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THE SIREN

..... A NOVELLA

AARON BLAKER



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..... AARON BLAKER

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THE SIREN

January 2000

The first time I saw Marama she was balanced on a tyre swing in her backyard. We were separated by twenty metres of bull grass, a wire fence and the kitchen window. As I lay down my teatowel to stare across the swollen heads of the red hot pokers lining the fence, she leaned and pulled, to swing as high as physics would allow. She tilted her head and her hair hung almost to the ground. Her legs were wrapped tightly around the knotted rope suspended from the thickest branch of a flowering pōhutukawa. Marama wore a short denim skirt and a singlet the colour of pearl. Her arms and legs were those of an ocean swimmer, tanned and lean-muscled. Her face reflected the unblemished sky, her arc a perfect mirror to the curve of the stratosphere, and as she hauled on the rope and tensed her calves, it seemed that where the moving air molecules met the surface of her skin there was a faint luminescence. From where I stood, a recent arrival, alone and slightly disoriented by the proximal beauty, Marama was glowing. With life, yes, and youth, of course. But also something else not clear to me that summer afternoon before the millennial rains arrived and didn't cease—something I came to understand as originating in the heavens or the oceans, which are the same thing.

I put away my cup and bowl. When I returned to the window, Marama was no longer alone. Two of her brothers, one a few years younger than she, the other still in nappies, had emerged into the subtropical afternoon to

spoil her solitude. As if they had sensed from the darkened lounge the human happiness nearby. Some words were exchanged. Then the older boy took hold of the tyre and began to swing it round and round. He was trying to shake her off or at least make her dizzy but she circled and spun like an unrealised moon and no matter how fiercely he jolted and pushed, Marama rode serene. Until, at a moment of her own choosing, she loosened the grip of her thighs and slid from the rope, falling lightly to her naked feet. Her smile was Lady Madonna's as she stilled the tyre to protect the body of the smaller boy, upright but naïve. Then she was gone. But the grace of her withdrawal was not. And implanted even more deeply was the image, the glimpse as her legs parted, of a shimmer of silver material.

Still I watched. The boy eyed his little brother then hauled him up by his stiff arms onto the tyre, 'Hold on tight, Maki you motherfucker,' and he began to heave and push once more. The tyre and child rose and fell in jerky slow motion. Maki was only three and his eyes were screwed shut. 'Doppit, Regal! Doppit! Dop!' But Regal was just passing on the suffering and his ears were closed. Higher and higher, closer to the trunk of the pōhutukawa. Until the little boy's knees hit the lumpy wood and his hands flew off the rope and he was released from gravity, but only for a moment then he was falling, twisting as he fell to earth on his elbow and ribs. My nose was at the glass and my breath had caused a mist through which I saw Regal nudge his brother, curled up and still, with a neutral gumboot. I moved through the back door and across the grass that was still sharp to migrant soles.

'Hey.' I pushed aside the pokers and leaned over the fence. 'Give it a rest, Regal.' The boy turned to me. I expected some sort of reaction, contrition perhaps. But he looked at me blankly. Maki whimpered. I pointed. 'He might be injured.'

'Who the fuck are you?'

I was not prepared for the blunt axe of his voice. Nor for the provocation of his stance. Standing there over his brother. Big-knuckled

hands like raw joints of meat at his side. Visible too, despite the puppy fat resting on the elastic band of his rugby shorts and the dark, immature nipples, were the muscles forming in the chest and shoulders and upper arms. Eyes, smallish, framed by thick eyebrows and pudgy cheeks, only thirteen but they must have already seen a lot. Who the fuck are you? I had no chance to respond (and in truth had no response) because the back door opened and the father appeared on the concrete stoop. Brown bottle in hand, he was Regal without the fat. The boy saw his father and went from pig dog to deer. 'Pick him up,' said the father.

'Careful though,' I called out. 'His back.'

The father turned his eyes to me without moving his head. *Who the fuck are you?*

Regal carried Maki across to the steps and up past the father who followed them in, pulling the door shut. I watched the tyre swing quietly to stillness, the molecules of violence and recent loveliness shimmering into oblivion. Then the sounds of bruising commenced.

January 2010

Eric and Mae Seaward arrive in Marehau Bay in the middle of the wettest summer in a decade. Nobody can pinpoint exactly the day of their arrival. One day they are just there, Eric and the child waiting in line for mail at the general store.

In their first humid week in the state house third down from the fire station, Eric feeds his daughter peaches from the tree on their front lawn. He gives away as many as possible to the kids who go back and forth, back and forth. Particularly to one, Maki is his name, who rolls around all day in all weather in his electric wheelchair with a small nervous dog on his lap. On the road because there are no footpaths in the backstreets. In the chair because of a quad bike rolling on him when he was three, the riding father drunk then dead. Maki says nothing to Eric. Just stares.

