth and South African by citizenship. He owned and captained *Donella*, a wooden sloop crewed by Heike, his oldest daughter, and her Swedish boyfriend Janie. He told us his middle daughter Claudia had married a Brazilian who stayed in Sao Paulo while Hanelora, Christian's wife, was in South Africa where Anja, their youngest, attended school. Christian spoke with a German accent, just like our friend and porn fan Ari in Salvador. He even wore the same style of beard. Unlike Ari, however, Chris-

tian was a Springbok spear fisherman who held more than one record in our book of South African fishes. I could tell just by looking at him that he was fit, strong and fearless and it would take more than a shark or two to rattle him. I wondered if he had dirty magazines on his boat too, although I doubted it. He had brown hair, brown eyes and brown skin. His beard jutted aggressively from his jaw and his face was composed of planes all set at determined angles. Even his hair looked confident. Heike and Janie were pinker and softer with limp locks of white, baby-fine hair framing their faces. Janie's lips cracked easily in the sun and he kept with him a tin of lip balm which he applied regularly. Christian, in Robert and Dad's eyes, was the perfect sailing companion. Before he left for Ecuador Dad made arrangements to chat to him everyday on the Ham radio.

On Christian's advice we left the moorings at the Tropical Star Fishing Lodge, a discrete high security resort where half the men wore bermuda shorts with golf shirts and the other half wore dark suits and sunglasses, and we sailed to the uninhabited isles in the group. Although water visibility was poor – the muddy contamination of the mainland extended to the islands – the sea stirred with life. At night we were awakened by the splashes of fish leaping from the water, by day, fins continually broke the surface. Each day at lunch time we went ashore with a pot of rice, a machete, matches and a fishing rod. While Robert made a fire and climbed a palm for coconuts, Dad cast a line in the surf and within an hour we would sit down to grilled fish and coconut rice. It was a bit like paradise, I thought, only muddier.

Several decades after our visit, *Survivor*, a reality TV series, would be filmed on these isles, with contestants battling it out in the heat while the producers and film crew stayed in luxury villas on the main island, conveniently out of sight. I like think of Stuart from *Odys-*

sey still enthralled by television and watching the series as a grown man. Would he know, I wondered, that the events were filmed only 50 miles from Panama City, where he'd once crouched in the blue light of the cockpit of his parent's yacht watching old American sitcoms.

From Las Perlas we set sail for the Galapagos, 800 miles away. Dad said it would take a week and he couldn't have been more wrong. Although how was he to know that *Vingila* had been affected by the soupy, rich waters of the Gulf of Panama? Even Lynnath with her degree in marine biology didn't suspect what was happening beneath the waterline.

Part 4

Pacific Ocean

Ecuador

After we reached Galapagos, Lynnath gave me a lecture on *cirripedes*, or barnacles. From her I learnt that unlike the sessile acorn barnacle, which cements itself to rocks, hulls and the skins of whales, the goose-necked barnacle is free to move a little. Twisting its long, supple stalk, it directs its bivalved head toward the current and extends its adapted feet, or *cirri*, to trap food. Its tubular neck grows long and muscular, and is thought by some – the Japanese and Spaniards for example – to be a succulent delicacy. Unlike acorn barnacles who cling to rocks, goose-necked barnacles usually grow on wood. They accept pilings but prefer the driftwood of the ocean. Once the crustaceans take root, they multiply quickly to form a bristling carpet of coiling necks, pale snapping heads and grasping, retractile *cirri*. *Balenus*, the rock barnacle, annoys humans by fouling the hulls of ships and harbour structures. The goosenecks usually keep a lower profile, sailing the open seas on their wooden rafts like Thor Heyerdahls of the barnacle world.

In the warm, murky waters of Las Perlas, a swarm of *cypri*, or non-feeding larvae, collided with *Vingila*. Reaching out with the cement glands on their antennules, they took hold. The copper oxide, and other poisons, in her anti-fouling should have provided some degree of protection, but the high level of pollution in the Gulf of Panama with its heavy traffic of passing ships, perhaps inured the larvae. Whatever the explanation, *Vingila*'s protective coating did nothing to stop the invasion.

We didn't know what was wrong. Our boat wasn't moving. The wind was on the nose, and there was a strong current, but still. Twenty-five miles in two days? Rain clouds obscured the sky and Dad couldn't always get a sight, but whenever he glimpsed the sun we hovered at the chart table, waiting for the results and hoping for better news which didn't come.

I found Dad outside one morning, staring into the pulling sails while *Vingila* jackknifed and stalled in the waves.

'What the hell is going on here?' he asked, but he didn't seem to expect an answer from me.

On the Ham radio we heard from Christian on *Donella*. They'd arrived in Ecuador and taken a bus to Quito, the capital. A filthy place, Christian said. But the good news was that they had visas for the Galapagos. He urged us to do the same.

'I'm not going to a dirty city for visas,' Dad said. 'I don't believe in visas. If the crowd at Galapagos don't want us, then they can piss right off. We're going to Galapagos.'

Except we weren't moving. After a week we ran out of fresh food. The last of our withered apples from Panama City was eaten. Then our cabbages and potatoes.

'I'm sorry,' Mom said, 'I didn't think it would take this long, and there was nothing to buy in the Las Perlas. The Tropical Star Fishing Lodge didn't have a shop.'

We ate food from tins. Granular pink corned beef, and pale tinned pork sausages. We finished the eggs. As a treat, Mom brought out some American breakfast cereal – pillows of latticed wheat. But when we added reconstituted milk, weevils swarmed from the holes and floated on the surface like coarse ground pepper on soup.

'I can't eat this,' said Robert.

Even Dad didn't insist.

We started to develop strange cravings. One night I found Mom eating sugar from the pot by the spoonful. The next day she said, 'I feel like fudge.'

Dad let her make it, even though it used butter. We had some in cans but we were supposed to be saving it. Fudge also used a whole can of condensed milk.

The fudge was faintly gritty and so sweet it made my ears buzz. But I craved it and could think about nothing else, particularly at night when I had to take watch. Three days after we had finished the first batch I asked Mom to make more. My gums had started to itch.

'This is getting expensive,' Dad said, but I noticed he was eating it too.

But even fudge didn't really satisfy my cravings, it just left me with a sour mouth and a need for more. What I really wanted was an orange. I could imagine the smell of its skin, feel the spray of oils as I peeled it, the burn of its juice sliding down my throat.

'Don't tell Mom,' Robert said, 'but there was blood on the brush when I cleaned my teeth this morning.'

'Maybe it's from the fudge,' I said.

*

One night we went to take in the fishing lines. We had left it pretty late and in the darkness they felt strangely heavy, but without the tug of a fighting fish.

'Feels like a plastic bag,' Robert said.

But the bag spat a jet of water at us, soaking our heads as we looked over the side, trying to figure out exactly what we had caught. A hefty pair of squid, taken on our lead-headed fishing lures.

‘Well I never,’ said Dad.

The next day Mom fried them in batter for lunch. The wind was still on the nose but it had picked up and we hunkered down on the main saloon floor with the table lashed against the bulkhead while *Vingila* threw herself into the waves. We ate the fried squid from dishes balanced on our knees. Something was wrong with Mom’s recipe; the batter had fallen off in the oil and formed brown floating balls which she had fished out and served atop the pale, contorted curlicues of sliced hood and tentacle. Frying oil, which could have been fresher, formed pools beneath our mounds of rice. Mom thought draining food on paper towels was wasteful. Pepe had his own bowl in the corner with oil and crunchy bits. When he looked up, his beard was dark with fat.

‘Did you put lemon on this?’ Dad asked Mom.

‘Now tell me, where would I get a lemon?’

‘Tastes like lemon to me,’ Robert said. He was right. Perhaps it was because we’d been so long without lemons – or any other fresh fruit – but our calamari, although not too tender, had a delicate citrus aroma. It was delicious. After two hours of eating we were full and we fell greasily asleep on the floor for the rest of the afternoon.

Some days later when Dad’s sights showed we were being pushed towards the coast by the current he said, ‘Why don’t we go to Ecuador.’

We were all tired of sailing and Mom was hoping she could buy some bananas. We turned *Vingila* so that the wind hit her beam, and she increased her speed by a fraction as she made for the coast of Ecuador. Dad pulled in at Baia Pinas, a settlement so small I don’t even know how he found it. We were very far from Quito. A ring of mountains in jungle as thick as a fur coat, formed a backdrop to a tiny cluster of dwellings. There was a wooden

hotel on stilts and an airstrip, a few huts and a small but secure anchorage crammed with smart, new, recreational fishing boats. In the evening, after the boats came in, giant marlin and sailfish were hung bill down on hooks while the men who had caught them posed alongside for photographs. Once or twice I spotted bare chested jungle people in loincloths and grass skirts drifting out from the damp, liana draped trees to watch. They never spoke a word. Inside the hotel, the walls were covered with the pictures of men and their fish. There was a ten to one club, for those who had caught a hundred pound marlin on ten pound breaking strain line, and a twenty to one club. In the corner a glass case stood stuffed with trophies. Against the far wall a stuffed and painted marlin at least nine foot long, swam against the grain of the wood.

After the first night the manager of the hotel asked us to leave.

‘This place is for fishermen only,’ he said, ‘and we have a very exclusive clientele. I don’t want any trouble.’

‘What kind of trouble was he expecting anyway?’ Mom asked. She was upset because she hadn’t been able to buy any bananas.

‘Drugs?’ said Robert.

‘Don’t think so,’ I said. ‘Aren’t drug running boats supposed to be fast?’

Dad gave me the evil eye then, so I didn’t say anything more, though I could have.

Back at sea the wind had turned and the skies had grown clearer. We set our sails again for Galapagos. *Vingila* still wasn’t moving and we still hadn’t figured out she was dragging a carpet of writhing barnacles cemented to her underside. Around us, the sea teemed with billfish. Even at our low speed we caught a few, but they snapped our lines. We saw silvery torpedoes rocketing from the sea and tail-walking to the whirr and ping of our

reels. We were fishing with 200 pound breaking strain tackle. We didn't even belong to the one to one club, I thought, no wonder the manager had asked us to leave. But what would we do with a fish that size anyway, Mom wanted to know, who would cook it? One morning Dad found a few marlin on deck. As long as his thumb, they were perfect copies of their elders, right down to the dorsal fins that slotted into pouches on their backs. Lynnath put them in a jar of formalin.

'As far as I know,' she said, 'baby marlin haven't been described. I'm going to write this up.'

We knew that we had reached the Galapagos when we started catching birds. We had been a month at sea crawling our way over 800 miles and even our onions were finished. *Donella* had arrived a week earlier and Christian, over the radio, told Dad to clear in at Wreck Bay on Santa Cristobal before making our way to Isla Santa Cruz. Mountains like black teeth rose from the sea and the gannets wouldn't leave our lines alone. They kept diving like arrows and we kept pulling in soggy yellow-eyed birds and trying to unhook them while they vomited up sea water over the stern. We threw them back before Pepe got at them but a few looked as if they wouldn't make it.

Mom came up with the pilot book.

'I've just read,' she said, 'that this entire area is a nature reserve. So I think you should stop catching these poor birds.'

Lynnath agreed and we took the lines in.

The *capitano* of the parks board wasn't pleased with us either.

'Where are your visas?' he asked.

Mom and Dad acted surprised. What visas, they said, we didn't know about visas. The *capitano* had hair combed back from his forehead and a black moustache. He was unmoved.

'If you don't have visas, you cannot stay. Please prepare to leave.'

Then Dad launched into a story about how we had had such a long and difficult trip, and we had run out of food and that Robert and I, since leaving South Africa had only ever wanted to see the Galapagos Islands, which was why we had started the whole circumnavigation in the first place. We only bought this boat, he repeated, so that our children could see the amazing animals of the Galapagos. This was news to me.

'How can you turn them away now?' Dad asked, casting his hand towards the bunk where I was sitting beside my brother.

I saw the *capitano's* moustache quiver a little. His eyes lingered on my blonde plaits, making me wish I had washed them more recently. I gave a small, unhappy smile, glancing at Dad to see if that was what he wanted.

'And we have a scientist aboard,' my father went on, gesturing to Lynnath, 'who has come here especially to study the animals and write articles about them.'

Lynnath smiled at the *capitano* too. She wasn't looking particularly scientific. Her glasses were hazy and smeared with salt, her Elvis Presley hairstyle from Puerto Rico had long since out grown itself and her ragged cutoffs needed cleaning.

'This,' my Dad repeated, 'is our scientist.'

The *capitano* sighed.

'Give me your passports,' he said. 'I will allow two weeks. No more.'

'See,' said Dad once they had left, 'I told you we wouldn't need visas.'

Seals were swimming in the anchorage at Isla Santa Cruz and we saw *Donella* anchored in front of a house built on an outcrop of black rock at the water's edge. Marine iguanas were sprawled about on its roof, sunbathing.

'Annie, annie annie annie!' the owner of the house yodeled twice a day, and at his call they jerked from their torpor and came alive to be fed. It was surprising how fast they could run, slithering over one another down the walls and pouring through the door to his courtyard in a black scaly river to eat rice and lettuce from a bowl.

'Sometimes I give them a few dog biscuits as well,' the owner told us, grabbing an iguana at random to show us the third eye on the top of its head. In his hands the beast went limp, its black clawed limbs dangling, white membranes drawn down over its eyes like blinds. The man's name was Karl Angermeyer and he spoke German to Christian. He said he hadn't been back to Germany in more than twenty years but it was good to stay in practice. He had come to the island, he told us, with his three brothers to escape the war. He told us that the voyage over had not been easy; there had been a shipwreck he said, and one brother had died. The three survivors built houses on Santa Cruz. They planned to stay only until the war was over but after a few years, discovered that they did not want to go back to Europe. This place is my home now, he said, I couldn't imagine living anywhere else. As he talked the lizard stayed limp in his hands and his fingers flicked idly at the loose skin peeling from its body.

'Why Annie?' asked Christian.

Karl put the reptile down, brushing dry flakes from his hands. 'Oh Annie was something my daughter started when she was just a baby. I don't know why. But the iguanas are used to it now.'

Karl had two other brothers on the island. We didn't meet Fritz who was away, but Karl's younger brother stayed down the road. Gusch, a shirtless man with gleaming olive skin, told Robert and me to call him the King. He said that his wife Lucrezia, a tiny, snappy-eyed woman with long hair down her back, was a Peruvian princess. She lived in the main house while Gusch said he preferred the cave at the back of the garden. It was a fantastic cave, with walls of black volcanic boulders and an entrance obscured by a thick curtain of creepers. The floor inside was smooth concrete and in the gloom, kerosene lanterns spread soft haloes of light. There were whale vertebrae to sit on and animal skins, plenty of books and bones, and a real human skull that the King said he'd stolen from catacombs on the mainland. The King said his brother Karl, was an artist, a finger painter, but that his own job, as king of the island, was to collect things. He had done well; in addition to the books, bones and skins that covered the floor and every surface, an entire whale skeleton swam suspended from the ceiling on ropes. Robert and I loved the place; we spent hours lying on the furs, reading his books, looking at stuff and listening to the King's stories. In Las Perlas I'd found a battered copy of *Kon Tiki* in Mom's locker and discovered a hero. Thor Heyerdahl was a Norwegian, a Viking really and he sailed from the coast of South America to Polynesia on a raft with a bunch of his equally heroic friends. They were Nordic, good-looking men, with red gold beards and brave-sounding names like Knut, Bengt and Torstein. They battled storms and killed sharks and didn't always have enough fresh water to wash their hair. Before they left people told them they were going to die but they went ahead anyway. In the black-and-white photographs in the book they grew wilder, more sun-tanned and better looking as the voyage progressed. I loved *Kon Tiki*, and while I lay in my bunk, sucking a piece of fudge to make it last, I thought about Thor and imagined him asking me

to join the expedition. I could help them catch sharks and would make them fudge and they would all say how great I was. After we got to the Galapagos I was still thinking of him. On the floor of the King's cave I found another book by Thor. *Fatu Hiva* was about how he and his wife went to live in the Marquesas Islands which was to be our next stop after the Galapagos. I was a bit disappointed to find out that he had a wife, and an adventurous Norwegian one at that, but I read on. According to Thor, *Fatu Hiva* was dark, wet and spooky; full of taboo and tikis and people dragging huge, swollen elephantitic limbs around. There were also plenty of mosquitos which drove Thor a bit crazy. After a month he began pulling them through the net by the snout, and amputating parts of them. Apparently, when you live on a rainy tropical island, you have a lot of time to do things like that. When he got to the stage the point where he was removing their mouth parts and watching them try to feed, he decided it was probably time to leave. I kept waiting for his wife to contract elephantiasis and get disfigured but she didn't. If his wife got sick, I thought, and I was there then I would nurse her and over the months while she worsened, Thor would see all my good qualities and fall in love with me. Because he was true to his wife he would only realise how much he loved me after the funeral. I would be taller then, and have breasts. I couldn't stop reading. Late in the afternoon, when the King strolled in and asked what I was was up to, I lifted the book to show him the cover.

'Oh Thor Heyerdahl,' he said, 'you like him do you?'

'I do,' I said, 'a lot.'

He told me that he and Thor were close friends and that Thor had spent many an hour in this very cave with him. Then he scratched around and pulled out a crumbling letter.

'Read it aloud,' he said.

It was from Thor and was about how he had gone to a ball to meet royalty and was expected to dance with the queen's cousin except he couldn't waltz. Some friends gave him an emergency lesson, but it didn't help. I got the idea that he preferred sailing across the ocean in a raft. That night I wrote in my diary that I had read aloud a letter by the great adventurer Thor Heyerdahl himself. And when I had finished I looked at my hands and said to myself, these hands have touched the same piece of paper that Thor's hands touched. I put my cheek against my right hand, which had had the most contact with the letter, and went to sleep.

Mom encouraged us to visit the King and spend as much time ashore as we wanted. I think that after a month at sea together she was pleased to be free of us for a while and after the episode with the goose-necked barnacles, I thought Robert needed a break too.

We first saw the barnacles when we launched the dinghy to go ashore right after the *Capitano* stamped our passports. Mom screamed because she didn't know what they were. But Lynnath identified them immediately and even told us their scientific name: *cirripede lepas*.

'I don't care what they're called,' Mom said, 'they give me the heebie jeebies.'

Dad ran his hand over the side of the hull, reaching down below the waterline.

'Jesus Christ Almighty,' he said. 'No wonder we weren't moving.'

The crop covering *Vingila* was almost ten centimetres thick by then. A bristling forest of wrinkled, swaying necks and mouths that shut sullenly at our approach. Not an inch of our boat's underside appeared to have been spared. The crustaceans had even invaded her prop shaft and seemed to be working their way up the stern gland. I pictured them coming

up the rudder into my cabin. I imagined waking up to find them growing on my face and arms.

‘Don’t be such a baby,’ Robert said, ‘you know they can’t live out of water.’

Dad made Robert help scrape them off. The sea was icy. A cold Humbolt current flows to the Galapagos from Antarctica, which explained why fur seals and penguins were living on the equator. Unlike my father, Robert didn’t have a wet suit but Dad said he’d warm up swimming. I sat inside in my cabin listening to the rasp of their scrapers against the steel hull and when I went up there were chunks of barnacles floating everywhere and marine iguanas and seals all swimming around having a look. When Robert came out his lips were blue and his teeth didn’t stop chattering even after Mom wrapped him in his crochet blanket and made him drink hot Milo. Dad said the swim would make him tough and later, once he was warm again, Robert told me the one good thing about it was that the seals had been friendly.

Christian came over for tea and laughed at Robert’s blue lips. He said Dad was quite right, swimming in cold water makes you strong. He told us that he’d been doing some research and that to see the real animals we had to go to another island but we needed a guide.

‘Always the same bladdy thing,’ Dad said. ‘Pay, pay, pay. I got on this yacht to be free. First visas and now guides. What next? Chains of American supermarkets? Cruise ships?’

Mom said she had heard that a few years previously yachts could sail where they liked but then a bunch of French yachties arrived and collected tortoise eggs and ate all the flamingos.

‘Flamingos?’ asked Robert, ‘Do they have flamingos here?’ He was warming up a little because his lips weren’t as stiff and he had started forming words again.

'Not anymore,' said Mom, 'because the Frenchies ate them all.'

We decided that to save money we would share a guide for a day and sail on *Vingila* because she was bigger than *Donella*. So we went to Plaza island, a shelf of brown rock with sandy paths and a few cacti growing from the cracks. Big tortoises and really gigantic land iguanas were strolling around everywhere. The iguanas, golden-orange with a spiny crest running the length of their body, stomped slowly, rolling their eyes as if they thought they were dragons. None of the animals or birds were the least bit frightened of humans. The seals tried to steal our dinghy. After our walk, we found several of them squashed between the seats while one attempted to untie the painter. The gunnels were nearly underwater beneath their grinning, whiskered heads. They didn't leave until Christian shouted and waved a stick at them. Apart from telling us twice not to leave the path, our guide told us nothing about the island and its animals. Later that night, as we lay in bed, Lynnath explained to me about Charles Darwin and how he'd visited these islands on the *Beagle* and noticed how the tortoises looked different from island to island, depending on what there was to eat. That got him thinking, she said, and he came up with the theory of natural selection. You see, she told me, everybody thought it was the finches that gave him the idea, but it wasn't. He just used the finches to confirm his theory. Then she reminded me again what natural selection was because I'd forgotten. I loved the theory of evolution. It all made perfect sense to me and took my mind off the goose-necked barnacles which had been giving me nightmares.

*

Santa Cruz was half deserted. The dry, sandy ground and cactus plants gave it a sort of Wild West feel which was reinforced by the cowboys strolling the streets and shoving through the

swinging wooden doors of the dusty saloon on main street. There were no supermarkets in town but at the butcher shop on the hill a cow was slaughtered every morning and then hung from a hook. Two cuts of beef were on offer; with bone or without, and in an unpainted concrete room a man in a bloody apron and boots hacked chunks from the warm carcass and wrapped them, still quivering in brown paper. At the place next door, we bought onions and hefty, earth-covered carrots for stew.

One morning I awoke to the lowing of cows in distress. The island ranchers were exporting animals to Ecuador, driving the creatures into the sea and swimming them out to an anchored ship in the bay where they were winched aboard by the horns. In the afternoon the crane got stuck, or the workers went for lunch or something, and for more than an hour a dangling steer was left to bellow and make runny shits into the sea. Although I didn't like what we'd seen, I kept eating meat.

A few days later we left Santa Cruz with *Donella* and sailed to Floreana Island to visit Post Office Bay.

'That sounds boring,' Robert said when he heard the name of our destination.

Lynnath explained that it wasn't boring; we were visiting a place where, for hundreds of years, buccaneers and other sailors had dropped their mail off in a barrel.

'And it's all still there?'

'Ha, ha Robert. No, other people pick it up, of course, and take it to where they're going. That's how mail used to work. If we leave post there, someone might deliver it for us.'

Robert said it still sounded boring.

Post Office Bay had a hippy feel to it, with a few weathered stumps to which sailors had nailed boards with their boat names. Shells and pieces of bone and driftwood dangled

on lengths of twine in the surrounding trees, and clanked quietly in the wind. The heat had cracked and peeled the bark from the trunks of the trees and only the cacti seemed to be thriving. Dad painted *Vingila's* name on a plank and nailed it up while Lynnath sorted through the letters and left a postcard for her parents in the barrel.

The Galapagos, I was learning, was a favourite place for pirates, whalers and other sailors. They came to hunt fur seals and collect tortoises which they took aboard two to three hundred at a time. Stored upside down in the holds and remaining alive for more than a year without food or drink, the reptiles could be slaughtered anytime for fresh meat. In their free time, early sailors killed the other tame animals for fun. Darwin hated senseless killing but even he ate his fair share of tortoises. The younger ones in particular, he wrote, made fine soup. Over the centuries all that soup had taken its toll. We saw no wild tortoises at Post Office Bay, the Floreana species was now extinct and Darwin himself probably ate some of the last of them.

Post Office Bay was a lonely place with ice-blue water and a greenish beach. Dad and Christian went spear fishing.

'What about park regulations?' asked Mom.

'If you see anybody, then make sure you tell us,' Dad said.

Lynnath went snorkelling too, but she didn't take anything. Dad shot some fish and collected two excellent specimens of *Cypraea galapagos* which, like most of the other island creatures, were to be found nowhere else in the world. After cleaning the animals out, I hid the shells away, in case we were searched. Robert wasn't keen to dive, he said it was too cold without a wetsuit, so he walked around the island with Mom and me, looking at the cactus plants and enjoying the tame birds. I liked the red-footed boobies, but the blue-footed

ones were my favourite. They looked preposterous and unnatural; it was as if somebody had dipped their feet into bright, powder-blue paint, and they stomped about, taking exaggerated steps and waving their legs in the air as if they were trying to flick the colour off.

Our last stop on Floreana was at Ma Whittmer's place. Mom said she didn't want to go because she'd heard that Ma Whittmer had murdered her husband.

'How did she do it?' I had just finished a detective book where everybody got murdered in a different way.

'Poison,' said Mom. 'I don't think we should eat any food there. In case she tries to do it to us too.'

I felt a thrill run down my spine. A real life murderess was almost as good as the blue-footed boobies.

'I don't think it was her husband who died,' Lynnath said. 'I read that there was a German doctor who ran away to the island with one of his patients who was married, and then the Wittmers came and lived in pirate caves until Ma had her first baby, and then a Baroness arrived with her three lovers. They called it the Galapagos Affair.'

'I'm not sure the children want to hear this story,' said Mom.

'Oh yes, I do,' I said. 'What happened next? Who died?'

'Well the baroness wanted to open a luxury hotel, but she shot at people and swam in the only drinking water on the island. That made everybody cross. Also, one of her lovers started beating up the other one.'

'And then?' This was even better than my detective book.

‘And then she disappeared with her lover, the one who had been beating up the other one, remember? The Wittmers swore the couple had taken a yacht to Tahiti, but nobody on the island remembers seeing any boats that week. And they left all their stuff behind.’

‘And what happened to the guy who kept getting beaten up?’

‘Well he asked a Norwegian fisherman to take him to Santa Cruz, but they never got there. Their mummified bodies were found on Marchena island.’

‘Mummified bodies,’ I said. I liked the sound of that. I also liked to hear Lynnath say the word ‘lovers’, mainly because I knew Mom didn’t like it.

‘Sounds a bit far-fetched to me,’ said Mom. ‘But I thought somebody was poisoned.’

‘Well yes,’ said Lynnath, ‘the German doctor was.’

‘Who was he again?’ I was struggling to keep up with the plot.

‘The one who ran away with his patient, remember? They were nudists and vegetarians, but I think they stopped getting on. Anyway, he was poisoned with a chicken and she went back to Germany.’

‘I thought he was a vegetarian.’

‘That’s what’s strange about it.’

‘So only the Wittmers were left?’ I said.

‘That’s right,’ said Lynnath, ‘they had the island all to themselves after that.’

‘I told you there was poison,’ said Mom. ‘And I still don’t think we should eat any of her food. What if we got murdered?’

‘I should be so lucky,’ said Dad.

Ma Whittmer’s long grey hair was twisted into a bun. Her cheeks were pink. She had smile lines fanning out from her eyes and a sweet, tinkling laugh. I’d never seen anyone

look more like a granny. Her hotel and bar was on the damper side of the island and the evening we visited her a fire was burning, which glinted off the dark wood furniture and gave the place a cosy feel. She said she hadn't seen visitors in a long, long while and offered us home-made orange wine and cookies. We didn't ask where her husband was. Christian seemed very relaxed and chattered away in German. He said the orange wine was delicious and he finished all the cookies. I didn't eat a single biscuit and, after Robert ate one, I watched him closely for suspicious signs.

Ma Whittmer told Christian about the oranges. If you walk up the mountain you'll find them, she said. She was right. Once we were past the cactus and grey scrub, the air cooled and grew misty. Moisture dripped from the plants. There, amongst the indigenous vegetation, were orange trees, loaded with fruit. We filled several sacks. Three thousand miles non-stop lay between us and the Marquesas islands; a month at sea in the best conditions, with a clean hull and good trade winds. I couldn't bear to think of such a long sea voyage without fruit. The oranges we collected were perfect; fresh and ripe. I picked one from the tree. Its skin sprayed fragrant oil as I peeled it and, when I bit into the flesh, juice spurted into my mouth, stinging the back of my throat.

Chapter 14

Tahiti

The ferry from Morea capsized the morning of the storm. Coming in laden with people and bananas, it went over in the harbour entrance. Waves were breaking across the pass and the buoys marking the reefs on either side. In the white water, the dirty red underside of the ferry looked like the back of a bleeding whale. We watched a tug and rescue boats go out and heard later on the radio that four people had drowned. Heavy weather warnings were issued and the harbour master advised us to evacuate our yachts. He was French and the gale, he said, was going to be *'orrible*. Pappete, the capital of Tahiti, didn't have a particularly sheltered harbour. It was also very crowded. Yachts slotted stern to shore in an accordion-sweep from the inner concrete pier to the outer reaches of the beach. Boats deep within the bay were slightly more protected than those of us anchored further out where mooring was cheaper.

