

Lost and Found

by Maria Gill

It was a good day to go snorkeling – the water was crystal-clear at Goat Island Marine Reserve. The sun had lost its harshness and a golden light made it all the clearer, above and below the water.

By the time we had motored around to the bay we had already squeezed into our wetsuits. Mum took over steering and gave the engine a few more revs while Dad went to the bow to let out the anchor.

“Hey Pete, come over here,” Dad called to my brother. He wandered over to where Dad was checking the transit points. “See how I’m lining up with the trees, over on the bay.” He pointed to the Pohutukawa trees on the green hilly slope. “And I’m also lining it up with the little island.” Pete looked over at Goat Island. I also looked up to see where Dad had lined it up with the headlands, out of habit. Dad had taught me all this several years ago. Now Pete was ten, it was his turn to learn.

“If it moves from that point and I’m in the water, you’re to tell me the anchor is dragging, okay?”

“Yep,” said Pete.

Dad turned up the volume to include the three of us: “Okay kids, you know this is a marine reserve.”

“Yes, Dad,” we chorused.

“There’s no taking anything out of the water and into the boat.”

“Okay,” we said.

My little sister Hannah and I adjusted our snorkel and face masks.

“Well, the reason the diving’s so good around here, is because no one can fish or pollute this marine reserve.”

“Yes, Dad.”

“This is a place where fish can grow old. Remember, there’s that old snapper that’s got to be eighty years old lurking around here.”

“Old Monkeyface: I’m going to find him first,” shouted Pete. He climbed on top of the cabin. “Watch me, I’m bombing in,” he said, before jumping off the cabin and into the flat sea.

Hannah and I slipped into the water, one body part after another: taking the slow and painful route. Dad dived in and swam out to sea before joining us. Hannah lunged onto Dad’s back and clung like a limpet. We waved to Mum on deck – one of Dad’s safety clauses – always have someone on board the boat. Pip, our fox terrier barked from the transom.

Dad, Hannah and I swam down a couple of metres then floated underwater. Hannah opened her fingers one at a time to release the frozen peas she had brought with her. The green balls drifted away.

Within minutes, a school of young trevally swam to the peas and swallowed them whole. Then in a silvery flash, they disappeared. In their wake, a large snapper swam onto the scene. It gobbled the rest up before the other snapper had a chance.

Hannah reached out her hand to touch the pinkish scales. Dad pushed her hand away. The snapper bared its dagger-like teeth. Hannah gasped. Tiny bubbles escaped her snorkel. Dad pointed upwards and followed the bubbles to the top. I swam over to a blue object nestled in seaweed and took it up with me.

As I rose to the surface, Hannah cried out, "Look!"

Not far away from us, a gannet dive-bombed into the water. Within seconds, it came to the surface with a mackerel in its beak. It swallowed the fish whole and flew off.

Dad laughed. "You see, there's plenty of fish for the birds in a marine reserve too." He pointed to a small bird that dipped and dived as it flew past. "See that little fella, it's a Storm Petrel. You'll see plenty of them around here too." Dad used to work for the Department of Conservation so he knew his birds.

A seagull began to land on the cabin. "Shoo it off Pete," Dad shouted, "It'll pooh all over the place." As Pete climbed up the ladder, he grabbed a towel and flung the end at the bird. It squawked and took flight.

I threw my treasure into the dinghy, intending to look at it later. I heaved myself onto the launch's transom.

"What have you got there?" asked Mum.

"Just something I picked up underwater."

I looked over to the beach. Earlier in the day there had been hundreds of novice divers on the shore, now, ducks outnumbered the humans. One group of Mallards waddled in a line from the sea to a creek. Several seagulls screeched as they fought over the remains of a forgotten lunch. A woman stood at the edge of the rocks and waved.

We checked behind us. The sun cast an orange light onto the teal green sea. We could see no other boats.

“She must be waving at us,” Mum said.

“Do you know her?” I asked.

“No, do you?”

“Nup. She kind-of looks desperate.”

“We better go and see what she wants,” said Mum.

We put on our lifejackets before leaving the launch and stepped one slow step at a time into the dinghy. “Stay on board, we’re going to see what the lady wants,” Mum shouted to Pete and Hannah. Dad hauled Hannah out of the water.

Mum rowed the tin dinghy to the gravel shore. The woman waited for us.

“Have you seen him?” she asked before we bumped onto the shore.

“Who?” Mum asked.

“My husband. He surfaced just astern of your boat a while ago.”

I shrugged my shoulders; Mum shook her head.

“He might have gone over to the island and be diving around there,” Mum said.

The woman rubbed her forehead. “It’s just that, he went out ages ago. He’s only had one lesson but he loved it so much he insisted we come this weekend, to practice,” she said.

“Oh,” said Mum. “Maybe, we can help you look for him.” She reached into the boat for the binoculars that she always stored in a plastic bag.