Eric hangs netting from the ceiling above Mae's cot to try and protect her from the coastal mosquitoes. Then, when he isn't washing peach juice stains out of dresses or applying calendula to bites, Eric takes to pushing Mae along the quiet streets of Marehau. Up to the beach and around past the urupā with its headstones chronicling mortality since the days of Cook. Beside the river in the scents of fennel, bamboo and weeping willow. Out alongside state highway 35 to the southern end of the bay. A stretch of road in the shadow of the maunga. Then along the pier, colonial remnant, built to allow access to this shallow bay, to encourage those nineteenth century ships to fill their bellies with sheep, flax and timber. Now a magnet for

tourists and fishermen and Eric, who pushes on, out to the end of the pier to watch the fishermen haul up kahawai, the old man in the rowboat harvest mussels. Nobody speaks to him there. Nor during the homeward march in the barcode shade of the poplars, grown taller in the years since Hector.

In that first humid month an earthquake in Chile leads to the fire station siren going off and the issuing of a tsunami warning on Marehau FM. Picture this. Eric and his daughter sitting on their tin roof with a chilly bin full of tinned food and bottled water. Baking on the silver roof in a rare clear blue-sky morning, on the transistor DJ Hercules warning the bay residents to move to high ground. The bay residents driving their utes and quad bikes past the home of the Seawards, heading for the beach. Vehicles festooned with fishing rods and diving gear, and children all pointing at the Seawards. The danger passes. Father and child come down from the roof. Eric puts his daughter down for her afternoon sleep. A summer storm blows in from the sea and settles over the township. At three o'clock the sky goes Golgotha black. From the kitchen window Eric watches lightning strike the ocean, strike old-man pine at the urupā, strike the ancient lemon tree next door. Thunder and lightning are simultaneous. Eric moves away from the window. The siren goes off again. Rising to a peak, sustaining that note, falling away so you think it is about to end, but here it comes again, rising once more to that banshee wail, activating some primal fear node deep within you and summoning the volunteers from their prosaic daily tasks. The din is enough to wake the dead. But Mae remains asleep and Eric lies down beside her cot to wait out the apocalypse.

No one comes down to the house to see if they are okay, not that afternoon, nor in the weeks that follow. Nobody really knows why the man and his child have come to this coastal backwater. In truth, their presence is held responsible for the biblical weather. The gods are offended. The people of the township steer clear of the man and his child if they can, because of the weather and because of his resemblance to someone from the uneasy past. Eric himself does not know exactly why he is here, what he hopes to

learn about Hector. He only knows that there is an untold story. It isn't until the disembodied voice in the stormy night, the mention of the millennial floods, that history begins to resurface.

February 2000

I have in the past been accused of turning rainy afternoons into seasons of monsoon and reducing complex encounters to black and white diagrams. But I am telling the truth when I say that that clear blue day which framed the swinging tyre was almost the last of its kind. Afterwards, life in Marehau Bay descended into one long hot wet test of resilience. Nobody left home if they didn't need to. When they did – to buy milk or collect mail – it was in gumboots and under umbrellas. The lawns, parks and school fields of the township became great lakes, awash with paradise ducks. Clothing hung dripping on outside lines or lay in mouldering piles next to washing machines. And the grassy verges turned to mud. The thick smell hung over our heads. Children loved it. Adults went mad. I stayed home and translated Neruda. From one exile to another.

One typical afternoon toward the end of the month as I sat working line by line through 'The mermaid and the drunks' I became aware of a scrabbling at the kitchen door, as though one of those aqueous pūtangitangi had got lost on the way to the lake and wound up at my door, rapping on beaded glass with a tired beak or wing. I opened the door. There he was, not a duck but a little boy on the top step. In nappies, tee-shirt and bare feet. His long hair was plastered to the sides of his head. Several thick strands were trapped across one darkly flushed cheek, held there by dried snot. His eyes were fever bright. I knelt down. Maki walked right past me. Through the kitchen and into the lounge. By the time I got back to my feet and caught up, the book was on the floor and the boy was in my seat. Pointing

at the television. I scooped him up and he began to arch and howl so I put him down.

‘Does your mum know you’re here, Maki?’

‘Nope.’

‘Your dad?’

‘Nope.’

‘Your brothers?’

‘Nope.’

‘Marama?’ It was my first time saying the name out loud. *Marama*.

‘She dat cool.’

‘School.’

‘Yep.’ He pointed at the television again.

‘I think, Maki, that we’d best get you home, eh? Your mum’ll be getting worried.’ I took his hand and he started howling again and I dragged him by a stiff arm back out to the kitchen door, his feet squeaking on the lino then forming runnels in the saturated backyard. Over the wire and then we were at their back door, me knocking away and getting drenched, Maki subdued now, sniffing and snottering. No footsteps behind the door, no turning handle, no anxious mother with eyes uncreasing, no handing over of precious cargo or brushing off of gratitude, *Oh, no big deal, quick mover, eh? See you, no worries, bye...*

I carried the boy around to the front door. Same routine. We continued around the house, me pressing my face to glass to see into rooms. Bunks. Water pistols. Gumboots. A rifle leaning against a double bed. A single bed with a pale pink cover, upon it a circular mirror and comb. Underwear on the floor; I tried but it was difficult to see exactly, silver or mother of pearl. What *was* clear was that no one was home. Then I found an open window. Maki was starting to shiver. In this room there was a cot. Maki must have climbed out of his cot, then up onto a dresser and out the window. There

was a drop of four feet to the softened ground, which would explain the mud up one side of Maki's body. *Jesus*. We went back to my place.