As the storm worsened, an onshore wind tore straight through the channel to *Vingila*, who lay with a single anchor at the bow and a pair of stern lines tied to bollards on the shore.

'When are we moving?' Mom said after the harbour master's announcement.

Vingila was pulling like a dog on a leash. Behind the stern, breakers were throwing tantrums on the dirty beach and dissolving in spumes of petulant foam. I couldn't believe the change. For the preceding months our boat had sat in water as calm and flat as Garmiston lake.

'Moving where?' Dad said.

'To a safer anchorage. I thought you said there was a hurricane hole somewhere.'

'And how are we going to get through that pass? Tell me that, then we'll go.'

'Well what about the evacuation then, like the harbour master said?'

Dad snorted. 'Are you out of your tiny, cotton-picking mind?'

I went to my cabin. From the porthole I watched the breakers on the beach. If I had to, I could just about swim ashore, I thought, wondering where the life jackets were. I couldn't remember seeing any since Durban.

Lying down on my bunk with a book my friend Barbara had given me, I tried to read. Beneath the curly script of its title, *Sweet Savage Love*, a woman with streaming hair in a silk dress rode a horse at high speed. Her tight bodice was cut very low at the neck and it looked as if her breasts were going to fall out at any moment. Mom had expressed some reservations at first regarding the book's suitability for a 12-year old but when I told her my friend Barbara had read it and she was 12 my mother gave in. There was a lot of sex. Ginny, the woman on the horse, burned with passion for Steve Morgan although it took her most of the story to accept it, because they fought so much at first. In the beginning he had to force himself on her. For a while she also became a prostitute but they found true love in the end even though he called Ginny a whore and was fooling around with a slave girl on their wedding night.

Barbara had told me there was another book after *Sweet Savage Love*, called *Wildest Heart*, which was just as good and I could read it when I finished. However, distracted by the swaying curtains and the stern smashing down and sending up sheaves of spray, I found reading difficult. The rattle of the halyards and the rising whine of the shrouds protesting against the gale, didn't help. Flecks of froth, blown by the wind, quivered on the portholes.

After a while, Lynnath came through to the cabin and began to pack. It didn't take long; her books and clothing fitted comfortably into a single rucksack.

'What time are you planning on leaving?' I said.

Vingila heaved, nearly throwing Lynnath off her feet.

'After supper,' she said.

Dad had agreed to take her ashore that evening – after that she was by herself, he said.

She put her passport and plane ticket to one side, with her camera. Then she looked out of the porthole to where rain had begun to mingle with the spray of the waves.

'They said the sea will be even bigger later,' I said. 'Will you make it in the dinghy?'

Lynnath was quiet for a time, her gaze on the sea outside, one hand on the grab rail for balance. I waited for her to say she'd changed her mind and decided not to leave, that she wanted to stay and keep sailing with us, teaching me marine biology and helping us catch fish, but she said nothing.

*

Our journey from the Galapagos to the Marquesas had taken 30 days, all of them wonderful. It had been wonderful, unlike the 24 days from Las Perlas to Galapagos. We had a clean hull, wind on the stern and oranges – sweet juicy oranges – to eat every day. The north-east trade winds had arrived as we set out, blowing the clouds and mist away from the stark mountains that formed the back-drop to Ma Whittmer's pub and hotel. Raising our twin jibs, we left the rough half-baked landscape of the Galapagos to sink into the ocean, a volcano emitting one last puff of steam into the pale sky as if its fire had been extinguished by the rising water. From that moment until we made landfall in the Marquesas a month later, the wind blew solidly, never varying its strength by more than a few knots. Other than a row of unkempt

cumulous clouds slouching on the windward horizon and promising nothing more than a continuation of the trades, the sky remained clear. Sitting on deck in the evenings, watching the glowing ball of the sun melt into the horizon, I believed I could feel the world turning.

Vingila grunted and creaked contentedly, sighing as she descended the waves. With the wind behind her and twin jibs out on whisker poles, she didn't once argue or fight with Baruch who kept course for her without complaint. The temperature of the air was never too hot or too cold and I felt safe and completely content.

Mom found scraps of material for me to sew a doll. As I worked by hand with a needle and thread, my doll took shape as the days passed. She had white skin, a red dress and long black hair hanging down her back. I wanted her to look like Snow White and onto her blank head I embroidered two long-lashed eyes and a pair of red lips. I didn't intend it, but her face emerged angry and wicked, with a sulky, twisted mouth and mad eyes looking in different directions. I felt shocked and disappointed at first, although I decided after some thought that I could – with caution – still love her. I named her Lucrezia after the King's Peruvian princess wife. Once she was finished, we curled up together on my bunk in the stern cabin, and read the works of Charles Dickens which Mom had bought in Panama. Of the stories – *A Christmas Carol*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *The Pickwick Papers*, *David Copperfield*, and *Great Expectations* – only the *Pickwick Papers* bogged me down. I could see that Dickens meant the story to be funny, but I couldn't understand why men would want to start a stupid club and keep notes on their meetings. *Great Expectations* I read twice; losing myself in the spooky cobwebby house with bitter old Mrs Haversham, I ached with Pip's love for the beautiful icy-hearted Estella, and was torn by his terrible disappointment. Occasionally I came up for air, my head still on the moors and filled with the mournful clanging of the

convict ships. Outside I would find the sun shining and Robert gutting a fish for lunch. There was no mist, no gloom, no unrequited yearnings. Dad hadn't even raised his voice for weeks. Mom baked bread daily and, on Heike's advice, sprouted mung beans and alfalfa seeds in a jar. Heike was a vegetarian, the first one I had ever met. She'd lived in America where health food was the latest craze and she introduced us to ratatouille and brown rice. Through Christian on the radio, she gave Mom recipes and told us how to eat the sprouts. Make tuna salad, she said, with the next fish you catch, and eat it on bread fresh from the oven. Sprinkle sprouts on the top. Christian and Dad spoke everyday. The crew and captain of *Donella* were also having the sail of their lives and Christian told us they hadn't trimmed a sail or touched the helm for days. After a few hours of sunshine I'd be drawn back once again to the convict ships and the closed-up, dusty, house of heartbreak.

Over the days we grew so familiar with the regularity of *Vingila's* motion, that we traversed the decks as if we were dancing; one big step, three quick ones and a rapid stop as she reached the end of her roll. We used our hands too, reaching shrouds and swinging off in time for the next wave. Our movements became graceful, unthinking, and it seemed I could scarcely remember a time when I had plodded across solid ground, one dull footstep after the other. My body, unchanged as yet by puberty, felt exactly right and as it should be; my limbs and feet obeyed my commands and were the correct size, not too large, clumsy or far away as they would soon become, and my skin, soft, small-pored and fine of hair, covered all of me just as it should. I was as happy and comfortable with myself as I was with the wind and sea around me. A month passed like this before the faint outline of mountains appeared on our port bow, ragged as the backs of sleeping dragons. My heart sank. I didn't want to stop sailing. I wanted everything to stay as it was and I understood then how Ber-

nard Moitessier, reaching the end of his race, had turned around to sail half way round the world again.

The island names on the chart were confusing; Fatu Hiva, Ua Huka, Hiva Oa, Fatu Huku, Nuku Hiva and Ua Pou.

‘Which one are we going to first?’ asked Robert. ‘I keep forgetting.’

‘Ua Hooker, isn’t it?’ said Mom, ‘Or was it Hiva Poo or something?’

‘Fatu Hiva,’ I said, ‘the one Thor Heyerdahl lived on. That’s first.’

After reading Thor’s books I knew just what to expect: gloomy jungle, mosquitos and a morose population disfigured by the swollen limbs of elephantiasis. His descriptions were fairly accurate. The Marquesas Archipelago was volcanic, gloomy and brooding, the islands draped in jungle, and the people, our first Polynesians, weren’t very friendly. The mosquitos on Fatu Hiva were as bad as Thor had described but although I looked constantly for elephantiasis sufferers, there were none to be seen.

Fatu Hiva’s silhouette, seen from afar, had suggested the backs of sleeping dragons. Up close, however, it became apparent that the dragons weren’t sleeping after all, but were in fact long dead. All that remained were the remnants of their decaying carcasses. Black ribs of rock fell into the sea, shattered shafts of femurs and tibias poked through the slimy, green vegetation. Broken skulls with caves for eyes. Everything was smashed and rotten. A crumbling pillar cast long shadows across the anchorage and in some of the dank valleys the murk was so dense I doubted the sun had ever penetrated. The beaches were black too, composed of a fine sand that, when the sun caught it gave off a toxic-looking, metallic gleam. In the black sand-bottomed bay, the navy blue water appeared impossibly deep. Taking off from the beach in a dinghy felt like dropping off the edge of a cliff.

Some years earlier, missionaries had built whitewashed churches. In the dampness, mildew had eaten into the plaster, turning it black. Before the arrival of the missionaries, people worshipped tikis, snarling gods they chiselled from black volcanic stone. Tikis were everywhere. Over the years lichen grew over the stone eroding it, although the carvings remained largely intact. Some of the bigger tikis stood out in the open, while other taboo tikis crouched in caves and the trunks of very old trees. Three young boys with scratched ankles and coarse, horny feet offered to show us the forbidden gods for a fee.

‘And bones too,’ they said.

As we left the village, they warned us not to say a word to anyone or we would all be in trouble. We followed them up a steep, slippery track. A pile of rocks marked a cave from which the old god gazed. Beside him lay a heap of human skulls and long bones. The boys could not, or would not, say to whom they had once belonged.

On Sundays the church bells rang, and people wrapped in their best *pareos* of garish hibiscus printed cloths, formed slow processions to worship. But it was clear who the real gods of the islands were.

Some people consider the Marquesas beautiful. I found them unsettling, like distorted visions of paradise. The palm trees were there, and the blue water and beaches, but somehow everything was wrong. I found the locals gloomy too. At night as we lay in our bunks Lynnath told me how relations between the Polynesians and visitors had, right from the beginning, been marked by misunderstanding and dreadful diseases. The islanders had done their best to counter the threat of the visitors by eating missionaries and skirmishing with buccaneers, but they had fallen to influenza and small pox. The population dropped from 100 000 strong to a paltry 2 000 individuals. At the time of our visit less than 500 people

lived on Fatu Hiva, in a squalid village pressed against the base of a dripping cliff. Thor had initially considered spending longer on the island, which he had initially envisioned as paradise, but I could understand him moving on after less than a year, worn down at last by mosquitoes, mud and hostility. Two days before we ourselves departed, I finally saw an old woman with elephantiasis. She crept from a hut, dragging her hugely swollen, deformed leg behind her, to stare unsmilingly at us.

*

‘What on earth are those triangles?’ Mom said, pointing to the muddy stream which trickled into the bay, forming a half moon of brown water washing against the beach.

‘What triangles?’ Dad asked. We were standing on a low hill looking back at the bay where our boat was anchored. After Fatu Hiva, my father said he’d had enough of people, which is why we’d sailed to this island, Motane, which was deserted. Dad lifted his hunting rifle and put his eye to the sight.

‘What are you talking about?’ he said. He swept the rifle in an arc which encompassed the bay where our boat was anchored and the dry red hills behind us. We had come to shoot sheep.

‘They’re shark’s fins,’ Christian said.

He was standing next to Mom and didn’t sound unusually concerned.

‘Can’t be,’ said Mom. ‘Not so many, surely.’

The black triangles were swimming to and fro and occasionally coming together in splashy collisions, which made them difficult to count.

‘Twenty-seven of them,’ I said.

They were keeping to the brown water, which was roughly the size of the municipal swimming pool in Benoni.

'Impossible,' Mom said. 'I didn't see them when we came in. What're they doing there?' My mother still didn't want to believe that 27 sharks were swimming around less than 10 feet from the beach. We looked at Lynnath for an answer.

'I've no idea,' she said, 'breeding or something, I'd imagine. I've never heard of anything like this.'

'So how are we going to get through the surf back to our boat?' I said.

'Well for one thing, we can't tip over in the waves,' Robert said. 'If that happens we're dead.'

We left the sharks and went to investigate the headland while Dad, Christian and Janie went hunting. Motane was the only non-volcanic island in the Marquesas, and apart from the muddy stream which flowed intermittently, the place was dry and covered in sparse shrub which had been eroded to reddish patches by herds of feral sheep and goats. Beneath a single bent tree near the stream, stood the remains of an abandoned shack. It had been built by a Frenchman who had tried – and failed – to live on the island. The Polynesians had never even bothered. From the top of the headland we looked directly down to *Vingila*, anchored in three fathoms of clear water on a sandy bottom. We could see the stream and the shack and the brown water near the beach, although it was too far to see the sharks. We watched the three men walk inland with their rifles and disappear behind a hill.

'Do you think we'll get back to the boat okay?' Mom asked Lynnath.

'I don't know, it depends how aggressive the sharks are.'

'I didn't like the way they were acting,' I said, 'and I wish we had the hard dinghy, not the inflatable.'

'I never thought of that,' Mom said. 'What if they bite a hole in it? Will it sink?'

'I hope not,' Lynnath said.

Robert wasn't listening to us, he was staring at *Vingila*.

'What's that?' he said.

There was a very long, dark shape beneath our boat that hadn't been there before.

'The shadow of the keel on the sand?' Lynnath said. She didn't sound convinced.

'So why is it moving around when *Vingila* isn't?'

Donella was anchored a short distance away, had nothing but clear water beneath her keel. From the hill we could see her bobbing on her anchor chain while Heike sat in the cockpit, drinking tea. As a vegetarian, she had declined to be part of the sheep hunt. The dark shape beneath *Vingila* swam to the stern to investigate Baruch. It was enormous.

'I think it's a shark,' Robert said.

'Not *another* one,' I said. 'I don't like this place.'

'It's quite big for a shark,' Lynnath said, 'and the shape's wrong. I guess we'll find out when we get back, if it's still there.'

I said, 'If we get past the other sharks first, you mean.'

'Shh,' Robert said. 'Listen.'

Gunshots ricocheted from the far hills.

We waited for almost two hours beside the stream before Dad and Christian came back. It was hot and the dry air smelled of goat droppings. Pepe panted in the sparse shade of the single tree, rolling out a steamy tongue. I held him loosely by the collar because Mom

asked me to keep him out of the sea, away from the sharks who were still patrolling. As the afternoon wore on our eyelids grew heavy in the heat. The arrival of the flies awoke us.

Dad and Christian walked ahead, each with a sheep slung across his shoulders. Janie came behind with the guns. Cloud of flies accompanied them and raced ahead to meet us; crawling over our arms and faces to drink our sweat and burrowing into our noses and mouths. The men looked tired, blood smeared their clothes and dust streaked their faces as if they'd been crying. Dad's sheep was missing its head, the neck terminating in ragged flesh, a windpipe and shards of bone.

'What happened to your sheep?' Mom said.

'This hunting rifle,' he said. 'it's for elephants, not goats. One shot took the head off.'

Christian's animal was lumpy, covered in multiple bulbous skin tumours.

'Can we eat that?' I asked. 'What if we catch something?' I pictured the lot of us breaking out in mobile, squashy bumps.

'It'll be fine once it's cooked,' Mom said, waving a fly from her upper lip.

Pepe pushed forward and began licking the blood from the open neck of Dad's sheep.

'Get him out of here,' Dad said, sharpening a fish-filleting knife on a stone. *Donella* had a deep freeze and the plan was to freeze portions of mutton after Dad had butchered the carcasses. We would eat the liver for supper that night. I hoped there wouldn't be lumps on it.

'Don't let him anywhere near the sea,' Mom said. Pepe hadn't noticed the sharks yet and we didn't want him chasing after them.

Dad began by hanging the animals from a tree by their back legs. He made cuts around their ankles and pulled off their skins as if they were pyjamas. I was relieved to see

that the lumps came off too, leaving the meat underneath looking normal. Dad had grown up on a farm and knew what he was doing. He slit open the abdominal cavities, catching the spilling intestines in a bucket. Rivulets of blood formed dams in the dust as they trickled down hill. More flies came, crawling over everything, giving the sheep carcasses new black pelts and drinking from the sticky red rivers.

Dad told Robert to fetch water to clean the carcasses. As scraps of gristle and fat washed into the stream and then the sea, activity increased in the bay. The black triangles moved faster, patrolling back and forth with a jerky urgency. Then one shark, obviously deciding he couldn't take it any longer, tried to climb the beach and surfed in on a wave which receded to leave him thrashing in an ankle-deep puddle. The big fish was dark-skinned, without fin markings, and had a blunt, bullish face. Pepe pulled free of my grasp and charged, barking his shrill, poodle yelps. Robert ran after him. I followed and got close enough to see a pair of piggy, blinking eyes. The shark looked confused, torn between lunging for Pepe and making his escape back to deeper water. A wave rolled in and the big fish twisted, turning over and gaining purchase with its fins. Dragging Pepe by the neck, we went back to the tree.

Hanging from a branch, the sheep were looking less like dead animals and more like meat. Janie carried the bucket of entrails, hooves and the remaining head, to the beach and emptied it into the sea which erupted in fins, mouths and sleek, sinewy bodies.

Dad's eyes went flat. His lip twitched and tightened, made to turn down at the corners. 'Why the hell did you do that?' he said.

'For fun,' Janie said, returning the look.

Later, when the meat had been packed into buckets, we stood on the shore beside the dinghy and Christian spoke to us.

‘I don’t have to tell you,’ he said, ‘that we can’t, under any circumstances, flip over.’

He didn’t have to tell me we couldn’t turn over. I knew that if we capsized we’d be floating in muddy water with twenty-seven over-excited sharks and two dismembered sheep. I tried to be brave. I thought of Thor: he wasn’t afraid of sharks, he plucked them from the water by the tail as they swam beside the raft, and hit them on the head until they were dead. That was okay for him, another voice in my head said, he was on a raft, not floating in muddy water with a bucket of mutton parts. And his raft was made of wood, not soft rubber, which any shark could bite through, if it felt the urge.

‘Does everyone understand?’ Christian said. ‘There’ll be no silly buggers, okay?’

He looked at Robert and me first, then at Janie. I nodded my head, no silly buggers from me.

‘This is how we’ll do it,’ he said, and gave us our orders.

‘Nicky,’ Mom said, ‘look after Pepe, okay? Don’t let anything happen to him.’

My mouth felt as dry as the eroded earth beneath my feet. Ripples of heat and a rank goat-smell arose from the fly-covered meat. Then the light changed quality and became suddenly brighter and – momentarily – everything looked further away. A few lazy yellow spots floated up in my field of vision. I thought I was going to be sick.

‘Mom,’ I said softly so that the others couldn’t hear, ‘I’m scared. I don’t want to do this.’

‘Don’t be silly, you can’t stay here. Now take Pepe, and whatever you do don’t let him go.’

We carried the dinghy to the sea, and packed the buckets of meat into it. Robert and I climbed in first with the dog while the adults waited and watched the wave sets for a gap. At the first lull, they grasped the inflatable by the handles on its sides and ran into the water, kicking off and jumping in quickly. Janie and Christian grabbed paddles and began stroking against the surge. We were using Christian's dinghy and he hadn't thought we'd need the outboard. When the dinghy hit the water and was carried out by the backwash, the fins disappeared.

'Where'd they go?' I asked, looking around. I held Pepe by the collar, pressed onto the floorboards in case he decided to jump. He fought me, rolling his eyes and twisting his throat as if he were trying to choke himself.

'Here they come,' said Christian.

Fins appeared, approaching with speed, pushing up bow waves and leaving a wake in their trail.

Before I could scream, or rather squeak, because Mom didn't like me screaming, Christian smacked a shark on the head with his paddle and, without missing a stroke, continued paddling. More sharks came for us and were shoved away by either Janie, or Christian, depending on who was closest. Thor Heyerdahl himself couldn't have done better. Christian, I thought, could easily have made the Kon Tiki team. It took more than 27 irritable sharks to scare him. Once we crossed the line, solid as glass wall, that demarcated the brown water from the clear, we left the sharks behind.

A very big, very old kingfish was waiting for us at *Vingila*, casting the shadow we had seen from the hill. He kept close to the side of our boat, sidling up for protection or company, I couldn't be sure. His scales were almost the size of my hands, and his wide, thick-

lipped mouth looked big enough to swallow Pepe. Filamentous parasites trailed from his tail and his opaque eyes appeared ancient and somehow sorrowful. His movements were slow and stately, no sinewy thrashing in the shallows for him. He refused the scraps of mutton I offered him, opening his mouth as he rose to the surface to ingest the globs of fat and muscle before fixing me with a reproachful eye and spitting them out. He liked fish biltong though. Over the course of an hour, I fed him a bowl of it.

*

In the Tuamotos the people ate dogs. On Takaroa atoll, Turoa, a round-bellied Polynesian man in a stained *pareo*, told us he liked to kill dogs by stuffing them in a sack with rocks and throwing them into the lagoon. He said he fed the meat to unsuspecting tourists. I wondered where he found tourists. There wasn't a hotel and the only visitors we saw were a few other yachties like ourselves. We were stopping in on our way to Tahiti, because we'd heard the diving was good. Each of the Tuamoto islands is a coral atoll formed on the crater of a volcano lying beneath the sea. Seen from the air, I imagined they'd look like a string of smoke-rings, with their circles of white sand surrounding bottomless lagoons.

Making landfall was tricky because the atolls were only as high as their tallest coconut palm. We perched on *Vingila's* prow, listening for the sound of breakers, which were usually the first indication of land. Almost every atoll sported the rusting remains of a Taiwanese fishing boat, stranded high on an outlying reef. Sometimes we saw these broken vessels first, before the reef or the palm trees.

'Why so many wrecks?' Robert asked.

'Probably can't hear the breakers over the sound of their engines,' I said, 'or maybe the navigators were sleeping.'

Turoa of Takaroa told us the Taiwanese boats fished for shark fin and *bêche de mere*, or sea cucumbers. He said that captains of wrecked trawlers, if they survived, were arrested by the crew of the next trawler and sent back to Taiwan to be tried for negligence. If found guilty, he had heard that they were executed. Sometimes they committed suicide before they were arrested. They can't take the shame, he said.

Making landfall wasn't the only difficulty in sailing the Tuamotos, the passages into the lagoons were equally hazardous; between tides, water rushed through the narrow openings at such a rate it formed standing waves, and our engine at full throttle was barely powerful enough to get us through. On Takaroa, we tied up to the concrete jetty at the entrance of the lagoon to await slack tide. *Vingila* lay alongside *Donella* near the oily-smelling copra sheds. A pool of captive sharks cooked in the sun. From the pier, a road of crushed coral bisected a huddle of lime-washed houses with roofs of steel. Shade was in short supply, provided here and there by a coconut palm or breadfruit tree. Hibiscus bushes, heavy with blooms, sprouted from stark gardens of swept beach sand. The sea, either the luminous turquoise of the lagoon or the deeper blue of the open ocean, was almost always within sight and breakers on the outside reef sounded like traffic on a highway. The glare, reflecting from every surface, blinded us and made us squint. In addition to being a vegetarian, Heike suffered from migraines and a short walk into the village was enough to bring on a sick headache which drove her back to *Donella*, where she rested with a wet towel over her eyes. Lynnath was made of hardier stuff and protected by her photochromatic lenses, which turned almost black in the glare, she spent the afternoon investigating the shark pool, showing me the males with their double penises, or 'claspers' as she called them, and describing their mating habits. They were small reef sharks with unhappy mouths of fine yellow teeth

and skins that caught the sun like diamond sandpaper. Turoa found us at the shark pool and introduced himself. When the next Taiwanese trawler arrived, he said, the sharks would have their fins cut off. Then he described how he killed dogs for eating and fed them to tourists.

‘What about those dogs?’ Lynnath asked, pointing at a couple of grizzled specimens sleeping in the shade of the copra shed. ‘Would you eat them?’

‘Of course not. We keep eating dogs somewhere else, and feed them only coconuts, for the taste.’

‘Anyway,’ he added, sizing them up with a gourmet’s eye, ‘those animals look too old.’

That evening, after the sun fell, we were visited by locals with guitars and gifts of shell jewelry. Dad sent Robert to the village for beer. After a while the singing started. People grew merrier as the night wore on then after midnight the mood changed again and a certain melancholy pervaded. The songs became increasingly mournful. Women keened; men moaned. The sounds were of yearning, mourning and regret.

‘I don’t know if I like the music,’ Mom said, ‘but it is distinctive.’

I went to bed soon after, drifting from sleep to catch snatches of music or laughter and the footsteps of people climbing on and off *Vingila* through the night.

*

On the atoll of Manihi, a secretive Japanese company had set up a black-lipped oyster farm and were cultivating pearls. The manager granted us a truncated tour of the fenced-in plant where masked women scratched the insides of live oysters and planted marble sized ‘seeds’ beneath their mantles. At the reception desk oversized, fake-looking black pearls lay ar-

ranged in a glass case. We asked their price and were informed that nothing was for sale, the pearls were for display purposes only. At the end of our tour the Japanese manager bowed and thanked us, then suggested we move on to another atoll.

‘Recreational snorkelling and diving here is forbidden,’ he said, ‘our company bought the rights.’

Before my father could reply, the man said: ‘We have patrol boats. I wouldn’t recommend trying.’

In the village on the other side of the chain-link fence, we found none of the friendly smiles we’d received in Takaroa. People sitting on the steps of their houses lifted their heads as we walked through, then turned away quickly or looked down again.

In Ahe Atoll, where the people were as laid back and friendly as Takaroa, we found Bernard Moitessier on the copra jetty. *Joshua* was anchored in the lagoon – looking just as she did in the book taking pride of place above Mom and Dad’s bunk. Hard-chine steel and still the same shade of red but a little more weather worn. Bernard, in a pair of underpants and plastic sandals, looked a little more weather worn too. He had skinny, ropy-veined legs and when my parents approached him to say what an inspiration he was to them – and to all sailors for that matter – I saw a look of panic enter his eye. He didn’t like people much, which was why he’d spent months sailing around the world alone and was now laying low in Ahe. After a while he excused himself and left us to watch Polynesian men load rancid-smelling bags onto the copra schooner, which was taking the dried coconuts to Tahiti where they would be turned into soap.

*

After the ferry from Morea overturned, the harbour master closed the port of Pappete. All vessels were forbidden to leave or enter the channel, except in an emergency. Rain fell and the water was so rough we couldn't get ashore. We settled in to await the evening and Lynnath's departure, hoping the storm would ease off. Mom cooked dinner and we gathered in the saloon.

'Do you think the waves are getting closer?' Robert said.

'Have some more soup,' Mom said, pushing the pot over.

Dad reached in for the Swedish ham bone Heike had made Janie to give us because she didn't like seeing him eat meat, 'Nah,' he said, 'when they're bigger they just break further out. Nice soup.' He patted my mother on the leg.

While we ate supper *Vingila* was slowly dragging her anchor and edging towards the shore. For dessert Mom cut a pineapple. Sometimes, after shopping at the local market for our daily soup greens and pineapple, we walked through the Bon Marché to look at the expensive apples and peaches on display. We never bought any.

'Pineapple, anyone?' Mom said, as if it were a treat. She had started making beer from the peels. When I told her that it made me drunk, she said I had a vivid imagination. When we ate too much pineapple it gave us mouth ulcers and then we stopped for a few days.

'I'll have a slice or two,' Lynnath said. 'My last piece of Tahiti pineapple.'

She'd run out of money and her mother wanted her to come back and get a job. Also, she and Dad had had a fight, I knew this because I'd found them at the stern one day. She'd turned away so I wouldn't see the tears in her eyes. She refused to talk about it but something had changed.

'If the weather clears tomorrow,' my father said, 'I'll go to the wharves and look for work.'

Even on a diet of soup and pineapple, we were digging into the last of the whiskey smuggling money.

'Yes,' said Mom, 'cash would be nice for Christmas.'

It was easier to be poor on the islands than in a city with bookshops and supermarkets and rich people on other boats who all seemed to have better clothes and much nicer food to eat than we did.

After supper, Lynnath wrapped her camera and passport in a plastic packet and hugged me good bye. We went outside to see her off. It had stopped raining but the gale was still blowing. She ruffled Robert's bleached hair and punched him on the upper arm.

'Look after your sister,' she said, 'and both of you, try to be good. Don't make your Mom cross. I'll see you again one day when you get back to South Africa.'

South Africa couldn't have been further away. Lynnath herself had pointed out that it lay exactly on the other side of the earth. I felt tears rise in my eyes. Lynnath lowered herself into the lurching dinghy which Dad was trying to keep beside the boat. The wind was too strong to row against so the old Seagull had been brought from its canvas wrappings in the chain locker and screwed to the back of the dinghy. My father primed the outboard, wound the cord and gave it a yank. It sputtered a bit before coughing into life. In the dark we could see the white heads of the breakers.

'How'll you get past those?' Mom shouted.

'The harbour's more sheltered,' Dad said. 'We'll tie up at the dock.'

We watched him and Lynnath motor away into the night, the bow of the dinghy rising and falling in veils of spray. I could see they were taking on water. I hoped they'd turn around, but they didn't.

'She'll be soaked when they get ashore,' Robert said.

The dingy became smaller and smaller until it was lost at last in the hazy, uncertain line where the sea met the sky. I watched until it was out of sight and then I went into my cabin, lay down and closed my eyes.

