

1

TO BE SURE I AM A DOUBTING THOMAS. TOO MUCH curiosity, too little faith, and that from early days and always. Off-duty, I stand on deck, wave-watching, awash with qualms. I let drift my mind and vex myself alone, afraid to fright my fellows, whispering only to wind and water. All is wind and water here.

I did not choose this path – the path of doubting, that is to say, doubting both myself and higher matters. And now the ocean path we follow here, a path so freely taken, stretches before me unclear, unknown, unproven, and I worry and wonder still if it was wise to take it. What if we find no island, or if there is no master living? Where then will the captain take us? And what if this Yankee has lied to us despite our minister? We have no papers. Proof of nothing. We leapt so fast. Nine days at sea, and we see nothing of our landing place.

My setting-forth desire was like an itch that I must scratch. It made me restless. I could not walk in circles all my days while others winged away. We hear how the world turns, and we want

to see its turning with our own eyes. Its riches too. This is natural, says Mr Reverend. We whose fathers have been plucked from us, perhaps we feel most strong the call to venture. But there are calls and callings. I am no Gospel Ploughman, and do not share my brother's thirst for pioneering in that blessed field.

I search again for my voyage-spirit, so strong on parting, so soon sped away. Way beyond our reef, the winds that blew within now skim my words away, quick as quickness, or blow 'em down my throat again, back into hiding. I tell myself it was timely to go, to seek a living beyond the skyline, to better all my family. I tell myself we can never know what is to come. I try to hide my fears – of failing, falling, flailing – but cannot shield all from all.

Because Solomona – holding the rail beside me, knuckle-soft – Solomona sees everything. Older (a little), taller (a little), steadier (always), my brother shake his head. Maybe he sees even into my cauldron-bubbling-mind. All-seeing, all-knowing, you know how it is. Like Him above, or would like to be, I sometimes reckon, before I dam my thinking. When the trader-captain came to our island, asking for men, quick quick – good jobs for good kanakas, working for an Englishman, no big plantation, no guano-gathering – it was not for his strength that Mr Reverend recommend Solomona but for his faith. And other reasons. All psalms, no qualms is my brother, even when grief is greatest. When I think it over more, very possibly, yes, indeed, most probably (I can have no doubt now), Solomona say what he say, despite all things, because he say what he always say, whatever he sees or fails to. Same as ever. Yes, same as ever.

God will provide.

God will provide.

Maybe so. Maybe no. But, I say – to myself alone, you under-

stand, only inside my own head's thinking – faith in the Lord is one matter, faith in men another. Right now, we are here at sea, a handful of Rock fellows ready to work, and days passing bell to bell on this vast vessel. Tar and copra, rope and strangers in our noses, many lands' voices in our ears. Talk I must learn harder to track. Some men call themselves God's Englishmen, but their speech is nothing like the Reverend's. Pig-tailed Celestials (as Yankees call the yellow men), a night-dark fellow whose name is Baltimore, some other Islanders who work with us in the ship's waist: all their words come strange and fast and loud and snaking, and I skip after them, catching two or three and losing four, so I cannot be sure always that I grasp what they may signify. My own words pitch and roll. My English tongue tangles as home twists in me, and a longing for land I had no need to know before.

High and dry we stand on deck on the big palagi ship called *Esperanza*, Auckland-bound, and the two-blooded deckboy from Samoa tell me as he passes, without a smile, that *Esperanza* is a word that signifies hope, in the language of the silver mines. Then on flies my mind, wayfinding without a body, all over and everywhere, wandering, wondering. How long will we voyage, in this ever-cooling air, and see no other island? I must try harder to keep faith with Mr Reverend, and Solomona too. These people are good, they tell me. This is no man-stealing ship. No chains. Look how we stand on deck, bound only to God. We will work, and our island master will pay as promised, and we will return with all our bounty, and our families will be raised in all eyes and we will make them proud. I will know a little more of the world and its wisdom. And Solomona's splintered heart will come back whole and healed.