I sat him back in my chair and turned on the television. *Come and play, everything's A okay*. Flannel and towel, least damp, from the laundry pile. Hair first, then snot, then mud. 'Wet,' said Maki, eyes on Oscar the Grouch. 'That's right, Maki, but not for long.' 'Wet,' he said, pointing at his nappy. 'Ahh. Right.' I helped him peel it off. Wrapped him in the towel. I brought my own duvet for him and his shivering eased while the monster ate cookies. I made him a hot chocolate. 'Cookie,' he said, so I got him a gingernut, and then a second, standing next to the chair as he gnawed away with his ruined milk teeth. We listened to David on the bottom step of a New York brownstone, *La de dah de dah, la de dah de dah, what's the name of that song?* Joined by black Gordon and white Bob, *Something shining above*, and along came Maria in her tight jeans, with her smooth brown sugar belly skin and Latina hips, joining the group but standing closest to smiling widest at David and there is obviously something between the characters and between the actors Sonia Manzano and Northern Calloway, what sort of name is that, Northern with his too-long sideburns and Afro side part and bulbous eyes, all symptoms of an unrecognised bipolarity that will bloom into psychosis and eventually lead to his death, young and mad, but today he's beside Maria and singing into her eyes, *so la de dah de dah, la de dah de dah, what's the name of that song?*

'More?' Maki was holding up his cup.

'Time to go home now, Maki. It's after three o'clock.'

'Nope.'

But it was and the kids from school were flowing past the front fence on foot, horseback and bicycle. Maki's two eldest brothers passed by, pointing at the peach tree. Then Regal, dragging his gumboots through the muddy puddles. He stopped at my gate, flicked a look around, stared at the glass of the ranch sliders but evidently saw only reflections for he pushed

through the gate and approached the peach tree. He had both hands full when I slid open the doors. He dropped all the fruit. Stood there. Same stance. 'Help yourself,' I smiled. He gave me the middle finger. I gave it back. His tight eyes opened up. He picked up a peach and let fly and it exploded on the glass next to my head. The peach gore slid down the surface. Regal looked darkly satisfied. Then he saw Maki, standing beside me now, holding up the towel with one hand. 'What the fuck are you doing there?' Maki held on to my leg. Regal spoke from the base of his throat, more of a low growl. 'Come here, you little fucker.' Maki wasn't moving, just held on tighter. 'And you,' Regal turned his attention to me. But then Maki bolted out the doors, across the concrete, towel flying off, not heading for Regal, fleeing, making for Marama.

Marama alone in the rain, hair up, moving through the water in school uniform, her forearms and calves wet, sees little naked Maki and leans over the fence, brings him to her, taking in Regal, the pākehā at the door, the pulp of a peach; her eyes envelop the whole scene and then she is moving past, her little brother with his arms around her neck that's bare beyond the collar, her steps light. Once more the luminescence, undiminished by Regal who leaves the property and drags his feet through the mud trying to catch up. I am once more alone with the mermaid and the drunks. The light is dying when a quad bike passes the house and a few minutes later Regal arrives with a bucket of hot water. 'Sorry 'bout the peach,' he grunts and he sets to work cleaning off the gore. I leave him to it and I hear the rusty hinges of the gate and it isn't until the morning that I see the word smeared with a thick forefinger in peach juice right at the base of the glass door.

SIKO.

February 2010

Hercules leans back from his desk. ‘Your brother was an odd man, if you don’t mind me saying so. Not to speak ill of ... of the ...’ He crosses himself.

His creased face is illuminated by his computer screen, the only light in the room. Eric is seated opposite Hercules, this side of the windows that look out onto the main street of Marehau. Rain falls on the tarmac. The glass, the water, the glow – Eric feels a little like a tank-fish. But there’s no one to see him because it’s three o’clock on a Wednesday morning. Hercules is nearing the end of the third day of his marathon. He stretches his arms above his head. The nylon sleeves of his Warriors training jacket rustle during a quieter part of the song. ‘You hungry, young fella?’ Hercules stands with a creaking of knees and a small grunt. He gestures to a trestle table at the rear of the studio. It is groaning with fruit, cakes and rēwana. Eric is not hungry. Hercules moves clumsily to the table and takes a chunk of sweet bread. ‘Never could turn down free food.’ He waves the bread in Eric’s direction before taking a bite. ‘Tell ya what though, mate, invite Māoris t’bring round some food and y’set for life.’