Later I awoke to the roar of *Vingila's* motor. Dad never over-revved the engine because he said it caused damage. I groped my way from the cabin, fighting against *Vingila's* lurching and a strange, unnatural angle she'd adopted. I found Mom in the radio room wearing only a pair of panties. She was sobbing into the VHF radio. Water ran from her wet hair and mingled with the tears streaming down her face. Dad was nowhere to be seen. Robert stood next to her, braced against the tilt of the passage.

'Mayday, mayday, mayday!' Mom sobbed. 'This is *Vingila, Vingila, Vingila.*'

Her only answer was an unconcerned swish of static.

She dropped the microphone, leaving it to dangle in mid air as she clawed up the companionway stairs. I heard the engine scream again. I followed Robert into the cockpit, my feet slipping on the wet steps.

'What's going on? Where's Dad?' I yelled.

Spray drenched us. The air was so thick with the stuff, I could hardly make out what was happening at first. Our boat had dragged her anchor and was lying in a line of breakers. Submitting to the force of the waves, she had rolled over on her side like a dog. White water pushed her hull closer ashore and sluiced the decks, swamping the cockpit. Her masts,

glowing in the light of the street lamps, tilted over to almost touch the beach. Waves pum-
melled her hull against the ground in a series of crunching blows.

‘God no, help us!’ Mom stumbled as *Vingila* struck the beach again.

It looked like the end of our boat. I couldn’t see her making it through the pounding she was taking and I couldn’t see how we’d ever get her off the beach. Soon the main saloon and cabins would be flooded. I would lose everything. My clothes, my red leatherette Dickens compendium and my journals. Everything.

‘Nooo! I can’t steer.’ Mom spun the helm. She revved the engine again and the propeller chopped foam. Hair blew over her face. Her glasses teetered askew. Her mouth became an ‘O’ of distress in the white mask of her face. Abandoning the helm, she groped her way downstairs into the tilted radio room, where she grabbed the mike and fell to the floor.

‘Please somebody, come and save us,’ she moaned.

While my mother sobbed into an unresponsive radio, I went outside and curled into foetal position on the cockpit duckboards because I couldn’t think of anything else to do. A wave breaking over the hull brought me spluttering to my feet. Robert poked his head from the companionway.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’ he said.

Before I could answer, we were distracted by the sound of a Seagull engine at full throttle. I looked up to see my father surfing towards us on the back of fresh roller. Now at least, I thought, we’ll have an adult to help.

The wave rose up and broke, collapsing and taking Dad and the dinghy with it and burying them in several feet of tumbled water. When the breaker sucked back, we made out the overturned dinghy with the Seagull prop still spinning in the sky, but no Dad.

Vingila was so far over we were standing on the sides of her cabin top, clinging to the life rails. Another wave swamped us.

‘Where’s he gone?’ I said.

‘I dunno,’ said Robert. ‘It’s hard to tell, it’s so dark.’

We crawled uphill to the stern for a better look. A black blob, which might have been a head, surfaced and was then swallowed almost at once by the next wave. The blob resurfaced, nearer this time.

‘It’s Dad, he’s swimming over.’

We were perfectly placed to see the breaker that lifted my father into its barrel and threw him against Baruch’s rudder with such force that it jolted the transom. His head was sucked under again, but his hands, like those of a horror movie monster refusing to die, rose up from to cling to the self-steering device.

I heard voices calling and I saw then that a few men had waded into the surf, fighting the waves to get close to the boat. Between breakers they were able to stand with their arms open.

‘Jump,’ called a man, ‘and I’ll save you.’

So I jumped.

‘Like a rat,’ Dad said the next afternoon when Robert and I saw him again.

‘A rat deserting a sinking ship. That’s how you acted. Because that’s what you are. A useless pair of bladdy rats.’

He spoke slowly, taking shallow breaths between words and he sat bent over in the main saloon, a frown of pain stamped on his face. His ribs, he said, had been broken when the wave threw him against Baruch. Mom sat beside him stroking Pepe. She didn’t look up.

Dad was angry with her too. He said she should have raised the anchor and motored away from the beach. He said that maybe she'd had the motor in reverse and not forward. There was no excuse for what she'd done. She hadn't been paying attention and she'd panicked.

'Get out of my sight,' he said to me. He reached above his head for the Whistler and was brought up short by his painful ribs.

I ran to my cabin, Dad didn't look strong enough to use the Whistler although I thought it best not to hang around and find out. We were back at the same mooring, having re-anchored further from the shore. The storm was over and the harbour had reverted to its placid self. *Vingila* was missing nothing more than a few layers of paint on the port side of her hull. The dinghy had been retrieved and even the Seagull engine, after a little cleaning, still worked. I lay on my bunk, fuming. I wanted to tell Dad that while I hadn't broken any bones, my night hadn't exactly been easy either.

After jumping into my rescuer's arms, he'd carried me through the surf to a white VW beetle parked beside the road. He left me on the lap of the young woman sitting in the passenger seat. I couldn't stop shivering so she hugged me against her bony chest, pressing my face against her neck which was marked by a string of purple bruises. Her hair smelled of cigarette smoke. After a few minutes my rescuer came back with Pepe and Robert. Both of them were soaking wet and shivering. Pepe tried to climb onto my lap. I pushed him into the back seat where Robert sat cradling his left arm. His face looked oddly yellow.

'Robbie, are you okay?' I said.

He nodded.

'And the arm?' I said

'Sore,' he said, 'but okay.'

For a few days he'd been complaining of a painful arm since tumbling from a frangi-pani tree. He'd scaled the tree to pick flowers for Shannon, a pretty American girl he liked. When a police car with flashing lights delivered my brother to the moorings after his fall, Mom's first thought was that he had been arrested for stealing. New Louis L'Amour novels had been turning up lately in his cabin and we knew he couldn't be buying them. When my mother paddled ashore in the dinghy, the policeman told her my brother had been found lying on the pavement in front of a small, concerned crowd; he was injured. Dad, wondering if Robert's shoulder might be dislocated, had given the arm a hard yank, draining the blood from my brother's face and elicited a surprisingly shrill scream. We found out much later that his humerus was broken in two places but initially my parents hoped his injury wasn't serious and would heal on its own. It's pointless taking him to a doctor and paying good money only to find out nothing's wrong, Dad had said.

In the back seat of the VW, Robert rubbed his arm cautiously.

'Are you sure you're okay?' I asked.

'I'm okay.'

After a while I reached back for his hand and said, 'Oh Robbie, I'm so scared.'

I knew *Vingila* couldn't go on pounding against the beach before she'd start breaking apart. It was like watching a house burn down. She lay on her side, pinned to the beach by the force of the wind and the waves. Dots of people clung to her like ants. She looked as helpless and ungainly as a fat woman collapsed in the street with her skirt wedged up to show her underwear. Our boat was pathetic and also somehow shameful and embarrassing; a public testament to our incompetence and carelessness. I became sentimental. I thought about what a good yacht she was, not too lively or quick, but solid and dependable and I

started to cry again. It seemed she'd taken care of us when we needed her and now we'd let her down. The intensity of my emotions surprised me and moved me to further displays of grief. The girl with the cigarette hair put her arms around me again, murmuring something French into my ear. Pepe pushed against me, nudging my arm with his damp muzzle. Robert, reaching over from the back seat, patted my shoulder.

'Nicky, don't cry,' he said, 'at least it's sand, not rocks and the hull's steel, that makes a difference.'

People kept coming to the window to ask if we were okay. Then somebody brought news that a rescue tug was on its way. He told us that some yachties – rich ones with a car – had heard Mom on the VHF radio. When the harbour master didn't answer her distress call they'd driven around themselves to see what was going on. The emergency people were asleep in their compound with the radio turned off. It had taken quite a lot of shouting to wake them, the man said. Anyway, they'd dispatched a tug. He patted our hands through the window.

'Where's Dad?' Robert said. 'Can you see him?'

Vingila was ploughing her way sideways up the beach, with her tilted deck facing us and her masts horizontal. Several human shapes clung to the rails at the bow. A fresh gust hit the beetle, driving rain against the windscreen.

I started to cry again.

'I can't see properly, but I think that's him on the bow, with Mom and some other people,' Robert said. 'And look, there's the tug.'

The rescue boat threw *Vingila* a line and within minutes had pulled her, anchors and all, off the beach. Then it towed her to the far side of the harbour where she disappeared from view. The people on the beach started walking toward the road,

‘What now?’ I asked Robert.

He shrugged. We looked at the girl with the cigarette hair but she didn’t know either. She’d only come to the boulevard to watch the storm and kiss her boyfriend in the dark, she’d never expected to pick up a pair of damp kids and a poodle. The crowd on beach drifted up to stare at us. Mostly they were fellow yachties I’d seen on the pier. After a huddled conversation, a woman stepped up to the window.

‘Do you remember me, children? My name’s Mrs Kiefer.’

I knew her. On yachts nobody called anyone mister or missus. She made a point of it, though. She was American and she lived with her husband on an elegant schooner at the expensive walk-on moorings, closer to town. She was rich and stingy and she usually greeted me with a hint of pity, looking sorrowfully at my bare feet and grazed knees. I got the feeling she thought Robert and I were neglected and needed to be taught some manners. It was true that we usually looked scruffy and I had recently spent some weeks with my nose covered in yellow impetigo crusts. Mom had hoped they’d would get better by themselves but they didn’t. At the height of my skin infection when the scabs had spread to my chin as well, Mrs Keifer had found me at the Bon Marché staring at the imported fruit. She was wheeling a loaded trolley and the expression on her face made me flush with shame. I wasn’t averse to sympathy but Mrs Keifer irked me because I suspected that she enjoyed feeling sorry for us. It confirmed her image as a caring, morally and materially superior person. I hated her for it.

Her concerned face pushing in through the window of the Beetle made the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

'I suppose you two will have to come with me,' she said sighing, 'and we'll get you back to your parents in the morning.'

'And Pepe?'

She sighed again. 'And the dog, of course. Come along, be quick now.'

I got out of the car and realised that I was wearing nothing except a pair of old panties and a torn T-shirt. Robert at least had had the sense to get dressed before abandoning ship.

Mrs Keifer's 72-foot teak schooner was immaculate; all polished brass, varnished mahogany and tasselled lampshades. Every surface was clean and uncluttered and Persian rugs were scattered over the gleaming floorboards.

'What lovely carpets,' I said.

'Rugs,' said Mrs Keifer, 'we call them rugs. Now I'm going to find you something to wear. Wait here, you two and please, try not to touch anything. And don't drip.' Looking pleased with herself, she trotted away in the direction of the fore-peak.

The largest, most intricate carpet had a golden tree embroidered on its surface. Hanging from its branches were fruits of different colours. Little birds sat in the tree, their beaks open in song. Pepe sniffed around with interest before walking to the centre of the carpet where he squatted down and deposited a coil directly onto a singing bird. A hot wave of shame and disgust swept over me. I felt sick.

'Quick,' said Robert, 'she's coming, do something.'

So, without thinking I picked up Pepe's turd in my bare hands and threw it overboard. I'd never touched a turd before and the bulk and steamy warmth of it surprised me. I could still feel it on my hands after I'd tossed it in the sea.

Down stairs Mrs Kiefer held out an old shirt of her husband's.

'Try this on, dear.'

I can't wear that, I thought. Mr Kiefer was even creepier than his wife. He smelled musty and stale. How could I wear a strange man's clothes? I looked at Robert. If I have to wear Mr Kiefer's clothes I'll never be able to sleep, I wanted to tell him. I'll have nightmares and feel even more lonely and scared than I already am.

'Put this on,' she said, 'I don't have any underwear your size so you'll have to do without.'

I had survived a shipwreck only to sleep without underwear on a strange boat with the Kiefers and an incontinent dog. Tears welled in my eyes and my throat closed in painful spasm. I knew one thing, I wasn't going to sleep without panties with those creeps around. I'd keep my own panties on, even if they were torn and wet.

'Can I wash my hands first?'

'Whatever for? You're wet enough already and we can't go around wasting fresh water.'

The next day, while we were waiting to be reunited with our parents, Robert slipped on the dock, falling onto his sore arm. He told me he heard it crunch. We were returned to our parents shortly before lunch. I thought they'd be happy to see us, but they weren't particularly. Pepe, however, was treated like a returning hero and showered with hugs and kisses. Then Dad told us what rats we were.

I could hear my father's voice in the saloon as I lay sulking in my bunk. I wanted to tell him that I had been brave. Waves had broken over me, and I'd been carried through a stormy sea to be abandoned with strangers. I was only 12-years old anyway. And what about picking up dog poo with my bare hands? What thanks had I got for that?

Dad's voice rose. He was talking to my mother.

'I didn't ask for any bladdy tug,' he was saying, 'who the hell's idea was it to ask for a tug? I could've got my own boat off the beach, I didn't need their help. And now they want me to pay for it. Where's the money going to come from?'

I was trying to picture Dad getting *Vingila* off the beach without a tug when I heard a knock on the hull. Outside a rough-hewn man and a pretty woman with short, dark hair and a heart-shaped face were standing in a red dinghy.

'I'm Jean-Marc, from *Cipango*, and this is Dominique. We have to speak to you, can we come aboard?'

Dad invited them in and, over a cup of coffee, they told him their warp had been swept away by *Vingila* the previous evening and that they wanted compensation. Which was when the conversation really heated up and Jean-Marc got to use some of the hand signs he'd learned as a truck driver in Marseilles.

*

In the beginning of December my father found work in the docks dismantling a gas carrier for the scrap yard and we began planning a modest Christmas celebration, one without pineapple. Most of the money my dad earned was put aside to see us through a few more years of cruising, nevertheless our tight budget eased a bit and Robert and I even received a little pocket money. Mom and Dad went with Robert to the hospital where the doctor took X-rays

and told them my brother's arm was broken in two places. He then proceeded to wrap most of Robert's upper torso in plaster of Paris.

A few days before Christmas, Shannon helped Dad cut off Robert's cast with a pair of side cutters. The doctor had recommended the plaster stay on until mid January but Dad said he couldn't take the stink any longer. I had to agree with him. I could smell Robert from his cabin in the fore-peak. At night the ammoniacal odour of his discoloured bandages crept into my dreams as I slept, forming images so unpleasant they woke me up. Once my father had cut through the plaster, Shannon got her fingers under it and they broke it open like an egg. Under the shell, Robert's skin was dirty looking, dry and cracked as mud on the bottom of an empty lake. Shannon fetched a bowl of water and scrubbed my brother's back and arms with a sponge, rubbing and mopping until the wash water turned to broth. She dried him with a towel and asked Mom for moisturiser which she smoothed into his skin. Her movements were slow and languorous. I noticed that she was leaning against him with her bare legs pressed against his body. And he wasn't moving away, he leaned against her and pressed back.

For Christmas my brother spent half his pocket money on a fake gold chain for Shannon and the remainder on a granny-smith apple from the display I'd been admiring in the Bon Marché. He wrapped the fruit in coloured paper and placed it on the chart table with the other presents and on Christmas day we exchanged gifts. The apple was for me and when I bit into it, its crisp sour flesh tasted as exotic and exciting as mangoes had once seemed in Benoni.

Chapter 15

Society Islands

In Morea, we anchored in the shelter of the outer lagoon. Steep slopes rose behind us from white beaches. Before us, turquoise water stretched out to the thin line of breakers marking the reef and, beyond that, to the contours of Tahiti's mountains on the far horizon. Morea, I thought, was probably the most beautiful island in the world. A pair of deep bays lay side by side, separated by a forested tongue and overlooked on each side by green mountains. A fringing reef created a calm, clear lagoon around the island, like a moat around a castle. A few hotels lined the shore, their discrete buildings lost in gardens of hibiscus and frangipani. It often rained in the afternoons, leaving the narrow, island roads steaming and the air smelling of flowers.

We expected Shannon and her father to arrive any day from Papeete, and my brother's eyes often swept the horizon, searching for a set of sails belonging to the wooden sloop with a pretty 11-year-old aboard. He was distracted and dreamy. He told me often how pretty he thought Shannon was, and how sweet and kind. It was true that she had sparkling eyes and a quick bright smile. Robert asked me if I thought she liked him. Yes, I said. I'd seen her scrubbing dead skin from his arm, and I couldn't imagine liking any boy enough to do that. While he was waiting for Shannon, my brother French-kissed Barbara Hearn from *Barnacle Bill*. Who – he told me afterwards – he didn't even find pretty or nice.

I suppose it was my fault in a way. I may have started everything by kissing Barbara's older brother Michael. He was 14, almost 15, and he had glasses, bushy brown hair and

milky skin entirely unsuited to a tropical climate. His teeth stuck out a little at the front and had wide gaps between them. His stepfather, he said, had promised him braces when they reached Australia. Michael often annoyed me with stupid jokes and general teen-age boy boorishness but he could also be funny and clever and sometimes we got along. One afternoon we were sitting in my cabin looking at a book together when he asked me if I'd ever tried French kissing. When I said no, he admitted that he hadn't either...and would I like to give it a go?

From reading *Sweet Savage Love* and its sequel *Wildest Heart* I knew a lot about kissing. For the perfect kiss it was best to have both a full bosom and full lips. I had neither. Galloping horses were good too. The man you loved, even though you didn't think so at first because because he made you so angry, should chase you. Preferably on horse back. It worked best with two horses. If there was only one horse, the man should ride it. Once he'd caught you – or your horse – the man, who was very strong and lean in an open-necked shirt which revealed his hard flat muscles that gave you a tingling feeling whenever you saw them, would sweep you up, or down, depending on how many horses there were, and press his lips to yours, thus causing an even more tingling feeling to course its way from your lips to your loins. I wasn't exactly sure where my loins were but all in all kissing seemed a thrilling business. If you had a horse, that is, and a full-lipped man in a silk shirt.

'So,' said Michael, leaning toward me. 'Do you want to kiss or not?'

'Well okay,' I said. 'I suppose so.'

It wasn't very nice. His peg-like teeth clashed against my lips and his thrusting tongue, coated with oddly cold saliva, felt big inside my mouth. When our noses collided I thought I would suffocate.

'How was that?' he asked, after I pulled away. I felt an urge to run outside and spit overboard, but forced myself to swallow. I wiped my mouth and took a deep breath.

'Weird,' I said.

He nodded. 'I thought so too.'

When Robert heard what we'd done, he went and kissed Michael's sister Barbara.

'I thought you liked Shannon,' I said, 'and she's prettier.'

'I do, but she's not here, is she?'

'So how was it then?'

He shrugged, 'Okay, I guess.'

We were finding the Society Islands to be quite sociable. In Tahiti there were hundreds of yachties – long distance cruisers – not racers or tourists on charter boats. Sailors filled our visitors book with entries and every night there were drinks or dinner invitations. *Wotan*, the converted Danish fishing trawler, threw huge parties and had a fore-deck big enough for dancing. Julie and Dancha Papazov, the Bulgarians, supplied the vodka. They received endless deliveries of bottles in wooden crates from the Russians – a shadowy crowd from a ship in port. Julie, with an explosion of peroxide hair, claimed to be a concert pianist while Dancha, stumpy and thick lipped with heavy spectacles, said he had once been a composer and conductor before turning his attention to science and research. In our visitors book, they wrote their names and address in Cyrillic. They added rare stamps celebrating a voyage that the two of them had made, rowing across the North Atlantic in an open boat for three weeks, eating nothing but plankton which they caught in a trailing net. Then Dancha presented Dad with a card, signed by the *Director General of Bulgarian TV* and the *Chairman of the State Committee for Science and Technical Progress* – a certain Nacho Papazov – who may have

been a relative. The card, embossed black on white, commemorated the *PLANKTON expedition which is of lasting and fruitful importance and proclaimed itself to be a modest expression of the deepest respect for Frank's attention, assistance and sympathy.*

The Papazovs weren't eating plankton in Tahiti. In addition to delivering regular crates of vodka, their Russian friends provided them with jars of caviar.

Mom didn't enjoy it. 'Too fishy,' she said, 'and I don't like how it pops in my mouth.'

Dad, who hated the commies and thought they were trying to take over the world, found these two, the first he had ever met, to be quite likeable, although he was puzzled by certain details.

'So if you're communists,' he asked, 'how did you get a yacht like this?'

Dancha explained that private ownership being illegal in Bulgaria, their lovely wooden sloop with varnished topsides belonged to the state and was in fact on a government sponsored expedition to cruise the world. Even their life rafts, of which they had several, had been donated by the Russian space agency, and one calm afternoon they opened one up to show us. We took turns sailing the orange inflatable with its stumpy, gaff rigged sail, in slow circles. It came fully stocked with cans of dehydrated astronaut food. In a gesture I found difficult to interpret, the Papazovs donated a selection of unlabelled tins to *Vingila*. Our breakfasts became a lottery. The dried strawberries were tricky to identify, but delicious. The desiccated rice pudding was almost completely unrecognisable as a food stuff by either its appearance, smell or taste. Even Pepe wouldn't eat it and I could understand why the astronauts had given it away. After several months of partying, vodka drinking and strange tinned food in Pappete my parents said they needed a break and sailed to Morea. Which was when Robert and I became more involved with Michael and Barbara.

'Maureen,' Michael said to my mother the day after we had kissed, 'I want to take Nicky on a date.'

Mom looked mildly surprised.

'Where too?' she asked.

'Just ashore, to the jetty. But we want to go at night.'

Mom looked doubtful.

'You'll have to ask her dad.'

My father agreed to a date as long as Robert went along too, and Barbara as well. I couldn't quite understand his logic. If he thought my brother would keep an eye on me with Barbara around he was wrong. Barbara and Michael's stepfather Jim told them they had to be back by nine and because we didn't own watches, Jim said he'd flash the light on *Barnacle Bill's* masthead to let us know our date was over. That evening, after supper, Barbara and Michael rowed over and took us ashore. After securing the dinghy to a post, we spread towels over the rough surface of the wood jetty, lay down and got in about 40 minutes of French kissing before the masthead light flashed. While I still wasn't sure I enjoyed kissing Michael Hearn, I felt that with practice I could get used to it and that perhaps both of us would improve. For a start, we'd learnt to tilt our faces slightly rather than coming at each other head on and I found breathing through my nose to be helpful. Robert, substituting vigour for feeling and expertise, kissed Barbara so hard that he split her lip. It was still swollen and bruised the next day.

Going on dates was alright, but I preferred swimming from the boat with Barbara – diving down in the clear warm water, holding the anchor chain and screaming our heads off together. We also liked sneaking into the island hotels and swimming in their pools. A fel-

low yachtie told us that if we wandered along the beach in the morning it was possible to follow the Club Med holiday makers into the dining hall and partake of their breakfast buffet.

‘All for free,’ the yachtie said, ‘just make sure you don’t get caught. Act casual.’

Each day, after finishing our boat work and schoolwork Robert and I were allowed to take off and do what we liked as long as we returned home by sundown. We roamed the island, getting about by hitchhiking and visiting all the hotels and beaches in turn.

‘Of course I don’t worry about those two,’ I overheard Mom telling someone, ‘What could happen to them here?’

Barbara and Michael usually joined us on our outings around the island and we often split off into pairs, which made getting lifts easier. Sometimes Michael and I stayed together, and at other times he went with my brother. Barbara and I, when left alone, took to washing our hair and shaving our legs at the tap beside the road, and trying out new ways of wearing our *pareos*.

I discovered Dolly Parton when I heard her singing on the radio back in Benoni. Her high, sweet voice warbling ‘love is like a butterfly, as soft and gentle as a sigh’ entranced me. I thought it the loveliest song I’d ever heard and convinced Mom to buy her record. When I saw Dolly on the cover, with her fantastic chest, mounds of candy floss hair and sticky black eyelashes, she looked even more beautiful than her voice sounded. She was, I thought, exactly what a woman should be and I decided immediately that when I grew up I would have breasts just like hers. Barbara, with a freckled face beneath a wedge of frizzy ginger hair, also liked Dolly Parton. She confessed that she wanted big breasts too and her

period. When we shaved at the tap, we compared recent changes in our bodies and discussed our impending metamorphosis into beautiful, curvaceous women.

Robert and Michael – more interested in shoplifting than personal grooming – stole sweets, books and pens almost daily from the local store until the shopkeeper got wise and refused to let them past the door. Our weekly dates continued, developing from straight kissing sessions to fish barbecues followed by making out. Kissing non-stop for 40 minutes could get boring, we were discovering.

Then Shannon arrived. The set of sails that my brother had stopped looking for appeared on the horizon and made their way through the pass to anchor between *Vingila* and *Barnacle Bill*. Shannon, sitting on the fore-deck of her father's sloop, gave us a shy wave.

'So what are you going to do now?' I asked my brother.

He shrugged. 'I dunno, go spearfishing I suppose.'

Which he did, ignoring both girls and going off in the dinghy to the outside reef with Dad instead.

'I don't think I like your brother anymore,' Barbara said to me that afternoon when we met at the tap with our razors. We hadn't asked Shannon to join us because Barbara didn't want to, but we could see her sitting hunch-shouldered in the cockpit of her boat watching us on the shore.

'Well, I don't like yours either,' I said, which was true. Michael had begun to repulse me. I disliked his pale skin and bony chest, his peg-like teeth and the way he breathed through his mouth when he read. I didn't like the teenage boy smell of him or his dorky glasses. I wanted a boyfriend who was strong and suntanned and preferably blonde. Somebody who looked and acted a bit like Thor Heyerdhal or a more polite version of Steve

Morgan from *Sweet Savage Love*. Michael wouldn't even go spearfishing with Robert because he was scared of sharks and he lacked the strength to load a speargun. He was funny though, and clever, and he knew a lot about music and Fender Stratocasters and Jimi Hendrix, but that didn't count for much if I was going to be as glamorous and buxom as Dolly Parton. I wondered if Estella had felt the same way about Pip in *Great Expectations*, who might also have had strange teeth and an irritating personality and who may have looked at her with begging puppy eyes. If Estella had met a man like Thor or Steve Morgan she might not have been so cold and haughty. I had tried being haughty with Michael but it didn't work. Instead of driving him away it had the opposite effect. I'd had enough. Besides, I was cross with Barbara for saying she didn't like my brother; I wasn't sure I always liked him much myself but somehow that was different. We soaped our legs in silence.

'I don't feel like trying on *pareos* today,' said Barbara.

'Me neither,' I said. 'I think I'll just go back to the boat and read.'

'Oh well, see you sometime then.'

'Yeah,' I said, 'sure.'

'You're back early,' Mom said, 'want to help me make supper?'

Ever since our Chinese banquet in Papeete, Mom had been cooking more adventurously – with mixed results. That night, over an experimental stir-fry of bully beef and bitter cabbage dripping soya sauce, Dad announced we would be sailing the next day for Huahini. I didn't hear him at first because I was trying to feed Pepe my supper under the table without anyone noticing.

'I suppose you'll miss your friends, specially now that the little girl Robert fancies has arrived,' Dad said, 'but we can't stay here forever.'

Robert swallowed. An unreadable expression crossing his face. 'What's that?' he said.

'We're off to Huahini tomorrow. Don't you ever listen?'

Pepe shoved a greasy chin onto my thigh and gazed up with imploring eyes for more bully beef. Robert scratched the last grains of rice from his bowl and looked relieved.

'That's okay,' he said, 'we can always make new friends.'

The next day we left to explore the rest of the Society Islands, stopping first at the twin isles of Huahini Nui and Huahini Iti. We visited Raitea and Bora Bora, an island even more beautiful than Morea. And although we found a yacht club and met several other yachts, none of them had children of our age aboard and so Robert and I didn't make any new friends. We left Bora Bora with plans to anchor at Maupiti for a few days. which were shelved because the wind was so good. We sailed past Maupiti for was shelved because the wind was good, and made for Penrhyn, the northernmost of the Cook Islands, hoping to make friends there.

Chapter 16

Penrhyn

We were in Omoka village, opening oysters in search of pearls for the premier of the Cook Islands.

‘Take it for you,’ the man said, ‘it’s a *poe pipi*.’

He spoke in an offhand, casual manner and I felt I could believe him. I’d seen him in church, handing out hymn books and leading the choir. I examined the oyster in my hand again. I hadn’t done a very good job at wrenching it apart; the bivalve looked as if it had been smashed by a rock. Shards of broken shell sprinkled the pinky-grey flesh and floated gently in the juice. My neighbour’s oyster was cleanly sliced in two. If I had been working in a restaurant shucking oysters, I would have been fired. Luckily, I didn’t intend to eat the oyster in my hand. My attention was focussed on something else. A pearl. I scooped out the gem with the tip of my knife, and dried it on my tee-shirt. In Brazil, the Caribbean, Panama and the Tuamotos we had dived for the oysters and always, before opening them, I had said a little prayer. *Please let this one have a pearl*. None of them did. Finding a pearl seemed as likely as discovering a diamond or a bar of gold on the beach. Then we arrived in Penrhyn, an atoll famous for its natural pearls, where every sixth or seventh bivalve held a gem. Although to be truthful, most of them were disappointing; small and misshapen, and more like grains of faintly nacreous sand than honorary gemstones. Now, finally, I had opened an oyster and found a real pearl. It was perfectly round and the colour I’d heard the islanders call silver, or *poe pipi*, which wasn’t silver at all, but more like a mix of colours that drifted and

changed with movement. Golden-sheened with tones of black, pink and greenish-blue; it was as beautiful and mysterious-looking as diesel floating on the sea. I wanted it more than I could remember wanting anything.