Sunday comes again. Far ahead, clouds gather at the meeting of sea and sky. A brief line, darkening at its base. When I see the moving of another, darker cloud – a cloud of birds – and know that soon I will hear their clacketting calls, this is how I know that Monday Island will also soon be here, and then, like the birds, I will be wide awake indeed.

LIZZIE STICKS A KNIFE INTO THE BREAST OF THE nearest mutton-bird: a vicious hiss as a stream of hot oil hits the smouldering log below. It flares up, too high, and she jumps back, shielding her face. It's time to turn the rack, to keep things even, and ward off her mother's chiding. Where's Ada got to, or Billy, come to that? Out of sight and out of hearing. The smokery is built a little distance from the dwelling huts and outhouse, to save them from its powerful odours, and the vegetable gardens, where Ada and Ma were weeding earlier, lie on the other side again, on the flats above the beach. Strong as she is, Lizzie can't shift the weight of sixty spitted chicks on her own, and they will catch if she doesn't. She will have to move the fire instead. So she leans into the heat to spread and shift the embers with the stripped green stick she's using as a poker.

Then Billy's cry puts everything out of mind.

'A sail! A sail! Have you seen?'

She turns instantly, looking out to sea, seeing nothing yet. Billy appears but doesn't stop – and she knows just where he's going.

Abandoning fire and birds without a second thought, Lizzie scrambles down the tree-filled gully after him and up the other side to the higher bluff beyond, the lookout cliff. She moves quickly in her loose tunic, but not as fast as her younger brother, and not as fast as she'd like. At the top first, Billy squints at the ocean, and windmills his arms at her.

'Look!' he shouts. 'Right over there.'

'Where?' A sail is too easy to imagine, never more than when the sky and sea are bright. The sun catches the flat side of a wave at the wrong angle. A crest of foam. A whale's fluke. From far away anything can look like a billow of canvas if you want it hard enough. 'If you're wrong . . . '

'I'm not. Look harder. Look over there.'

Lizzie's brother lines her up behind his back as soon as she reaches him. He'll be catching her up in height before she knows it. His warm brown hair, darkened with fresh sweat, is already at her nostrils. But though his chest is broadening too, a little, she can match him for strength still, and let him know this when she needs to. Which isn't now. Billy pulls Lizzie's arms down around his own shoulders so that her eyes can follow his, and together they trace the line of his arm and pointing finger.

'You must be able to see her now.'

She can.

At last.

Billy pulls away, leaps and prances, as if his energy will speed the ship, but Lizzie resists the urge to join him in his dance. The vessel is a long way off. It's hard to tell its course. This unknown ship could be sailing away from them already, could go on sailing, straight-waked, and never come close, never see them.

'Does Pa know?'

'I don't know. He's not back yet. Nor Albert.'

Lizzie's eyes widen at the thought of Albert, and his joy at this. A vessel on the horizon would please nobody more. Away from Ma and Pa, well away and out of earshot, Albert talks of little else, on and on, relentless speculations, till only Ada can stand to hear him. Billy nods.

'I know. Maybe he'll shut up. If it really comes.'

'What do you think she is?' Lizzie asks, still looking, hope tacking. 'Can you tell?'

'Not yet. Three . . . no, four masts. I think. A windjammer?'

'Never mind. We're wasting time. Quick. Kindling.'

Like a cork from a bottle, Billy's off, sprinting up towards the forest while Lizzie shouts after him: 'Green wood too, remember, and plenty of it!'

The trickles of smoke already rising from the small cluster of huts on the flats and from the nearby smokery are too quickly dispersed, too missable. They need a proper fire, a huge one, a bonfire to darken the clouded autumn sky and roar, a fire that can't be mistaken for anything but a signal. They always keep some heavy fuel here on the bluff, ready and waiting, just in case. If a ship's sighted, they must act quickly, Pa used to warn the children, day after day. But he's said nothing about the fire for months, and the lighter branches are all blown away. There's nothing left here to catch a flame. Once or twice Lizzie's heard Pa remind Ma, quietly, how long it can take for word to spread when a place as remote as this is settled. The whaler that came last year, before they moved this side of the island, the mate who talked of work gangs . . . his ship could have wrecked itself a week later, and their message gone down with all hands. As for the *Good Intent*, which brought the Peacock family here, it's

been two years since they waved her off. No hope nor desire of seeing her again.