A cackling laugh from somewhere near the table. Eric’s head swivels. Hercules wags his finger at the darkness. ‘Don’t mind these old kuia, mate. Just knitting me a scarf. And keeping me company through the ghost hours. Frightening the kēhua with their ugly old faces.’ More dry laughter, and a

thin high voice, *You can talk, Hercules. You've aged ten years in three days! You'll look older than us by the end of the week!*

And as Hercules sits back down heavily, it is clear that he is feeling the strain. His eyes are hooded and bloodshot and his skin looks like last week's newspaper, even in the gentle glow of the monitor light. His head is lolling slightly, as if it is too heavy for his spinal column. As Hercules closes his eyes and opens his mouth, jaws working as he tries to break down the dense bread, Eric catches a whiff of his breath and skin. Compares the decay with the sweetness of Mae and wonders what he's doing here.

Eric had come out of a deep sleep to swing his legs from the bed, shuffle through to Mae's room, Mae who had teeth pushing through the flesh of her gums, Mae who needed a hand to hold though the bars of her cot. Eric had knelt there, his eyeballs pressing against the inside of his eyelids but the irritation swept aside by the pulsing tenderness, the tender flesh of the palm and the finger creases. He flicked on the transistor with his cold hand, expecting the sentimental music of Marehau FM, the guitar chords that seemed to soothe Mae's gums and draw the curtains on sleep, but on this occasion it was the voice of Hercules.

'... and how's this rain, eh whānau? Haven't seen this kind of water since the millennium and I suppose the farmers are happy but jeez, enough's enough. Anyway, anyway, don't forget to keep dialling in your requests. Coming up next, something for Nanny Patsy and for all you night owls, so from one ruru to another, kia ora and keep listening as DJ Hercules and Marehau FM put a smile on your dial...'

Which had a narcoleptic effect on Mae but the opposite on her father. Eric gently disengaged his hand and rose from his kneeling position and eased out the door. He tiptoed up the hall. Out the ranch sliders on their aluminium rails. Out into the air thick with salt. Awake and heading for the twilight booth of the radio station with only an umbrella between him and the hydrogen. A mobile phone with an app connecting to Mae's monitor in his

back pocket. Past the plate windows, behind them Hercules staring. Welcomed through the door by the Rolling Stones.

Now Hercules speaks thickly through the bread. ‘You look like him though. Cept with a beard. Thought I was seeing another ghost when you came past the window just before. My heart leapt a bit for a second. Just a second. Cos it was never really a hundred percent sure if he, if, you know ...’ Hercules is labouring with the bread, trying to swallow, eyes still closed, head beginning to loll again and as Eric leans in to hear, the two foreheads almost touch. Their breath mingles.

Then Hercules is coughing and remembering his task, ‘Whoops, hang on, young fella, I’ll just ...’ Hercules clicks his mouse and breathes into the microphone. ‘Okay, Marehau, what’d you all make of *that* old Stones number? Brown Sugar! Awesome! Requested by Nanny Patsy. She says it reminds her of her first dance with Hēmi. Didn’t know the Stones were around in 1920, eh Nanny, hah! Righto, here’s one for the young people, who should be asleep, but just in case the rain on the roof is keeping you all awake ... here’s a lovely one from Boys to Men.’

Eyes closed as the opening chords swell. The rain is now being hurled down, the music and the water are held apart by millimetres of tin roof. Hercules cannot hold his head up. It descends towards the desk. Eric watches. Should he touch a Māori head? *It’s so hard, to say goodbye, to yesterday.* Just as impact seems unavoidable, the head jerks up, comes back to a central position, the eyes pop open. ‘Ah shit, I need a breather, young fella, a bitter fresh air.’ Hercules knuckles his eye sockets. ‘Maybe grab a shower.’ The kuia mutter from the dark corner, *Āe, Āe, starting to get a bit ripe there, nephew.* ‘Taihoa, ladies,’ grimaces Hercules as he stands. ‘I smell of roses, eh Eric?’ Eric nods. Hercules’ laughter is dry. ‘Typical Pākehā, eh. Polite. Anyway, every eight hours, the rules say. For ten minutes. How does that sound?’ Eric doesn’t know what Hercules is asking and he nods again. ‘Good man,’ and Hercules scrolls down the screen.

‘There it is. “Stairway to Heaven”. That’ll give you ... about ... seven minutes, then a few minutes of filler talk.’

Eric is on his feet now, hands up as if Hercules is a rearing stallion. ‘Whoa, whoa, whoa, no, nah, that’s not really my cup of tea, Hercules.’ ‘Don’t worry about a thing, Eric, it’s a piece a piss.’ Hercules is up on his feet too, raising his knees, swinging his arms, getting the blood flowing. Eric is starting to panic. His back pocket is humming. Mae. Mae. Mae. ‘It’s very kind of you, Hercules, but I, I really need to get home.’ ‘Just turn down this mixer, turn on the mike, say your bit, I’ll be back ’fore you know it.’ Hercules is halfway to the door. The needles of the kuia are clacking furiously. Eric’s adrenal cortex is urging flight. Then Hercules, hand on the doorknob, delivers the coup de grâce. ‘And I’ll grab something that might interest you, e hoa. A book. A diary. Your brother’s.’

