

Oakley Creek

by Kate Paris

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I get out of bed and grab my swimming gear from under the pile of clothes I picked out last night. The sun reaches in through the gap in my curtains. It feels like it's cheering me on. As I quickly dress, I listen for footsteps. I can hear my brother grizzling in the kitchen. I'm glad he's not in our room, asking questions. I pull my T-shirt and skirt over my swimming shorts and singlet and check that my towel is still stashed in the bottom of my school bag. I jiggle some things around, making sure Mum can't see flashes of tell-tale colour through the rip by my strap.

I brush my hair and pull it tight and high. The face in the mirror staring back at me looks the same as always, but I feel different. I try to do some of the calming breaths Miss showed us before culture night, but that only makes things worse. The breaths just bring her face into my head, her face with a big frown. I grab my bag and walk down the hall into the kitchen.



Mum has left the cereal out, so I fill my bowl and try to look normal. Jonah is watching cartoons in the lounge and has stopped grizzling – unfortunately.

“What time do you have to be there again?” Mum asks.

“Nine-thirty,” I mumble, looking up at the clock. It’s only eight, but it will take me an hour to do my jobs and half an hour to walk to the dairy, where Destiny will be waiting.



Mum sits down opposite me, so I become very interested in my bowl.

“Why no note?” Mum asks for the tenth time. She knows it’s weird to be going to school on a Saturday.

“I told you I lost it,” I say. “Just ring the school and ask them.” I’m bluffing. I know Mum’s phone won’t have any credit until pay day. I can feel her waiting for me to look up, so I scoff the last of my food and start clearing the table.

Mum’s still sussing me out, and as I fill the sink to wash the dishes, I think perhaps I should just chicken out. She knows something’s up. Is going to the swimming hole with my friends worth the hassle? But then I think how I’m never allowed to go anywhere. I can’t even go to the shops on my own. Mum’s scared the boys hanging round the takeaway bar, with their coloured bandanas and baggy jeans, will give me a hard time. As if I can’t take care of myself! My cool fear has been painted over with hot anger. Destiny’s right. I’m nearly twelve. It’s time I stopped acting like a baby.

After drying the dishes, wiping the bench, making the beds, and shaking out the mat – it’s time to go.

Mum’s hanging out the washing. “Bye!” I say as I race past, brushing her warm, soft cheek with a kiss.

“Wait, Faith. We’ll come, too. I want to talk to your teacher.”

My belly does a flop, and I walk back to the clothesline.

“What? You can’t,” I say. “You’ll make me late. Jonah’s too slow. Don’t worry, I’ll be home at two-thirty.” I reach my arms round Mum, and she hugs me so hard I can feel her heart thumping. I still can’t look at her properly, and I pull out of her arms and race off towards the gate, my feet on some horrible autopilot that I can’t turn off. She won’t bother going to the school. Jonah will complain about having to walk.



By the time I get to the dairy, my jaw hurts from clenching my teeth.

“Come on,” Destiny urges, “or the boys will beat us there.” Destiny looks impressed. I know she didn’t expect me to go through with this. Now it’s too late to change my mind.

We walk across the busy road a little way down from the crossing. I see a lady shake her head at us. It’s a relief to get through the park and onto the quiet track. The trees and gentle flow of the creek make me feel safe. Sunlight and shadows flutter on the path. As we come round a corner near the bridge, I hear shouts and splashes, almost drowned out by the sound of rushing water that must be the falls. The boys have beaten us here.

Liam raises his eyebrows when he sees us. Abroon does a showy flip into the swimming hole. Olivia and Ana are stretched out, their towels spread beneath them, watching. We sit down beside them, and Ana offers me some chips. I know their mothers don’t mind that they come here, and they know my mother would ... if I’d told her. It isn’t spoken, but I’ve gained something by showing up.

All morning, there’s only us, and it feels good. We’ve just finished lighting a fire to try to cook the eel Liam stabbed with a stick, and I’m drying myself by the flames after my third swim, when a familiar voice startles us.