‘I’ll run and tell Ma, and Ada!’ shouts Lizzie. Her voice trails off, because Billy’s out of earshot, and she’s talking to herself. Is it too soon, too cruel to raise Ma’s fragile hopes? Part of Lizzie wants to hang back, until they are certain this ship will really come, until she’s checked with Pa, but she can’t risk any delay. An ignorant ship might try to put ashore by chance, if it had to, a ship short of water or meat, a nosy ship, an adventuring ship, but even on this side of the island, landing took skill. Why come close if you could keep yourself well clear of all the rocky islets on this side? Who’d ever guess a family might be here and longing?

Then Lizzie remembers the unturned birds and groans, anticipating ruin – half-charred carcasses; black on one side, bloody on the other – and Ma’s silent disappointment, so hard to bear. A scramble back down and up again, as it always goes on this island, into the trees and out the other side. And she finds her mother standing by the smokery, one hand in the small of her back, the other skewering. The birds are perfect.

‘Oh, Lizzie,’ she says. ‘How could you? Running off like that, and telling no one. Lucky for you I noticed.’

‘But Billy’s seen a ship! He really has! I’ve seen it too.’

The skewer falls and Mrs Peacock’s hands move swiftly to her ever-thickening waist, just for a moment, as if to pass a message to the child inside. Then she’s back with the one she birthed fifteen years earlier. ‘Then what are you waiting for?’ Her voice is sharp and urgent. ‘Back up there at once and get the bonfire going. Queenie can help me take these birds off. Ada will go with you – look, here she comes. Where’s Billy?’

'Gone for kindling and more wood. But I don't know if Pa and Albert have seen it. They need to know.'

Ma scans the trees that rise at the back of the buildings and climb towards a broken peak, mist-shrouded as many days as not. 'They'll soon see the smoke, with luck, if they've not seen the sail. Depends where they went hunting. Can't wait for 'em though.'

Ada arrives panting.

'What's all the fuss?'

Lizzie stays long enough to have the satisfaction of giving her older sister the news.

'A ship.'

She offers the words like a present, with a faint pop of her lips. Ada closes her eyes for a moment and swallows, swaying slightly. The first visitors since the whalers last winter. The second they've ever had.

'At last.'

Lizzie grabs Ada's upper arms, to hold her still and calm, and then to shake her into action. Unspeakable expectation skips through both pairs of eyes.

'Hurry up girls! And take this to light the fire.' Ma bends, with difficulty, to pull out the thick branch which Lizzie had been slowly feeding into the heart of the smoking fire. 'Tell Billy to bring up the logs Albert cut for seasoning yesterday. For speed. They're good and green.'

'Yes, Ma,' said Lizzie.

'We mustn't count our chickens though.' Cheeks flushed, Mrs Peacock turns back to the mutton-bird racks, but only for a second, and then she's looking again from daughter to daughter. 'We can't imagine . . . It would be foolish. No. Could it really . . . ? Oh, but quickly now, Lizzie! Don't let those embers die.'

Get back up there right away. I want to see that bonfire blazing. Blazing, do you hear?’

Lizzie steps back from her mother’s heat.

‘Ada, you run and get wood too now.’ Ma’s arms flap her away. ‘And send Queenie here. With Gus of course. Quickly now. Go!’

The sisters charge off in opposite directions. Lizzie holds her torch awkwardly away from her, determined not to stumble. Pa and Albert must have seen, she tells herself, what with being higher, and they’ll surely be on their way. If they’ve not seen the sails, they’ll soon see the bonfire. She longs to see Pa’s face, just at that moment. She aches for this ship to be the one they’re all hoping for.

Back on the bluff, Billy takes the glowing log from Lizzie and blows it hot again, then kneels as if he’s praying. Through a hollow green stem, he whistles up a flicker from the pile he’s made of twigs, dry leaves and broken embers. It falters and retreats a little before the flames take hold. Finally, urged on by both children with all their might, a thick dark column spews angrily from the bonfire and billows into the sky.