March 2000

The poplar leaves were fluttering flags, each silver leaf a departed soul or so I'd once heard. This was the second blue day of the summer. The pause in the rain seemed a benediction upon Hercules' idea, his notion that broadcasting live from the east coast school swimming sports would breathe fresh life into the local radio station. He was as new to town as I was and we were both pinning our community aspirations on Marehau FM. Being Māori, he had a head start.

'Swimming with the Stars,' read the banner I was stringing across the fence surrounding the school pool. Steam rose from the sodden grass beyond the fence. Further back, a concrete quadrangle and the white glare of school buildings. Puddle-gleam and the pink brilliance of bougainvillea nearly blinded me. Patsy was placing the *No Smoking* banners at the entrance. *Auahi kore*. 'That includes you,' she said to a group of parents on their way in. The lunch hour was over, students were filing into the changing rooms in maroon uniforms, emerging in togs. Boys in black shorts flexed their stomach muscles. Girls hugged towels to themselves, glimpses of skin and lurid swimsuits glowing like coral fish.

A few metres inside the fence, at the river end of the pool, Hercules was hunched over the sound desk, dripping sweat all over the controls. 'Fuck me, Hector. Much more of this and I'll be needing to get in that pool.'

'Hundred metre whale-style?'

'Cheeky Pākehā. Get the mike from my waka, eh? In the glovebox.'

Returning from the ute of Hercules I was consumed by a stream of kids heading for the unshaded, grassed incline that spanned a half a length of pool. Regal parallel for a moment. 'Here to watch the kids in togs, eh?' I might have heard as he plodded by. Heavy and flat-footed, he was centrifugal. Until one inexperienced kid tried to pass him on the inside. A leaning and the child was falling, the skin of the pool stretching and splitting. He popped back up to echoes of laughter. 'Taihoa, tamariki!' Patsy called from her director's chair beneath the emerald-green shade-cloth. Regal smirking. 'Regal! Behave!' 'Whatever.' 'E tama?' 'Yes, Nanny Patsy.' Regal skulked up the path to sit by himself on the grassy knoll.

Beneath the shade-cloth, grouped in rings of influence around Nanny Patsy, teachers and parents were setting up blankets and chilly bins, settling in for an informal board of trustees meeting. Atop one of the poles supporting the cloth perched a carved wooden morepork, the eternal ruru, forever poised to issue a warning. On the bank a hundred kids bickered and yakked. An emanation rose from this body of flesh, a manifestation of God. There was an absence though. 'The mike, plug it in, bro', it's nearly showtime.' And then she came, the last swimmer. From the darkened doorway of the changing room. In a wetsuit cut at bicep and thigh. Disturbing the atomic curtain as she passed a few feet from me, slicing through in sealskin, Marama joining the masses.

Then it began, as it always did, with ritual. Patsy positioned herself before the students. No microphone necessary. She invoked the watchful eye of Ruru. She issued instructions. She led a short karakia. Marama's eyes were closed, her lips moving. Regal wound his towel into a turban. The sun flattened my straw hat. Hercules fiddled with switches until he got the nod from Patsy. He let loose.

'Kia ora, whānau! Haere mai and welcome, welcome to the very first Swimming with the Stars, broadcast live, up and down the coast on Marehau FM!' The kids hollered. 'Get on with it,' called Patsy. 'Righto, ladies and gentlemen. Hold on to your seats—' 'We're sitting on the

ground, Hercules you egg.’ ‘Well, hold on to the grass ’cos first up this hot afternoon, the fifty metres girls’ breaststroke.’ The boys sniggered. ‘And the hot favourite, our very own Marama Hōhepa. Give it up, whānau!’ They gave it up.

Patsy was at the far end of the pool, in charge of the clappers. The two blocks of wood came together. By the time the echo came back at us from the classroom walls, the eight seals were in the water. Marama was ahead by six strokes as she touched for the turn.

(Marama trained in the ocean twice a day. I had seen her myself from the end of the pier at dawn and dusk, carving a path parallel to the shore, half a kilometre out. At home in the water, it seemed to me. Free, I imagined, of the sins of the father. Five hundred metres and more from cigarette smoke and shared bruises. It aroused in me the sense that with a little help she really *could* be free. But the way wasn’t clear, yet.)

‘Come on bro’, get over there.’ The race was nearly over, Marama ahead by half a pool-length, touching, easing out of the water. ‘It’s got to be *now*, before the feeling fades.’ My role for the day, interviewing the victors in their moment of triumph, something Hercules had seen on Sky TV. ‘It’s not the Olympics, Herc.’ He urged the microphone upon me. ‘It is for these kids, e hoa. Now, shift your white butt.’

