



“There it is,” says Mum. “There’s Great Barrier.”

Cathy can hardly believe they’re almost there. She looks to where Mum is pointing and sees a thin blue smudge. It hovers in the distance like a mirage. Cathy would like to draw her first view of the island, but the water’s too choppy.

Chris pours a bucket of seawater over his head and shakes the drips from his hair. He’s too distracted by the heat – and the evening’s plans – to bother looking. “What time does the party start?”

Dad yawns a giant yawn. “After nine hours’ sailing, we’ll be lucky to stay awake till midnight.”

“Not me,” says Chris. “There’s no way I’m missing it.”

The wind freshens as they near the island. Cathy watches the shoreline take shape. What was once blue is now green. Bush cloaks the island, which is bordered by grey rock. They seem to be heading for a wall of that rock until it suddenly parts to let them through.

Mum wipes the sweat from her brow. “Radio Uncle Pat,” she says, checking the chart. “Confirm that we’re about to anchor for the night.” A few keelers and launches have already chosen a spot in the middle of the long, sheltered bay – but with the centreboard wound up, they’ll take their trailer yacht closer in.

Mum grins as she and Cathy fold the mainsail. “Feeling happy?” she asks. Mum’s cheeks blaze, and her hair is stiff with salt.

“I thought you said people lived here,” Cathy says. “All I can see is bush.”

“Exactly.” Mum’s smile has become even wider. “Don’t worry. There are houses in Port Fitzroy – and even a few shops.”

At least there’s a nice beach. Cathy can see a crescent of gold sand backed by a swath of green bush.

“I’m going to start collecting some firewood,” says Chris. “Our bonfire is going to be the biggest.”

“Sorry, Chris,” says Dad. “A bonfire’s out of the question. The island’s as dry as a bone.”

“But we *always* have a bonfire on New Year’s Eve.”

Chris is right. They do always have a bonfire. Cathy wants one, too.

“We’ll be careful,” she says. “We’ll build a proper fireplace with stones.”

“No. There’s a total fire ban, and that includes letting off flares,” Dad says.

“The bush could go up in a flash.”

“Whatever,” Chris grumbles. He looks at Cathy. “Do you want to swim to the beach?” He throws off his T-shirt and stands poised to dive from the bow. “I’ll race you.”

From the beach, they follow a track that leads to a stream. The bush is so dry it’s like walking on cornflakes. Thirsty leaves are coated with a fine layer of dust. They both lie in the cool water and stare up at the trees.

“I’m still rocking,” says Cathy.

“Same.”

“Is that one a kauri?” Cathy asks.

She points to an enormous tree with a mottled trunk that looks like it’s been there forever.

“How should I know? Let’s go back to the beach.”

Mum’s rowed ashore to explore the bay. “Look at the *nīkau* palms. They’re so beautiful,” she says. “But I can’t believe how dry it is.”

“I’m going to draw those palm trees,” Cathy says. “I like their spiky leaves.” Mum tosses Cathy a beach towel along with her sketchbook and pencil case.

“Did you bring something to eat?” asks Chris. Mum digs around in her backpack for apples and biscuits, and this makes Chris think about the marshmallows they brought.

“How will we toast our marshmallows without a fire?” he wails.

“You won’t,” says Mum. “You’ll have to eat *untoasted* marshmallows.”

Cathy takes her things and clammers up a steep, rocky track. She finds a perfect spot overhung with small *pōhutukawa* and with a view of the beach. The birdsong from bellbirds and *tūi* is backed by the white noise of cicadas. Fantails flit and squeak, and the bush smells of dust. Beyond the *nīkau*, Cathy can see more *pōhutukawa*. Beyond that might be some *kauri*, but she’s still not entirely sure what they look like. She waves down to Mum and opens her sketchbook.





The sun is much lower when Cathy finally stops drawing. She'll finish it tomorrow. Back at the beach, boats are rafted up in twos and threes, many with gas barbecues going. "At least they're observing the fire ban," says Mum.

Their cousins arrive, and the kids start a game of football on the sliver of beach the high tide has left behind. The adults arrange rugs and food. Dad moves crates out of the way, then flops onto a log. "Look at that!" he says, spreading his arms at the view. "Heaven."