“Where did you get that?” the woman said pointing at the bottom of the dinghy.

We looked at the blue snorkel. I had forgotten all about my earlier find.

“I found it underwater,” I said.

The woman picked it up and examined it. “It’s his.”

Mum put her arm around the woman. “People are always losing snorkeling gear in the reserve. How do you know it’s your husband’s?”

The woman put her hands to her face. “Because it’s brand new, see it’s still got the plastic tag on it.”

Mum scanned the water with her binoculars.

“Can you see anything?” The woman snatched the binoculars off Mum.

“Not yet.” Mum pushed me away from the woman and whispered. “She’s nearly hysterical. I want you to go back to the boat, get on the VHF and call for help.” Mum helped me push the dinghy along the sand and into the water. “I’ll help her look for her husband from land. Get Dad to dive round to where you found the snorkel.”

I clambered into the dinghy and got the oars into the rowlocks. I began rowing to our launch. The wind and tide buffeted me sideways and backwards and I seemed to only inch forward. By the time I arrived, my arms shook with tiredness.

Dad pulled me up onto the transom. “Everything okay?” he asked.

“Her husband’s missing. Mum wants us to call the Coastguard.”

Dad hurried over to the radio. He switched it on and changed the channel to 16.

“Mayday, Mayday,” Dad called into the microphone. “It’s the Moana here: Mike, Oscar, Alfa, November, Alfa. We have a diver missing at Goat Island Marine Reserve. We request assistance. Over.”

After answering a series of questions, the Coastguard ended with: “We’ll be there in twenty minutes. Keep searching the area. Over.”

Dad hung up the microphone. “Do we have any clues where the diver could be?”

I told him about the snorkel.

“Okay, you come with me. The rest of you stay on board.”

Pete and Hannah watched, as we put on our gear and dived back in, holding our masks and snorkels in place.

I followed Dad's bubbles. A school of pink maomao scattered and reformed around us. I swam to the place where I had found the snorkel. Dad inspected the seaweed, but could find nothing. A wrasse swam around him and then came to visit me. It blew bubbles towards my facemask, as if trying to tell me something. Then it swam off along the sandy bottom. Out of curiosity, I followed it towards the kelp forest. It swam between two boulders and disappeared. I rested my hand on the sand. Eeek! It moved. Had I put my hand on a body? Nope. A freckled flounder pushed off, wriggling deeper into the sand until I could not see it at all.

We came up for air then dived down again. We swam through the kelp forest. Its brown fleshy fronds swayed in time to a tidal dance movement. Fish veered off when confronted. When we came up for air again, we saw that we had come a long way from the boat. I could see Mum on the shore holding the woman in her arms.

Pete waved his hands in the air. I looked up and saw the Coastguard helicopter circling around our boat. Hannah held the VHF microphone in her hand.

"Hell's teeth," Dad said when he saw her. "You better get back to the boat. Who knows what Hannah's telling them to do."

"Probably ordering takeaways," I said.

"Wouldn't put it past her," said Dad. "Okay, I'm going to search the area over there." He pointed westward. "See you soon."

I swam back to the boat and pulled myself out. I grabbed a towel and rubbed my face dry. The wind had picked up and I could see we had moved from Dad's transit points.

"What have you been saying on the VHF?" I asked Hannah. "You know Mum and Dad don't like you touching it."

"S'alright," Pete said. "I took the message."

"What is it?" I said, running to the map chart table.

"You won't find it written, cos I've remembered it." He flicked his eyes upwards to remember the words. "The Coastguard boat has launched and it's on the way."

"And..." added Hannah.

"They're looking for a cadaver," said Pete.

"What's that?" Hannah asked. Pete shrugged his shoulders.

"Umm, a special type of diver." A dead one, but she didn't need to know that.

"Oh." The answer seemed to suffice. Her attention had already switched to food. She opened a packet of biscuits Mum had hidden in the back of the cupboard – for EMERGENCIES.

Just then, we heard Dad calling. When we looked out, we saw Dad miles away. I had not realized the boat had drifted so much. I called to Pete to help me let the anchor rope out a bit. Dad swam towards us.

All of a sudden, Pip began to growl.

“Cut it out Pip!” I shouted. There was enough going on without his antics.

He continued to bark. Just as Dad heaved himself on to the transom, Pip ran and dived. His belly smacked the water. He paddled further and further away from the boat. We shouted for him to come back.

“Dad, a shark or something could get him.” I shouted. Dad dived off the back of the boat to follow Pip.

Pip swam for ages, then stopped and began paddling in the same spot. When Dad reached Pip, he tried to tuck him under his arm but he barked even more. Every now and then, Pip tried to dive but his light body prevented him from going under. Perhaps Dad got Pip’s message because he dived down and disappeared from sight. Pip remained in the same spot.