The cord spooled in my wake. Marama motioned me back and came to me. We were standing together before the congregation. The concrete seared my soles. Someone threw Marama a towel. Clapping and cheering. ‘Whakarongo mai,’ hollered Patsy. The silence pooled. Marama’s skin breathed and I could smell the salt, the seaweed. The hair oil and the candle wax. There was nothing to say. Hercules moved up beside me. Marama dried her hair and waited. I saw myself in her eyes. ‘You done yet?’ called Patsy. The next line of swimmers was crouched over the water. ‘Hold on, Aunty.’ Hercules took the microphone. ‘So there you have it, whānau, our very own Pania of the reef, making us speechless with her talent. Give it up again for Marama Hōhepa.’ The assembled pupils whooped once more but I

might as well have been on the ocean floor, so muted was the sound. Hercules flipped on 'We are the Champions' as Marama walked away from me and they couldn't have been clearer in the east coast light: the thumb-shaped bruises above the backs of her knees, the cigarette burns on the inner thigh just below the unstitched edge of the neoprene. She tugged the wetsuit down as she slid by Regal and beneath the turban his eyes sought mine, his expression a variation on a theme. *What the fuck are you going to do about it?* Engines roared in my ears. A quad bike skidded up to the fence. Winstone Hōhepa stepped down from his bike and entered the enclosure. The clappers came together. The divers broke the surface and all that followed followed.

February 2010

Eric's giving the Led Zeppelin reunion tour dates when the door swings open and Hercules is blown back in. To say he looks fresh would be generous. He looks less likely to have a heart attack. He has on fresh track pants, a woollen jersey and a pair of fingerless gloves. Eric gives him the thumbs-up. Hercules sinks into his chair like a casket being lowered. 'So. This belonged to your brother.' He pushes the book across the desk. 'It was in the bottom of the boat ... when it came back in ... on the tide, the morning after Marama ... you know.' But Eric doesn't know and the cortisone in his glands heads for the heart. 'Have you read it?' he manages, but the microphone's still on and Hercules raises a hand. 'Hold up there, young fella, got some airtime to fill, you know how it is. You head home now. Get some moe. See you tomorrow night.' 'Tomorrow?' But Hercules is a DJ once more, mouth over the microphone, 'All right, you restless sleepers and early risers, I'm back. But a big kia ora to our guest DJ, all the way from the land of Oz,' and there's nowhere to look but down at the cover of the book.

It does appear to be a journal. Plain blue hardcover. Handwritten words on the front. *By the Light of the Moon*. The same handwriting as that on the envelope in his pocket. The final letter that Eric received from his brother in Marehau. But now's not the time to show it to Hercules. It's time to go. Mae will rise with the sun. Eric nods again, a reflex now, heads for the front door. *Ahem*. From the darkness an outstretched hand, pale and bony, an extended finger. *The umbrella, boy*. 'Right.' *And that book, boy*. *Read it by the light of the sun*. *Stay in the light*. Eric stumbles out into the ozone-heavy air. Staggers the hundred metres home as the eastern sky begins to lighten in the eyes of forestry workers and fishermen. He's home. Mae remains asleep. Eric lies down beside the cot to await the dawn.

March 2000

The afternoon's rhythm established itself. Clappers, churning water, yearning ligaments, the oscillating hum. Adults in the shade, children in the light. Chilly bin lids rose and fell, Winstone Hōhepa's fist seemed always to be closed around a flashing green bottle. Regal wound and rewound his turban. Patsy relinquished the woodblocks, sat in the chair fanning herself with a *Woman's Weekly*. Maybe her veins were throbbing, perhaps she wanted to keep an eye on her son and his son. The morepork looked on without blinking as the bougainvillea grew pinker in the thickening air. Clouds massed upon the western ranges. Hercules sweated nervously over the station's electronic gear. Marama won every race she entered. Winstone roared. Regal knotted the towel into a whip. At some point, Winstone was asked where Maki was on this fine day. Kōhanga Reo? Playcentre? With Mum? 'Her? Nah, she's at the pub. Maki's having a sleep. He'll be right.' Patsy closed her eyes. Ruru frowned.

The final two events were the boys' and girls' marathon swims. Thirty-two lengths, eight hundred metres in all. Each race would take about fifteen minutes. During this 'dead-time', as Hercules called it, I would circulate

through the crowd, gathering quotes and harvesting votes for swimmer of the day. ‘But stay on your toes, Hector, ready to roll if it starts to piss down.’

The boys’ event was first, perhaps to allow Marama to be the final act of the day. I sat amongst the students. Regal was in the water so the mood on the bank was helium. The children were unanimous: Marama was ‘a dophin, the bomb, gangsta, a fish.’ I moved over to the adults. Attention was centred on Patsy as she wound up the afternoon hui. ‘All in all, though, they need more from us, the tamariki. Look at them. They are our taonga. And we are *supposed* to be their harbour, their refuge. Not the ones *bringing* the storm.’ Regal was leading the pack. Winstone lolled in his singlet, rolling a cigarette. ‘Don’t give us that Māori stuff, Miss. Kids are kids. They need discipline.’ His musculature was obscene. There was movement from light to shade and then Marama was standing above her father. Pointing to the banner. *Auahi kore*. Winstone dwelled in confusion. He may not have been able to read. Many eyes witnessed the rise of his shame and then his awareness of the many eyes. *The fuck are you looking at?* But he reserved the silent oracle for his daughter. *You’ll be coming home at some point and these people won’t be there then, little miss Pania of the reef*. The knowledge passed as a current between them and it must have been clear to even the blindest among us. We passed judgment. Ah, we were fierce and united in the crowded afternoon. But who would pierce the pus-filled sanctity of the private sphere? Who would swim against the millennial tides? No one here. Not even Patsy. Thus, as Winstone Hōhepa lit his cigarette, as Regal touched the wall and breached, as Marama made her way to the water’s edge, as the first thunderclap rolled across the plain, a furious spark combusted in my heart and erupted as a chant:

‘Mokopuna, tamariki, blah, blah, blah
taonga, harbour, blah blah blah
suck your fags, down your piss
have your hui, have your hīkoi

but look at *them*
look at them
look at *them*
look, shining under a Maori sun,
don't you see ...'

It came out in one breath and as I ran out of oxygen, the flame, the fury began to flicker. Silence lay all around like dead fish. The sea of listeners had merged into a featureless mass but now they separated out into individual faces. Hercules pale. Patsy a stone. And Winstone Hōhepa. Kneeling down to shatter an empty bottle. Holding it out to me like it was a microphone, the sun shining through the green glass. And then. The noise unbelievable here so close to the fire station, rupturing the scene. The Babylonian wail. An uprising. 'Hope that's not my house.' 'Hope that's not my father.' Forgotten for a moment. Hercules pushing keys into my palm. 'The ute, man. Get the fuck outta here.' The driver's seat burning. One look back. Winstone Hōhepa drawing a line across my throat. That left only one direction, and that's the one I have taken.

February 2010

The morning after Eric's guest appearance on Marehau FM, the rain steps up its campaign to drown Marehau Bay. All over the decaying township, gutters are overflowing, water tanks are spewing water out onto earth that is struggling to absorb it. The mighty Uawa is roaring toward the sea, littered with poplar and silver birch and tōtara logs that have travelled many kilometres through the heart of farm country that still bears the scars of Cyclone Bola and the lesser floods of the new millennium. Behind every sliding door and on each encased verandah, cabin-feverish children look out at the vertical water. They bicker and sigh and their thoughts return to

the Playstation. The fathers of the township left in the dawn hour, gumbooted and cursing, for the pine forests and the fishing grounds. The mothers, battle-weary after three solid days of it, reach for the jar of instant coffee and think about heading down to Playcentre. Radios are tuned to Marehau FM, or Hercules FM as people are starting to call it. Hercules is staggering toward *The Guinness Book of Records*. Seventy-two hours down. A hundred to go. He won't make it. Too much pressure on tired valves. He is ignoring the flutter that will become a jackhammer and then a siren.

Propelling Mae before him with his knees, Eric slides open the steamed-up door and they step in out of the rain. Playcentre is a wall of sound. The place is teeming with bombastic children and pissed-off mothers. He issues a general good morning, places his umbrella in the corner beside the library shelves. There's no response so Eric leads Mae over to the jigsaw area. He says a specific hello to Marama's kids: blind Jackie, Kingston with his twin streams of snot, wide-eyed baby Tūmatuenga. He leaves Mae there and heads for the kitchen.

The aunties, mothers, grandmothers are looking in any direction but his. Taking an orange, a banana and a Mahana apple from his bag as he goes, trying to fight off the paranoia. In the kitchen today are Nanny Patsy and Marama, making sandwiches and opening packets of biscuits. *This cannot be the same Marama*. He squeezes along past Marama's bulk, careful not to make contact. Locates the sharp knife in the second drawer under the sink. Peels and begins slicing the banana. Waiting for an offer of instant coffee so he can turn it down graciously and endure the teasing as he whips a peppermint teabag out of his back pocket. But silence.

Marama's back in a grey tee-shirt is a boat hull. 'Just about had to come by kayak today,' offers Eric. Marama puts the lid on the margarine, leaves the kitchen, an awkward shuffle as if the weight is too much to bear. Patsy empties a sachet of Raro into a plastic jug and steps up to the sink to fill the jug with cold tank water. Eric starts on the apple. He glances sideways. Her

face is closed. Eric cuts into his forefinger just below the first joint, not to the bone but deep enough to stain the apple flesh and draw a grunted, 'Fuck.' Patsy looks down at the hand. Takes it and pulls it under the running water. 'That knife's none too clean. Rinse your finger for a minute while I get the kit.'

March 2000

The rain commenced as I deposited the ute at the mouth of the pier. I entered and passed along between the metal tracks. The sun swallowed by storm clouds. The white cliffs still glowing though, the sea a silver shimmer of fish belly. A thousand paces. At the end, three swandried men intent upon their lines. The nylon cut the water, tiny furrows in the outgoing tide. My knees took a while to settle down, the thigh muscles to stop twitching. The men fishing in silence. The light exiting. A ladder, rungs cold. Down and into the boat tied to the rusting iron, the old man's sacks and ropes under my feet, the mussel knife glinting. Boat rising and falling on the low waves. The fishermen hauled up their hooks and sinkers, retreated with the light. I searched the liquid horizon for a yellow moon rising, scanning left to right.