They eat late. The sky has clouded over, hiding the moon, and Cathy walks to the water's edge and stands in the shallow waves. Dark sky ... dark sea ... dark land. She shivers. It's spookier being on an island when everything is so black.

Much later, after games of spotlight and a swim in the dark, they gather under the gas lantern that Uncle Pat has hung from a large tree. Someone produces a radio, and they chant along with the scratchy voice. "Five, four, three, two, one ... happy new year!"

There are yells and foghorns and hugs and kisses. Then the traditional circle of hands, and they begin to sing. "Should auld acquaintance be forgot ..."

They stop as a flare blazes from a launch far out in the bay.

"What are they doing!" says Dad. "Idiots!"

A second flare arcs into the trees behind them, trailing orange light.

"It's OK," someone says – but it's definitely not OK. A small glow in the bush appears. It becomes larger and larger. They stand and stare, horrified.

"We need to get off the beach," says Mum. The adults dash about grabbing gear and stumble towards the dinghies. They hear a "Woomf", and an explosion turns night into day.

"Run!" someone screams. Flames roar, and heat singes Cathy's cheeks. The fire is a living thing devouring the bush.

They row towards their yacht, now clearly visible in the surreal, dancing light. Cathy watches the fire race up the peninsula. Sparks glitter the air, the odd one falling into the water. Back at the boat, Mum and Chris clamber up the ladder. Dad passes them gear while Cathy steadies the dinghy. Safely aboard, the four of them stand on the cabin roof. Cathy grabs her father's hand.

"It's OK," Dad says. "There's no danger unless the wind changes."

Ash rains like flakes of grey snow, and the sea mirrors the pyrotechnic sky. Cathy wonders how such a terrible thing can look so beautiful?



Early the next morning, the air smells of soot. Most of the peninsula is black.

“Everything’s gone,” says Cathy.

“At least the fire’s out,” says Chris.

“Not quite,” Dad says as they watch a large inflatable roar into the bay. A fire crew assembles a pump and trains giant hoses on the remaining hot spots. The last few dribbles of smoke become steam.

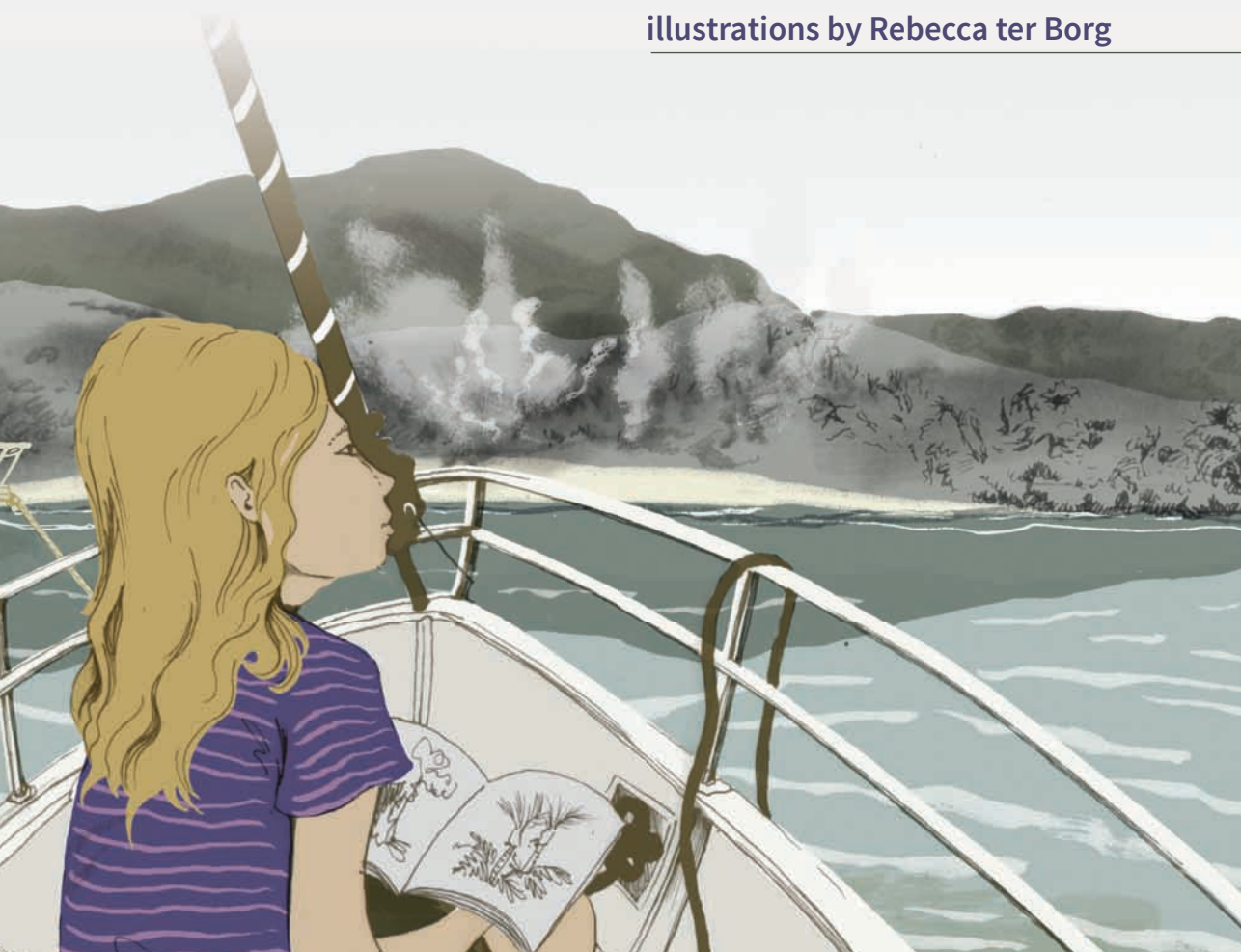
“I hope the culprits own up,” says Dad.