“I’m going to get Pip, be back soon.” I said throwing off my towel, donning snorkeling gear and diving in.

After swimming a while, I came to Pip. His breaths came in short pants. He would not last much longer. I also saw the Coastguard boat zooming around the island. Great, help was nearby.

“Pip, go back to the boat.” Pip hesitated but I pushed him away. He paddled off. I dove down to see if Dad had found anything.

I pushed the seaweed fronds out of the way to see in front of me. A wrasse, which looked very similar to the one I had seen earlier, came up to my face and blew bubbles again. Then it skittered off. I followed it. We swam through kelp forests, over rocks, getting deeper and deeper.

Then I saw Dad. He tugged at something. I swam over. As I got closer, I saw that he held a body. Dad put his hand up – a signal for me to stop. He jerked his thumb up and then mimed using a VHF.

It took a while for Dad's message to sink in. My eyes kept reverting to the body. The man's eyes stared upwards, his mouth open with no bubbles coming out. His foot still wedged into a crevice.

A large snapper with a scar on its face came up to my facemask to look at me. I recognized him as the legendary Monkeyface. It woke me from my frozen state. I swam to the top, gasping for air. Dad joined me, gulped a few breaths and swam down again.

I waved my arms, hoping the Coastguard boat would see me. It must have, as it changed course and headed in my direction.

They shut the engine off just before getting close. One of the men hauled me onto the boat. “Seen anything?”

I could hear voices but it seemed as if I was looking on in another world. The man repeated himself. I pointed downwards.

“What’s down there?”

I nodded my head.

“The body?”

I pointed downwards again.

After that, everything seemed a blur. Two men from the Coastguard dived in to help Dad. The skipper took me back to my boat. He asked Pete to keep me warm. Then he went back to the rescue.

Pete let the anchor rope out some more to stop the boat from drifting. Dad left the coastguard boat once they had the body on board. Rescue people came and took the bereaved woman away. Dad collected Mum in our dinghy.

Back on board, Mum revved the engine and turned on the lights. Dad hauled up the anchor with Pete’s help. Pip cuddled up to Hannah. I stared out to sea, seeing nothing.

We motored back to Leigh. No one talked except Hannah. We were just about to turn around the last peninsular when a bird landed in the boat. Pete was just about to shoo it off, when Dad yelled out, “Stop!”

The bird hopped over to Dad and perched on his pocket: its hooked claws curling around the pocket edge. Dad kept one hand on the steering wheel and with the other reached around and picked up the small bird.

“Wow,” said Pete.

“Keep it quiet, kids,” Dad whispered. “We don’t want to frighten it.”

We moved closer to get a better look.

“That’s weird,” said Dad.

“What?” we asked.

“It doesn’t look like the Storm Petrels we usually see.”

Mum pulled out a bird book and looked at the photographs of birds in the book.

“You see, it’s got a streaked tummy and black webbed feet, these birds don’t,” said Dad, turning the bird sideways, so we could see. “You know, I think it’s the New Zealand Storm Petrel. For a hundred years, they’ve thought this bird was extinct. Then a couple of years ago they started sighting them around Little Barrier Island,” said Dad.

“Cool,” said Pete.

“We need to hand this bird in so they test it,” said Dad.

“They won’t hurt it?” I asked.

“Not at all. They’ll measure it and take a few feathers. They can check its DNA and then we’ll know for sure.”

I could feel my insides and outside begin to thaw. “We’ve lost and found a few things today,” I murmured. Mum put her arm around me.

“Petrels nest in holes, so we need to make a burrow for it.” Dad looked around the room. We held up a few things for him to consider. Just then, Hannah came out of the head, “Mum, we’ve run out of toilet paper.”

“That’s it,” said Dad. We looked at Hannah and her toilet roll. She held it out for Dad and he squeezed the small bird in.

Dad held the toilet roll up for us to peer at the bird inside. The bird tucked its head into its dark brown wing and closed its eyes to sleep. Its feet poked out of the cylinder.

“Can I hold it?” asked Hannah.

“No, we need to put it somewhere safe, until we can get it to a scientist,” said Mum handing over a box. Dad put it inside.

Mum took over steering the boat to Leigh Wharf, while Dad used his cell phone to call a bird expert. The expert met us at the wharf and took the bird.

Later that night, scientists came and checked the bird. Then set it free. We knew we had found the right bird when we saw Dad's name in the paper.

He was a hero for finding two things that day.

(This is a fictional story with fictional characters, situated in a real place with events that really happened but not in the way the story depicts.)

LOST AND FOUND

By

Maria Gill

2918 words

Maria Gill
740 Leigh Road
R.D. 5
Matakana
Warkworth 0985
Phone: 09 422 9456
EMAIL: mariagill@ihug.co.nz