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From "On This Island"

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PENELOPE TODD

from *On This Island*

Note: Martha is head of this antipodean quarantine island community in the late 1800s. All others mentioned (bar Henry, a patient) work on the island, Kahu and the young women as nurses.

Out at the woodshed in the early sun, Martha picked through the knotty offcuts that had foiled axe or saw, wanting a shape that suggested a bowl hidden in its depths. By mail she had obtained new, cunning chisels and gouges that were going to make her work easier. The holdfast set up on a narrow bench in the corner of her living space was not aesthetically pleasing by classical ideals, but she appreciated the strong, silent presence that was ever ready to hold and grip without grudging or bargaining. This week a jar of japonica blossoms made a graceful companion piece for the squat and stoical piece of equipment.

She took up a lump of tree fuchsia and peeled away its papery skin.

Gregor emerged from the men's quarters, greeting her on his way to the wash-house. Jimmy shortly appeared, and then Kahu who stretched and yawned in the sun like a tousled young animal. Kahu had been accommodated by the addition of a platform above the existing beds. He liked his nest with the tiny accumulation of possessions and fragrant bracken mattress he had scythed and stuffed for himself.

On the edge of the vegetable garden, Gregor caught hold of the other two and began to consult them on some matter. Leaning on the sunny stack and picking idly at the wood, Martha saw how Kahu and Jimmy, each for reasons of his own, was barely present to their elder with his earnest hands and emphatic words. Jimmy swung at a red butterfly, catching it between thumb and finger. Kahu stood a little way off, kneading the grass edge beneath his toes, nodding as necessary but, Martha was certain, pursuing his own thoughts.

She felt a warm hum in her chest. She, Martha, was responsible for their being here, had chosen each or—it could be argued—drawn each here in the first place. Oh, people thought they were in charge

of their destinies—well, men did perhaps more than women, who allowed that biology must also unfold in them—but what was it, really, that towed Kahu safely through the sea that night? Why did Jimmy lose his hearing only days out from the new colony—this loss which made of him the perfect free spirit to have about the place? He refused to be paid as long as he could remain here, be fed, clothed—and suit himself; and mostly what suited him suited the rest of them well enough. He liked to work, even though his choices were idiosyncratic and he not to be leaned upon too heavily.

Then there was Henry, brought into Liesel's sphere, and both caught equally in the loop of fascination; they presented an observably exotic, but a perfect, congruence of life in decline and life burgeoning. Martha had seen the young tree of Liesel leaf, bud, and flower in this intense month, while Henry was drawn out and out by the twin energies at work in him—the energies of love and death. His work was all of fruition: whatever peculiar fruit it was had grown golden and sweet; tense-skinned, it trembled on its stem—readier every day to fall and rupture and release its potent seed back into the living world.

Was it very strange that she, Martha, was tempted to see herself at the hub of this web of influence? As the fat mother spider drawing them all in? But no, it was a kind of grand folly, and she must not linger over the schema that nonetheless persisted in her imagination, where unseen complexes and influences bloomed and stretched, as in a star chart, across, or beneath, the surface of the seen world. It wasn't as if she planned to eat these others, but only to employ their talents and peculiarities, and to see them flourish, for their own sakes and for the sake of their small community.

No, she would rest her weight only on what appeared, here and now—let these fable-ish concepts proliferate if they must, like algae in the dark, but they could stay there, too, out of sight where they belonged.

“Another set of rocks against the bank will hold the sun's heat as well as shoring it up.” Gregor's voice obtruded on her thoughts.

“Sun doesn't need shoring up,” Kahu quipped.

Gregor stared back in perplexity. He was asking the others to help him cut out an extra width of garden from the piece of uncultivated hill between the potatoes and the donkey fence. Why were they being so dense, like rocks themselves, and as hard to rouse?

