

Want Relief

by Paul Mason

“Nellie?” Mother’s voice woke her.

Nell opened her eyes. She couldn’t pretend any longer. She was still trapped here, in this hovel, waking to the awful truth. They were still castaways, marooned on this freezing island. Nell glanced at Mother. She was propped up on an elbow, rubbing tired eyes. Father snored gently by her side. Under his sealskin, Mr Hawkins slept, too.

“The fire, Nell!” Mother gasped, suddenly wide awake.

Nell sat forward with a jolt, glancing over at the cold hearth. She threw off her cover and struggled to the fire. Was there still a whisper of smoke? Please let it be so. She poked at the ashes, finding a faint glow beneath the dust. She pressed some dry shrub against the embers. Leaning in, she could barely muster the strength to blow.

“It was your turn on watch this morning!” said Mother, at her side in an instant.

Nell blew again. The anxiety of her movements spread through the hut like contagion. Now she could hear Father and Mr Hawkins stirring.

Then came Father’s grumble. “What’s the matter, Ann?”

“The fire,” said Mother again.

“Dear Lord!” Father scrambled over just as a tiny sliver of flame began to rise. Nell almost wept at the sight of it.

“It’s saved,” she cried.



Now Mr Hawkins was wide awake. “That fire’s the only thing that stands between us and the grave!” he said.

“Everything’s fine, Mr Hawkins,” said Nell. She moved out of the way to show him.

“Don’t answer back,” said Father.

“She’ll be the death of us all,” Mr Hawkins said. Nell couldn’t hold back her tears. She pushed herself up and fled.

“Nellie!” her father called. But she didn’t want to face what came next. She stumbled through the clearing in the early light, only stopping to lace her boots once she’d reached the far side. Beyond lay the twisted trunks of the rātā forest. Nell ducked under the boughs, picking her way through the confusion of trees, away from the shouts.



At last, she stopped to catch her breath. Underneath the rushing wind came the low gurgle of water. She went a little farther and knelt down at the stream, suddenly thirsty. Despair lay like ballast on her chest. It wasn’t just that the words in the hut were angry – they were also true. Fire kept them from the biting cold, gave them a way to cook, to light the beacons if they saw a sail. They’d nourished the flames all these months, born from the one precious match that had survived the shipwreck. Each of them took turns watching the fire, morning and night. And she’d almost let it go out.

When their ship perished on the rocks, groaning and shuddering to the last, only three lifeboats managed to escape into the fog. They’d lost sight of the other two. They hadn’t seen hide nor hair of them since. Now it was only Nell and her parents and Mr Hawkins. Holding out through days of eating foul seabird and seal meat; chasing off bloated, repulsive flies; and worry – endless, gnawing worry. Was there any hope? Would they make it through the winter?

Suddenly, above her, Nell heard chatter. She glanced up at the canopy, spotting a bright green shape perched on a branch. The little parrot skipped along the branch and stopped to face her, tilting its red-crowned head one way, then the other. He’d come.

Nell was able to smile. “Boss!”

The kākāriki fluttered down. He stepped closer, his toes gripping the swaying wood, and tested the bark with his beak.

What’s wrong? Nell imagined the bird saying.

“Hello, Boss,” she said.

The parrot stared back. “Hello,” he answered, his high-pitched voice making Nell laugh. “Hello, Nell,” he said again.

“Good boy, Boss.” She looked around for something to reward him, poking among the fallen leaves. Boss fluttered to the forest floor to join her, scratching at the ground, more chicken than parrot. She stroked the feathers on his back. Then, under some dead leaves, she spotted a prize for him. A tiny black weevil.



Nell sat down on her haunches to watch him eat. “If it wasn’t for you, Boss ...” But the parrot was too busy to talk. She remembered finding him as a fledgling, nesting in a tree trunk. Downy feathers caught in the bark were the only clue he was there. She’d reached in and got a gentle nip for her troubles. The fledgling’s chest and tail feathers were already as green as leaves, but fuzzy grey down still covered his head. It looked as if he’d forgotten to comb his hair. He had a head too big for his body and a beak that seemed to be curled in a smile. He always made Nell laugh, something that hadn’t happened often since the shipwreck.