They pile on more green branches – and more. Burning leaves take off like fledglings, swirling and dancing above the flames, rising and falling, glowing and dying. Blackened fragments stick to Lizzie’s sweaty face as she pokes impatiently at the mass of vegetation, shifting branches here and there to make passageways for the air, then stepping back with outstretched hands when the heat becomes unbearable.

‘They’ve seen us!’ shouts Billy, staring out to sea again with red-rimmed eyes, which he wipes with the back of his hand. He blinks a few times to clear his vision. ‘Look! She’s coming about . . . she surely is.’

He’s jumping again, in danger of waving both arms from their

sockets. Lizzie's eyes are streaming too. When she squeezes them shut, it's like closing her lids on thorns. She tries to shake away the piercing, forcing herself back into the heat and smoke to heap yet more sticks onto the fire, young ones, leafy ones, mossy ones.

Can't be sure yet.

Billy still might be mistaken. The ship's captain could change his mind and course at any time.

More fire, more smoke. Don't stop. Effort now, reward later. That's her training. She's learned it well.

'Did you see Pa?' Lizzie asks Billy for the second time. 'Are they back?'

'I've not seen him or Albert. I already told you.'

'I do wish Ada would hurry up.'

Ada will be rounding up her smaller sisters, soothing their mother. She'll hardly dare look out to sea for fear of disappointment.

More wood. More smoke.

'Oh, where *are* they?' Lizzie frets. 'Did they say? How long *can* they be?'

Billy doesn't remember either where Pa planned to hunt – just that Ma wanted to smoke and barrel up some meat while the smokery was going.

'If they've struck lucky, they'll still be butchering, and never looking up,' says Billy. 'You know Pa told Albert he had to do it by himself this time? So he'll be watching him. Making sure he doesn't do it wrong.'

'Poor Albert,' says Lizzie. 'How he does provoke Pa.'

She swings on another log. Smouldering branches shift and crash, releasing a new stream of sparks. Satisfied they've both done all they can for the time being, Lizzie plants herself beside her younger brother. Feet apart, they stand and watch the sea.

That's it, she thinks, and her heart contracts. The windjammer is some way off still, but she's surely seen them. Yes, she's changing course. She's drawing closer. No doubting. Again Lizzie regrets she cannot see her father's face.

'Look, Billy! We just need patience now.'

'You'll tell Pa I saw the ship first?' Billy says.

'Maybe I will,' Lizzie teases. 'Maybe I won't.'

Billy aims a sideways kick at her shin. She catches his leg without a thought and traps his muscled calf in the palm of her hand, so that he's left tottering on the other foot.

'What's it worth?' she asks.

He twists away from her, unsuccessfully, for now she's used to catching kicking goats by the hind leg, and she knows how to hold on. His hands go down for balance, his head hangs between them. He doesn't reply, because she knows the answer: praise from Pa means everything to Billy.

'But will you?' he pleads again.

Grinning at the desperation of his desire, Lizzie lifts his leg still higher. She can afford to be amused. She hardly needs a ship-sighting to prove herself. If anyone does, it's Albert, she reflects, and this makes her hope harder he's seen it too by now.

'Yes. I'll tell him. Of course I will.'

Her younger brother escapes without much trouble, and pushes her briefly, not hard.

'A ship!' she shouts, pushing him back.

'A ship!' he replies, crashing back into her. Hysteria erupts with the speed of overboiling milk, a crazy, barking laughter that leaves them quickly still and empty.

'We mustn't stop watching,' says Billy, eyes back on the sea.

Something's changed. Lizzie can't say quite what, but it unsteadies her.

'Are you sure she's seen us?' she asks.

'Yes. No. Yes, I'm sure.' His fingernails dig into her arm with every urgent contradiction.

'I suppose they could be . . . ' Lizzie's other fear is best not spoken. What kind of ship is this? It's hard enough to judge the character of a captain when you've spent weeks as his passenger. From a clifftop, it's impossible. But weren't their fortunes turning now, the scales rebalancing at last? The Peacock family was surely on the up. Pa had said so, just a few weeks ago, looking at the thriving vegetables, and Ma had agreed, and they had looked at each other in such a way Lizzie knew it couldn't be for show. They had earned their change in luck, Ma said. And this ship would be the proof and crown of it.