‘Take it.’

‘Aren’t the pearls today for the premier?’

He shrugged. Reached for another oyster, opened it, gave it a cursory stir with his knife, and tossed it onto the pile behind him.

‘That’s your decision,’ he said.

*

We reached Penrhyn 12 days after leaving Bora Bora. Unlike the Society Islands, whose volcanic peaks could be seen from 30 miles away, the coral atoll of Penrhyn lay low in the ocean, its coconut palms scarcely higher than the waves. Like the Tuamotu Atolls we’d visited, the place didn’t become visible until it was dangerously close. We saw the white water of the reef first and then began looking for the entrance to the lagoon. With *Vingila* tacking back and forth, Dad flipped through the pilot book and peered at the chart, then raised a pair of binoculars and stared at the line of the reef.

‘Over there,’ he said.

We didn’t believe him.

‘Can’t be,’ said Mom, ‘that’s not a pass – waves are breaking across it for God’s sake.’

‘Show me another one and I’ll take it,’ Dad said.

Mom reached for the binoculars.

‘It can’t be right,’ she said, ‘look at the white water. How can anyone expect us to sail through that?’

We sailed closer for a better look, trawling back and forth on the shoulders of massive, curling swells. I squinted into the sun. Using my imagination, I could just about see a break in the reef and some darker water where rollers were closing out.

‘If you want to go to Penrhyn, we’ve gotta get through that pass,’ Dad said.

We didn’t particularly want to go to Penrhyn, it was more my father’s idea. The pilot book described the place as seldom visited. Apparently the airstrip had fallen into disrepair and a freighter only passed by once every three months or so. Even visiting yachts were rare. To Dad, that had sounded ideal. Looking at the pass, I could think of at least one reason why visitors were scarce.

‘Speed got us through the entrance to Manihi,’ Dad said. ‘Remember, back in the Tuamotos? Seems to me, the faster we go, the better steerage we’ll have when we get into the breakers. Which means less chance of landing up on the reef. What do you say?’

We didn’t say anything, just took our positions with quiet, fatalistic acceptance. There was no arguing with the old man. He took the helm, which confirmed just how serious things were.

In 1805 the Beaufort Scale was devised for grading wind and sea conditions. It ranges from 0 (calm), through 3, 4 and 5 (gentle, moderate and fresh breeze) all the way to 10, 11 and 12 (storm, violent storm and hurricane). The sea is described at each stage too, from flat, to ripples, to completely white and the air filled with foam. I reckoned that on *Vingila* we had the Dad Scale to measure the severity of the situation at any given time. It was much simpler and just as accurate.

Level 1 – Dad reading or sleeping in his bunk.

Level 2 – Dad still in his bunk, but head cocked to one side and listening.

Level 3 – Dad sticking his head out of the hatch.

Level 4 – Dad standing in the cockpit.

Level 5 – Dad at the bow.

Level 6 – Dad at the bow and Mom on the helm.

Level 7 – Dad at the helm.

We'd never reached Level 8, but I imagined it would be Dad on his hands and knees inside with the rest of us while *Vingila* rolled around with her keel in the air and water poured through the hatches.

The entrance to Penryhn's lagoon was a solid level 7.

My father gave the wheel a spin and grinned. I noticed that he had donned a pair of underpants.

'Are you ready?' he said. 'Let's take on this pass.'

We trimmed the main and jib sails, switched on the motor, and took our run-up. As we sailed closer the waves grew steeper. *Vingila* began surfing. A wave reared behind us, the toppling its front threatening to swamp the stern. As its crest collapsed in froth, the wave picked our boat up by the tail, and pushed her forward. A steep drop opened beneath the bow, brown coral flashed past on the sea floor and a high, feathery wake spread out on either side of the hull. With *Vingila* humming so loudly I thought she might break into song, we shot through the passage and into a calm, wide lagoon.

To the right of the pass lay Omoka, the nearest of the atoll's two villages. Wind-burned and crusted with salt, we anchored before a huddle of low, steel-roofed houses. They had colourful, well-tended gardens, with coconut palms, morning glories and hibiscus bushes. Instead of lawn their yards were spread with bleached coral. Everything looked quiet and

peaceful. We folded the sails, raised our yellow quarantine flag and, while Mom made tea, sat down to wait for the customs and immigration men before we could go ashore.

*

A few days after arriving in Omoka, Mom enrolled Robert and me in the local school. I was nervous because I hadn't been in a classroom since St Helena, so my new best friend Tepou, promised to go with me. She agreed to meet me on the beach and in the morning I found her waiting under a palm tree. Unlike me, (skinny, with a perpetually sunburned, peeling nose), or even my old friend – poor freckle-faced Barbara; Tepou was beautiful. She looked nothing like either of her parents, a pair of heavy limbed, unexceptional Maoris with broad faces. Tepou had smooth dark skin and straight white teeth. Her shiny hair smelled of coconut oil and lay in a heavy plait down her back. Her lips looked as if they'd been painted on with maroon lipstick. She was so pretty she made me feel awkward, gawky and unsure of myself. I couldn't speak properly around her. Like the other Omoka scholars, she wore a white shirt and blue skirt. I didn't have a skirt – blue or otherwise – so I had just pulled on shorts and my best T-shirt. I hoped that would be okay. Both of us were barefoot. Seeing Tepou's feet made me feel a little better about her otherwise intimidating beauty. She had island feet as flat and broad as my own, and around her ankles were several sores.

Robert trailed behind us as we strolled along the crushed coral road to the far side of the village. Tepou and I talked. She could speak Polynesian, catch fish, weave hats from coconut fibres, open oysters and hold a baby so that it didn't throw up. She told me, and the other children would later confirm it, that I'd only get bitten by a shark in the lagoon if I swam on a Sunday or wore a revealing swimming costume like a bikini. As long as my family obeyed these two rules we were safe. Her mother and aunties always wore long dresses

when they collected oysters, she said. Sunday swimming and bikinis made God mad and then His sharks bit you. A few years back a boy had been eaten by a shark on Sunday. That proved it. Sunday was for church and singing hymns.

The school building, which squatted near the beach under a grove of palms, was split into two by a drywall partition. One room was for secondary school students and the other for primary school children like ourselves. Robert and I followed Tepou to meet our teacher, Mr Dunn. He was Australian and had yellow hair, yellow skin and yellow eyes. He looked tired. Tepou was still talking about sharks as instruments of God and I could tell from his face that he didn't agree with her but all he said was that one should always be careful when swimming, and keep a constant eye out for dangers.

Mr Dunn gave me a seat in the front row beside my new friend. A boy with long plaited hair and a huge ulcer on his shin sat behind us. Almost all the children had ulcers. I even had a few myself, although they were still quite small. They started as blisters which burst and grew crusty. Swimming washed away the crusts, making the sores itch and ooze sticky yellow water.

When gusts of wind blew across the lagoon, the palm fronds scratched so loudly against the tin roof, that the noise nearly drowned out the voices of the children reciting their times tables on the other side of the partition.

Mr Dunn cleared his throat. 'Today, children, we're going to start with math homework. Please open your books.'

He nodded at Robert and me. 'You can share with your neighbour.'

The boy behind me waved away a cluster of flies that had gathered on his ulcer. They rose in a cloud before settling back again.

Through the open door I could see the bright water of the lagoon. A beam of sunlight reflected from it to form a rhomboid on the floor. As the morning wore on, the rhomboid flattened into a rectangle which tracked across the cracked concrete and crawled up the wall.

Shortly before break time, when I leaned closer to read Tepou's text book, I noticed something moving in her hair. It was an insect. She reached up, plucked it out and absently crushed it between her fingers, before flicking the corpse to the floor. The realisation came to me that my new friend had lice. Trying not to be obvious, I made a study of my fellow pupils' heads and came to the chilling conclusion that each one of them was infested. In Benoni nobody had lice, at least nobody I'd ever met. Nana said lice were for dirty people.

At break time we walked down to the lagoon and sat on the beach in the shade. I couldn't stop looking at Tepou's hair. Eventually she asked me if anything was wrong and I confessed that I'd never seen a louse before. She shrugged and said that on Penrhyn everybody had them. A thin, sharp featured girl with long pigtails told me that when she lived in New Zealand with her father, she never had lice. She thought it was because in New Zealand she washed her hair with hot water. Did I wash my hair in hot water? No, I washed my hair in cold water like every one else.

Once they had finished eating their lunch, my friends began searching each other's heads for the parasites, which they collected in a cup. There was a flat rock near the sea, and they drew a starting line on it and lined up the lice they'd caught and proceeded to hold a race. When the soft-bodied insects crossed the finish line the girl with the long pigtails crushed them with a stone.

After break, we had a writing lesson and then we wove mats from coconut fibres. For phys-ed Mr Dunn took us outside to play volleyball on the beach. The boy with the ulcer on his shin didn't join in. He sat under a palm and watched us, and every now and then a school mate ran past and called him a *le-le*. Mr Dunn told them to stop it but they didn't listen to him and after a while he went inside, leaving us to play by ourselves. The boy with the plaits got up, dusted his shorts off with stubby-fingered hands and followed the teacher. I asked what a *le-le* was and everyone went silent except for one girl who burst out laughing. Nobody would tell me. Then the bell rang and we went back for the next lesson.

As we walked into the classroom, Tepou sidled up to whisper in my ear that *le-le* wasn't a nice word and that the boy was an *akava'ine* – a boy like a girl – which was why he wore his hair in such long plaits.

When I got back to the boat that afternoon, my mother was drinking tea in the cockpit with a visitor. Mom introduced him as Gunter, from the German yacht *Ghost*, which was anchored alongside *Vingila*. He was wearing a Speedo with a string vest and his bony feet were thrust into a pair of ugly German health sandals. Folds of shrivelled turkey skin hung from his neck, and his eyes were small and suspicious. They fixed on my ulcer-dotted legs.

'This is the problem with the atolls,' he said, 'everybody is eating too much coconut. It's too high in cholesterol, and you get tropical ulcers.'

'I thought they were sand-fly bites,' Mom said.

'No. It's the cholesterol.'

When my mother asked me about school and I told her about the *le-le*, Gunter said that it was common in Polynesia for boys to be raised as girls, particularly if there weren't enough women in the family.

'Yes,' said Mom, 'I heard something like that in Tahiti too. I know certain yachties had trouble in the bars there with lady-boys.'

'What sort of trouble?' I asked. 'And what's a lady-boy?'

Mom was vague. 'Oh, just thinking they were girls and getting confused,' she answered, before adding, 'you have to watch out, you know, they can be very beautiful.'

But the boy with the ulcer on his leg wasn't beautiful, he had muscles and broad shoulders and a flat, fleshy nose and he didn't look as if he much liked being a *le-le*.

After a while Gunter stood up to leave. He wagged a finger at me. 'Stay away from those coconuts,' he said, before rowing back to his own boat.

Sitting on the cabin top eating my lunch, I spotted Tepou's house by the size and whiteness of its crushed coral yard. The building, surrounded by an airy veranda, was perched on stilts and the hibiscus bordered garden extended to the lagoon where a couple of small boats were bobbing beside a concrete jetty. I watched several other boats arrive. People converged on the jetty to unload great hessian sacks which they dragged into Tepou's yard.

'What's going on?' Mom said, staring at the shore. 'What are they up to?'

'Only one way to find out,' Robert said.

We woke Dad from his nap and piled into the dinghy. Pepe immediately took his usual position at the prow, with his tail up, mouth slightly open and the wind blowing back his ears as Robert rowed. Once ashore, we made fast beside the other boats. Tepou's family and most of the village were sitting on pandanus mats in the shade of the hibiscus bushes, around the sacks which we now saw were filled with oysters.

Tepou's father waved a short knife at us in what I supposed was a welcoming manner. 'Join in,' he said. 'Help us open. We're looking for pearls, but you can eat too, if you want. As much as you like. Tastes real good with coconut and a bottle of beer.'

For the next hour we opened shellfish. I found a two knobby pearls the size of rice grains and after a while, worked up enough courage to nibble at an oyster. It had the consistency and flavour of the inside of my cheeks when I bit them accidentally. My parents were eating heaps of the things, and even Robert was scoffing a few. I tossed the rest of my oyster on the discard pile.

'Why don't you come diving for pearls with us tomorrow morning?' Tepou's Dad said.

Mom sucked an oyster from its shell and swallowed. She looked at my father, who nodded. 'We'd love to, thanks,' she said.

'Isn't pearl diving dangerous?' I asked Tepou. 'I thought pearl divers need to dive so deep that they tie heavy stones around their legs. Don't you need to be able hold your breath forever?'

Tepou shook her head. 'My aunties do it all the time and they can hardly swim.'

'Do people ever die?'

'No.' She thought a moment. 'Well, maybe if you went on a Sunday and a shark ate you...'

The next day we discovered that pearl diving on Penryhn was as easy as Tepou had said. In the calm of the lagoon, oysters grew on coral heads in water so shallow that fully clothed women stood waist deep and scooped them into baskets by the handful. Wearing suitably modest clothing, Mom donned her mask and snorkel and plunged in alongside a bevy of Tepou's female relatives. Setting her basket within arms reach on the coral, she be-

gan loading bivalves. When a bronze-backed shark sidled up to see what she was doing, she screamed into her snorkel, making Tepou's mother and aunts laugh.

'It's okay,' said a fat aunt, gathering her floating skirt and wringing it out. 'You're safe. Nothing to worry about. He won't do anything to you.'

Tepou's father oversaw the operation from his boat. He collected the full baskets which he stacked in the bow.

'Oysters are woman's work,' he said to my father, 'come fishing with us tomorrow. We'll fetch you in the morning.'

When Dad got back from his fishing expedition the next day, his hair stood in wild peaks and his glasses were smeared with salt. As he climbed aboard I caught the coppery whiff of fish blood. He carried a pair of coral trout tied through the gills with twine which he tossed on the deck.

Mom looked up from a handrail she was varnishing. 'So, how was it?'

'Never seen anything like it,' he said.

He told us they had gone through the pass – the same one we had surfed through – in an open boat.

'Waves breaking right over us, I thought we were gonna die.'

They'd anchored on the outside reef and prayed. Then a man, quite an old guy, Dad said, had stripped off, put on a mask and taken a mouthful of coconut. The men handed him their baited hooks and he dived down. The water was so clear, my father told us, that if he leaned over the side of the boat he could see the old guy at the bottom of the sea, spitting out chewed coconut and dangling hooks in the cloud of fishes that had gathered, choosing the ones he wanted to catch.

'He held his breath for four, maybe five minutes. Then he came up, gave me a nod and told me to pull my line in. And this was on the end of it.' Dad gestured at the bigger coral trout. It was a fine specimen.

The days slid by. I walked to school with Tepou, recited my times tables, played volley ball on the beach and walked home again at lunchtime. In the afternoons we usually found Tepou's mother in the shade of the garden, weaving a hat or working her fingers through the hair of a sleeping toddler. For lunch we helped ourselves to cabin bread – hard, white-flour crackers. They were kept in a big silver tin in the kitchen and we ate them with Vegemite and brick margarine or tinned butter. Sometimes we had a block of processed cheese from New Zealand. After lunch, we ran around the village playing with the other children until the fishermen and pearl boats chugged in and my parents came ashore to help open oysters.

One afternoon, Tepou asked my mother if I could sleep over at her house. It was a warm evening and, together with her parents, little brother and some other children, we spread our sleeping mats over the coral near the lagoon. Like the others, I used my *pareo* as a night dress and a sheet. A squall swept across the atoll in the early hours. We awoke to our *pareos* snapping in the gusts and fat raindrops splashing onto our faces. Tepou's mother, cradling the baby in her arms, herded everybody indoors where we fell into the great double bed. I snuggled against the others, listening to the palms thrashing in the wind and rain driving against the tin roof while Tepou's dad snored on the floor next to us. As I drifted off I felt a sudden anxious urge to check the anchor, before realising I didn't have to – I was sleeping in a house which was fixed rather firmly to the earth.

In the morning Mom and Dad came ashore with Robert. My mother said their night had been horrible; with the wind blowing across the lagoon, *Vingila* had been on a lee shore

and they'd stayed up checking the anchor and taking bearings every 30 minutes. Luckily the mooring had held, although they hadn't got much sleep.

Robert gave me a sheepish grin. He had a woollen hat pulled low over his forehead and I saw that overnight he had broken out in impetigo. Yellow scabs festooned his nose and chin. He said that his ear was sore. Gunter walked over carrying a jerry can. He stared at my brother's face.

'Not enough fresh vegetables,' he said, giving the word vegetables four syllables. Robert asked what kind of fresh vegetables he had in mind and where did he think we could find them, because he hadn't seen any for sale. I said that I didn't think fresh vegetables would be nearly as effective as antibiotic ointment because as far as I understood it, impetigo was a bacterial infection. The pharmacist in Tahiti had told me so. Gunter, pretending he hadn't heard us, turned and asked my father where we were headed next. He and Dad began talking about Suwarrow, an uninhabited island about 400 miles away.

Tepou's mother came outside with a rolled-up sleeping mat under one arm and a baby under the other. She gave the mat a shake and spread it over the coral. Sitting with the baby stretched belly-down across her lap, she told us that the premier of the Cook Islands would be visiting Penrhyn the following week. The people of Omoka were planning a celebration for him, which they wanted us to be part of. Later that day, she said, the men would be fetching very special oysters, from the best beds in the lagoon, and we were invited to join them when they collected pearls for the premier.

*

The sky was enamel blue and a light southeast wind was blowing across the lagoon the day the premier and his wife arrived in Omoka. In loose, cream-coloured suits and matching hats, they looked like African explorers on safari. She held a sun umbrella, and a crowd of children formed; reaching out to touch her dress and admire her shoes. Everybody pointed out how lovely and light-skinned she was.

The premier and his wife started their tour of the village at the school where Mr Dunn conducted while we sang songs and waved cut palm fronds in the air. All the children looked neat and were wearing bright, well ironed shirts. The *le-le* boy had a clean new bandage over his ulcer. After our dancing and singing, we followed the premier in a procession to the church where the elders prayed for him and the Cook Islands and the choir sang Polynesian hymns in high, shaky voices. Outside the church hall, a table was set with cakes and sweets and metal pots of tea. Mr Dunn told us the treats were for the adults but if we sat very quietly there might be something leftover for good children at the end. There wasn't. Once the food had been eaten, the speeches began and gifts were exchanged. Black-lipped oyster fans, hats and place mats woven from white coconut fibres, and carvings and bolts of fabric were heaped on the table in front of the premier. The climax of the gift-giving was the presentation of a glass bottle completely filled with pearls. The premier thanked everybody and said what a pleasure it was to visit Omoka. He talked about Penrhyn's importance in the Cook Islands, even though it wasn't very populous and lay so far to the north. He spoke about the pearl industry and the copra and how they hoped to repair the airstrip one day which would bring in tourists. After he had finished speaking almost every other adult in the village had a turn to talk too. There was a lot of religious speech and some people said that even if Penrhyn was far away and didn't have a big population like Raratonga, an airport

would be a big help. Also if the freighter came more often they wouldn't run out of supplies. The church elder I'd opened oysters with, spoke for the longest. While he spoke I crept closer to the presents, eyeing the bottle of pearls. I looked for the *poe pipi* which I had found, but couldn't see it. The church elder talked at length about the fishing industry and its importance not only to Penrhyn's economy but also to that of the Cook Islands and I found myself wishing that he would mention the premier's gifts, particularly the bottle of pearls. I imagined him saying that, buried among all the other pearls, was a particular pearl. An extra-ordinarily rare and completely perfect *poe-pipi* that was far better than any of the others. A pearl which had been found by the blonde girl on the visiting yacht, and put in the bottle when she could have kept it for herself. Of course I knew he wouldn't say anything like that at all.

Tepou gave me some pearls when we left. One of them was a *poe pipi*. Small and egg-shaped rather than spherical, its colours were as lovely as diesel floating on water.

Chapter 17

Suwarrow

When Robert and Dad went diving with Dave, Lily's husband, we took an afternoon walk along the beach, just us girls. The sand was as soft as baby powder, and the sky as iridescently pink as the slices of smoked fish I'd seen in the pages of Lily's *Bon Appetit* magazine. In the pass the water was dark blue, lightening over the shallows. Over on Gull Island, a cloud of frigate birds wheeled and soared, bullying the terns and tropic birds into giving up their food. A moebus strip of beach and sea stretched ahead. Pepe trotted with us, sniffing at seaweed and piles of beach debris. Mom reached for a cowrie lying on the tide line and passed it to me.

'Have you ever felt depressed?' Lily asked Mom.

'Not really. Actually never. Why do you ask?'

I threw the cowrie into the sea, trying to make it skip. My mother looked at me with surprise.

'*Arabica*,' I said, 'beach worn.'

'Never felt low?' Lily asked.

'No.'

I knew my mother was telling the truth. Sometimes Dad made her miserable – but not for long – and of course she got irritable with Robert and me and was scared in bad anchorages and storms, and panicked in ship wrecks, but she was never depressed.

'I've been feeling a bit down lately,' Lily said.

'Whatever for?' Mom asked. 'It's so beautiful here, just look around.'

Lily gave a twitchy sort of half-smile and bit her lip. She had long bleached hair and rather red skin with prominent pores over her nose and cheeks. Her cleavage was soft and full and her arms wobbled a little when she walked. She was about the same age as Mom, late thirties early forties perhaps, and she sailed on *Liberty*; a trim little boat with Dave, her New Zealander husband. They owned an imposing music system, the entire set of Encyclopedia Britannica and several shelves of gourmet food magazines filled with interesting recipes. They had pale blue canvas covers on the cushions in their saloon and, unlike our boat, everything looked clean and pretty.

We walked in silence except for the squeak of coral sand under our feet. I wanted to say something about how I could see that lovely surroundings could make feeling sad worse because they didn't give you any excuses. You couldn't say: 'If only I wasn't in this horrible city, if only it wasn't cold and rainy, I know I'd feel better.' Lovely surroundings had a tendency to mock and belittle your misery and made feeling sad worse. It was like having a voice in your head saying admit it, if you can't be happy here, you're never going to be happy, are you. I was thinking this as we walked, but I didn't say anything because I couldn't talk to an adult like that, and anyway the words wouldn't have come out right.

When we reached the end of the beach Lily said, 'Do you know that Robert Louis Stevenson's wife Fanny thought Suvarrow was the most romantic island in the world?'

*

When we sailed from Penrhyn, an old man called Coaa offered to pilot us through the pass. Tepou's father led the way in his boat with a few other men. With his hands on *Vingila's* helm, Coaa squinted at the breakers curling across the passage and told us not to be afraid.

Over 35 years he had delivered far bigger boats than ours in and out of the lagoon. It had been his work before he retired. He usually charged for his services but, because we were friends, he was helping us for free. If we ever came back to Penrhyn, he said, we just had to call him on the VHF radio and he would come out in the skiff to guide us in again. Once *Vingila* reached open water, Tepou's father pulled his boat alongside and Coaa jumped in. They bowed their heads in a prayer for our safety, and then waved us goodbye. We switched off the motor, trimmed our sails and set Baruch on course.

After six days of unpredictable winds interspersed with frequent rain squalls, we reached Suwarrow, the most westerly of the Cook Islands. It was yet another low-lying atoll with a central lagoon and making landfall in poor visibility and heavy rain was almost impossible. Dad sent Robert to the bow, where he sat in a dripping oilskin, listening for the sound of breakers, although he failed to hear the surf above the noise of falling rain. We saw the reef when it was only a stone's throw from the boat and fortunately we were ready to come about or *Vingila* would have joined the wreck we saw minutes later sitting high on the coral. After some searching, we found the entrance to the lagoon. Piyades Pass was a wider and easier passage than that of Penrhyn. Unfortunately, it led into a far more dangerous lagoon: a booby trap of poorly charted coral heads and random reefs rising unexpectedly from deep water to nearly break the surface. Dad ordered Robert – still in a dripping oilskin – up to the spreaders to look sharp and shout directions. The squall blew over and the sun emerged. Its glare reflected from the sea, blinding us and obscuring the subtle colour variations which gave us clues to the depth of the water.

'Can I come down? I'm getting hot in this raincoat,' Robert said from the spreaders.

'Too bad *boetie*,' Dad said, 'you're not going anywhere until I say so.'

Vingila inched forward with her main sail luffing to spill the wind. We wanted to go as slowly as possible. Colliding at speed with a coral head could have sunk us, (or at least caused considerable damage to the hull), and making repairs on Suwarrow would be almost impossible. Edging past the scattered reefs we made our way across the lagoon. The anchorage lay to the right of the entrance, tucked up against a small island where palm trees leaned attentively over a white beach and cast their shadows into the crystal water. *Ghost*, Gunter's red steel sloop tugged on her chain beside *Liberty*, Dave and Lily's ketch. Apart from them we had the lagoon and the isles of Suwarrow to ourselves. Robert and I lowered the dinghy and went to explore Anchorage Island. Inshore, a short walk from the beach, we found the remains of a derelict house. A few broken chairs surrounded an open-air fireplace of coral blocks. The rusted water tank was full of rainwater, and its tap still worked. We wedged open the warped door to the house and a stream of big, black rats ran out and scampered over our feet before disappearing into the palms.

*

Lily didn't mention being sad again. She certainly didn't act depressed. She cooked elaborate meals and invited us for dinner. We had frequent fish barbecues on the beach. And she organised the coconut-crab hunt and the gull-egg collecting expedition. Catching coconut crabs proved more difficult than we expected. For a start, none of us had seen a live coconut crab before, although we had heard a lot about them. We knew that they were very big and weighed up to six kilograms, and that they had an arm span of five feet which was tipped at each end with pincers strong enough to snap steel bars.

Lynnath had told me that they started out life as hermit crabs in the sea and then came ashore and outgrew their borrowed shells. Soon after taking to land they lost the ability to

live in water and became prone to accidental drowning. (For females, returning to the sea to lay eggs was a hazardous business which often resulted in death.) Adolescents sometimes carried broken coconuts to protect their soft under parts, but adults were far too big for that. Grown crabs went naked and the plates on their bellies thickened and grew hard. Islanders called them Robber Crabs because of their habit of breaking in to dustbins and houses. They were hunters and scavengers and were rumoured to ransack graves. During the day they dozed in burrows, emerging at dusk to hack into coconuts for the meat. Apparently they were strong enough to carry a nut up a palm and drop it repeatedly until it shattered. Once they got a grip, (on a finger for example), they didn't let go unless they were gently tickled in just the right spot on the underside of their segmented abdomen. Which would be a difficult task to perform – I imagined – while having one's digit crushed and dancing away from the other snapping claw. We had heard that their flesh was richer and sweeter than the finest lobster, which did much to explain their rarity on some populated islands and their extinction on others. What we hadn't heard, however, was how difficult they were to catch and keep captive.

The evening of the crab hunt we crossed the lagoon in Dave's Zodiac. After about an hour of high speed motoring, we reached an outlying islet where we beached the dinghy on a strip of sand beside a thicket of shaggy palms. A rustle in the undergrowth was followed by the sound of something heavy falling.

'Shh!' said Dave, 'what's that? A crab or a coconut?'

'Don't know, but it sounded pretty big,' Robert said. He scooped up his machete, a pair of diving gloves and a coil of line.

'Come on,' he said, 'let's go, can't you hear them, they're everywhere.'

Then I saw one moving over the ground. It stood knee-high, with a great scabby back, segmented legs and a strange, triangular little head, with beady eyes on close-set stalks. It waved a pair of insectile feelers. When my brother approached the creature, it turned and fled, with him following after it.

‘I’m not going,’ I said. ‘It’s getting dark and I don’t have proper shoes. I’m scared I’ll stand on one. I think I’ll just wait in the dinghy.’

‘What makes you think you’ll be safe in the dinghy?’ Dave said. ‘Sitting here alone in the dark, they’ll sniff you out and find you.’

‘Why do we have to do this at night anyway?’

‘You know why, stupid,’ Robert called from the gloom of the palms, ‘because they’re nocturnal.’ He said nocturnal as if it were three separate words.

‘I knew I should have stayed behind on *Vingila*,’ I said.

‘Too late for that now,’ Dad replied, getting out of the dinghy.

For the next five hours I kept as close to my father’s heels as I could, doing my best to avoid making contact of any sort with a crab. Actually, making contact wasn’t that easy. Robert, Dave and my father were making active efforts and it wasn’t working. The crustaceans were faster than they looked, and sneakier. We chased them with sticks and threw chunks of coral at them. We tried to lure them into buckets using open coconuts as bait. We attempted to herd them into an empty tin drum we found rusting on the beach. Our efforts were not successful. The animals were skittish but curious; they seemed drawn to us. They swarmed around on their clicking legs, always keeping frustratingly out of reach.

‘Maybe one of us should lie down and pretend to be dead,’ Dave said, ‘that’ll bring them over. Any volunteers? Nicky perhaps?’

