

Kauri Island

BY AMY HEAD

A few days after we arrived, my father called me over. “Come and look, Thelma.” He had a map of the island, showing all its hooks and craggy inlets.

“This is our bay,” Father said. He pointed to one of the blue bites out of the green. I knew it already – and where the bush camp was, a couple of bays around. “And this,” he continued, putting his finger on the other side of the island, “is where they’re felling trees. Stay away from there. It’s not safe.” He stood and went outside with one of my brothers to split some kindling.

“Can I go outside, too, Mam?” Between cleaning the cottage and unpacking, I’d barely had the chance to see anything. Father had promised to show us a kauri dam and a bullock team and men walking over islands of floating logs.

My mother lowered herself carefully into a chair. “Why don’t you start a list of names in your journal?” she said. “We’ll think about them for the baby.”

There had been sadness in her voice ever since she’d waved goodbye to my grandparents at Falmouth. Sadness, seasickness, and the baby waiting to be born had made the hundred-day journey miserable for her, and miserable for her was miserable for me. I wanted to escape it, even if only for a short while.

“Please.”

Mam sighed. “You’ll hear the felling stop on McIntosh’s. Come back then.”

On the forest road, I was properly alone for the first time since I couldn’t remember when. I didn’t think I’d ever felt so alone. Except that I wasn’t. A crowd of trees stretched away on either side. I stepped off the road and brushed through ferns. Until then, I had thought New Zealand trees to be ugly – a boggy kind of green. Most of the kauri I had seen had been lying on the ground. Alive, standing upright, they made me dizzy.

There were more delicate species crouched in the leafy shade. I had picked three specimens and pressed them into my journal, the last a twiggy shrub with tiny, leaves, when my heart began to thump. I could hear someone nearby, advancing fast.

He stopped. I had seen him before, down on our beach. He was a Māori boy. Father had told me he was related to one of the bushmen.

“Seen a pig?” the boy asked.

English – he could speak English. I was so surprised I didn’t take in what he had said. I felt silly there with my journal and specimens, as though I’d been caught out.



“A pig?” I said.

The boy snuffled and grunted and mimed a running motion with his fingers – away from the camp. He looked amused to be explaining to me what a pig was.

“Your pig ran away?” I asked.

He nodded, looking at my journal. “What is that?”

I passed it to him. “It’s my journal. I’m Thelma.”

He imitated the way I put my tongue between my teeth.

“Thhh.” Then he said, “My name is Tamati. Tama.”

Tama turned the pages to my piece of twiggy shrub.

“This is mingimingi,” he said. I thought he was the same age as I was, perhaps a year older. “I can write the names for you. Bring a pencil tomorrow? Same time?”

I took the journal back from him and nodded. “Tomorrow, the same time.”

I couldn’t see Tama when I arrived in the clearing the next day. Then from nowhere, I was showered with a spray of drops. It had rained all morning, and the trees were still glistening. I looked up and saw Tama crouching between the boughs. He put on a serious face, pulled a bunch of leaves down to show me, and said, “Pūriri.” He laughed at me while I wiped my face, trying not to seem surprised.



“Did you find your pig?” I asked.

He gave a quick, exaggerated nod. “Good kai.”

“I suppose I would have tried to run away, if I were it.”

Tama laughed again, but I didn’t mind this time.

“So, is this really a pūriri?” I said.

Tama scrambled out of position and jumped the few feet to the ground.

“Give me that,” he said, holding his hand out for my journal.

A few mornings later, I was making pūriri tea, which Tama had told me was good for backache, when a weka picked its way past the doorway. I pointed it out to Mam.

“I don’t like their jerky walk,” she said. “And that one’s liable to run off with one of my pegs. Shoo it away, Thelma ... and what is that?” She frowned at the floating leaves in my pot.

“It’s for your back.” I wanted to help Mam feel better, but I also knew that if her back was less painful, she might spare me for an hour.

“I don’t want witch’s brew in my pots, thank you. Tip it out behind the house. You can tell that boy we don’t need his native remedies.”



I had to plead with Mam to let me go and was hot and flustered when I reached our usual meeting place. My journal contained two lists now: one for baby names, which was by far the shortest, and one for Māori words.

Tama wasn't there. I peered through the trunks, thick and thin, in the direction of the camp, and I became curious. Why shouldn't I meet him halfway? I made my way past the mānuka, tōtara, spiralling rata, and spiky mingimingi – an explorer. I began to wonder what the forest would be like at night. I thought it would be desolate.

A pīwakawaka dropped among the branches and bounced along beside me for a while. When I heard men's voices and a sharp tapping sound, I congratulated myself for successfully finding my way to the camp. Tama would be surprised to see me. Then a man's voice shouted, "Hel-lo in the gully!" Everyone knew the bushmen's warning call. I turned to where the call had come from – somewhere behind me, farther up the slope. I'd never seen a kauri fall before, only heard the crackle and whump from a distance. I looked up and saw the tree coming towards me and was paralysed by a rush of fear.

Time behaved strangely. Thoughts crowded in, all at once: I'd made an enormous mistake, there was no doctor on the island, it wouldn't do any good to scream. Then I closed my eyes and darted sideways. I felt the rush of air – the wind the tree created. I felt the boom under my feet when the giant landed beside me. I turned and stared. The trunk must have been six feet across. If I had been a few paces to the left, I would have been crushed. The violent reality of it made me sick to my stomach.

Then I realised someone was standing beside me. It was Tama. He stared at me, wide-eyed. "Kauri," he said. I looked at him, with his unkempt hair and serious expression, and I started laughing ... then gasping. My parents couldn't know what had happened – what had *almost* happened. I took a deep breath.

"I have to go," I said. "Don't say anything ... please, Tama. They'll never let me out again."

Tama gave one of his quick nods. "Hei konā," he said.

We had practised this, so I knew how to reply. "Hei konei."

I felt shaken – and very small and disconnected from what I was saying. I started off around the branches of the fallen kauri, heading back the way I'd come. Back past the mānuka, tōtara, and rata. Through the flax and ferns, towards the forest road and home.



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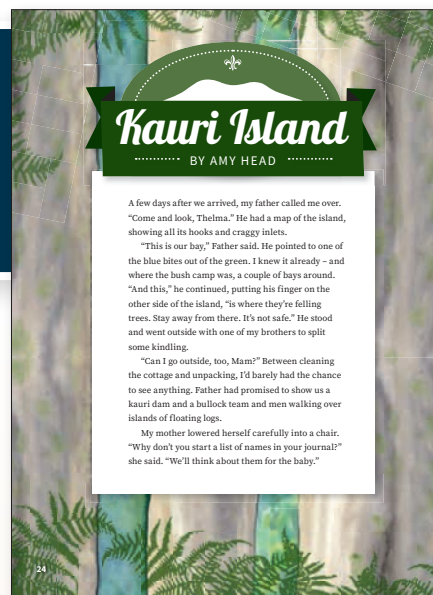
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