Holding her elbows, Lizzie moves her weight back and forth from foot to foot, side to side, a slow but deliberate rocking rhythm. Step by step, she is bringing this ship in with willpower, as you might sway a baby into slumber.

Some moments later, she spits hair from her mouth, and thrusts her hands into the pockets of her flapping tunic to hold its skirts down.

'Do you feel the wind rise?' she presses Billy.

'No. Yes. A little, maybe. It's always windy up here.'

It seems windier than before though. The clouds are moving faster. A squall? Now? No. No. No. She refuses to contemplate the possibility.

'Lizzie! Billy!'

It's Queenie, running to join them, slowed by her reluctance to take her eyes off the sea, and the awkwardness of her burden.

‘Oh no,’ she wails, as she gets closer, letting her logs fall. Her fingers pincer Lizzie’s arm. ‘It’s not going away, is it? It can’t leave us now. It can’t.’ Queenie shouts out, uselessly, waving and jumping as she calls: ‘Ahoy! Come back!’

Then Ada and little Gussie climb to meet them, with more wood, and also the young dog, Spy, barking sharply.

‘Come and see! Quickly! Ada!’ calls Lizzie.

Whirlpooling in the children’s flood of desperation, Spy rushes around the fire and leaps and growls and, without Albert there, Queenie and Gussie can do nothing to calm him. Lizzie begins to wave too. She’s sure the pitch of the growling surf below is rising. And the ship now seems to be getting smaller instead of bigger.

‘Keep waving, Queenie. You too, Gussie, wave harder! Make sure they see us.’

Ada is waving hardest of all of them, her body stretched to snapping.

‘Oh look over here! This way! Come on!’

They leap and sweep their arms through the smoky air like nesting terns. Ada stops to fumble in her tunic pocket.

‘Wait! I’ve brought Pa’s spyglass. Ma’s idea. He won’t be angry.’ She unscrews the instrument and screws up one eye. But her hands are loose and bony, and the horizon is bucking with her nerves.

‘It *is* a windjammer,’ says Billy at last, with satisfaction, without the need of magnification.

‘Can you see a flag?’ The words burst from Lizzie, who balls her fists to stop them snatching the glass from Ada.

‘Of course not,’ says Ada. ‘Not yet.’

In fact Ada can’t see a thing. Her eyes are filling with tears – of relief, of hope. She’s not even sure herself why she’s crying.

3

*E*SPERANZA ROLL AND PITCH, STILL IN DEEP WATER plenty lengths from land, and beyond her monstrous roaring. On the quarterdeck, our Yankee captain shake his head and flatten his lips. We six Rock fellows stand together, skin to skin, breath hard and quick, all holding tight the foredeck rail, keeping nerve and body steady. Here we are, but this place has yet to show itself. Our hearts little know if they should leap or bottom-sink, and we cannot command them.

We had no imagining of an island so unlike our own, so small from far off and yet so tall before us, rising high, even into cloud, so many trees above and so wild of sea below. Scatter of islets to one side. We stare through spray at breakers hurling on a grey beach of sand and stones, and stare at the green land above, upping here and downing there, dark and light in turn. Most of all we stare at the creatures we spy out where the land rises close and high above the shoreline and no trees grow, human creatures who up and down themselves as quick as quick.

Vilipate questions Solomona. Have we come to work only for children? How will they pay us? My brother's shoulders rise and fall. He hate to say he does not know. He knows as much of this as you, I say, but silently, to shield my brother. What can anyone know from this distance?

'You are certain it will not be like Flint Island?' asks Likatau, who we call Luka. 'The work?' Ten from our village went last year to scrape guano for Mr Arundel. Mr Reverend say he is a proper Christian gentleman, like our Mr Peacock, but still he sent a native teacher with them.

'You know we come to clear the land for planting,' I say, staring at the trees, so many and so tall, trusting I speak true. 'You know our labour here.'