February 2010

It comes to him, a fact as cold and clear as the tap water, that the journal entries are not mere fabrication. That Hector has left pain in his wake in this place also. Eric's finger is numb now. Blood is sluicing into the sink and down the plughole. Patsy is back at the kitchen gate, shaking Jackie and Kingston from her thighs, growling like one of her dogs. 'Not yet, my moko. We'll have a kai in a minute. In a minute!' The children scatter. She steps up beside Eric. 'That's enough water, you egg.' She reaches across

him and turns off the tap, dries his hand with a tea towel. Squeezes savlon onto this finger. Begins to unwrap the bandaid, talking all the while. 'Now, whakarongo mai, Eric. We all thought you looked a bit like Hector. But sometimes you Pākehā all look the same, eh.' Patsy pulls the plaster tight around the numb finger, turning the skin white. 'You seem harmless enough, Eric. And your girl is a real sweetie.' Marama's kids are back at the gate, Mae alongside. *We're hungry. What's for morning tea, Nanny?* 'But that man, that sick man. Your brother.' She crosses herself. 'No disrespect.' *We want a kai. We want a kai.* Patsy turns and points the biblical finger at the children. 'You'll get a smacked bum if you don't zip the lip.' Back to Eric. Speaking quietly now to the internal flesh, to the wound. 'Do you know the story, yet? What he did?' Eric is as numb as his finger. 'He tried to take her out to sea.' *I began to row toward the moon. To set her free. Of the sins of the father.* 'Told her she was too good for the drunks.' *I can return you to the heavens. You can take me with you.* 'She made it back without the use of her legs.' At the gate, Mae begins to sob.

March 2000

Then the splash in the gleaming sea. There, and there again. And another, a hundred meters from the pier and coming closer at a human pace. I stood trying to work it out. It was a luminescent something, moving in the water, glowing like phosphorous but a solid body rather than scattered pricks of light. Then I was able to make out the arms, overhead, back to meet the water, freestyle. A flash of upturned features. Fifty meters, forty, twenty-five, ten. Right across my bow and so on, under the pier so I had to carefully place my feet among the coils and hessian, swivel to witness it emerging, flowing on like oil, between the columns that connected the pier to the seabed. I expected the being to stop then, and head back round to the ladder. I couldn't imagine where it had come from or why I could see it so clearly when all else had become featureless. But it kept on, a firefly in the

water, each splash lit briefly, another hundred meters to the black rocks at the foot of the white cliffs that still contained some memory of the departed sun. Gliding in through the seaweed and wash, easing with the tidal flow onto a rock.

February 2010

There she is, trying to get over the gate, shocked by Nanny Patsy's threat. She wouldn't even know what a smacked bum is, thinks Eric as he steps over and kneels, hums in her ear. She says, 'I want to go home.' 'Me too,' he says and says, 'Me too.' With his face downcast. Patsy's ankles heave into view. His eyes ride up her track pants and jersey, to the pounamu resting on the woollen slopes of her enormous fallen breasts. Then up to her eyes. Grey, rheumy, tender. She holds an apple quarter out to Mae who takes it. 'Don't worry, no one's gonna smack your little Pākehā behind.' Patsy hands over the packet of plasters. 'Put these back on your way out, Eric. And Mr DJ? If you're planning on sticking around, don't go broadcasting your whakapapa all over town.'

March 2000

It was Marama. Her face glowed. I followed her sightline. The moon had crested, to float in the clear strip separating cloud and horizon. Marama was peeling her wetsuit from her shoulders, easing it over her breasts, pulling her arms free, squeezing the neoprene down to her hips. The light seemed to shift, the cliffs to tilt. I leaned. The boat listed and by the time I had centred myself, Marama was aware of me. I can only have been a pale shimmer but she looked right into me at my empty heart my impoverishment the insides of a man. It seemed then that I had a choice.

Step from the rowboat and descend between the mussel-crusting pylons. Or go to her. She peeled away the neoprene and I went. The rocks were a risk to the rowboat so she returned to the water. I hauled her in. During, she did not weep. Afterward, she slept on her side. I wrapped her in the reeking sacks. Then I began to row toward the moon, pulling until the ocean floor curved beneath us, the lights of the township gone. I ceased, released the oars, allowed them to drift away.

Now we rise and fall upon the copulating sea. Soon the cumulus will overwhelm the moon. I need to be certain of this one thing though so I will tend to her lower limbs. Place the blade against skin, a thumb width above bony heels. There are mythic tendons there, which she will have no need of as she returns to the depths, a dark stone. I will follow.

February 2010

Beyond the sliding door, Eric and the child are walking home in the rain that also falls upon the rotting boards of the pier. Upon Maki's head. Upon the raw mounds at the urupā. Upon the skin of the school pool. Upon the surface of the ocean. Maybe even upon the moon.

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