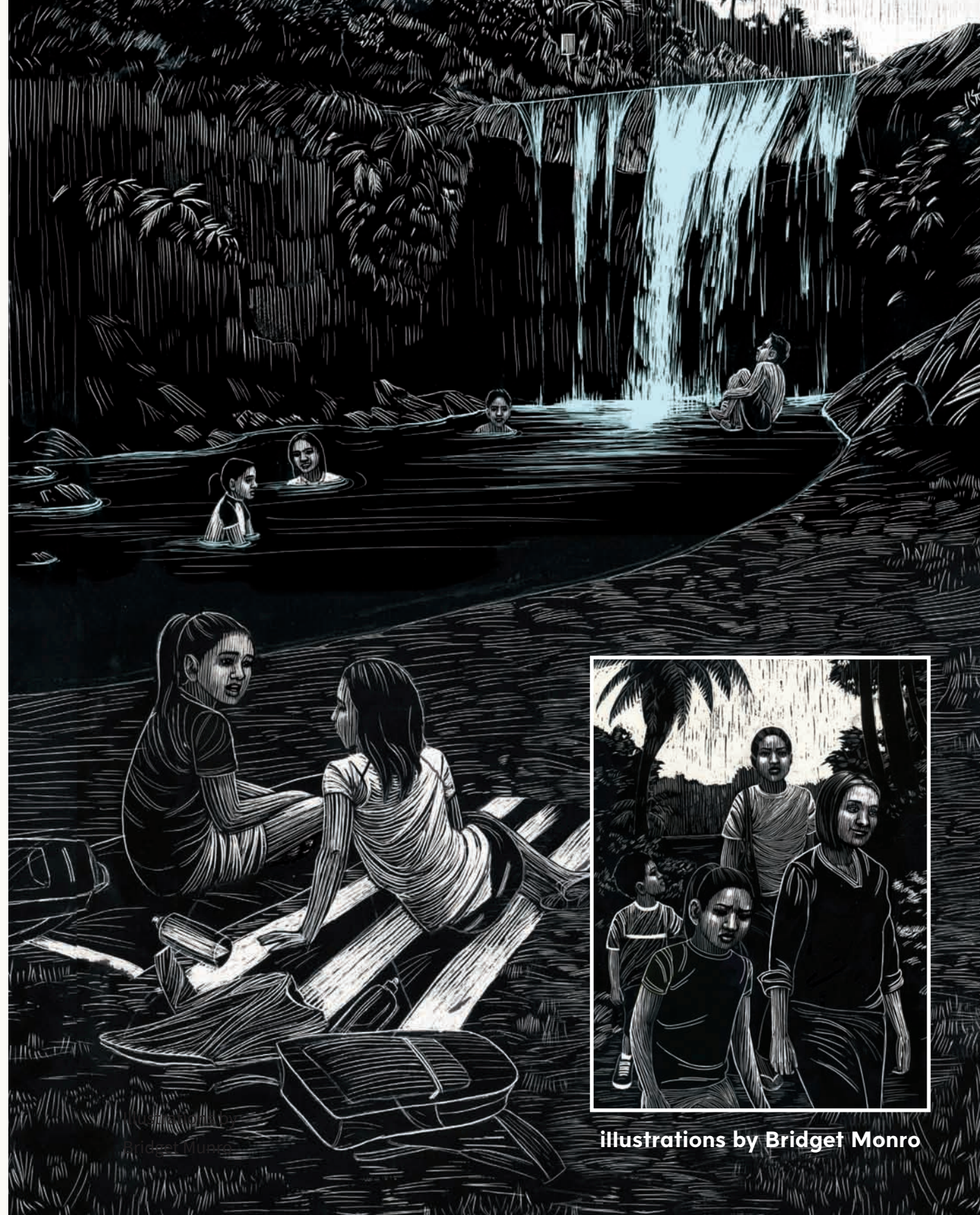
“Faith? Is that you?”

It’s Miss – and she’s with Mum and Jonah, up on the bridge. They’re looking down at us, Mum’s face tight, and my heart stops. For a moment, I can’t breathe or move. Abroon makes some lame joke, asking Miss if she’s brought her togs. My brain flops around trying to piece things together. Why is Mum with Miss? How have they found me? Mum knows nothing about Oakley Creek. Jonah knows nothing about anything. I snatch up my towel and bag, quickly turning away from my friends. I’m not cool. I’m in big trouble.

On the way back, Mum and Jonah trail behind. Miss explains that Mum walked to school after all. Miss had been there writing reports and quickly figured it out. The sunny day and the stories about the falls in kids’ writing books had told her where to start looking. Miss doesn’t growl, and so far Mum hasn’t said a word. She hasn’t even made eye contact. Even Jonah is quiet.

Miss tells me it might not feel like it right now, but I’m lucky. My mum cares enough to come looking for me.

She’s right. I don’t feel lucky.



illustrations by Bridget Monro

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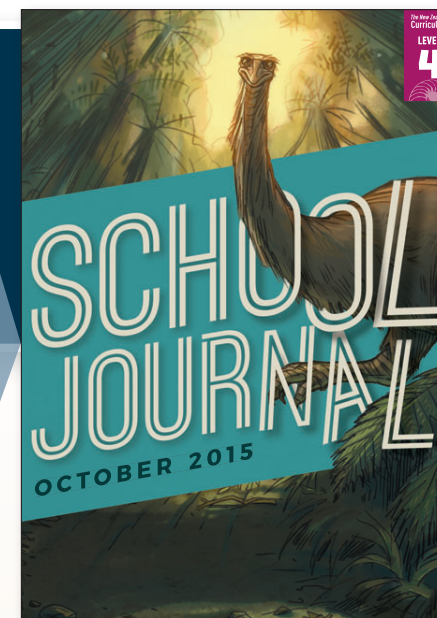
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