To begin with, she kept him inside. The little parrot slept perched at her feet, close to the warm fire. He happily ate all the seeds they could find, the boss of the hut. She even taught him to talk. Then the time came for the kākāriki to spread his wings and rejoin the forest.

His meal finished, Boss skipped over to the stream. He studied it for a moment, then hopped in and began to ruffle his feathers.

“Does that feel good?” Nell asked.

His look of joy was obvious. *You should try it.*

“Too cold.” Instead, she picked up a stick and dropped it in the stream, watching it float along the burbling water. It drifted out of sight, and she was about to throw a much larger one when she saw Boss watching her intently. His beady eyes behind their mask of red were curious, alert. He gave a burst of song, paused, and then gave another.

What had he noticed? Nell glanced down at the wood in her hands. Now she saw it was quite wide. One side was almost flat, and it had a tapered end. A bit like the bow of a boat.

The kākāriki chattered again.

Then an idea showed itself – like another shiny treasure from the forest floor.

“Clever boy,” she gasped.

Nell felt for the sheath she kept tied to her waist and pulled out her knife. She began to whittle the wood, comforted by the sound of Boss rummaging in the background, sometimes calling.

With the idea burning in her head, the bow began to take a better shape. Then her impatient hands formed the sloping edges of the hull. She’d make a keel and a sail later. Nell fashioned the straight edge of the stern and dug a hole in the deck for a mast. She stopped to admire her progress. It needed work – lots more – but it was no longer dead wood. Now it was a ship in miniature. Nell glanced up at Boss for approval, busily shaping his beak along the branch. He stopped and spoke.

Keep going.

Nell whittled away to form the ship’s deck. When she had a smooth platform, she began to carve the words that had tumbled into her head. W-A-N-T R-E-L-I-E-F. Mother would tell her what else to write.

It took her ages. Then, unable to sit still any longer, Nell got to her feet. She was desperate to get back to the hut, to show them her tiny ship, her lifeboat. The flowing water of the stream carried wood well enough. Why not the ocean? Stewart Island lay due north of here, Mr Hawkins had said. With the right current, the right winds, and the right message ...

She blurted goodbye to Boss and ran through the forest, the cry of her friend urging her on.

illustrations by Andrew Burdan



Author's note

Motu Maha or the Auckland Islands are 465 kilometres south of Bluff, in the wild Southern Ocean. They lie on a shipping route between Australasia and Europe and have claimed at least nine ships. This story draws its inspiration from the tales of survivors of two shipwrecks, that of the *Grafton* (1864) and the *General Grant* (1866).

Being marooned on the Auckland Islands was a grim prospect. Cold and windswept, with little hope of rescue, daily life was a battle for castaways. A fire was essential for survival, as was making shelter and finding enough food. To lift spirits, it was important to keep busy. Clothing was made out of sealskin. One group of castaways even tamed some kākāriki for company. Thoughts also turned to how to attract help. People used birds with messages tied to their legs, signal fires, and miniature ships as rescue floats, just like the one made by my character, Nell.



Joseph and Mary Ann Jewell, Auckland Island castaways, wearing the sealskin clothing they made while on the island



A rescue float made by a castaway on the Auckland Islands

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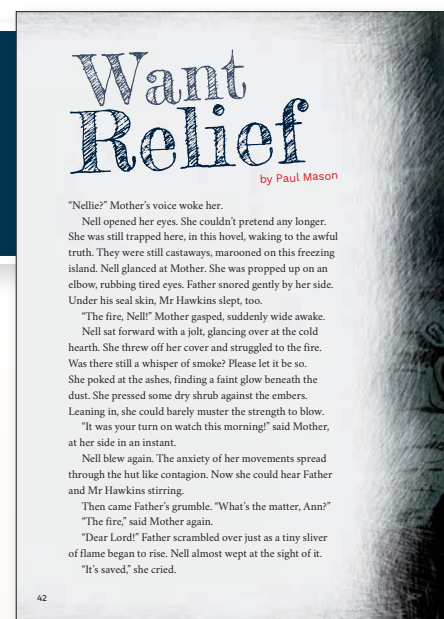
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