Robert, who had been reading a lot of Westerns, came up with the idea of using a lasso. Surprisingly, it worked. The lassos didn't so much catch the crabs as tangle their legs and slow them down. Actually capturing them entailed buckets and oars and sticks and plenty of hopping about and swearing. Once we had three of the coconut crabs in buckets, we loaded them into the the dinghy and returned to Anchorage Island. It was past midnight when we got back to the campsite and nobody felt much like eating, particularly not coconut crab. We discovered then that they weren't easy to keep captive.

Beads of sweat shone on Dave's face and a maniacal gleam had entered his eyes. His stringy grey hair stood in salty spikes.

'You hold him,' he said to Robert, 'and I'll try to tie him up.'

While the other two crabs scratched and threw themselves against the inside of a pair of overturned buckets which Mom and Lily were using as seats, Robert got an oar on the creature's back and Dave once again eased a line around its claws and legs.

'I've done this plenty of times with lobsters in Canada,' Dave grunted, 'and it worked there.'

After the knots had been tied – as tightly as possible and with considerable difficulty – the crab wriggled free as effortlessly as Houdini from a coffin. I thought Dave was about to cry.

'Maybe we should just cook them now and eat them cold tomorrow?' Mom said.

Her bucket lurched, nearly tipping her off. She gave it a kick.

'Stop that!' she said to its occupant. (Who unfortunately couldn't understand English.) My mother looked tired and unenthusiastic. She muttered something under her breath about how she preferred a nice piece of fish and when it came to eating strange creatures, she

could take them or leave them. Lily, however, inspired by her food magazines, had ambitious plans for supper the following night.

‘I’m worried they might go off if we cook them now,’ she said, ‘and they say you should starve them overnight in case they’ve been eating poisonous plants.’

‘Anyway,’ she added, ‘even if we had a fridge, they’d be far too big to fit in it.’

‘So are you planning to sit on that bucket all night?’ Dave said. ‘Because I’m not tying up this fellow again. I’m sick of it and I want to go to bed.’

In the end, we put two crabs in an empty drum with a sheet of plywood to separate them and prevent fighting and the third – and largest – crab in Tom Neale’s old bathtub in the house, with a rock and a piece of corrugated sheet iron on top of the tub to stop it escaping.

Somehow, the great Polynesian migration that swept across the Pacific, from Hawaii to Tahiti, the Cook Islands and on to New Zealand, missed this atoll, and so it had never known Polynesian habitation. In 1814, when the Russian explorer Mikhail Lazarev discovered the isle and named it after his ship, the place was deserted. Although, over the years Suvarrow became home to more than a few castaways and a couple of recluses. Tom Neale was the last of them, and the most tenacious. He was responsible for most of the crumbling structures on Anchorage Island. For a period of thirty years on and off until just before his death, he’d lived on Suvarrow, wandering around in a suntan and skimpy loincloth, spear-fishing and enjoying being by himself. (Except when he put his back out.) He wrote a book about the experience called *An Island to Oneself* which Lily had lent me to read. It was all about finding the right island on a limited budget, stocking up, arranging transport to the place and how wonderful it felt when he was finally left alone and took his shorts off.

As we walked back to the beach and the dinghies, away from the ruin of Tom Neal's old house, we could hear the crab in the bath banging away at its tin roof.

'Tomorrow night,' said Lily, 'we'll make heart-of-palm salad to eat with our crab.'

In the morning the crab in the bath was gone, having dislodged the rock holding down the corrugated iron sheet.

Robert gave a low whistle – something he had been doing frequently since he'd started reading so many cowboy books. He even talked like a cowboy at times.

'Well lookit that,' he said, 'the bastid got hisself free.'

'Will it be alright on the island by itself?' I said. 'What if the rats get it?'

'Jeez, Nicky,' Robert said, 'It's a coconut crab, it probably eats rats. Can you believe it lifted that rock? And the steel sheet? I could hardly do that.'

'I read the buggers can carry up to 24 kilograms,' Dave said, coming up behind us and scratching the stubble on his chin. He looked tired. None of us had slept much the previous night. We'd been up until three in the morning and had woken a few hours later to the tropical sun blazing down the hatches. After breakfast Robert and I rowed ashore, curious to see how the crabs were doing. Once we'd discovered that the crab in the bath was missing, we checked the two in the drum. They'd pushed aside the barrier separating them and the smaller one was missing a couple of legs.

'Strong little bastids, ain't they?' Robert said. He was still excited about the hunt the night before and the thrill of having used a lasso. We leaned over the wall of the drum. The crabs looked up at us, rubbing their hairy legs together and twitching their antennae like a pair of cockroaches.

'Jeez, they're ugly,' I said. 'See how they're looking at us? I don't like it. And why are they waving their feelers like that? Maybe I'll just eat salad tonight.'

'Probably smelling us out,' Dave said, 'by waving their feelers around. Or cleaning themselves.'

He yawned. 'I need another cup of coffee,' he said and wandered off in the direction of the beach.

Robert stretched over and tried – unsuccessfully – to flip the biggest crab on its back with the blade of his machete.

'Let's go,' I said. 'They give me the creeps and anyway, Lily asked us to chop down a palm tree.'

*

On atolls fresh vegetables were always scarce. In Penrhyn, the shopkeeper at the local store had been waiting three months for the freighter and his shelves were empty except for cans of cabin bread and a few boiled sweets turned milky-soft in the humidity. Vegetables had been sold out for months, he said. Some of the villagers grew bananas, but the mango season was over and the trees were bare and so, like the islanders around us, we lived on fish, breadfruit, and rice. Breadfruit tasted very much as its name suggested – starchy, and bland. We ate it boiled, before it ripened into a tangled mass of slippery, choking fibres. Although we ate breadfruit regularly, I hadn't learned to love it. To vary our diet, Mom sometimes opened a tin of peas or mixed vegetables, and occasionally we found a ripe pawpaw. Our biggest treat, though, was heart of palm. It was delicious – snow white, tender and crunchy. Lily said it tasted better than fresh asparagus, which was something I'd never heard of. I only knew asparagus as pallid fingers that we hauled limp and dripping from a can. I

couldn't imagine anything better than a heart of palm. Unfortunately, a fair sized palm had to be felled to make the smallest salad. On inhabited atolls, where every last coconut was collected and sold for copra and each grown tree had a designated owner, for a yachtie to fell a palm was unthinkable. However, on Suvarrow coconuts fell to the ground and sprouted unchecked in wild profusion, resulting in hundreds of adolescent palms for the taking. For the crab feast, Robert and I felled two.

Later that night we sat around the fire in the campsite, watching the crabs boil in a drum. Getting them into it had not been easy. Tom Neal's house lay beyond the ring of light cast by the fire and our kerosene lamps. If I looked hard, I could make out a string of rats coming and going through the half-open front door. More rats rustled in the undergrowth behind us. Occasionally, one or two of the braver rats ventured forth to walk over our feet.

'I've heard,' said Robert, 'that the best part to eat is the belly.'

Light from the flames flickered across his face as he spoke. On a make-shift table to one side, Lily had spread a tablecloth and arranged a plate of palm salad, a pot of rice and two bowls of sauce, one pink, the other green. The sauce, she said, was for the crab. Dad had brought a hammer and a couple of pairs of pliers from his tool box.

'This isn't actually too bad,' Mom said after Dad had used the hammer to crack an oversized leg which he'd then dropped on her plate. She'd declined the sauce: 'No thanks, I prefer my food plain, nothing fancy for me.'

I excavated a gargantuan claw and ate its contents between bites of the palm salad which Lily had sprinkled with lime juice. The flaky crab meat was sweet and butter-rich. I tried both sauces. They were good; tart and a little spicy.

'What about that belly then?' Dave said to Robert, 'Are you game?'

‘Of course.’ My brother was about to turn 13 and the muscles on his shoulders and arms had undergone a recent growth spurt. He spent several hours in the water each day, spearing fish and he had developed a new, cocky attitude and with it an almost complete lack of fear for sharks. Soon, girls would begin finding him irresistible. He reached into the drum for a crab carcass and wrenched off the abdomen. It was bulbous and segmented, with stiff hairs sprouting out at uneven intervals. Its cavity brimmed with a curdled, khaki-coloured soup of sorts.

‘What about you?’ Robert said, holding the abdomen out to Dave like a goblet.

Dave swallowed and shook his head.

‘Not me,’ he said, ‘it looks like part of Shelob.’

‘What’s Shelob?’ my mother asked, wiping her chin and hands with a rag.

‘You know, that giant spider-thing in *Lord of The Rings*,’ I said. ‘The one Frodo stabs in the belly and all that stuff oozes out –’

She interrupted me. ‘Okay, okay I get the picture.’

‘Yuck. Are you really going to eat that?’ I said to my brother who didn’t reply. He just lifted the broken-off abdomen to his mouth, tilted back his head and took a few big swallows. When he’d finished drinking, he wiped a greenish smear from his upper lip and grinned at us.

‘How was it?’ asked Dave, with a mixture of disgust and respect on his face.

‘Not bad, at all’ said Robert, ‘actually quite nice.’

‘So what did it taste like?’ I asked.

Robert thought for a moment.

‘Mmm...’ he said, ‘a bit like salty, curried condensed milk.’

*

A few days after the coconut-crab feast, Lily organised a bird's egg hunt. If Lynnath had been with us, she'd have known that tiny Gull Island housed three percent of the world's red-tailed tropic birds, creatures as beautiful as they are rare. She would also have identified the different types of gulls and terns on the isle and described their nesting habits. She would certainly have given several reasons why we should leave the birds undisturbed to raise their young, but she was in South Africa, lecturing at the University of Port Elizabeth and we wanted eggs.

Well, Lily wanted eggs. I wasn't sure if I did. Eggs made me squeamish. Even back in Benoni I couldn't eat lightly cooked white without feeling ill and I hated the thought of them sliding out of a bird's bum. On the boat it was worse. Mom bought eggs in bulk and rubbed Vaseline over the shells to keep them fresh without refrigeration. We stored them for weeks, eating progressively older eggs – eggs with blood spots and broken yolks that stuck to the inside of the shell. The last few would always be rotten, their cloying, sulphurous smell permeating every part of the boat.

'Fresh eggs would be so nice,' Lily said. 'I'd love *huevos rancheros* and we could even bake a cake or something.'

Lily talked so much about eggs and how long it had been since we had eaten any, that when we went to Gull Island, in our greed, we filled two buckets. The birds wheeled and screamed and dive bombed our heads. Pepe went wild, barking and chasing the fluffy chicks and lifting his leg on the nests.

'Fantastic!' said Lily, hoisting her bucket into the dinghy, 'now for breakfast on *Liberty*. *Huevos rancheros* it is.'

Lily cooked rice and made a pot of spicy tomato sauce.

'Now,' she said, 'we fry the eggs.'

We discovered then that we hadn't been very successful at collecting fresh ones. Once we'd sorted through the rotten eggs, and those containing foetal chicks in various stages of development, we worked out that there were two sorts fit to eat. One type had a normal-looking yellow yolk although its white part, while setting firm with cooking, remained clear. The second, with a normal white, had a yolk the colour of fresh blood. Both kinds tasted of fish.

'Not bad,' said Dad, 'if you put enough of this hot sauce on them.'

After tasting a bite from my mother's plate, I decided to eat my *huevos rancheros* without eggs.

'I don't know what we're going to do with the rest of these,' Mom said after breakfast, stowing the bucket of eggs on a shelf in *Vingila's* fore-peak next to Robert's bunk.

That night a storm blew in. It arrived abruptly at three-thirty in the morning and took us completely by surprise. Gusts blasted across the expansive lagoon, quickly building up ranks of steep, choppy swell. Our boats swung on their lines, to face the wind. Anchorage Island lay abeam on the port side, and the reef directly off *Vingila's* stern. Before the storm woke me I'd been having troubled dreams in which I was trying to fry eggs which kept hatching into chicks that hopped and squawked in my pan. In the main saloon I found Mom, Dad and Robert. The motor was on. Above the engine noise and the whistling of the rigging, the clatter of the halyards and the rattle of hastily stowed objects about the boat, I could hear the dull boom of breakers on the reef.

‘We’ve got a problem,’ my father said. ‘For a start, we can’t leave. We’ll never get out the pass in the dark. In fact, it’s unlikely we’d even make it across the lagoon.’

Robert nodded, wet hair plastered to his forehead.

My father continued. ‘The reef’s behind us now, and if the anchor goes, that’s where we land up.’

Vingila gave a sudden lurch, jerking us off our feet.

‘If she keeps doing that, we’ll break the chain,’ Dad said.

‘Wind’s picking up – waves as well,’ Robert said.

He looked keen, up for the challenge. I wondered how he could feel that way. It was almost as if he were enjoying himself. I wished the storm would just go away and let me sleep, even if it meant another chick dream.

We had a plough anchor out on chain at the bow. It was a standard CQR with a hinged shaft, good for most bottoms except mud. As he usually did in coral anchorages, Dad had hooked a heavy nylon spring-line into the anchor chain and taken up the slack with it, creating an uneasy compromise. Coral cuts through nylon but chain lacks give. If our chain wrapped around a coral head and *Vingila* jerked her head back, as she was doing in the chop, the chain could snap. A nylon spring-line had stretch and give, and protected the chain from sudden, jerky movements. Our chain snapping could spell the end of *Vingila*.

‘What we’re going to do,’ my father said, ‘is motor slowly forward, keeping the bow into the wind to take some strain off the anchor.’

‘You, on the wheel,’ he said to my mother. ‘I’ll keep lookout at the bow and watch we don’t override. Robert, you come with me. Nicky, you relay messages between your Mom and me.’

He'd barely finished his sentence when we heard the shocking thwang of the spring-line snapping.

Outside it was as dark as the inside of a cow. Anchorage Island had disappeared in a fug of rain and we couldn't even make out the shapes of *Liberty* and *Ghost*. The wind ripped the breath from our mouths. Even with the motor running, our boat jerked and pulled with such force that our heaviest warps lacked enough give to absorb the shock. Over the next few hours, three spring-lines of braided nylon as thick as my wrist were broken. *Vingila* simply threw back her head and snapped them like string.

'Damn it! Keep her head into the wind!' Dad shouted.

'I'm trying!' Mom yelled into the rain and spray.

Vingila, heavy and unresponsive as usual, ignored subtle turns of the helm. When my mother, in desperation, turned to helm hard over, our lug of a boat veered wildly, forcing Mom to overcorrect in the opposite direction. We zigzagged back and forth, overriding our anchor, often on just the single chain because the spring had snapped. Pepe didn't like being below without Mom and tried repeatedly to climb the stairs, getting thrown off by *Vingila's* lurching, to fall clattering to the floor. After a while I helped him into the cockpit, where he sat at her feet, his damp hair blasted back from his face as if he were taking a car ride. At five-thirty the wind was still blowing. My father took the wheel and Mom made coffee. When the hot drinks were ready, we abandoned the helm and went inside for a brief pow-wow.

'If the chain gives,' Dad said, 'we're finished. It's impossible to hold steady in this sea. I can't see a damned thing to take a bearing and we can't go anywhere because of the coral

heads. If we go, we'll take *Ghost* with us. And if *Liberty* loses her anchor she'll take both of us.'

'Then it's onto the reef,' Mom said.

'What about another anchor?' Robert said. 'We've got the Danforth. Can we row it out in the dinghy, maybe?'

He was referring to our seldom used fluked anchor, a heavy old thing, best suited to mud bottoms.

Dad shook his head. 'A Danforth won't hold on a mixed bottom. You know that, and besides it's only got five metres of chain and then nylon. The coral will slice through it in a second. Anyway, who do you think you're fooling by imagining anyone could row in this?'

He drained his cup. 'Come on, outside again. Everybody.'

We had another hour of the squall before dawn broke and the wind stopped. It ceased abruptly, as if somebody turned it off. A pink sun rose from a silver sea. In the first light of morning, the clouds fled to the horizon, disappearing like vampires. The waves died.

Mom made another pot of coffee and set about heating left-over rice for breakfast.

'What's that pong?' Robert said.

An awful smell was drifting from the fore-peak. During *Vingila's* lurching, the bucket of gull eggs had been thrown from a shelf, to land upside down on the floor. Broken eggs – some rotten – seeped out, oozing towards the carpet. Pepe walking up to investigate, gave a sniff and recoiled. Breakfast was put on hold while we cleaned shell fragments and pools of slime from the floorboards.

'At least we don't have to worry about cooking them anymore,' Mom said.

'I want to leave this place,' Dad said from the stove, where he was stirring rice in a pan, 'we can't spend another night in this anchorage. We made it through by the skin of our teeth this morning.'

Mom looked up from the floor, damp rag in her hand, and nodded.

'Are you crazy?' Dave said later, when we rowed over for tea on *Liberty*.

'Leave today? Look what a lovely day it is, and besides, you haven't had any sleep.'

I looked around. It was lovely. The palms, washed clean by the rain, trembled and shone in the light breeze. Wavelets nibbled the shore. The sky and sea shone as brightly as ship's brass after a good polishing.

'Stay another day,' said Lily. 'We'll have a fish barbecue on the beach later, and tomorrow, after a good night's rest, you can leave.'

'Go on,' said Dave, 'don't leave on a low note. You might not get a chance to visit a place like this again.'

'I suppose you're right, a night's rest won't hurt,' Dad said.

Against our better judgement we stayed another day. At three-thirty the next morning I woke to *Vingila's* lurching and the sound of the engine starting up. I hoped at first it was a nightmare, my subconscious replaying the trauma of the previous night's storm. Unfortunately I wasn't dreaming. A second, equally intense, squall had struck. Outside, in the cockpit, I found my family.

'What the fuck are we doing here?' Dad said. 'We should have left yesterday.'

I performed a quick survey. Short, steep waves, blasting wind, Anchorage Island to port, and the reef with its booming breakers directly off our stern.

'Get ready with the spring lines,' Dad said 'we'll be needing a few, if last night was anything to go by.'

We took up our positions again: my mother at the helm, zigzagging and overriding the chain; Dad and Robert at the bow, replacing spring lines as they snapped; me mid-decks, relaying messages while Pepe cowered next to Mom. I cursed Dave and Lily for making us stay. If we were at sea we'd just reef the sails and heave-to, which was better than being trapped amid reefs. The wind pressed against my chest, squeezing the air out of me. Rain lashed my legs. It was strange how something could be so tedious and terrifying at the same time.

'How many hours has it been now?' I called to my mother.

'Two.'

'Which means,' I muttered to myself, 'that there's only an hour to go, if last night was anything to go by.'

Then our anchor worked its way past a coral head and lost hold.

'Frank!' Mom shouted, 'what's going on? The anchor's not working.'

No longer restrained, *Vingila* heeled over and began sliding downwind.

'Turn up the revs! Keep her facing the wind!' Dad's hair whipped into his face.

'I'm trying, I'm trying.' Mom gunned the motor and spun the wheel, with no visible result. Behind, a dark form came into view through the haze, taking shape as it rapidly grew closer. A yacht.

I ran to the stern for a better look.

'Over here,' I yelled, 'it's *Ghost*. She's at anchor.'

Ghost's heavy bow was slicing through the waves a chef chopping onions. Gunter, her skipper, was nowhere to be seen

'*Ghost's* gotta let out chain,' Dad panted behind me. '*Vingila* will only stop dragging if we let out more chain – the weight helps the anchor grip. But we need space. *Ghost* must let out chain too. Where the fuck's Gunter? If he doesn't get up here, we'll smash into him and drag him along with us.'

Mom revved the engine and tried to turn *Vingila* into the wind but it was no good. Our boat swept backwards. *Ghost* grew closer. We shouted for Gunter but nobody responded. How could he sleep through this, I wondered. Without Gunter's help there was nothing we could do. All 17 tons of *Vingila*, collided with *Ghost's* chopping prow. The crash of his boat hammering repeatedly into Baruch, brought Gunter outside pretty quickly. He looked confused.

'Let out chain!' Dad screamed at him. 'Now!'

Gunter fell to his knees and fumbled with the anchor locker while *Ghost*, having pretty much demolished Baruch, set about destroying our transom.

'Fend off,' ordered my father, a wild look in his eye.

I ran to the rail and reached out to fend off just as *Ghost's* bow struck into our stern again. Several tons of steel narrowly avoided crushing my hands. I stepped back. Maybe fending off wasn't such a good idea after all. Gunter loosened a catch on the anchor winch – finally! – and chain rattled from *Ghost's* locker. She faded back into a haze of murky rain.

'Okay,' said Dad, 'now we let out chain.'

Our anchor, weighed down with an additional 50 feet of chain, caught against the bottom and held. Dad and Robert set out another spring line.

At dawn somebody switched off the wind yet again. The sun peeped over the horizon, pink as a rose. The waves gave up and died, the clouds put themselves to bed.

'I hate this place,' I said, sucking a finger tip, bruised during my ineffectual attempt at fending off.

'At least this time we don't need to clean up rotten eggs,' said Mom.

We didn't leave that day. We were too tired and the thought of sailing without a wind vane was worse than risking another squall in Suwarrow. Dad brought out his tool box and set about fixing Baruch, and hammering the dent from our transom rail. When he'd finished helping my father, Robert went spearfishing with Dave and came back with a couple of grouper for supper.

'So you're staying another night are you? Dave asked. He had dark rings under his eyes and a pallor that showed through his tan. He looked as if he hadn't slept in days.

Dad nodded. 'Call us stupid, but yes, we're here for another night.'

'Anyway,' said Mom, 'what are the chances of it happening again?'

I went to bed that evening with a lump of anxiety in my chest and spite of my exhaustion I had trouble falling asleep. How could a place so pretty and calm during the day, turn so wild at night, I wondered. At last I dozed off. A few hours later I awoke to the hammering of my heart, which felt as if it was diverting blood from my hands and feet, directly into my eardrums. I lay for a moment, listening to the whoosh in my head and somewhere – far beyond that – to the sound of gentle waves lapping against the hull. A warm breeze wormed its way into my cabin through the open port holes, but the palms of my hands felt cold and damp. Climbing quietly through the hatch without waking my parents, I found the night sky thick with stars and blinking planets. They formed veils and vapour trails and shining

clumps like candy floss so bright I could have read by them. *Ghost, Liberty* and *Vingila* lay parallel on the still water, floating above their reflections, noses pointing toward the strip of land and its untidy palms. I sniffed the air for a storm. Nothing – except for Anchorage Island which was exhaling a warm, vegetable smell of humus and fermenting coconut. I searched the horizon for the smear of an impending squall and saw only clear sky. I sat awhile to enjoy the stillness and warmth but I couldn't relax. With my parents asleep, I felt guilty and worried, responsible for the fate of the boat in an anchorage that could turn on us at any time. To distract myself, I played a game in which I attempted to remember my old classmates in Benoni, but my memories were shadowy; their faces lacked details and I discovered that I couldn't recall a single name. I realised with a shock that they would be finishing primary school soon and would be preparing for high school. I tried to imagine what sort clothes they were wearing and what hairstyles they found fashionable and found it impossible so I thought instead about sailing to Samoa, our next stop. After that we were going to Tonga and then Fiji and New Caledonia. And at the end of the Pacific lay Australia, where Dad hoped to find work and Mom said we might even go to school for a while. Thinking about all those islands made me drowsy and I returned to my bunk and fell quickly into a dense, dreamless sleep.

*

Months later we heard the news. Or – as we hoped – the rumour. We were sitting in the yacht club in Suva where Robert and I were celebrating our 13th birthday and eating Chinese stir-fried noodles with Don and Muriel. Don had promised us jelly-tipped ice lollies for dessert. Christian from *Donella* was there too, with his wife and youngest daughter Anja who had joined him from South Africa. She was 15, tall, blonde and suntanned. She knew

how to disco dance and was teaching me some moves. I felt I was coming along quite nicely and could nearly spin my hands around themselves while doing simultaneous pelvic thrusts.

Anja said boys liked girls who could disco dance.

When Dad gave Mom the news, he spoke softly because he didn't want me to hear, but of course I did.

'You know the New Zealand boat that just arrived today, the one with the family?'

Mom nodded.

'I met the father ashore today and he told me they were in Raratonga a month or two after *Liberty*.'

'Yes,' said Mom.

'And that they heard a story that one afternoon Dave came back and found Lily dangling from the shrouds. She'd hanged herself.'

Mom's face sort of crumpled.

'Are you sure?' she whispered.

'No,' said Dad, 'it might just be a rumour.'

I thought back to the day on the beach when Lily told Mom she was depressed and how I wanted to say something and didn't. I remembered the coconut crab feast and the gull egg expedition and I thought about how neat and pretty *Liberty* was, with her pale cushions and the tidy shelves of Lily's gourmet food magazines. I wondered if Dave had had anything to do with it, or if saying something to her the day on the beach might have helped. I couldn't imagine Lily dead. I decided it was best to hope that the news was a rumour, distorted along its passage like a game of Chinese Whispers, and that Lily and Dave were healthy, well and living on their boat together in New Zealand, eating *hevvos rancheros*.

Chapter 18

Samoa

From our anchorage in the centre of the harbour in Pago Pago, American Samoa, I couldn't make out what the man with the loud hailer was shouting. People on the streets stopped to listen to him. He stood on the back of a truck, leaning his elbows on the cab roof for balance. His voice emerged ardent and distorted from the cone, ricocheting off the buildings and bouncing off the hills. I assumed he was campaigning, or announcing a rally and decided to ignore him, turning my attention back to an English exercise Mom had said I needed to finish before I could play with Barbara. After our split in Morea we were friends again. The boys though, were now our enemies. They had decided that they hated us as much as we disliked them and we avoided any contact except for the occasional exchange of vicious insults. Most afternoons Barbara and I visited a nearby shop that sold cheap jewellery and browsed through their wares. Then we wandered about hoping to see Shaun, a good-looking older boy who never paid us any attention. After exhausting the attractions of Pago Pago, a muddy town with lots of traffic, we usually landed up on *Barnacle Bill* where we read, talked about boys and prayed for further development of our still flat chests.

I turned to my English exercise: 'Read the following passage, underlining the adverbs in red and the pronouns in blue before rewriting the text using the pluperfect tense.'

I wasn't sure what the pluperfect tense was. I asked my mother who told me to 'look it up somewhere'. While I was searching for a red pen we were interrupted by a knock on the hull. Outside, in their dinghy, we found Don and Muriel Border, an American couple who

sailed *Aries*, a chunky, full-keeled sloop. Muriel was short and trim, with big teeth. Her friends called her Beaver. Don was tall and narrow shouldered with wide hips and an unusually large bum which was almost always encased in a pair of khaki shorts. He had kind, crinkly eyes, a spade shaped beard and brown hair which shone red in the sun. Although I would never have admitted it publicly, Don was my saviour and hero. He was the man who had rescued me the night *Vingila* tried to brain herself on the beach in Tahiti. Over the days following that event, it became clear to me that not only was Don a kind and brave man, he was a tactful one too. After an initial attempt at light-hearted jesting about the rescue, he quickly sensed both Dad's anger and my embarrassment. After all, I was 12 and had wrapped my arms around a total stranger's neck and snivelled into his shirt, behaving – as Dad had pointed out more than once – like a total coward. Picking up on the tension in our family, Don never mentioned the incident again, and took to pretending that we'd met under perfectly ordinary circumstances. Of course, you can't be dragged to safety through churning seas without feeling something for the person who has risked his life, however minimally, to save yours. So I found it impossible not to have warm feelings for Don. Because she was my friend, Barbara shared my warm feelings for Don. A few days after the Tahiti beach event, once *Vingila* had been restored to her moorings, Barbara and I found a stray kitten cowering beneath a bush beside the main road, which we presented to Don as an expression of our gratitude. Don and Muriel were childless and they lavished the pot-bellied creature with attention. They named her Jib and she quickly grew into a large, ill-tempered and vicious cat.

'Have you heard the news?' Don said. He stood in the centre of their dinghy, one hand holding a dripping oar. Several bags lay heaped in the prow and Muriel crouched in the

stern with a cat basket on her lap. Through the zippered mesh panel I caught a glimpse of Jib's evil yellow eyes. Were they taking her to the vet, I wondered? Jib, possibly as a result of her traumatic early days under a bush, normally refused to leave *Aries*. Whenever she encountered dry land she 'freaked out', as Muriel described it.

'What news?' Dad asked.

'There's going to be a tsunami,' Don said.

'A what?' my father asked.

I half hoped Don would tell us it was a traditional Samoan festival with free food.

'A tidal wave,' said Don. 'The man with the loud hailer's warning people. There's been an earthquake near Japan, six point two on the Richter Scale and they're predicting a tsunami.'

'Oh,' said Dad, not looking too impressed.

'They're advising everyone to leave their boats and the low-lying houses and shops. They want us to move to higher ground. Didn't you hear?'

'I didn't' said Dad.

'What's going to happen, Frank?' Mom said.

Dad shrugged. He surveyed the harbour.

'I dunno,' he said, 'looks pretty flat to me.'

'Anyway,' he added, 'I'm not leaving the boat for any tidal wave.'

Don's eyes widened, 'What?'

'I'm not a deserter. If my boat goes down, I go with her.'

'I don't know about that,' Don said. 'I've seen a tsunami once before, in Alaska. I'll never forget it. An oil tanker was on the wave, broken in half, with all the oil spilling out.'

