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Excerpt from *On This Island* (2007)

A boy swims through black water. His head jerks; knees, elbows clamp and release.

The night is still. Ahead of him stars float and he breaks through them. To keep his mouth from the water he holds his head high like a frightened horse; he knows the whites of his eyes will be showing, too. But he's not only frightened. He's exhilarated. He's done it, is doing it. He'll miss that horse of Mr Harrington's that he's been breaking in. He wishes it were alongside him now, the warm smell of wet hide a rope between them. All he can smell is cold sea water. When something brushes against his calf he hears himself whimper. Turning onto his back he makes the shape of the man in the circle that Mr Harrington has on the wall by his desk. 'Human endeavour, Charles. No one knows what they are capable of until they are stretched out, fully unfurled, like this chap here.'

Furled. Fully. Curled, uncurled. He knows that he will soon be too cold, uncurled here on the surface. He goes back to swimming, towards the wedge of darkness that is the island set between floating and sailing stars.

Next time he rests, he scrapes at himself with his nails. The jelly is still there, although it has rubbed away where his arms clench up; it is gone from the insides of his legs. He tries not to think of warmth leaking from his ungreased skin. The growing male parts of which he is so proud are a numb absence. He dares not imagine possible damage down there. That would be a price to pay. He wonders if he put the lid back on the jar, if he returned it to the shelf. But what a foolish thing to worry about. First they will notice that he has gone. Then they will find his clothes in the woodshed. If the empty petroleum jelly jar is not on the shelf, probably no one will think about that for a long time. If at all.

He hears singing. At first he's glad — it seems a good sign — then he's afraid. He's heard of the water fairies, skittering petals. Tracing wake, those imps will chase a swimmer down, swarm into his hair and face, biting, sucking. He lowers his nose and ears into the water and breathes out slowly, slowly. He can hear only the chug of bubbles, feel them roll up the sides of his nose, but when he is forced to lift his face, still there is a woman's voice spooling notes across the water. It comes to him in fragments but he recognises the song as one of his mother's. Why would she be out singing on the darkest, slowest wheel of the night? Fear and hope jostle in him. He must be closer than he thought.

In front of him the darkness widens, the strip of stars narrows, and he finds himself on a bed of kelp whose rubber hands make unwanted caresses. He lies on his back and, blanking thought, kicks himself clear. He is cold and no longer sure if his arms are pushing back the water, whether his legs are doing more than jerk and bump against one another. His breath is a noisy rush, too noisy for singing to reach his ears. It is easy now to imagine that the horse is plunging along beside him; his hand threaded through the mane aches with cramp, the gallop in his ears is the horse's sturdy heart; into his face it blows spume from the red flare of its nostrils. The burning in his chest is a ring of flame, fanned by the bellow of those great lungs.

The boy can smell seaweed — and grass, trees, earth. The horse's hooves beat against his feet; his feet are hooves, striking gravel, stumbling, digging in and driving forward, up the slope of the beach.

There was a fire that he was viewing sideways, and something warm was at his back. It was unclear if the person tending the fire on the beach was a man or a woman, its torso both broad and bosomy, and yet it wore trousers, tucked into neat boots.

The horse lay behind him. He felt it stir and start up but a gruff voice — and still he couldn't tell the sex — warned it to stay put. He looked down at his body, glowing in the firelight. The piece of sacking on which he lay had been pulled up between his legs. It was scratchy so he pushed it back. Grit, twigs and tiny leaves were stuck to his thighs, belly and forearms. The animal growled — not a horse — long and low, and when it rose to its feet, cold air rushed at his back. Now he remembered where he was and what he was about.

He sat up, the woman shouted (there was no mistaking her now, on the rising tone) but the dog was on a scent and soon they couldn't see it, could only hear the scatter of stones and its muffled yelps as it dug and wrestled.

'Come closer in to the fire now you're awake.' It was the same kind of voice as Mrs Mac's at the big house. Burred and warm, like something to roll in, and it made him feel more child than man. 'I didn't want to leave you alone before you woke. But I can go and fetch things now. You understand me?'

It was tempting to reply in the bits of native he strung together when he met his mother's people — then he could abdicate responsibility, and be the boy still evident in the splay of his knees. He pulled the sack across his front. 'Yes. Thank you. But I can walk with you.' He was surprised at the effort talking required.

