

KĀINGA

BY PAUL MASON



We push up the slope, hands held tight, the sweat like oil between our palms. I squeeze harder. If Grace gets away, she'll break free and dash up the track. The ground's hard as concrete. She can run faster than me.

I'd lost my grip earlier when we crossed the wide, flat rock to get to the steps at the start. Grace yanked free to run to the blowhole, the sea blasting up like a whale's breath. I managed to grab her T-shirt before she got too far away. I told her off for scaring me and said not to do it again. Grace just stroked my cheek.

"Take Grace to the birds?" Dad had asked after lunch. "Would you mind, honey, just for a bit?"

I did mind. "You know I don't like going up there," I said.

"Half an hour."

"It's never just half an hour," I moaned. *Why do I always have to go? I've got stuff to do.* I managed to stop the words from getting out.

"I just need to get some work done." Dad found a crushed note in his pocket and put it in my hand. "Get some ice blocks."

I pushed the money away. "I don't take bribes."

"I owe you," said Dad.

"With interest."

The track is steep, and Grace half pulls me along. She's older – and stronger. One day, she'll work that out. Then there'll be trouble. Grace has brought Issa. Issa's full name is Clarissa. She's half-duck, half chewed-up flannel. Maybe that's where Grace got her whole bird thing.

We climb the hill, following the track one way, then the other. It's hot, but the wind coming off the sea is cool. It's an onshore breeze, and the smell of rotten fish hits us before we reach the top. I cover my nose and mouth. The stink's awful – fishy bird poo. Grace grins. She knows the birds are close.

The track heads along the top, out towards the sea. Beyond the railing, the hillside meets the edge of the cliff. It's a long drop to the waves below. We can see the colony now. Nesting birds cover the slopes – hundreds of them – guarding their little mounds. The cliffs are bare earth, dark grey. Against the dirt, the gannets are white specks. They call to each other in a deafening jumble of noise.

Just offshore, a pillar of rock sticks out of the water. More birds cover the stack on top. They fly above our heads too, riding the wind. They look sleek in the air, beaks pointed like arrows – but when they land, they walk about like clowns. Foolish birds.

Near the viewing deck, Grace almost rips my arm from its socket. I'm starting to get tired and let go, and she runs over and leans on the railing for the best view. I know she can't run off now.

A boy and his mother are on the deck. The birds don't seem to notice all the attention. Grace turns and smiles, one that takes in her whole face. She searches the spread of golden heads, holding up Issa so she can see better. All I can think about is how short I can cut this walk without causing a fuss. I check my phone. Clara said she would message. I'm supposed to go round later. The sun and the stink are giving me a headache.

Now Grace is running her finger over the sign, pretending to read. She babbles to Issa, explaining things. I notice the boy glance over, taking in Grace as she gives her flannel duck a lesson on gannets. She doesn't see the boy's look, but his smirk makes my head pound. I feel the heat rise up through my chest. It grows until it bursts.

You think my sister is funny? Because she's different? You don't know anything about her. You don't know what she's like. I keep my mouth shut and swallow. I want to break something.

The boy looks past me. Then he points to a nest right in front of Grace. "Hey, Mum," he says. "Look at those two!"