Then up through the hatch comes Cook's scowling face, question-full. Solomona points.

'Little ones . . . Palagi . . .'

Up and down they jump, mouths open, flapping wings, dark little birds waiting to be fed. No colour to 'em. We only see their shouts. The sky sucks up smoke from the bluff, and throws it around.

Cook – a little Englishman who scuttles side to side of his galley kingdom on crayfish legs, all that food and yet so thin – Cook stares too, peg-teeth on show.

'Practising their war dances,' says he, and raise finger-wagging hands and monster his mouth at us. His tongue is short and whitely scummed. Our eyes return to land. 'Only joking,' he says, grinningly, coming to stand with us, his well-cooked smell all about him.

One by one, one, two, three, four – now five I see – one tiny child on another's hip – the bodies fall still. Only the dog dances

on. They want to see who we are. If we stay or go. I feel their wanting swell me from inside.

'Poor little blighters,' says Cook. 'Don't they have no parents? Who'd have dreamed it? What could have happened? Nasty landing, all right, but have to make the best of it. Can't leave 'em now, not in this Godforsaken spot.'

No bumboats here to greet us. At home we send out vaka to meet palagi vessels. Pilot boats – canoes, as Mrs Reverend call 'em – to show the way to strangers, or offer goods for sale, though once upon a time we welcomed no one. Before Christ came. Here we see no greeters on wave or shore. Only these little ones up high, waiting and watching back.

Lower, the land flattens but is nowhere flat. Small buildings, three or four rough huts with empty eyes, unglassed, gather under tall trees. Another fire's smoke is whirling there, no, I see two – the darker beyond the buildings. Straight lines of taro and beans grow lush. Near to them, youngster orange trees, too much sapling yet for fruiting but strong of growth. A green meadow where goats are tethered. Not one coconut palm, and strange to say, not one other person.

'Well, there's a relief . . . thought we'd be taking on a party of orphans for a moment,' Cook says.

Pineki shifts my gaze with a pinch. Iakopo's smile is wide. I see the reason. Here comes Mother Bird, smallish herself from this way off. We watch the lady climb the brow, dark skirt full-long and blouse high-button like Mrs Reverend. She lean from side to side, and forward and back, for it is not easy for her to walk so fast. She is with child, and near her time by anybody's reckoning. But where is that child's father? Nowhere visible. Just one boy stands with all the girls, one white shirt alone on the sky's edge.

Esperanza shudders. Our captain nod, and first mate shout order. And down the anchor rattles.

Now the ship fights her ties, and we must hold the tighter.
Sails down, davits out.

Pulley wheels like morning birds as tars begin to down a small boat, ship's gig, but just as quickly stop for fear it smash. Up it come again, still squeaking. No good for landing yet, in gig or longboat. Captain and first mate still looking, talking, disagreeing somewhat it might seem, for we note more shaking heads. Shame. We need vaka, we fellows all agree. We must ride the surf, not fight it, says Pineki, and Vilipate is with him, and I see Solomona's eyes agree. Yet he will not change our words to theirs, and I dare not either. We are cargo once again, no longer crew. Cargo make no choices. Besides, we have no vaka with us. So it is idle thinking. We need another way to reach them.

Loud seas against the ship and shouting orders and wind in rigging all drown the children's calling voices. Their bodies slump, no longer jump. Hope leaks away, shivery. The dog falls out of seeing.

My eye measures rocks, sizes rollers, breath-counts waves. I ready-steady my knees.

'Now?' I say to Solomona.

'Wait, Kalala. Wait!' he say. He always want to wait.

My shirt is over my head already. I cannot wait. One hand on Luka's shoulder, a heave from bold Pineki, and I swing my leg to the topmost rail . . .

UP ON THE BLUFF THE WORLD TURNS A LITTLE BUT nobody talks until the windjammer is bucking at anchor. Ada clutches at Lizzie, who grips her back as bruisingly. Still no sign of Pa. Billy has the spyglass.

‘They’ve got Islanders on board.’

‘Give me the glass,’ says Ma, arriving beside her children, hips creaking and grinding, bones slowly parting. She gathers the air back into her lungs, holds out a swollen hand.