'Oh, but you can't. Did you not know you've fetched up on the quarantine island? I can't let you leave the beach, except for the sea again, and I'm guessing you'll not choose that tonight.' In the woman's face kindness and grimness were evenly mixed, in much the way her body attested to both strength and supply.

'If you wait here, I'll bring down a blanket and something for you to put on. There's a boat off here in the morning.' She was about to move out of the firelight. 'Did you come from a boat now?'

He shook his head, deciding, with this unexpected turn of events, that his reason could wait.

'That's a big swim then, whichever side you came from. I'll be back with the things.'

He was left alone with the fire and the dog still snorting and rustling foliage in the dark. He held his forearm against the flames and tried to wipe off the softened ointment with a handful of gravel, but the dust in it smeared grey. He worked on himself with the sacking. At least he hadn't put the stuff on his face. He pictured Mr Harrington asleep in his nightshirt, propped on the big pillows, with Mrs Harrington beside him in her night dresses. How his auntie laughed when she reported on the bedtime rigamarole. Why put clothes back on when you could put your skin against another's? That was the best thing to wear! Your lover's own warm pelt. His penis stirred at the thought and he wondered how long he would have to wait. He trickled cool stones over himself then stared up at the bulk of the island. Its outline was a hard block against the sky, softened here and there by trees.

She'd be surprised to see him. He wished he could have brought her something besides the milky green ellipse strung on his neck. She'd be cross, of course, that he'd left his schooling and the watchful eye of Mr Harrington, but under the surprise and the crossness she'd be glad to have her boy again. She'd laugh and cuff him and pull him in tight. And then she'd soon get better.

There was a yelp and a bark that was bitten off ... then a cry, and shortly the dog appeared on the edge of the fire's circle with a small penguin limp in its mouth. It looked

confused to see him there, and not the woman. It dropped the bird then put its nose to it, eyeing him.

‘Down,’ he told it and, anxious, the dog obeyed. It held its head high and waited.

The woman who said her name was Martha came back with a shirt and drawers, trousers that needed the twist of twine she’d brought ‘just in case’, and a heavy knitted jacket. As he put them on, she pushed a black pot amongst the burning driftwood and emptied a canvas bag. She had given the dog reluctant permission to go and eat its catch.

‘So have you got a good story for me?’ Martha asked when they had each taken and savoured their first spoonfuls of stew. ‘I sleep poorly,’ she confided, ‘which is why you had the fortune or the misfortune to be found. I walk about the place but it’s not often I have company.’ Her smile softened the solid features. ‘You may have noticed I’m keeping my distance, and downwind, from you — and the clothes are those reserved for such as you. Any of us living here might pass on germs. A healthy young man like you doesn’t want to get sick.’

‘I don’t care about that.’ The food was making him bold.

‘Well, I care.’

He held a chunk of potato in his mouth, waiting for it to melt down, then swallowed it. ‘I want to work here.’

Martha shook her head. ‘Ah, lad, what an idea. Who put you up to that one?’

‘It’s my own idea. I’m strong, you can tell. I’m seventeen.’

‘That I doubt. But why here when you have the whole country out there waiting for you? Why choose a scabby little island where most of them are sick? Are you in trouble where you come from?’

‘I wasn’t but I might be when they wake up.’

Martha took something from her mouth and threw it into the flames. ‘I won’t meddle but I don’t think yours is such a clever idea. Boat’ll take you away in the morning and you can try your chances over there.’ She nodded in the direction of the port and town. ‘I have a friend looking for farm workers, just yonder. Everyone’s looking for workers. Don’t throw your lot in at the first place you come to.’

‘I didn’t come here by mistake.’

Martha stood and scraped the remains of her stew into the fire, then she took his plate from him and did the same. ‘I’m not going to stay here, making things cosy for you, lad. This is no place for you. It’s for the sick and those with no choice. You’ve got the whole world waiting. That’s written in your face, plainly enough.’ She whistled to the dog, then growled until it slunk up, holding a feathered morsel tenderly between its teeth. ‘I’ll be down after sun-up, to see you away with Patrick.’ She took the things with her, leaving only the blanket and a jar of water.

Dawn was coming already — in the east a peel of light severing hill and sky — but he knew better than to think and worry the matter out when he needed sleep. Besides, his mind was made up. He lay on the edge of the spread blanket and rolled himself into it, then he curved his body towards the bed of embers, and slept.

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