Then it caught alight – the oil I mean – and the wave was burning – burning and carrying these two broken halves of oil tanker churning around in the white water like a pair of corks.

There's nothing you can do against something like that.'

'Besides,' Muriel said, 'when it comes to tidal waves, this harbour's particularly bad.'

'I thought it was a good harbour,' Mom said.

The place was like a fortress, completely surrounded by high mountains and accessible by a single, long, narrow entrance. It was one of the best harbours in the South Pacific, a perfect hurricane hole.

Muriel glanced at Don, who nodded encouragingly for her to go on.

'It's good for wind,' Muriel explained, 'but there's only the one narrow entrance for all this water to get in and out. That'll cause big problems.'

'First the water sucks out,' said Don. 'This whole bay for example. Sucked dry.'

I pictured the boats on their sides, a few fish flapping on the stinking mud.

'And then?' I said. Even Robert was listening. We were all there in a line, hanging over the side looking at Don.

'And then the wave comes in,' he said. 'A wall of white water carrying – I don't know what – yachts, bodies, wrecked infrastructure, broken oil tankers, burning oil.'

I looked around the harbour of Pago Pago again; placid greyish-brown water, surrounding mountains, a group of yachts in various stages of repair, all tugging gently at their anchors. I tried to imagine the scene Don described, first when the water drained out, and then when it came back and wrecked everything.

'When did they say the tsunami was coming?' I asked.

'Don't really know. Could be an hour, could be more.'

'Let's go then,' I said.

'I'm not going anywhere,' Dad said. 'If I need to fight for my boat, I will.'

Around us, people were throwing bags into dinghies and rowing to shore. Mom looked at Dad and opened her mouth to speak. I thought she was going to ask him if he'd lost his mind and turned stark raving mad but instead she said, 'Okay, then I'm staying with you.'

Don and Muriel swapped looks of disbelief.

'If you want to survive a tsunami,' Don said, 'you must get as far out to sea as you can, way past the entrance passage, that's the most dangerous place to be. I don't know if you've got enough time for that.'

'Then we'll sit it out right here,' Dad said.

'I'm not staying,' I said.

Dad turned to Robert, 'What about you? I suppose you're turning tail and running away too?'

My brother looked torn, but only for a moment. Perhaps he was remembering Tahiti, and our reception back onboard after *Vingila's* beaching.

'If you need my help, I'll stay,' he said.

'Good boy,' said my father.

'I'll just grab some stuff,' I said to Don and Muriel, 'can you wait for me?'

'Sure, get your things.'

I fetched my most important possessions; a tiny crochet bag into which I stowed a few pairs of earrings I'd bought with my pocket money. I didn't pack a passport – I didn't have one. Robert and I travelled on Mom's because Dad said it was cheaper that way, and I didn't pack any money – I'd spent it all on earrings – or any clothes. Mom stayed on deck with

Dad so I had nobody to supervise my preparations for orphanhood or make any suggestions regarding the practicality of my choices.

‘Is that all you’re taking?’ Don said when I came outside, swinging my little bag.

I nodded. If I was going to lose my home and family, at least I’d have a decent selection of earrings.

My mother appeared to be having second thoughts. She turned to Dad, with something beseeching about her posture, and it seemed that she was about to open her mouth, but my father stopped her with a cold stare. She sighed and looked back at me again.

‘Nicky,’ she asked, ‘will you take Pepe?’

‘Okay, if I have to.’

‘Thanks,’ Mom said. ‘I wouldn’t like him to die.’

From a suitably high spot on a hill Don, Muriel, Jib, Pepe and I sat in the shade of a tree and watched the harbour. We had a good view of *Vingila* and my family who were about to be drowned when the tidal wave surged into the bay. Pepe panted and Jib was mostly silent but every now and then she’d hiss or make low, rumbling growls. While we waited for the tsunami, Don and I talked about Robert Louis Stevenson and how when *Vingila* and *Aries* got to Western Samoa we would visit his house and grave together in Apia. Don asked me if I liked Pago Pago and I said yes, I did a bit. But I didn’t like that there was so much traffic and that the water in the bay was dirty and that we had to eat frozen turkey legs and lamb flap because it was the cheapest and Dad boiled the lamb flap in water with too much salt until all the grease ran out and formed a thick layer on the top. That made me sick I said. But I liked the shop that sold earrings and having Barbara as my friend again. And it was fun when the Taiwanese fishing boat got wrecked on the rocks at

the entrance and Dad and Robert went out along with a bunch of Samoans to dive for stuff. They came back with jerry cans full of soya sauce and tins of miniature boiled eggs and strange mushrooms which Mom said she wasn't sure were edible. I told Don that they also brought enough poly-filament fishing line to last us forever.

He asked me how I found the Samoans. Big, I said, and with those amazing tattoos. I told him how one Samoan swimming at the wreck had been wearing only a *pareo* – which in Samoa were called *lava-lavas* – and when he dived down we had got to see his whole tattoo which was like a swirly pair of pants reaching from his waist to his knees. Don said that was interesting to hear, he'd only seen the bits of tattoo sticking out above the *lava-lavas* and had no idea that they covered everything to the knees. It must be pretty sore, he said, to get a tattoo like that. It was, I agreed, but I'd heard Dad saying how it was a test of manhood and that the most beautiful girls in the village held the young men down when they were tattooed because that way they'd be too ashamed to struggle or cry. And then we talked about the fourth of July celebrations and how it had rained and the Samoan dancers had had to sit on the wet field as part of their dance, which had made their pretty yellow *lava-lavas* all muddy. But we didn't speak about the party at the barge afterwards with the other yachties and the Danish woman in a dress and no panties who got drunk and sat with her legs apart. And we didn't talk about how quite a few men, including Don, had gathered around her and found everything she was saying very interesting. We didn't say anything about that. After a while we stopped talking and sat in the shade just watching the harbour and I thought about where I would go if Mom, Dad and Robert all died and who would look after Pepe and if perhaps Don and Muriel would adopt me, seeing as they didn't have any children of their own, and if that meant I would become American. Then I got to wondering about Muriel's

teeth which were big and a strange pinkish colour with a black line at the gum which didn't look natural at all.

At about four o'clock that afternoon the man with the megaphone came around on the truck again, announcing that the tsunami had passed. I couldn't understand how we'd missed it, but later when we met some yachties, they told us that the water level had risen and dropped again ever so slightly. That was all. Which was a good thing, Don said.

When Dad heard me climbing onto *Vingila*, he stuck his head out the hatch to look me straight in the eye. I checked his hands for the Whistler but didn't see it.

'So,' he said, 'the rat's come back, has it?'

I took a chance. 'Better a live rat than a drowned one,' I said.

Although he tried to hide it, I saw the beginning of a smile at the corner of his mouth and his eyes crinkled slightly.

While he was talking to Don, I went to my cabin to change earrings. I brushed my hair and looked at my reflection in the square of mirror stuck to the bulkhead, turning my head this way and that to view myself from different angles. I wondered if Mom would let me go ashore again because I wanted to see Barbara and find out what she had done all afternoon while waiting for the tsunami.

Part 5

Coral Sea

Chapter 19

Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands

In 1983 we sailed from the east coast of Australia to Noumea, the capital of New Caledonia. For more than two years we'd lived on the river beside the Brisbane Botanical Gardens, with *Vingila* tied to pilings and Pepe forbidden to go ashore because of quarantine regulations. Dad found a job as a mechanic at a marine engineering company and Mom worked in pubs as a tea-lady and cleaner. After six months of us hanging about shoplifting, my mother enrolled Robert and me in school where my brother joined the rowing team and I took up 'cello, and then gave it up to become a punk rocker instead. When the Australian authorities refused to renew our visitor's visas for the fourth time, we were forced to leave. We planned to sail through the archipelago of Vanuatu to the Solomon Islands, before finding a safe place for the hurricane season.

In Noumea, the Kanuks were rioting against the French and had looted shops and defaced the town's statues. We sailed south to Îles des Pins and through the Réserve Yves Merlet to the Loyalty Islands of Maré, Lifou and Ouvéa. Then we turned north toward a group of islands which had once been known as the New Hebrides, but since their independence from both France and Britain, had taken the name of Ripablik blong Vanuatu. Or Vanuatu for short.

In the capital Port Vila, on Efate island, we met Vincent in a supermarket. Our French friend from Brazil and the Caribbean was eyeing a counter of cheeses. With a plaited leather thong around a tattooed bicep, and new gaps in his teeth, he looked as wild-haired as ever.

We were surprised because we hadn't noticed *Dou-Dou Diop* in the harbour, and told him so.

'Ah, now we are on *Andromeda*, our second boat since *Dou-dou Diop*,' he said.

Nadine and he had left *Dou-dou Diop* in the Caribbean, because they wanted a boat of their own. In exchange for keeping *Dou-Dou Diop*, Roland and Jean-Pierre had helped find them another yacht. Well – steal another yacht actually – because they didn't have the money to buy one. They discovered the perfect sloop in Venezuela, where customs officials had impounded the vessel after its original owner, a American single handed sailor, was run over and killed by a passing car. After stealing the sloop, which they painted green and rechristened the *Rio Grande*, Vincent and Nadine sailed through the Panama Canal to the Pacific Ocean. Old mariners would have told them it's very bad luck to change a ship's name or paint her green. Although to be fair, it wasn't as if Vincent had a choice about the name.

Less than a year later the *Rio Grande* was wrecked.

'She was a very, very good boat,' Vincent said, his hand caressing a wheel of wax-covered cheese, 'the right size and so fast and obedient.'

The *Rio Grande* was lost on Suwarrow, together with four other yachts. When the night-squall ripped across the lagoon, conditions in the anchorage deteriorated so quickly, that Vincent knew they would lose the boat. He urged Nadine, who was seven months pregnant, to put on her mask and snorkel and prepare to swim through the dark, sharky water to Anchorage Island. They stayed aboard until their anchor chain snapped and the wind began driving the *Rio Grande* towards the reef. Then they jumped off. There was nothing else he could have done, he said. The boat had no engine and the sails would have been shredded in that wind. The same night, four other yachts were wrecked. In the morning Vincent and

Nadine set up camp on Anchorage Island beneath a grove of palm trees near the remains of Tom Neal's old house. Unbelievably, the fresh water tank still functioned. Vincent salvaged his dinghy and speargun, and the lagoon was full of fish.

'With our suntans, we had no need for clothes,' Vincent said, slipping the cheese into his bag and walking towards the exit of the supermarket. 'I like Port Vila,' he added. 'Everyday I come to this shop and not once do I pay.'

On Suwarrow they had eaten palm hearts, coconut crabs and sea bird eggs from the outlying islets. Apart from a few disputes with another group of castaways who objected to their marijuana garden, Nadine and Vincent lived comfortably for just over two months, until the Cook Island authorities forcibly deported them a week before she gave birth.

Vincent invited us to *Andromeda* to meet Nadine and his son Ramone, a toddler with matted dread locks and a full body suntan just like his mother.

'I delivered him myself. In a hut in the jungle of Fiji,' Vincent said.

Nadine gave us a shy smile, before slipping away below decks.

'She still doesn't like to speak English,' he said, lifting the boy to his lap to kiss his head. He confessed that Ramone had no passport or birth certificate. He and Nadine had decided he wouldn't be schooled. He doesn't need to read or write, Vincent said, to know how to sail and spear fish is enough.

Andromeda, their new schooner, had been built in 1895 in Auckland, from New Zealand white pine. Her lines were lovely.

'Nice boat,' said Robert.

'From the moment I saw her, it was love,' Vincent said. 'At night she sails like a moth, so quietly.'

My father was astounded. 'How the hell did you get this after losing *Rio Grande*?'

Vincent's mother, and a few of her friends had bought the boat for him on the understanding that he would one day pay them back – somehow. He said his mother didn't want him living in a hut in the jungle of Fiji with her new grandson. She was generous, but even so, could only afford to buy half the vessel. The schooner's owner had agreed to co-ownership, with alternating years of occupancy. Nadine and Vincent had taken the first year, after which they would have to move out.

'We have not yet decided what we will do,' Vincent said with a shrug. 'Perhaps it's back to the Fiji jungle for another year.'

*

Away from Port Vila, the islands of Vanuatu were wild, with frequent rainfall, heavy jungle and semi-naked woolly-haired people living in grass huts. The men wore penis sheaths, or *nambas* as they were called in pidgin, which were oblong woven purses slipped over their willies and secured around their waists with twine. The women had bare breasts and muddy feet. Although they looked savage, everybody we met was welcoming. Some spoke a little French or *Bislama*, the Vanuatu pidgin. Many, however, spoke only their native tongue. We communicated with gestures and swapped fillets of dorado for mangoes and bananas, or taro pudding cooked on the fire.

On tiny Nguna Island we met missionaries who were translating the bible and trying to get the local people to change their ways. (With an average of 2000 speakers for each of its 113 indigenous languages, bible translators in Vanuatu had their work cut out for them.)

Tourists were non-existent away from the few hotels in Port Vila and, outside its busy harbour, we only saw one other yacht: *Cipango*. As we sailed north through the islands we

often found *Cipango* at anchor, or she arrived soon after us. At first we ignored Dominique and Jean-Marc, the French couple who sailed her. Since our first meeting in Pappete several years previously, relations between boats had been cool. The antipathy started the night *Vingila* had dragged her anchor and beached, when they accused us of losing their warp. They had demanded compensation. Jean-Marc, a truck driver from Marseilles, didn't speak much English, but his gestures were eloquent. And now, it seemed, our old enemies were the only other yacht sailing with us.

When we arrived at the anchorage in Emae, *Cipango* was there.

'We can't keep on ignoring them like this,' Mom said. 'Why don't we invite them for supper?'

That afternoon, a man in a dug-out canoe arrived with a dead chicken and four red-lipped olive shells, which he wanted to trade for a can of paint and a T-shirt. This was a windfall. I knew I could sell the olive shells for a hundred dollars a piece and fresh chicken was a rarity. We invited Dominique and Jean-Marc over to celebrate. The fowl, hunted in the forest with a bow and arrow, had been shot several times and was full of holes. Prior to its death by archery, the bird had lived an active life in the jungle which toughened its muscles, but we cooked it slowly with rice and olives in a cast iron pot.

'This food is good,' said Jean-Marc. 'Strange, because we thought the English were unable to cook.'

My father told him we were not English.

A few islands later in Espirtu Santo, Dominique traded two T-shirts for a live hen which Robert and I offered to kill for her. After I had given a demonstration on how to put a chicken to sleep by tucking its head under its wing and stroking it soothingly for a few min-

utes while murmuring pleasantries, we took the abject bird to the beach where Robert decapitated it with his machete. Dominique stayed on the boat and refused to hear our story of how the headless body had run into the sea and performed backward somersaults in the waves. That night we ate *coq au vin*, the second of many shared dinners. The next day Dominique called Robert and me over and taught us how to play Tarot, a French gambling game. As we sailed through the northern islands of Vanuatu, to the even wilder Banks Islands, and on towards the Solomons, our friendship with *Cipango* grew. We met up in anchorage after anchorage with them and, occasionally also with Vincent and Nadine on *Andromeda*. We dived with Jean-Marc and Vincent, and spent hours playing Tarot with Dominique. Nadine, as usual kept to herself.

*

In October we arrived in Santa Anna, the easternmost of the Solomon Islands, where we met a pair of missionaries who were living in a sago palm hut in the local village. Brown-skinned children with shaggy mops of sun-bleached yellow hair, swam out to swarm over *Vingila*. They swung from the shrouds and jumped into the sea from the prow. They ran through the cabins, fingering the sheets and curtains. They screamed at the sight of Pepe. The missionary couple rowed out to visit *Vingila* too. They told us they were translating the bible and had built a church.

‘Slowly, we’re seeing some change,’ the woman said. She had a pale, pinched face and wore a long, sack-like dress with a print of faded roses. ‘These things take time. You realise of course, that the people here were cannibals not too long ago.’

When we went ashore, the adult villagers glared at us from under their dusty Afros. The bare-breasted village women wore grass skirts and had bones stuck through their noses.

The men were in tattered shorts and had thick, scarred feet. Unlike Vanuatu and the Banks Islands, there were no smiles, or offers to trade.

‘Seems like there’s quite an atmosphere here,’ Mom said as we walked along a muddy track, dodging stray pigs.

‘Yeah,’ said Robert. ‘I wonder when the locals will decide they’ve had enough of the missionaries and eat them.’

‘The woman looked a bit tough and stringy,’ I said, ‘maybe that’s why they’re holding back. Just not hungry enough.’

‘If there’s one thing I can’t stand it’s a missionary,’ Dad said.

We decided to sail west to Gaudalcanal. Robert and I celebrated our 16th birthday there on the tiny island of Tavanipupu with Mfanwy and her husband Charles Humphreys, an elderly couple who lived in an A-frame house, a safe distance from the malarial main island of Gaudalcanal with its villagers and missionaries. The Solomons, equatorial and cloaked in sweaty jungle, were riddled with treponemes and filarial parasites. Even on breezy Tavanipupu the Humphreys said they occasionally succumbed to fevers, while on Gaudalcanal, villagers regularly took to their huts to lie shivering and dull-eyed on the floor. It wasn’t easy living in the Solomons, the Humphreys told us. Nevertheless, they were happy. Myfanwy told me their story. They’d met during the Second World War when Charles was in the airforce. As a fighter pilot in the RAF, a much younger Charles had inspired intense interest among the Wrens. But, she said, her eyes still dreamy at the memory, ‘I was the one who got him.’ Four decades of marriage and life on a remote island hadn’t dulled the satisfaction of winning her husband from those Wrens. After the war, Charles worked for the British Colonial Service before retiring to Tevanipupu with his wife. Advancing in

age, he was still good looking and very charming. For my birthday he presented me with a ripe tomato from his vegetable garden. His fingers brushed mine as he handed me the gift and his blue gaze was a little too prolonged. I pictured him suddenly in a raffish pilot's hat and understood why the Wrens had got excited.

*

An optimistic Spanish conquistador hunting for King Solomon's gold named the 992 volcanic islands and coral atolls of the Solomon Islands. Four hundred years after their discovery, gold had still not been found. The islands lie wedged against the equator, more than a thousand miles north-east of Australia. The climate is tropical. From March to November, trade winds cool the air to an almost bearable average of 27 degrees Celsius. From December, the winds die, temperatures rise and the rainy season begins. Showers pour daily from towering cumulonimbus clouds; part of the great monsoon weather system which later moves north to India. The rain is hot, the land steamy, and humidity levels hover above 90 percent. These conditions were our old friends: the equatorial doldrums – the birthplace of hurricanes.

We were the last sailors to leave the Solomon Islands in the season of 1983. Heralded by a slackening of the trade winds and the gathering of clouds like bruises along the northern horizon, the weather changed early that year. Most boats had already moved on to Papua New Guinea, which, like the Solomons, provides safe anchorages and lies close enough to the equator to avoid full-strength storms. However, we were unable to follow them. During the years of apartheid, Papua New Guinea didn't recognise South African passports and, our Solomon Island visas exhausted, we had no choice but to return to Australia, a thousand miles away across the Coral Sea.

In Gaudalcanal, Dad didn't share the urgency of his fellow sailors.

'We're not leaving now,' he said, sitting at the Honiara Yacht Club bar and sipping a beer. 'We haven't seen New Georgia yet.'

The islands of New Georgia lay 105 sea miles to the west, in the direction of Papua New Guinea. We'd heard that Marovo had the largest coral-fringed lagoon in the world, and that the diving was excellent. The villages scattered around the edges of the lagoon were difficult to visit, except by yacht. My father said that with a decent wind *Vingila* could cover the distance from Gaudalcanal to New Georgia in under 24 hours. So what if our return to Australia was delayed by a few days, Dad said, a chance to visit the lagoon was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. We just couldn't miss it.

We weighed anchor early, hoping to make landfall in Marovo the following morning, but our boat sat within sight of Honiara for a full hot day. The air felt too hot and heavy to move itself, let alone several tons of steel. That evening, using a little of our precious diesel, we motored back to the yacht club, undoing our sailing in an hour. Robert and I were pleased. We didn't care much for Honiara, a ramshackle town with a miserable market and broken roads stained with orange betel-nut spit, but we liked the yacht club. The bar, beneath an airy thatched pavilion, served ice water for free. There was also an ablution block with cold showers and a place to wash clothes. After months of remote islands, we thought we were in heaven. On Friday nights, jumpy movies were projected onto a fluttering screen. The crackling soundtrack, issuing from a pair of aged speakers, was further obscured by waves breaking on the concrete pier. None of the yacht club members – a few ex-pat Australians – owned boats. They congregated at the bar to drink beer and gaze at the dirty beach. The only sailors at the club were fellow yachties like ourselves; deeply suntanned, wearing

plastic sandals and living long-term on tight budgets with boats as old and battered as our own. The waiters, at least half of whom had proposed to me, all had betel-stained teeth, but although it never happened Robert and I remained confident we would, one day, meet a group of good looking teenagers at the bar.

When we dropped anchor after our failed attempt at sailing to New Georgia, the yacht club lights were ablaze and Robert and I felt certain the teenagers had arrived at last and were sitting at the bar drinking coke with ice and slices of wild Solomon Island lime.

'Nobody's going ashore,' Dad said. 'We're leaving in the morning and the dinghy stays up.'

We kept our hard dinghy hoisted on davits off the stern when we sailed. Also at the stern, beneath a covering of palm fronds, lay my dugout canoe. I'd bought it from two young boys for ten dollars, the low price partial compensation for its extreme instability. I considered paddling to the club, but in Honiara's polluted anchorage where the bloated carcasses of pigs often floated amid the other muck, black shark fins sometimes broke the surface of the water. I didn't want to capsize at night.

Sharks in the Solomons were plentiful – in many anchorages one had only to empty a pail of water overboard for dark, circling shapes to appear. '*Plenti tumas saks hea*,' we were told by locals who explained that it had been so ever since the Second World War when so many ships sank, often with a full complement of crew. The sharks, feasting on the corpses, had developed a taste for human flesh that was assumed to have been passed on to subsequent generations.

The six month battle of Gaudalcanal had been a turning point in the war. On this wild and previously unknown island, an American victory had been won over the Japanese at the

cost of 30 000 lives. Henderson battlefield lay a short, reggae-blasting taxi ride from town, and we had been dropped off to walk on soil crunchy with the bones and teeth of soldiers dead 40 years. In the Solomons war and death were everywhere. Iron Bottom Sound – the channel out of Honiara – was named for all its sunken ships. We dived on wrecks whenever we found them in shallower water, searching for rust-stained cowries that I knew would fetch a good price. Always, we looked out for sharks. Like the local people, sharks had entered our psyches.

I'd heard that on Malaita Island north of Gaudalcanal, the people of Auki lived on manmade coral islands and believed themselves to be the descendants of sharks, which they worshipped. If an Auki man's canoe capsized, he could call on a shark to carry him to shore, and unless it had been slighted or angered, the fish would oblige. But for relations between man and shark to remain amicable, sharks needed regular appeasement. So, summoned by a designated shark caller, they were fed the bodies of great chiefs and – more frequently – unwilling sacrificial victims. Missionaries and the government discouraged the use of human flesh, suggesting a substitute of roasted piglet. Usually black and white-tipped reef sharks answered the call, but occasionally a tiger shark arrived, scattering the others. Big, aggressive, and responsible for most fatal attacks on humans in these isles, this was the shark to appease. Tiger sharks could eat a piglet in a single bite.

Looking first at the canoe and then at Robert, I considered my chances of overturning. If there were sharks about, I wondered if a sacrificial poodle would appease them. I decided probably not. In spite of the sharks, I still wanted to go ashore and meet the teenagers.

Robert read my thoughts and shook his head. 'Don't even try,' he said. 'Dad will kill us.'

A wave of laughter rose from the yacht club. I pictured the teenagers: clever and funny, joshing each other and ordering rounds of cokes in the flickering yellow light. Then I went to bed with a book I'd read before, knowing that I'd never meet them.

The following morning when a light wind began ruffling the surface of the water, we set sail again. The breeze soon died. It took *Vingila*, and her trailing entourage of pelagic sharks, over 60 hours to reach the New Georgian archipelago. To pass time, Robert and I made lures from the silvery liners of wine boxes, which we trailed from the stern to tease the sharks. *Vingila*'s followers – with their attendant pilot fish and remoras – glided in blue space, barely moving a fin to keep pace with our boat. Sporadically they'd break from their torpor to attack our lures. The pretty blue-sharks, with dark, fathomless eyes, flashed their white bellies, as they came at the lures side on. As they twisted their heads for the bait, we pulled the line from their mouths. We didn't want to catch blue-sharks. The big makos, with mouths spilling untidy teeth, attacked the lure directly. We let them bite, giving slack and enough time for the bait to be swallowed, before we hauled them in fighting. After gaffing and beating them on the head until they were still, we sliced out their jaws and set them to dry in the sun.

'We'll sell these in Australia,' Robert said.

'Haven't you got enough now? How many do you need, anyway?' My mother sat beneath an awning in the cockpit with one hand on the helm and Pepe at her feet. Reflected sunlight from the sea played patterns on the underside of her jaw. Pepe raised his head to watch us with interest. He barked fiercely at each catch, but ever since a previous encounter with an energetic dorado had turned nasty, he declined to visit the stern while we were fishing.

My mother wiped the sweat from her glasses. 'Okay you two, I think it's time to stop now. And make sure you wash every bit of blood off the deck. Use a scrubbing brush. And then what about some school work?'

*

In Marovo lagoon, we were greeted by the curio-laden canoes of Bislama village. The paddling salesmen wore salt-faded shorts and told us they were warriors; in the old days they had set out in war canoes for the surrounding islands and villages within the great lagoon. Sometimes they crossed the ocean, going as far as Santa Isabel and even Gaudalcanal. They returned with heads. They also brought body parts, which they ate. Because they were cannibals, missionaries found them irresistible. The men of Bislama explained, in pidgin: 'When the first missionaries came, they told us to stop. Our ancestors ate some of them, but later when we became Christians, the British government forbade us to hunt heads and eat men anymore.'

This, oddly, was the same government who rekindled head hunting among the Dyaks of Borneo, encouraging the tribesmen to go after the Japanese during the war. As a rule, the Solomon islanders stayed out of the war, and were merely bewildered observers to bloody battles fought by strangers on their own land.

'Where are the missionaries now?' Dad asked.

The men told us that they had been converted and, after building a church, the missionaries had left. Now they had their own pastor.

In New Georgia the local god, or Nusa-Nusa, adorned the prows of canoes. Salesmen scrambled in their hessian sacks for other Nusa-Nusas, which they wanted to sell us. The god was usually carved from ebony and inlaid with mother of pearl. It had a nose like a ski

jump, with great flaring nostrils. Under the nose, tiny hands clasped a shrunken head. Sometimes, the hands held a bird. '*Dispela nusa-nusa he likum pis.*' This version then, was the god of peace, carved primarily for the occasional squeamish tourist it seemed, for I never saw it on the prow of a canoe.

After the returning warriors had finished feasting on body parts, we were told the severed heads were deposited on an island in the centre of the lagoon. An older man pointed it out to us. When Dad asked to see the skulls his request was denied. '*Dis ples tumas taboo.*' Nobody went there nowadays.

'If nobody's going there,' my father said later, when we were alone, 'the diving's got to be good. Maybe a dive tonight?'

'I'm not sure that's a good idea, Frank,' Mom replied. She confined her snorkelling to shallow lagoons in the daytime, and she said it worried her when my brother dived at night. I was forbidden to go on nocturnal expeditions, she couldn't stand the thought of it.

Blackie Stephens, the headman of Bislama village, came to trade hand-carved fishing lures for spools of our Taiwanese poly-filament. His people, he told us proudly, were the blackest on earth. Visiting scientists from America had taken biopsies and proved that the skin of the Melanesians of New Georgia had higher melanin levels than the skin of the darkest person in Africa. When we told Blackie we were African, he looked at Robert's and my blonde hair and shook his head. His colouring was impressive; not blue-black like the National Geographic pictures I had seen of equatorial Africans but matt-black like carbon paper, with deep orange palms and soles, stained darker in the creases. The whites of his eyes were orange too and when he smiled, he showed gums the colour of molasses. John Wayne, the man sitting next to him on the deck, was equally dark but less talkative. After

writing his name in the visitors book, he ate a handful of popcorn before leaving in his battered canoe. Blackie, however, visited daily for the remainder of our stay, bringing gifts of bananas, purple fleshed yams and swamp-taro pudding. He drank tea and had long discussions with my father about fishing, seamanship and the possibility of exchanging Pepe for a wood carving. Weddings were never mentioned. In Bislama nobody wanted to marry me, for fear, perhaps, of diluting the melanin levels. The morning we left, Blackie gave my father a intricately carved ebony fishing spear. The attached tag – made from exercise book paper covered in clear tape – read: *Presented to Frank's family from Blackies's family, Bislama Village, Marovo Lagoon, Western Solomon Islands.*

We left Blackie and sailed across the lagoon to Tongoro passage, where we found *Cipango* in a deep bay, beside a chain of wooded islets. In Honiara we'd made loose plans to meet up in New Georgia, and we were pleased to see them again.