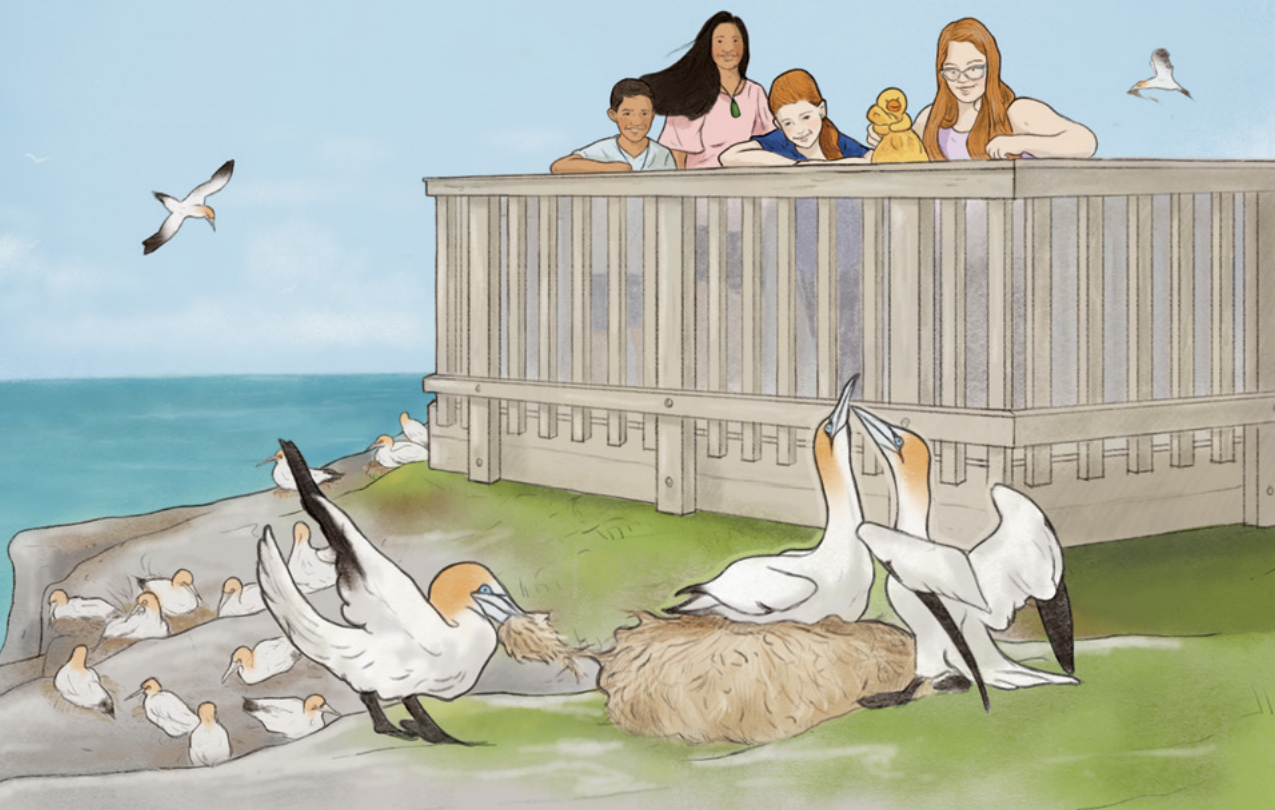
Grace is looking, too. I follow their gaze. One of the birds is sitting on a huge nest. It's an impressive arrangement of seaweed and dried grass, and its gannet neighbour is trying to pinch some. The bird is caught every time, gets a beaky jab, but it doesn't learn. The gannet with the flash nest is really annoyed. It is funny. I let my shoulders drop. The boy wasn't laughing at Grace – it was the birds. My cheeks flame. Did he see my glare before?

As we watch, another gannet swoops in. It waddles over to its mate on the big nest. The two of them do a kind of dance, heads moving from side to side, beaks clacking together. While they're busy, the other bird sees its chance, grabbing some of the straw. We all burst out laughing.

"They always make me smile," says the boy's mum.

"They're Grace's favourite, too."

"Well, your sister knows what she's on about." Grace holds Issa up in greeting. "Kia ora," says the woman, and Grace gives another one of her huge smiles.



We turn back to watch the birds. The mates are still dancing. They stop for a moment, neck resting on neck, two heads of soft gold. The black lines around their eyes look like they've been drawn on with a marker.

"Tākapu are just so lovely," says the mum. I nod. They are. I see it.

"Gannets fly to Australia," says the boy. "But this is their kāinga. They always come back."

"Us too," I say. *Sorry about before.*

When we get home, Dad's at his computer, fast asleep, his head bobbing. I decide to let him rest, but Grace gives him a hug, startling him.

"Hey, girls." He gives the top of Grace's head a kiss.

"Hard at it, eh?" I tease.

"I must have nodded off." Dad grins. "How were the birds?"

I shrug. "You know, Grace might be right about them."

"You heading over to Clara's now?"

Grace reaches up and gently strokes Dad's neck. She sometimes likes to touch his Adam's apple while he speaks.

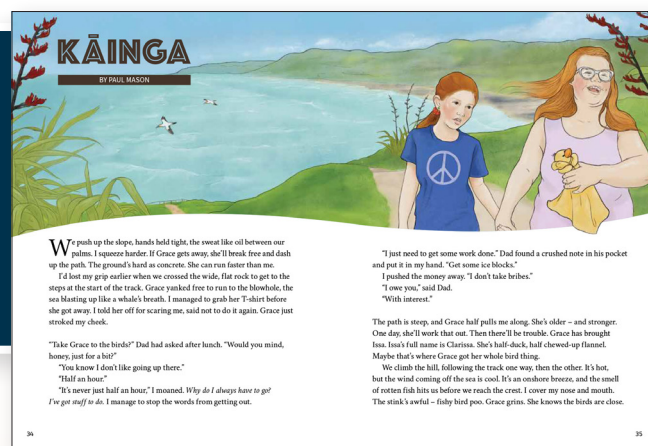
"Maybe later," I say. "No rush."



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