‘The ship’s called *Esperanza*. These must be our kanakas, come at last,’ she says. ‘Look at the colour of them.’

‘One of them’s escaping!’ calls Lizzie. ‘Look out! He’s on the deckrail.’

‘He’s going to dive!’ squeaked Queenie.

‘He’s in the drink,’ says Ma. ‘Gone so quick.’

IN WATER ONCE MORE, ALL MY LIMBS ARE JOYFUL, AND my ears too, joyful with bubbling whoosh, all sluice and surge and flow, a dulled and busy quietness which is never silence. Eyes open in bluest blue. A slow-winging turtle rises. I rise myself, for air, and sink again. The sea argues; back and forth, it tests me sorely – but I know these tricks and tumbles, and I have power enough in mind and body to work these waves to my delight.

Head up and out.

The shore approaches.

I am down and under, and now give way and let the water roller me in – the rocks cry out a warning – I swim sideways with all my ebbing strength – so fast so fast – and then a mighty power throws me down, hard, in whiteness. Yet I claw for life with so much longing that nothing can pull me back. Fiercely I fight – my enemy, my friend – the suck of it, guzzling and gulping at my legs. Ploughing and pushing, now in air, gasping, now under foam, I launch my body and dive for land.

My bellowing back ups and downs, unasked. My chest is first fast and roaring, then slower and slower still. Smallest of stones print my face, embed their heat in all my body. Ears whine and sing. Foam flecks and waves reach, rush, drag at my feet, trying to lure me back into water, over and again, but I resist the sea's entreaties, crawl from its hungry reach. My head hammers and hums and stars whirl brightly in my closed eyes. I wait for all to slow, for glow to dim, for land to cease its tipping.

And then I raise my head and look up and down the beach. Nobody. Spume slides slowly on flat wet sand where sky and clouds lie spread and wrinkled. Some scattered rocks. So much sand. On and on and on all along the shore. Out of the sea's reach, the land dries and lightens, stretches up to a wall of rock, grass at bottom and green bushes tipping from on top. Not so high you could not climb it. There will be holes for fingers and toes in the red-brown lumps and chunks. Or I will find another way to reach the houses and the children. When I can breathe. I hardly can hold my head up yet.

Thud. Thud. Thud. As this thumping lulls in head and heart, I gather strength. Here I am, Monday Island. I have come as commanded. Now it is for you to make good your promise.

6

WITH THE SAME GAZING FORCE THAT DREW IN the *Esperanza*, Lizzie willed the young man's headway through the waves. Once, his head rose in the foam, and twice an arm flashed, but after that, they saw nothing.

This island interrupts the ocean like the head of a loosened nail. The rollers drive in with the force of all the Pacific behind them, as if their one desire is to join the waters on the far side. They come crashing against the rocky shoreline and against the sand, and stagger back to battle with the next incoming wave. Unpredictable whirlpools and eddies of current fight night and day for possession of the waters of the bay. But there was nowhere easier to come ashore than the stretch of beach below this bluff. The stranger had a chance.

'He must know what he's doing,' says Lizzie uncertainly, scrawny hand dropping from her open mouth. Her grey eyes are dried out with stretching them open in this wind. Where *is* Pa?

'I hope he does,' says Ma, chest still heaving. She slips a few fingers down the back of her neck to unstick the linen from her

damp back, but does not release a button. She sticks a loose pin back into her hair. Gus, who can walk on her own two feet, clings closer.

‘Can you see him now? Can you see him?’ Ada can’t stop fretting.

‘Why is he coming alone? Why doesn’t he wait?’ Queenie asks what they all want to know.

‘We’ll find out soon,’ says Lizzie. ‘I’m going to see if he’s made it.’

‘You go with her, Billy,’ Ma orders. ‘Be careful.’

‘We’ll follow soon – as soon as we know they cannot leave,’ says Ada. ‘When we see they are sending the boat. Look! It’s calmer again now. Sit down and rest, Ma, do, and give me Gus . . . We will look pitiful. Truly pitiful.’

Lizzie is already running, down to the invisible shore.