'*Salut,*' said Jean-Marc from the deck of his boat. 'The diving here is superb.'

While Mom, Dominique and Pepe wallowed together near the beach in a lukewarm soup of electric blue minnows, the rest of us went diving at the sea wall.

Napoleon wrasse bigger than our main saloon table swam past ornate coral formations while schools of barracuda played in the bubbles way above my head. We used the hooker – a compressor with twin air hoses – for shell diving; our scuba tanks were kept for emergencies. Robert seldom looked for shells; he preferred spear-fishing and refused supplementary air, believing it was un-sporting, so I dived with Dad. Our hoses snaked past the snouts of barracuda to the dinghy on the surface, as distant as an object viewed through the wrong end of a telescope, where Robert sat tending the air-pumping compressor. The paddles of his oars dipping sporadically into the sea disturbed its surface from the underside, as he fol-

lowed the trail of our exhalations. Descending, further my father's red shorts turned purple and then deep maroon, as each frequency of light was absorbed in turn by the water. As we dived deeper and the water became darker, the coral trout, groupers, parrots and trigger fish, grew bigger. I kept close to my father and whenever I saw a shark, I held his hand. Wearing gloves, we turned over rocks and poked in crannies with metal prods and our fingers. When Dad found shells he showed them to me and asked, with his thumb, yes or no. Thumbs up, the shell went into the mesh bag at his waist, thumbs down, it was returned to its place. *Conus geographicus* we never put in the mesh bag because of its fatally toxic harpoon. We carried it immediately to the dinghy in our hands, holding the widest part of the shell, while the harpoon waved desperately from the other end. Once in the dinghy, we confined it to a bucket until death. I never gave an adult *geographicus* the thumbs down; they were collectors items and good for trading and selling.

After Dad and I had finished looking for shells, he and Robert went spearfishing with Jean-Marc. Then we gathered around a plastic basin of fish in *Cipango's* cockpit for lunch.

'The season has changed,' Jean-Marc said, looking about at the still water. He spoke through a mouthful of *poisson cru* – snapper marinated in lime juice and coconut milk. His tanned, weather-beaten head looked as if it had been inexpertly carved from a block of wood. Dominique, with short dark hair and a heart-shaped face, sat next to him, like the sad queen in the deck of Tarot cards. An awning shielded us from the sun, but not the sight of the shockingly blue water and the strip of white beach trimmed with green palms. The colours were strident and garish like those of a travel brochure, but we'd stopped noticing the features of our surroundings, however, except in terms of shelter or as a source of food. Robert slouched to one side, fiddling with his spear gun. I noticed dried fish scales stuck to

his hands and saw tide marks of salt that ran like snail trails down his brown arms and back. He'd speared and cleaned the snapper for lunch and also the fish for our supper that lay in the dinghy off *Cipango's* stern. We were unlikely twins. Him stolid, muscular, suntanned, and happiest in the sea, while I, nervy, scrawny and pallid, read books in my cabin. He read a little, and I snorkelled, but we both knew where we belonged.

'It's time for leaving,' Jean-Marc continued, looking up at the sky. 'The trade winds are dead. Soon, perhaps, we'll have the first cyclone.'

His face became thoughtful. His tongue roamed his mouth, searching out a fish bone.

'*Putain!*' – he spat the bone out.

He picked at a front tooth with his thumbnail. 'For us there are only two days of sailing to Choisel and Papua. But you have two or three weeks to Australia if the winds return. If not, maybe more.'

Dad snorted. 'I'm not scared of a cyclone,' he said, spooning the last of the *poisson cru* from his steel plate and tipping the dish to his mouth to drink the juice. I was scared of cyclones but I knew better than to say anything. Robert, busy with his spear gun, also stayed silent. Mom looked out over the dazzling water and sighed. She stretched her arms above her head. 'I wish we had some bread to eat with this fish,' she said

When we sailed from New Georgia the next day, Dominique gave Robert and me a deck of Tarot cards, and a bar of chocolate and a small box of orange juice each.

She kissed both of us on the cheeks.

'*Au revoir, mes petits,*' she said. '*Bon courage.*'

Robert consumed his juice and chocolate immediately but I kept mine, thinking ahead to the voyage to Australia. In a hurricane, I hoped chocolate might help cheer me up. Aus-

tralia wasn't on the cards yet, however, for Dad had noticed the speck of Bellona on the chart and read in the pilot book that it was inhabited by Polynesians.

'We can't miss that,' he said, 'and it's close, only a day or two away.'

At least the place lay to the south, in the direction of Australia. After four days of light winds which often faded away completely or alternated with gusty rain squalls, we reached the atoll of Bellonna.

There was no safe anchorage, and only the calmness of the sea that day allowed us to drop anchor on the western side. Within minutes of anchoring, the chief of Mata-Moana settlement and all his men had paddled through the surf in their dugout canoes to welcome us. At least a dozen men climbed aboard and introduced themselves with nods of the head and grave handshakes. Naked children swam out and climbed the sides of the boat to sit dripping and giggling on the cabin top, staring through the hatches, aghast at the sight of Pepe. I roasted pop-corn, lifting the lid to dramatic effect while the kernels still jumped. A small boy, nudged on by the older children, fought back tears to take a handful which he ate reluctantly, while his friends laughed. Mr Rolf Teikangei, a village elder, removed a pair of one-armed sunglasses and wrote his name in the visitors book before asking my father for the poodle. He'd never seen such an animal before, he explained. My mother declined. For months we'd received similar requests throughout Vanuatu, the Banks Islands and the far eastern Solomons. Pepe was her beloved companion, her ally, foot warmer and source of comfort. She would sooner have parted with one of her children than her dog.

Matthew Tamotai, newly returned from the Honiara Technical Institute in the capital, drew palm trees in the visitors book with a ball point pen. After shading them carefully with fine cross-hatching, he invited Robert and me ashore in his canoe. The children watched us

go – a few leaping into the sea from the bow and holding onto the dug-out with clinging hands which Matthew removed, finger by finger, leaving them to swim to *Vingila* and pull themselves back aboard. Beaching the wooden craft on a strip of white sand, our new friend led us past frond huts where women with long hair sat in the shade on pandanus mats. Pigs foraged beneath the mango trees behind them. I felt as if I were in a painting by Gauguin.

‘We are Polynesians,’ Mr Rolf Teikangei had said while writing his name and address in the visitor’s book. But they didn’t look like the people I knew from Tahiti and the Society Islands, who looked bloated and overweight, with swollen ankles and decaying teeth. Too much white sugar, we’d been told. Diabetes was rampant. Polynesians in the Solomons were a further anomaly, because we were in the heart of Melanesia. We hadn’t seen a Polynesian in years. Mr Rolf explained: ‘When our ancestors arrived on this island in their canoes, there were other people living here. Black skinned people, but we killed them.’

Matthew lead us away from the village. ‘This palm,’ he said, ‘has the best drinking coconuts on Bellona.’ Like Mr Teikangei, he spoke English, not Pidgin.

‘*You-fella no likum spik pijin?*’ I asked. I’d been speaking pidgin for several months and with teenage confidence, considered myself quite fluent. At first the language shocked me; it sounded as if it had been invented by supercilious colonists for conversing with golliwog dolls. The word for broken was *bagarup*. After I noticed that nobody else seemed embarrassed, I’d begun speaking with more enthusiasm than any real skill, and often made it up as I went along.

‘Of course I speak pidgin,’ Matthew said, ‘but I also speak English. I learned it at school.’

That made him part of the one percent of Solomon islanders who spoke the official language. The rest spoke pidgin, introduced by the British to fill in the gaps between the 71 indigenous tongues and their multiple associated dialects.

Matthew climbed the palm quickly, followed by Robert who wanted to show that he could do it too. Both made the ascent look far easier than it was. I'd climbed a coconut palm once, on Islas Las Perlas near Panama, and had reached the top sweaty and shaken, my hands bleeding from the sharp bark. Looking down, with the potential for a deadly fall a quivering hand hold away, I had resolved never to do it again. From that time on I waited below, well out of range of falling coconuts. Matthew opened the nuts with his machete. He was right, they were delicious. After five years in the Pacific, Robert and I knew our drinking nuts.

'I was born here, and I'm back on holiday.' Matthew said. 'But I want to live somewhere else. I'm looking for work and a wife.'

He ran appraising eyes over my skinny arms and legs, and flat chest. I was accustomed to rejecting marriage proposals, especially in Honiara where all the taxi drivers were from Malaita, an island to the north of Gaudalcanal. On Malaita wives were bought for lengths of handmade traditional shell money, measured out in fathoms. Modern drills made the process easier, but it still took several months to make enough beads to buy a standard wife. Malaitan men often migrated to Honiara where women were free. This was the *kastom*.

'*Wea nao yupela stap?...* where are you going?' taxi drivers in Honiara asked me before flashing their betel-stained tooth stumps and enquiring, '*Yu marit nomoa?...* You married already?'

Western women were not only free, they usually came with appliances, like outboard engines or gas fridges. At least this is what the men in search of wives believed. In the smaller villages, men negotiated directly with my father. They wanted both Pepe and me.

But Matthew didn't propose, he asked for my address. Although his feet were rough and splayed from climbing coconut palms, he had lovely teeth and the drawings he'd made in the visitors book had impressed me with their attention to detail. I said, that if he wanted, he could write to me care of the GPO in Brisbane.

Back on *Vingila*, negotiations were taking place over fruit. With twenty-five watermelons and fifty pawpaws in the fore-peak, and a mound of pineapples and cucumbers on the floor, my brother's cabin and bunk had become inaccessible.

'It's okay,' Mom told Robert, 'because at sea you usually sleep in the cockpit anyway.'

She had also given away most of our shoes.

'They asked me what I wanted and I said a bit of fruit, and then they came with so much and kept bringing it, that when our trading T-shirts were finished, I gave them our shoes.'

'We'll buy more in Australia,' she added.

Men in ragged shorts, with ledges of salt-stiff hair extending up from their foreheads, crowded around the main saloon table, drinking tea and listening to our cassettes. They smelled metallic and salty, of fish blood and coconut.

'If we start this lot on rum, they'll never leave,' my mother whispered. The cassettes were old and had stretched in the equatorial heat, distorting the music. The men preferred Aa'pa, our wailing Samoan music, to Mom's Neil Diamond or my Sex Pistols. They hummed along with the Samoans, swaying to the rhythm. My father made a note in the visi-

tors book: make and send a copy of Aa'pa to Bellona Island. Mr Teikangei described how they sailed their dugouts a hundred sea miles to Gaudalcanal to trade copra, navigating only by the pattern of the sea and clouds. At dusk they departed in their canoes.

'Tomorrow,' Matthew said, 'we'll hunt a pig.'

'Great,' said Robert, 'what will we use?'

'Anything you like. Sticks, spears. Do you have a bow and arrow?'

'No. What about a spear gun?'

'Okay, bring a spear gun.'

But later that night we left without saying goodbye. When the wind changed, the sound of our mooring chain breaking coral on the sea floor had dragged us from sleep. A few firm wave-slaps under the stern roused us from our bunks. The wind was blowing on-shore and we knew couldn't stay. We raised anchor in the dark, without turning the engine on. Robert, strong from daily spear-fishing, pulled the chain up by hand, shunning the winch which he said was too slow. The moon, escaping for an instant from the clutch of a cloud, illuminated the bent backs of a line of palms, bowed over a strip of beach as curved as a nail paring. Above the rustle of the wind in the palm fronds, we heard the hiss and crash of breakers. The village, a huddle of huts beneath the coconut palms, was dark; the drums silent. Night air brought the smell of cooking fires, drying fish and smoked coconut. Working soundlessly, we raised the main and hauled our bow away from the island. Then Robert raised the jib while I sheeted in, setting the sail. Dad sat on the cabin top, looking ahead. He hadn't given a single order, after seven years at sea, he often didn't have to anymore. When the sails caught the wind, our loaded boat yielded slowly, heeling over in sublimation, as if she knew what lay ahead and didn't want to be part of it. Below decks, the cabins were

packed with drinking coconuts, pawpaws, yellow watermelons, pineapples, sea shells and cockroaches. Villagers had brought the fruit and – hiding within its crevices – cockroaches undeterred by repeated salt water dunkings, who had swarmed out to join our thriving resident population.

We were on our way back to Australia at last.

Chapter 20

Coral Sea

The wind that forced us to leave Bellona blew until dawn. The atoll, a dark smudge against a darker sky, dissolved into the sea, taking with it the smell of land and leaving a feeling of loneliness and vague expectation. The rise and fall of surf on the shore faded, replaced by the gurgle of waves against the hull. With a steady breeze and moderate sea, *Vingila* settled into a broad reach, cantering over the easy swells. The following morning the sun rose into a clear sky. The 18 knot breeze teased the scattered tops of wavelets into white frills. A group of cirrocumulus clouds above the north east horizon suggested the wind would hold. The mood aboard lightened. Perhaps, after all, we weren't too late to catch the last of the trade winds which, if they held, would carry us across the Coral Sea to safety.

'What about pawpaw for breakfast?' Mom asked.

'I'm sick of pawpaw,' Robert said, walking to the stern for his morning pee.

Dad came up the stairs with a pot of coffee.

'Well too bad, it's what we're having,' he said.

'So why ask me if I don't have a choice?'

'Dad's right,' Mom said, 'we can't let it go to waste.'

My father handed out mugs. 'Nicky, what about you?'

At sea, it was our habit to gather for early morning coffee in the cockpit. With warm mugs in our hands, we'd watch the sun rise while the decks were damp with dew and dead flying fish from the night before still lay in the scuppers. It was my favourite time of day.

Since finding a drowned cockroach in the bottom of my cup, however, I'd gone off coffee. The roaches used the narrow ledges of the hand rails as thoroughfares to get about the boat. At night they could be seen marching along in glossy-backed single file, and sometimes – if an unexpected wave struck – tumbled off to land on the bunks, the chart table, the stove or the open book of a reader below. We'd been infested with cockroaches for years, but never like this. Mom had wanted to fumigate in Honiara, but the single supermarket in town stocked only sacks of rice, cheap tinned fish and some cans of Chinese duck. No pesticides. Like new footwear, arthropod genocide would have to wait until we reached Australia.

For 24 hours after Bellona slipped from sight, the wind blew steadily on the beam and the ocean, superficially ruffled by the breeze, remained calm within its deeper layers, soothed as it was by the preceding months of light airs. *Vingila* made 6 knots, which was fast for her.

'A week of this'll get us to Australia,' I said to Robert as we brought in the fish biltong that evening.

The next morning, the wind died, leaving our sails hanging limp. *Vingila* – a lump of steel – sat motionless on a sea of slate, beneath thickening clouds. The heat was suffocating. By noon the clouds were the colour of lead and sweat trickled in rivulets between our shoulder blades and down the backs of our knees.

'What about a watermelon for lunch?' Mom said, rising from the companionway with a long knife in her hands.

Dad looked up from his book. 'Don't ask them, tell them,' he said.

I reached over and dug my knuckles into my brother's ribs.

'I think Robert wants pawpaw.'

My brother made a face, grabbed my wrist and twisted it backwards.

‘You’re hurting me.’

‘Grow up.’

‘Stop it,’ my mother said. ‘let’s eat some watermelon.’

We lowered the sails – without wind to fill them they were chafing against the shrouds – and we sat in a row on the cabin top eating watermelon and spitting the pips into the sea. Ripples spread from the floating seeds, fanning out and radiating across the still water. In air humid enough to drink, breathing felt like drowning. The safety of Australia seemed a million miles away. I pictured the ripples from our watermelon seeds spreading out in ever widening circles to arrive at the coast, weeks ahead of us. My watermelon rind looked like a fake smile. I stretched and threw it into the water to join the seeds.

‘God I’d like to feel those trades again,’ I said.

Mom reached for the knife and stabbed the watermelon, splitting off another chunk. The flesh in the centre of the fruit was pale orange, almost white.

‘Strange,’ she said, ‘I’ve never had one this colour before.’

I looked at the sky. To the east, a squall was trailing a veil of rain.

‘I just hope we don’t get a hurricane,’ I said softly to Robert. Dad overheard me.

‘You and your hurricanes,’ he said. ‘You’re like a goddamn broken record. Always the same bladdy thing, isn’t it?’

Lightning showed in the distance and the accompanying roll of thunder brought with it the faint smell of gunmetal.

‘If it rains,’ Mom said, ‘at least we can have a wash and collect some drinking water.’

I ate another slice of watermelon and moved to the shade of the cockpit with my book. Sweat dripped down the backs of my knees and the bare flesh of my thighs stuck to the vinyl cushions. Mom and Dad went below. With *Vingila* drifting there was no reason to take the helm, no sails to adjust, no wake to watch disappear from the stern, and no comforting sense of motion. Being becalmed is, in many ways, more difficult than dealing with a gale because there is nothing to react to, no urgency, just slow frustration mixed with mounting apprehension.

‘Don’t you wish sometimes we could just be normal and go to school and stuff?’ With Dad below I could speak to my brother.

Robert looked up from the watermelon rind he was whittling with his pocket knife.

‘What’s wrong with you now?’ he said. ‘I thought you hated school.’

‘I do. I just don’t want another trip like the one from Fortaleza to Granada. Remember? Becalmed, becalmed, becalmed and then a hurricane.’

Robert threw the rind overboard and leaned over to punch me lightly on the arm.

‘You worry too much,’ he said.

‘And if it’s worse than Granada?’ I said. ‘What then?’

‘Well there’s nothing we can do about that now, is there?’

*

I thought we were sailing – however slowly – for Australia. Dad, I discovered, had other plans.

‘Look here,’ he said, tapping the chart with the back of his pencil, ‘*this* is where I want to go.’

The reef he pointed at looked like a pale water stain on the white expanse of the map. Tiny black numbers, fine as hatched spiderlings, charted the shallows and the coral heads which extended from a central circle into a long, north-reaching arm.

‘Where’s the land?’ I asked.

‘Here.’ Dad’s finger jabbed at a tiny spit of yellow. A sand bar. I leaned closer. Elevation two metres, I read. The island looked about 300 metres long. The arm of its reef stretched out for 30 or 40 miles.

‘Is there anything left at high tide?’ I pictured white waves washing over the reef and sand bar. I saw the sheltered water lost in a swirl of currents and rip tides.

Dad shrugged. ‘Who cares,’ he said, ‘the diving’s got to be good.’

‘But the anchorage won’t be,’ I said.

Dad ran his callused finger over the chart, absently following the convolutions of numbers and black lines marring an otherwise unblemished stretch of ocean. I leaned closer to read the name of the place: Chesterfield Reef. Where he saw pristine diving conditions, I saw disaster. Most of the submerged reefs would be visible only once we were on top of them, particularly if we made landfall at night. We would have to find a passage which led to an anchorage that looked almost non-existent, and was probably scattered with coral heads which could snap our chain like wet wool should the seas rise. A two-metre-high sand bar would provide protection from neither waves nor wind. Getting out at night if the weather turned foul would be impossible. In a storm we’d be much safer on the ocean, far away from reefs. I was wary of atolls with extensive fringing reefs and poor land protection. Nadine and Vincent had survived the wrecking of their boat in Suwarow, but Chesterfield, this new reef that Dad proposed we visit, would have no abandoned settlements or water

tanks. In fact I expected to find nothing more than sand. What's more, the reef lay hundreds of miles from the nearest land; if we survived a shipwreck, we couldn't expect to be rescued.

My father bent his head over the chart, a pair of callipers in his hand and his mouth slightly open in concentration.

'Dad,' I said.

'Yes?' He looked up from the chart.

'Do we have to go there?'

'What is it you want Nicky? No wait, don't tell me. You want a shopping mall where you can steal stuff. You want a yacht club with a bar and a city with movie houses that stay open till midnight where you can hang out with your good for nothing pals. Isn't that right?'

His lips tightened a little more and against the pale background of his blue eyes, I thought I saw his pupils constrict.

'I just don't like the look of it,' I said.

'Do me a favour, okay? Leave the sailing to me.'

So it was decided; we would sail to Chesterfield. To get there we needed wind, but the sea stayed smooth and unmarked in the pre-monsoon heat that choked us and sent a panting Pepe to sprawl flat-bellied against the floorboards. At night he woke me with his whimpers and scratching and restless search to find somewhere cool. Day after day the sea remained calm; a hot, polished disc with us in its centre. The water was so flat, that in the evening we ate our meals sitting at the table, from open plates instead of the bowls we generally used at sea. We might have been at anchor.

'Wind would be nice,' Mom said.

Sometimes, at night, we were awoken by the the sound of wavelets lapping against the hull, and a subtle change in *Vingila's* motion.

'Wind,' Dad would grunt.

Pulling ourselves from our bunks, we'd go outside to raise the sails. The night breeze cooled the sweat on our bodies, bringing hope.

'Look we're sailing,' my mother would whisper, pointing at the knot meter where the needle jerked from its resting place of zero to point hesitantly at one knot.

'Two knots now,' she'd breathe, stretching the truth. Dad would set Baruch and we'd fall back into our bunks. Drifting to sleep, we'd be reawakened, this time by the slapping of empty sails against the shrouds. Climbing on deck, we'd lower the main and genoa again to stop them chafing, before returning once more to our airless bunks and fractured sleep.

*

In the afternoons I listened to weather reports on the short wave radio. An extensive low pressure system was building in the north of the Coral Sea. Water and air temperatures were high; squalls and rainstorms frequent. At least the Australian announcer sounded sympathetic. *Vingila* crawled slowly southwards, away from the low. The barometer hovered steady at 1012 millibars and the sky's tones had deepened to shades of tarnished pewter. It rained almost every day. Sunsets, when we saw them, were crimson. Sunrises; diluted bloodstains seeping through the sky. Dusk was brief and it stayed hot until after midnight. We ate pawpaw for breakfast, watermelon for morning tea, pineapple and cucumber for lunch and watermelon again in the evening. The fruit pile in Robert's cabin showed subtle signs of diminishing but still it crawled with roaches who marched in single file at night on their secret missions throughout the boat. A week passed.

'Walking would be faster than this,' Robert said, watching bubbles sliding slowly past the hull.

I started drinking vodka. Dad enforced an alcohol ban at sea so I pilfered from the liquor cabinet while my parents slept. Vodka allowed me drift off and deadened both the hope and disappointment of getting and then losing wind in the night. Mom and Dad didn't notice that I wasn't always sober. The first night I mixed vodka with the box of orange juice Dominique had given me as a parting gift. I'd hidden both the juice and chocolate under my bunk to keep them away from Robert. I opened the juice as a kind of private nocturnal party for one, and decided to also allow myself a piece of chocolate. I planned to eat it bit by bit over the nights, but when I opened the wrapping, a stream of cockroaches poured out. They had burrowed their way past the foil wrapper to nibble circular depressions in the surface of my chocolate bar.

'Serves you right,' Robert said the next day when I told him. 'You wanted to keep it all for yourself.'

At least the juice had been spared. A bizarre, neon shade of orange, it tasted far too sweet, although the writing on the box proclaimed at least 6 per cent natural fruit ingredients. After the juice was finished, I drank vodka straight from the bottle, pulling out the chart table quietly to reach Dad's booze stash. Two quick glugs were usually enough.

We were a hundred miles from Chesterfield when the wind finally picked up. One afternoon *Vingila* came alive as if she had been released from a spell. Breeze in her sails, she shook herself and fairly scampered across the water. Charcoal clouds dispersed to reveal an evening sky the colour of under-ripe mango. It was the first untroubled sunset we had seen in days. Baruch was put back to work, and the sound of his twang-thunk, twang-thunk and

the other familiar sounds and rhythms of our boat making her way steadily across the sea, soothed us. And with *Vingila* moving, we could trawl for fish again. We set out fishing lines and caught a tuna for supper.

*

Bracketed to the wall of the radio room was a Sat Nav, an early precursor to GPS, which Dad had bought in Australia for several thousand dollars. It had changed our sailing completely. Unlike the early days when we relied on celestial navigation, we now had a chunky black box which magically gave us our position every four hours.

As we sailed toward Chesterfield, Dad plotted the SatNav's readings, tracing our progress. With the good wind, we reached the area of the reef the following evening as the sun was setting. The Sat Nav confirmed our arrival, but there was no land in sight, just a long line of white breakers stretching ahead to the horizon. This was the reaching-out arm I'd seen on the chart. Taking readings from the Sat Nav we sailed down the long arm in the darkness. The moon came out. We took watch, keeping the silver line of rollers within view, to windward, on the starboard side. The roar of waves hurling themselves against the outside of the reef kept us company through the night, but the arm sheltered the sea and over the flat partially sheltered water, *Vingila* picked up speed. The wind rose. To ensure landfall at dawn, we dropped the jib to slow the boat down. Daybreak found us at the bow, searching for a sandbar in a sea dotted with whitecaps and foamy breakers. With each minute the wind strengthened.

'Typical,' Dad said, 'for weeks we haven't had wind and now we don't want it, we get it in buckets.'

Mom went below to boil water for coffee and came back on deck looking pale.

'Frank,' she said, 'there's something wrong with the barometer. Come and see.'

Our brass barometer was mounted next to a matching clock on the bulkhead leading to Robert's cabin. They looked smart together like that, nattily nautical – particularly when we remembered to polish them. Dad stepped up to the barometer and tapped the glass with his finger. The needle juddered a little before returning to its position: 1005 millibars. I'd never seen it so low. For weeks the needle had been hovering between 1012 and 1013. Now it appeared to have developed a sort of dropsy and it was falling unsteadily even as we watched. By the time we had finished our morning coffee, the needle tip pointed tremulously at 1003 millibars. This was not a good sign. Low atmospheric pressure represents a void which air rushes in to fill. Rushing air is, of course, wind. The faster the fall and the lower the pressure, the stronger the wind that blows across the gradient.

In Brisbane I'd taken geography, a subject I discovered was very relevant to sailing. I knew that weather maps represented pressure variations using isobars – lines on a chart joining areas of equal pressure. The closer the lines and steeper the gradient, the more violent the storm. Over the ensuing 15 minutes we watched our barometer fall to 1000 millibars. Plotting these isobars on a weather map would be almost impossible, they were so close together.

'What the fuck's going on?' Dad muttered. 'Nicky, you're always listening to the weather reports. What does your clever man have to say about this, hey?'

I shook my head. 'Nothing. Just that big low in the north, it's been there for weeks.'

I tapped the barometer myself. 'This doesn't make any sense.'

We were interrupted then by Robert shouting from the bow where we'd left him on lookout. His voice was barely audible above the wind, and Mom relayed the message down

the hatch: Robert had seen land. The island he had seen lay so low in the water it was visible only from the crests of the waves. Joining my brother at the bow, and straining to see above the swell, I glimpsed a scoop of yellow sand and a single adolescent coconut palm cringing in the wind. It was more than I had expected. The anchorage, however, was every bit as terrible as I'd feared; there was no shelter at all, and short, choppy waves broke and foamed everywhere. In bright sunlight, through the water, we saw endless banks of coral. To anchor we needed sand, somewhere we could let out a length of chain to absorb the repeated shock of *Vingila's* bow yanking against the choppy waves. Closer to shore we found a patch of sand, but a yacht was anchored there already. We dropped our main sail and motored around the boat, yelling greetings. She was a small vessel, about 30 feet long, and her hatches and sails were firmly battened down. A dinghy lay lashed upside down on her foredeck. Waves broke over her bow as she rode at anchor, jerking back against the chain as showers of spray drove against her sun dodger. Nobody responded to our calls.

Dad went below to make contact on the VHF radio.

'They're not answering. I tried the Ham as well. I wonder if it's been abandoned. And the barometer's fallen to 998 millibars.' He looked around. 'Maybe we could anchor over there, in front of them.'

'998 millibars?' Mom said, 'we can't stay here.'

Robert came from the bow. 'What's happening?'

'Barometer's fallen to 998,' I said. 'We're in for shit and I'm not looking forward to tonight.' I turned my face into the wind and spoke into his ear. I was close enough to see how salt crystals had formed along the tiny hairs sprouting from his ear lobe.

'Dad wants to stay here,' I said.

'Why?'

'Frank...' Mom said.

'What is it with you lot?' Dad's sweeping, exasperated hand gesture encompassed us all, including Pepe, who was cowering in the cockpit keeping clear of the spray. At the sound of my father's voice, Pepe winced. Robert and Mom were quiet; I had the feeling they were waiting for me to speak.

'Dad, if this wind picks up we'll never get out at night,' I said.

'Can't you see we'll never get the chance to come here again?'

Dad's voice took on a wheedling tone. 'Imagine the diving. Think of all the shells.'

I thought of the reef, the coral, the fish, the sharks and all the shells. I thought of the hot yellow sand and the single stunted palm. I thought of the dropping barometer and the rising waves. I didn't want to stay.

'What's here anyway? One frigging palm tree,' I answered. I waited for the old man to slap me, but he turned his attention to my brother, who was at the helm, keeping *Vingila's* head into the wind.

'Robert?'

'Aw, Dad.'

'Well, I don't like it,' Mom said. 'I don't want to stay.'

'I didn't ask you, Tubby,' Dad said, staring at Robert.