Jimmy's glance grazed the older man's mouth, which was moving in his beard as though he were chewing a piece of gristly mutton. Jimmy's plans for the day did not include bending over a spade. He always took Saturdays away from the hospital, sleeping the adjacent nights in his bunk over here—but Gregor seemed to forget that he'd never yet pinned Jimmy down for his purposes on a Saturday. Jimmy watched the butterfly on his forearm. Apart from the pigment that had come off on the tips of his fingers, it was whole, testing its wings through every angle, then pausing in a V and sending out its tongue in long, curly investigations of the hair at its feet. Jimmy watched Martha, too, turning the wood in her hands. She resembled that junction cut from a fast-growing paperbark. Half an inch beneath the surface the grain of Martha and the grain of the wood ran in whorls and reversals, deviating and accommodating, but conforming in the end to the principles of their intrinsic natures. Martha had been pushed this way and that by fate but had let herself sink into identification with her true character—revealed to her once she had peeled away the papery skin of convention. He knew this because he was the same: in his case smitten—as it had seemed—by deafness, but now reconciled to the silence that yielded up its own riches, which were brighter and truer than any he had encountered when he was distracted by noise. The only thing he couldn't stand was the only sound he could hear: an intermittent, high-pitched ringing and chattering that came, not from the world at large, but from the deeps of his own head and transmitted into his left ear. Now it made him grimace and wrench his jaw this way and that—which sometimes shut it up.

Gregor shook him by the shoulder and mouthed about the parsley seed Jimmy had gathered from the bolted plants last autumn, and Jimmy knew where it was—would put it in Gregor's way later in the day—but for now didn't want to be bothered. One of the women in the cottages had promised to help him make a rag rug. They'd sit out in the sun, four yards apart, she on her doorstep, he on a blanket on the grass. He'd gathered up a bundle of fabric, including a pretty blouse and a tablecloth from the ironing pile, that he'd stripped into rags before they could be missed. He was heading over there as soon as he'd eaten breakfast. He pursed his mouth at Gregor and puffed at the butterfly, making it flutter away, and off he went.

Butterfly himself, thought Martha, as she brushed off her clothes and took the wood inside. Alighting wherever fascination took

him—sometimes to work all day like a Trojan, rubbing wax into a floor, another time taking an entire morning to create for the patients dainty pink-iced sponge cakes that were eaten in a trice. But if any of the nurses asked for help with a simple job, like lifting a patient, or fetching wood for the fires, he was happy to oblige. He was almost always happy to oblige, but he did what he wanted and not a thing that he didn't.

Gregor needed a cup of tea, strong and black with sugar, two spoons of sugar. It had been foolish of him to broach the subject of the new piece of garden with those two together. He should have been as sly as they were; he should have got Martha on his side, convincing her that he needed their muscles. Jimmy tended to mind her wishes when he minded no one else's, and the new lad was still very much at her command. It was a shame that young Kahu and he, Gregor, twitched at one another's nerves, but the boy was unwilling to commit himself to a job if there was any chance Martha would permit him over among the patients. He wanted to become the best, the nonesuch of nurses, in the shortest amount of time, and the honest turning of soil he seemed to consider beneath his dignity. How did he think his ancestors had spent their days, their whole lives? Not tripping about in aprons, or studying fat volumes on the finer points of bed-bathing. Live and let die; that would have been their motto, Gregor felt pretty sure, although they might have employed witch doctors, medicine men or what-have-you when they wanted to argue the toss with Death. But Kahu didn't seem to be of that ilk with his clean limbs and open face; the boy looked nothing like a pagan: knew how to wash himself properly and keep his things in order. Well-spoken, too. The fact was, Gregor didn't know if it was right or wrong for Kahu to have the aspirations he did. Certain it was, the boy was well above him in the realms of his mind. Well above the garden with its lowly ways, but they were pure, true ways, too.

Ah, he needed to get that tea into him. What was it Liesel said once? Nine minutes for it to take hold and do its work. He shook his head as he recalled her that night recently, spinning on her chair, talking a blue streak, hair falling out of its clasps and cheeks pink with agitation. A troubled young pet, that one, but a pet nonetheless. Nine minutes be damned. He had only to close his lips on the first hot, brown tannic mouthful and Eden was restored.