“Would you?” Chris asks. “Isn’t there a big fine?”

“I wouldn’t ignore a fire ban in the first place,” says Dad.

But Cathy doesn’t really care who did it – or whether they’ll be fined. It won’t change anything. She goes below to fetch her sketchbook and opens it to the drawing from the night before ... to the nīkau and pōhutukawa, to the maybe kauri – although now she’ll never know.

**illustrations by Rebecca ter Borg**



# Happy New Year

by Adrienne Frater

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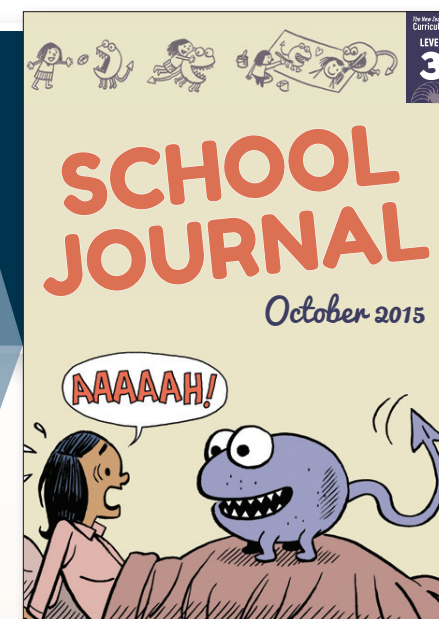
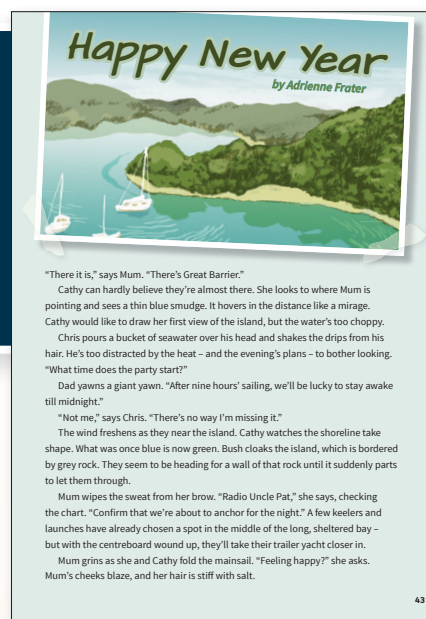
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