Mom squatted next to Pepe, running her hand along his back. He heaved a sigh and shuffled closer, resting a damp chin against her leg and looking up at her to show the stained whites of his eyeballs. Something in my chest clenched. I remembered a time when I too

could be calmed by a word or pat from my mother and I envied Pepe his ability to be comforted. I also envied the dog his ignorance of the barometer's falling needle.

Robert, who seldom voiced an opinion, did so now. '998 millibars doesn't sound good to me,' he said, holding Dad's stare. 'I think we should go.'

We circled the unresponsive yacht once more, blowing our horn and shouting, and then we left; picking our way through coral heads and a building sea, under a small mainsail. Robert looked sharp at the bow, standing on the pulpit with a hand behind him on the fore-stay for balance. By lunchtime we were clear of Chesterfield and the sea was so rough we could barely eat lunch.

'I'm sailing with a bunch of blabby rats. Always ready to give up, always ready to leave a sinking ship.'

'So I'm a rat,' I said. 'I left the boat on the beach in Tahiti and and I left in Samoa for the tidal wave. Well I'm sorry. I was only 12.'

'A twelve year old rat. And now you're 16 and nothing's changed.'

Dad didn't generally forgive and forget except in a few, exceptional cases. After five years he'd managed to forget about the line *Cipango* claimed we had lost when *Vingila* was beached in Tahiti but he could not forget my desertion that same night. He'd made up with *Cipango* but he still liked to mention my lapse of courage. Then of course there was the tidal wave incident in American Samoa. And now a mutiny in Chesterfield.

Pepe shivered and tried to make himself smaller in a corner. I think my father would have liked to continue with a more detailed analysis of our character deficiencies, but the gale intervened. First we had to reef the main sail and then – as the wind intensified – we were forced to lower the main and raise the storm jib. All this was done as the sun set and

darkness fell. To a constant soundtrack of wind screaming through the rigging, bellowed at each other, although when we opened our mouths, the wind swept our voices away. The spray was so heavy it felt as if we were working under water, and all the previously inanimate objects on deck – the sheets, the winch handles, the helm, the boom – seemed to have come violently alive, to twist and fight in our hands, and to lash out vindictively. The sails refused to be restrained and tried to escape and take along anyone foolish enough to try to stop them. Once we had hove-to under the storm jib, we went inside. We couldn't eat a proper supper – the sea was too rough, so we lay on the floor, gnawing fish biltong and black strips of dried banana while *Vingila* lurched and bucked like a mechanical bull at a rodeo.

After some hours Mom made tea, serving careful half-cups. Outside the sea had been churned to pure white foam and our storm jib strained in the darkness. I wanted to sleep in my own cabin, as far away from my family as possible, but repeated wave blows under the stern threw me from my bunk, forcing me to return to the saloon floor where I spent a resentful night near Dad. The barometer – at least – was rising. At midnight the atmospheric pressure read 1002 millibars and, six hours later, 1008. It was clear that the blow, intense though it was, wouldn't last long. By morning the gale had eased, although the waves were still high and confused. At least we had wind again. We hoped it would persist and blow us all the way to Australia, but it didn't. It changed direction. As the sun moved through a smeary sky, making its way between storm-ripped clouds, the wind abated and simultaneously inched around degree until by late afternoon, we were facing a light headwind. Wind on the nose was the last thing we expected. Forced to into a beat, we put *Vingila* on a port tack. She responded sullenly, jack-knifing into the waves. The Sat Nav spat out the latest co-

ordinates; Chesterfield now lay 120 miles astern. Thanks to the storm we had at last made some progress.

Dad plotted our new position on the chart, measuring the distance we had covered with a pair of callipers.

‘We’re going back,’ he said.

Mom’s head snapped up from the book she was reading. ‘What?’

‘I said we’re going back.’

Mom looked confused. ‘Back to where?’ she said.

‘Chesterfield,’ said Dad. ‘Do you have a problem with that?’

That night when Mom made her daily entry in the logbook, in addition to the usual notes about wind speed and direction, the log reading and the co-ordinates of our position, she added an unusually personal line. ‘This is a very sad boat,’ she wrote.

We never reached Chesterfield Reef. First the south-west wind weakened and then it died. When it picked up again, it blew from the north. Dad wanted to beat again, this time away from Australia, but our lack of enthusiasm had worn him down, so we turned about and set *Vingila*’s course south. We were within 38 miles of Chesterfield at the time, and too far to see the palm tree.

Later, that same afternoon, Dad cheered up.

‘Look at this,’ he said, pointing to something small on the chart. ‘Here’s a reef I’ve never noticed. We’ll go there instead.’

I examined the tiny mark next to his finger. Bird Islet was smaller than Chesterfield and without the extensive fringing reef, which could possibly make the anchorage safer, or not. The entire place looked miniscule and I doubted palms fringed its tiny shore, but at

least it lay in the right direction. In light winds *Vingila* might take several days to reach Bird Islet. During that time, much could happen. Dad could even forget about the place.

Over the following days the wind remained weak – around 10 knots – which was just enough to keep us moving, although progress was painfully slow. We caught sharks, wahoo and tuna and made biltong from their flesh. A school of bonito swam beside the boat for most of a morning. We began to spot sea-birds. To the north, the low pressure system gradually intensified.

Bird Islet was roughly the size of a rugby field. Composed of nothing more than yellow sand sprinkled over a crown of coral, it rose incongruously above the waves in an otherwise empty stretch of ocean. Without the Sat Nav we might have sailed blindly past. The place lacked even the single, clichéd palm of Chesterfield, although it did have a lot of birds and in the light winds, the anchorage was protected by a close ring of reef. We took Pepe ashore to disturb the colonies of nesting frigate birds, gannets and fairy terns which, until that point, had thought they were safe from land-based predators. Having no desire to eat gull-egg *heuvos rancheros* ever again, we didn't collect any eggs. Pepe sniffed at the fuzzy chicks, ignored the screaming adults and, after failing to find anywhere suitable to lift his leg, squatted near the high-water line to pee on a heap of drying seaweed. Dad and Robert snorkelled on the reef and speared a couple of coral trout, which we ate for lunch together with our 10th last pineapple and a slightly wrinkled cucumber. After we'd eaten, cleaned up, and had a rest, we raised anchor and sailed away.

'That wasn't so bad now, was it?' said Dad, giving me a playful cuff on the ear.

That evening the sympathetic Australian weather man sounded worried when he announced that the low pressure system lying to the south of the Solomon Islands had deep-

ened further and was growing more organised. The system was now officially classified as a tropical depression. He sounded apologetic, as if he were in some way implicated. Within the depression, winds had begun gusting to 39 knots, or 63km per hour and, although it still lacked a central eye, it was showing signs of developing into the first tropical storm of the season.

*

Robert and I lay together at the back of the boat, spitting water melon pips into sea and watching small fish dart from beneath the protection of *Vingila's* hull to investigate. I lowered myself off the back of the boat, holding on to Baruch's rudder. It was cooler there, closer to the water in the shade of the overhanging stern.

'Watch out for Dad,' Robert said.

'It's okay, he and Mom are busy inside. He told me not to bother them for a while.'

I sat on the part of the rudder above the water.

'What do you think they're doing?' Robert said.

'Don't ask. The usual.'

I dipped a finger into the impossibly blue, impossibly clear water. It felt as if we were floating in space. Bending my head over, I felt the blood pulse in my ears. The sun's rays refracted to depths where I thought I saw long, silvery shapes swimming. I trailed my finger in a circle. The bravest of the small fish came out and took a nip.

'Ouch.' I pulled my finger from the water to suck it and bent my head over again.

'What are you up to down there?' Robert asked.

'Just having a closer look.'

Above the abyss, *Vingila's* deep keel looked small and toy-like. Her red anti-fouling paint flashed dull purple in the blue light. Bending over, I could see her rudder and the brassy glint of her prop as she rose and fell on almost imperceptible swells. I straddled Baruch, dragging both feet in the water. The fish fled, then turned back on themselves, lured by the promise of something to eat.

'How's the hull?' asked Robert.

'Clean. No barnacles.'

'Remember Galapagos?' Robert asked, hanging his head over the stern, to look at me upside down, blond hair falling over his face.

'Yup, and all the goose-necked barnacles.'

'If we had them now, I'd have to jump in and scrape them off.'

'I'd watch out for sharks,' I said, 'but don't expect me to get in with you.'

We were quiet for a while then I said, 'Robert, don't say anything to Dad, but when we get to Australia – I mean *if* we get to Australia – without a hurricane or anything, I'm thinking of moving out.'

'Leaving *Vingila*?'

'Yes, leaving the yacht, and Mom and Dad. You too I suppose, if you don't want to come with me.'

Robert looked at me and shook his head. 'Why?'

I didn't answer. My feelings were difficult to put into words and contradictory. I was leaving because of my father – who still kept the Whistler handy and told me how I couldn't think – and I was leaving because I hated sailing with a hurricane breathing down the back of my neck. Mainly, I was leaving because of *Vingila*. Watching her roll in the breakers that

night on the beach in Tahiti had roused feelings in me that hadn't gone away. She'd become more than a mere inanimate object. I began thinking of her as a protector with whom I'd formed a pact. She kept us safe in storms and heavy seas, and we in turn looked after her. I had somehow assigned that role to myself and it was eating away at me and wearing me down. I had made *Vingila* my burden. I felt responsible but powerless. I lacked authority. Everything I had was invested in her – my family, my possessions, my options, my future. She was suffocating me, and in turn I felt as if I was failing her. I couldn't see a way past her unless I broke away completely. I'd also begun to believe that the freedom of sailing was a false freedom. A trap of poverty and endless moving on. Of course I was just seeing things in the black and white of adolescence.

'I've had enough of sailing,' I said. 'I'm thinking of doing something else.'

'Like what?'

'Maybe going back to South Africa.'

'And money?'

'Nana might help and there may be something in Benoni from the houses. I'll take some cowries. The *guttata*, and maybe some others.'

The *Cyprea guttata* was my most valuable shell; a rare, deep-water cowrie usually discovered only in the stomachs of fish. Since its lowly beginning in a grape box, my collection had grown. I knew the name of every specie of cowrie, as well as their current market price. I'd been meeting other collectors when I could, to sell and trade.

'You'd sell that?'

'For five hundred US dollars, I would.'

We were quiet for a while and then I said, 'I've decided I want to be a doctor. If I live with Nana in Alberton, I'll go to school there, and after that university, if I get in. But don't say anything yet, cause I don't want Dad to find out. I'm scared he won't let me go.'

I chose doctor as a profession because I couldn't really think of anything else. And I was reading a book about a pathologist who solved murders, which made the work sound glamorous and interesting. There was something stable-sounding about being a doctor, something weighty and solid. If I were a doctor, I reckoned, I could have my own yacht one day, and sail it where ever I pleased. And also, if my family or I got sick, I'd know what to do. I couldn't say it, but I was tired of having no money, no clothes, and of small things like not being able to get my haircut. I didn't like how rich people at yacht clubs looked at us as if we were scum. Rightly or not, I wanted material things and autonomy. In a naive, adolescent way, I wanted to be person of stature, somebody to be reckoned with.

'You're crazy,' said my brother.

Over the following days, I took to spending time alone at the stern. Lines of drying fish sticks tangled in my hair when I stood up and the scuppers smelled of dog piss, but at least I could be by myself. For comfort, I dragged over a cockpit cushion. It had been with us since Durban and during seven years of life at sea had not aged gracefully. The bleached vinyl had split in places, taking on the colour and texture of peeling, sun-burned skin. The mildewed foam interior which bulged through the cracked surface had grown flabby and waterlogged. Dragging the cushion felt like dragging a corpse. I spread my *pareo* over the vinyl, rigged another cloth for shade and lay for hours with my chin on the stern toe-rail, looking over the edge at Baruch's rudder slicing through blue infinity.

I completed my school exercises at the back of the boat too, working my way through the modules of an Australian correspondence course that Robert and I were taking. When we reached Australia I planned to post the chapters away, and I expected a written response from a faceless teacher within a few weeks. Of my subjects, I enjoyed mathematics most and would sometimes finish several weeks worth in a single morning. At sea, I found science and biology more difficult because I couldn't always set up my experiments properly if the water was rough, and the lenses of the microscope I had bought in Durban had, in the humid air, become overgrown with black fungus. I had long given up on history, languages or the arts, as I felt they didn't suit me. In the early years Mom taught us herself with the help of my aunt in Alberton who worked at a primary school and sent exercise books for us to copy. Although both she and my mother were teachers, neither of them had experience with high school.

We were thirteen years old when Mom enrolled us illegally in Brisbane State High while my father took on work at a marine engineering company. School was a shock at first. I hated the uniforms, the discipline and the hours of formal lessons, but I discovered a knack for learning that I wanted to take further. When we were kicked out of Australia, Mom managed to register us with a correspondence college aimed mainly at children living on remote farms on the outback.

Usually Robert and I did schoolwork together at the saloon table, but as the tropical depression slowly intensified I did all my work alone, lying on the scabby cushion at the stern. Once I was done, I read books or just lay, looking into the water and thinking. I thought about Jean-Marc and Dominique on *Cipango*. I imagined that they would have reached Papua New Guinea, and I wondered how they were liking it. I thought about Nad-

ine and Vincent and how we'd met up again in Vanuatu. The last time we'd seen them was several months later in an anchorage on Gaudalcanal when Vincent invited us to dinner. He boiled yams and purple sweet potatoes and served them from wooden bowls he'd carved himself. We ate with wooden chopsticks because Nadine preferred not to have metal aboard, except for a few essential tools like pots, spear-guns and fish hooks. She didn't join us that night because she was too ill. While we ate, she lay in pain in the fore-peak with an abscess like a ripe grapefruit on her thigh. She looked as if she needed urgent surgery to drain the pus, but Vincent declined my mother's offer of painkillers and antibiotics, telling us Nadine refused to take anything unnatural. Ramone had watched us from under a tangled fringe with animal eyes. I thought about his future and my own. I thought about Ernest on the junk *Maria-José* back in Durban and how he believed his sons didn't need schooling because they could sail and navigate. Opting out of a conventional existence was all very well, I decided, if it was voluntary.

My thoughts were interrupted by Dad shaking a fist in my face.

'You!' he said.

'What?' I ran through all the things in my head I might have done wrong. Had he found out about the vodka?

'You did this!'

'What?' I knew I should have topped the vodka level up with water, but because he never drank at sea I didn't think he'd check.

'You thought it up.'

So it wasn't the vodka.

'Dad, what is it?'

'All that worrying and fussing. Before we even left Marovo you were at it. Always talking about hurricanes. Always going on and on. Well, now you've got one.'

He thrust his face into mine. 'Jonah!' he hissed, and stalked off to the cockpit.

I lay back on my cushion and looked around. The wind blew from the north west at about 15 knots, *Vingila* rode small, even swells and the sky above was scattered with benign white clouds. Where was the hurricane?

The Australian weatherman confirmed my father's news. Cyclone Winnie, with wind speeds of 150 km per hour, had formed in the Coral Sea, south of the Solomon Islands. Apparently Cyclone Winnie was very unusual because she was the latest severe tropical storm on record to have been seen so late in the year. Meteorologists label each year's hurricanes alphabetically from January to December, which made Winnie the 23rd storm of 1983. And the first cyclone of the new season.

'At least now you can stop waiting for it,' my brother said when he joined me later at the stern, where I sat brooding. Then he went to help Mom with supper while I sat hugging my cushion until after the sun had set and the sky had turned dark.

Part 6

South Africa

Chapter 21

Alberton

I wept all the way from Brisbane to Sydney on the plane. In Sydney I changed planes and stopped crying and remained dry eyed for the duration of the 18 hour flight to Johannesburg. As the aircraft ascended into the sky, pushing me back into my seat, my emotions drained away as if they had been left behind on the ground. I felt calm, and strangely empty, like a shipwreck survivor who, after a good pounding by the waves, has been washed up on a quiet beach. Outside the plane's porthole, a frigid wind screamed and humpbacked clouds wallowed between us and the red earth of Australia. At unpredictable intervals stewardesses delivered trays of strange food and brittle cups half-full of orange juice and, apart from mumbling thanks in the general direction of their stiff, painted faces, I spoke to no one. We landed in Johannesburg just before New Year. I collected my bag. Everything I owned fitted into a day-pack; one pair of jeans, five T-shirts, six pairs of panties and a sweatshirt. I'd also packed a selection of rare cowries, including the *Cyprea guttata* which I planned to sell so that I could buy some clothes and shoes. Slinging my bag over my shoulder I tried to find my way out. A pair of automatic doors opened with a sigh and I spilled into a white hall. When I saw Nana and Chummy waiting behind a waist-high barrier, I began to cry again. Sobs welled up and shook my body. Nana walked up and took my hand in both of hers. A few late-night stragglers stared at me. Chummy, who may have been looking for a slightly

larger version of a nine year old, made eye contact and looked alarmed. The spiky punk hairstyle I'd cultivated when we had left Australia to sail to the Solomon Islands, had grown out, but I still wore my antique spectacles with tiny, twisted arms and round, telescopic lenses. I had holes in my jeans, an image of Johnny Rotten on my T-shirt, and a pair of plastic lace-up shoes on my feet.

My grandfather moved forward awkwardly, approaching an unfamiliar teenage girl with caution. I hadn't seen him since 1977, the day my mother had packed Robert and me into the back of her blue Peugeot 404 together with Pepe, seven years earlier.

'Please Nicky, don't cry.' Chummy said, reaching into the pocket of his sports coat for a neatly folded tissue and handing it to me.

His gesture elicited a fresh burst of sobbing. He searched for words of comfort, his hand reached up to my shoulder but stopped before it got there. He looked bewildered.

'We'll get you other glasses,' he said. 'Please don't cry.'

'Don't bother the child like that. Maybe she likes her funny glasses.' Nana seemed to have shrunk. Her head barely reached my shoulder. Around us people waved Happy New Year signs at arriving passengers. My grandmother looked determined to remain upbeat.

'If we hurry,' she said, 'we can watch the end of the New Year party on television. Chummy watches it every year, so we mustn't hang about, he doesn't like to miss it. And there's a surprise for you at home Nicky. Somebody's waiting to see you.'

The smell of Nana and Chummy's house hadn't changed since I was nine. Walking through the door I took a breath, inhaling a familiar mixture of lavender floor polish and fried chicken. The decor hadn't changed either; green lino in the kitchen, brown carpet in the lounge, the long parquet-floored passage leading to an aqua tiled bathroom with frosted

windows and net curtains. Even my bed still had the same candle-wicked spread, its tassels hanging neatly in a row above the floral patterned rug. And yet everything was foreign.

‘Look who’s here!’ Nana said, taking me over to the spare bed. ‘See, here’s Lulu, and here’s Sharon and here,’ – she lifted up a familiar figure – ‘is Patsy!’

She handed me my old doll, the one with a bald head as big as a baby’s, still wearing her frock and frilled bonnet of gritty, blue fabric.

‘See, I’ve kept her for you. Doesn’t she look good?’

Patsy’s dimpled plastic arms had faded somewhat but otherwise she was unchanged, just a little more artificial than I remembered. I tipped her over and her stiff eyelids with their bristled lashes clicked closed, releasing me from her glassy stare. A pain shot through my chest with such force it made me gasp. I pictured my mother and father sitting around the main saloon table drinking coffee and eating rice for breakfast with my twin brother. Pepe with his chin on Robert’s thigh, begging for food. Dad on the fishing box, which was also the best seat. My place empty. Sacks of tuna biltong and dried bananas in the fore-peak next to my brother’s bunk, their smell mixing with that of the early-morning coffee. I saw my bunk in the stern cabin, near the sail locker and the work-bench with the vice and I wanted nothing more than to climb into my own bed, the one I had slept in for the last seven years, put my head on my pillow and go to sleep. When I woke up I’d find that the plane flight, Johannesburg, Alberton, Patsy and my grandparents were nothing but a dream.

‘Come on,’ Nana said, ‘let’s watch the end of the TV party, it’s fun.’

*

For three weeks I walked around with a constant pain in my chest. It was worst in the evenings after we’d finished supper, which we ate on trays in front of the television, and when I

helped Nana with the dishes. As I dried plates and cutlery, tears ran down my face, dripping onto my chest. Outside, African birds sang in the dusk. Everything was both familiar and simultaneously alien. Often there were thunderstorms with lightning and strong gusts of wind and although I no longer needed to worry about the anchor dragging or taking down sails, I was thoroughly miserable.

I had been enrolled in my new school and Nana had taken me to buy my uniform, a shapeless dress of sky blue, and a bag to carry my books. I would be starting in mid-January and had been told that because Alberton High was a small school, I couldn't expect to take German or several of the other subjects I had studied in Brisbane State High. Furthermore I was expected to pass Afrikaans, a language I hadn't heard for seven years, on higher grade, like all the other students. The principal had made a point to my grandmother that no special allowances would be made for me simply because I had an 'unusual educational background.'

After three weeks, as I stood drying the dishes and crying, my grandmother asked me if it wouldn't be easier to return to my family. I shook my head. I couldn't explain how much I needed to finish what I had started, how I could never go back to *Vingila*.

'No Nana,' I said, 'I'll feel better soon, I promise. I'll get used to it.'

At night I dreamed I was sailing. *Vingila* with her main and jib trimmed, heeling over in a broad reach, pushing up a bow wave. Pepe strutting the decks, barking at schools of flying fish bulleting from the swells. When my dreams woke me, I lay in the dark and thought about Cyclone Winnie, trailing us across the Coral Sea before turning away and dying. She never caught *Vingila*, although for a time it seemed she would. In the days before she dissi-

pated, we used the winds of her outskirts to sail to Brisbane. You see, my father had said to me, you always worry for nothing. The next day I told him I was leaving for South Africa.

After two months, my mother scraped enough money together to fly from Australia and see how I was settling in. Each morning I headed off in my blue dress with my hair tied back as per school regulations. Nana and Chummy remarked how much neater I had become in just a few months. I didn't tell them or my mother about the teasing I was experiencing at school, or the name calling. My chest pain eased somewhat with my mother in the house but I knew that when she left again it would only get worse.

In a way getting malaria was a relief because I stopped feeling so sad. I was far too ill and wretched to feel sad, and with the fevers my thoughts blurred into delirium and hazy dreams.

*

When Chummy drove me to the fever hospital he got lost on the way and for almost two hours we wandered through the back streets of Johannesburg. We arrived at Rietfontein hospital as the sun was setting. The hospital, set on spacious wooded grounds, was divided into sections. We were directed to the isolation wing, a low bunker-type building. During my stay I would learn that this ward, which dealt mainly with severe viral haemorrhagic infections like Ebola and Congo Fever, was primarily for whites. Behind the isolation wing sat a small TB ward, which was also for whites. The bulk of the hospital, however – several sprawling wards with verandas and galvanized tin roofs, was reserved for black men with tuberculosis.

As we drove into the grounds, we passed groups of emaciated men strolling under the trees, or sitting in the sun, smoking. They all wore faded blue pyjamas that flapped about

their skeletal frames. Their feet were thrust into slops or shoes with trodden-down heels which they wore without socks. Most of their pants were too short and exposed their scaly ankles.

‘At least you’ve got the right clothes for this place, Nicky,’ Mom said.

A nurse in the isolation ward told us that Dr Miller had waited until five before going home. He would see me in the morning. She led us down a long wooden-floored passage, from which doors opened into small cells. Each ward held only a single bed, made up with starched white sheets hard as cardboard. The doors to the rooms all had spy holes; hatches which could be opened from the outside, enabling nurses to look in without opening the door. Outside my room, I had a small veranda and beyond that were dark trees and grounds which stretched into the distance. I wasn’t sure if the peacocks and monkeys I saw foraging beneath their branches were real or vestiges of my delirium.

Mom helped me into Chummy’s old pyjamas, unwrapped a bunch of grapes, placed it on my bedside table, kissed me and left.

‘We can’t stay,’ she said as she walked out the door, ‘because Chummy doesn’t want to miss his TV program.’

A hard-faced nurse and an elderly bearded doctor with a paunch came in to see me about half an hour later. He wore a stethoscope around his neck and she pushed a trolley loaded with files and tinkling thermometers in glass jars.

‘So where have you been, little girl?’ he said as his hands palpated my abdomen.

‘Solomon Islands.’

‘Never heard of them. Where are they?’

‘Near Papua New Guinea, on the equator.’

'What on earth were you doing there?'

'Sailing.'

His hand made its way toward my underarm. On route its fingers curled themselves around my bare breast.

I flinched and glared at him.

'Sorry,' he said absently and the hand moved on to my armpit.

'How long have you been sailing?'

'Seven years.'

'Seven years! And what about school?'

I turned my face to the wall. 'On and off,' I said, 'a bit in Australia.'

The doctor took the chart from the nurse and wrote a few lines then they turned and walked out the door, leaving me alone. I couldn't sleep. Light from the passage flooded through my open door. At eight o'clock the nurse came in with a handful of bitter pills for me to swallow.

'I can't sleep. Is there anything for me to do?' I asked.

'Well you can't watch television because we've just admitted a bunch of open TB cases and they're in the TV room.'

She took my pulse, wrote a note in the chart and walked out the room.

About an hour after that I began crying. Hot, salty tears that slid down my cheeks to pool in my ears. The nurse stuck her head around the door.

'What's wrong with you?' she said.

'Can't sleep.'

The nursing office was across the passage directly opposite my ward. The bearded doctor who had groped my breast seemed to be working night shift because I could hear him talking to the nurse above the sound of a kettle boiling.

'How's the one in 6B?' he said.

'Sleeping,' replied the nurse.

'Sad story. Isn't it? And 7B?'

'The girlie with malaria? She's going to give us trouble, wait and see. Not sleeping. Crying.'

There was silence for a while except for the clinking of spoons in cups and the sound of water being poured.

Then the nurse spoke. 'Strange one, isn't she. Yacht and all. I wonder what she'll do without an education.'

'I can't imagine,' said the doctor.

The nurse gave a sigh so loud I could hear it across the passage. 'Oh well, I suppose she'll find something.'

Despite feeling weepy with the dregs of the malaria and the pangs of loss and homesickness, I felt an urge to set them straight. I had plans and a clear goal. I didn't know if I would achieve them but I felt that the doctor and nurse who were gossiping about me should at least know my intentions. I did not want to be dismissed. Pulling myself from the bed, I made my way across the passage on shaking legs. Chummy's pyjamas flapped around my ankles.

'Excuse me,' I said, looking into the little office where they sat knee to knee, holding their mugs of coffee.

'Yes?' said the nurse.

My lower lip began trembling so much I wasn't sure I'd get the words out, but I did.

'I couldn't help hearing – you were wondering what I'm going to do without an education?'

They exchanged a glance. Perhaps I'd imagined their conversation. Maybe they'd just been sitting in silence, drinking their cups of coffee when I chanced to stumble in and begin babbling. I continued anyway.

'One day,' I said, my voice cracking a little, 'I'm going to be a forensic pathologist.'

Then I turned and walked out of the room.

Eight years later I'd find myself in the same hospital again, this time as a final year medical student who no longer wanted to be a forensic pathologist. The old, bearded doctor was still there. He didn't recognise me, and by then I no longer felt that I owed him any explanation. I was too focused on attaining my concept of success. A concept which I only see now my father was brave enough to escape.

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN
GRADUATE SCHOOL IN HUMANITIES

**DECLARATION BY CANDIDATE FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER IN THE FACULTY OF HUMANITIES**

I, (*name of candidate*)

MARTINIQUE STILWELL

of (*address of candidate*)

15 RUSACRE RD
RONDEBOSCH
7700

do hereby declare that I empower the University of Cape Town to produce for
the purpose of research either the whole or any portion of the contents of my
dissertation entitled

in any manner whatsoever.

CANDIDATE'S SIGNATURE

DATE 3/2/2010

g:\ghu\forms\m-declaration

Signature

Abstract submitted

Date:

Yes

No

cc

**Fees
IAPO
PGFO**

g:\ghu\forms\m-receipt

Abstract: Thinking up a Hurricane

Martinique Stilwell

STLMAR011

In 1973 my father bought a yacht in land-locked Benoni and four years later, knowing nothing about either sailing or navigation, our family set off from Durban. Our intention was to sail the world. *Thinking up a Hurricane* is a travel memoir describing our journey and the changes that took place within the family as we wandered the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Over seven years we learned how to trim sails, catch coconut crabs and cook gull eggs. I found Jesus, and lost him again. I tried, and failed, to grow breasts like Dolly Parton. I learned to read the weather and predict storms. Growing older and entering adolescence, I began questioning the alternative life-style my parents had forged. This is a coming of age story about islands, relationships and hurricanes.

Abstract: Thinking up a Hurricane

Martinique Stilwell

STLMAR011

In 1973 my father bought a yacht in land-locked Benoni and four years later, knowing nothing about either sailing or navigation, our family set off from Durban. Our intention was to sail the world. *Thinking up a Hurricane* is a travel memoir describing our journey and the changes that took place within the family as we wandered the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Over seven years we learned how to trim sails, catch coconut crabs and cook gull eggs. I found Jesus, and lost him again. I tried, and failed, to grow breasts like Dolly Parton. I learned to read the weather and predict storms. Growing older and entering adolescence, I began questioning the alternative life-style my parents had forged. This is a coming of age story about islands, relationships and hurricanes.