ASAND-FLICKER ON MY SKIN, A DOG'S WET NOSE IN my wet hair, a growl and summoning bark, and then a falling shadow. A smell half known, half not, of fish and feathers and oil and something else. A rotten, eggy, hanging odour, sweet and sour together. The feet that stop so close to my opening eyes are rough and tough and bare and old. Man's feet. Ragged, grey skin, black-lined and splitting, toenails like hihi, unshined, scratched yellow, and broken like empty snail shells too. Thick hair, like a black goat's, creeps down from rolled-up trousers.

'Quiet, Sal!' The man's order is quickly obeyed.

Now the dog lies watching me for movement, pink tongue lapping air.

I raise my head. Paws forward creep, stopped by a pointed finger. Tongue swallowed.

I tilt my neck and look into eyes like sky or sea or glass or light, always moving, never resting. Eyes you long to land on you alone. You seek their favour with your own. Like Mr Reverend's,

in that way, and yet not like, for my minister's are soft and brown and steady. I see power of a different nature in the man who marks me now: power of purpose. Strong because he knows he is, he has strength of mind as well as muscle. Our master, then, and a man always to be quickly obeyed. So I urge my limbs to move.

Yet this is also a man gone almost to rags. His shirt is torn. A salt-specked, broad-brimmed hat pushes back from a brow that shines with sweat. His beard is vast and brown like coconut hair, and near as coarse. Some scattered grey. He does not look a wealthy man, which will not please Luka. His hands are empty. But the father of these children lives.

Like me, he cannot still his shoulders. Like me, he tries. Up and down, our backs heave helplessly, and in and out together. In our running and swimming we have both stretched our bags of breath too far. I think of Solomona, and Mr Reverend, and give thanks to God for safe deliverance. I push myself back on my heels. I sit and cross my legs, to show my humbleness. My mind remembers busily what is the something else I must do, and do at once. Shake hands, yes, shake hands, don't forget to show him what kind of fellow you are. Which hand? I look at both, so quickly he cannot see, I hope, and with them both I make the bottom of a square, palms down. One thumbs 'L' for 'Left', and then I know, so I give him the other. The Right hand is the right hand. I do not stand too close. I do not stand at all. I remember that too. I remember everything, and I want to tell my Mission friends so they know that I have minded their wisdom.

The clasp of his hand is like wet mud in sun, and moistens mine. Up and down I move them both, just like Becky show me. Yet calmly too like her mother, Mrs Reverend, tell me. I am

a gentleman like Adam. Mr Reverend has made a gentleman of me. I am ready.

‘How do you do?’ Slow, careful, am I. Eye to eye, as bidden. ‘Pleased to meet you. Sir.’

Then full-square he looks at me, eyes on every little portion of my person, so piercing quick I feel his looking on my body like crawling ants or dripping water. From up to down his sky-eyes go, and then from down to up, then once again, top to bottom, bottom to top. Still no movement in his lips, so I am silent, smileless too. Only our breathing speaking. He folds his arms.

I see what he wants: to poke my flesh . . . test my strength . . . feel my true weight. Am I the thing he ordered?

‘Just one?’ he ask at last. ‘Only one of you come?’

At first his words make little sense to me. He breaks gaze before I can. Down then he bends again. Down comes his hand to me once more, but not for shaking this time. Rope-laddered, rigged with veins, spotted brown, as hairy as his toes. I take the hand, and close my fingers, and as I do he pulls me hard, so hard I am quickly standing. I rock on my feet, head swimmerly, and he lets my arm fall, and steps back again to see better what has he in me. He is tall, I find, taller than me, somewhat – and broad too – but not so tall as Mr Reverend, who is a long, stretched man with a long, stretched neck and long, stretched fingers.

‘*Tally gally fy eh fy ah*,’ say he. He quickly sees this too means nothing to me. ‘Ah. So you speak English? Savvy?’

‘Yes, sir. Certainly.’ I say with pride. But I am fearful, a little, of releasing from mine this man’s visive powers.

‘My name is Kalala.’

‘Kalala. Well, Kalala, how do you do? I’m Mr Peacock. Welcome to my island.’