

Saturn's Orbit

I met her, for the first time, in spring. October swirled in on a warm breeze that smelled of mānuka flowers, showering my world with buttery kōwhai petals. I abandoned my beanie and gloves for a floppy sunhat and jandals, flinging myself towards summer.

We'd gone away for Labour Weekend, driving along twisting roads to our bach in the Sounds, stuffed in the car with pillows and chilly bins, bottles of lemonade and board games.

The weekend was gloriously warm, and I went to sleep each night still feeling the sun on my skin like a tattoo. It was on our last night there, while my sister Liv cooked and my parents played Battleships, that I padded silently out through the sliding door. The porch was dipped in shade, hidden from the setting sun, and the wooden boards were cool beneath my bare feet. I jumped down onto the ground where scraggly grass battled with the sand that got brushed in from the beach.

Our bach was on the edge of the bush, surrounded by the kind of thin, twisting trees that could cope with being near the sea, setting the stage for a constant symphony of birdcalls: bellbirds and fantails in the daytime, and the mournful song of the ruru once night fell. I turned away from the trees, towards the stretch of salt-kissed beach, because it was cold in the bush and I was only wearing a cardigan. I also didn't want to be jumped by any lurking possums.

I wandered down the beach, in and out of the shallows, chasing the warped sunlight. Our bay was one of the bigger ones, but it wound around the hills, like lace on the brim of a hat, so it wasn't long before I couldn't see the faded weatherboard of our bach anymore.

As the sun plunged lower into the sea, goosebumps began to prickle my skin, and the breeze flicked my hair into my face, but I kept going. After two days with no company but my family's, I needed a break.

It was beautiful there, the sand smooth and the ocean sparkling, as if someone had spilled a pot of glitter in it. I didn't notice the beauty at the time, at least not consciously, because I thought we would go back every holidays for the rest of eternity, the way you do when you're thirteen.

Just as I was about to turn back, I heard a shout. 'Hey!'

I scanned the beach, searching for the owner of the voice, but it was empty. I'd nearly convinced myself that it was just my imagination when I heard, 'Hey! Excuse me? Could you help me?'

Finally, I spotted someone. They were standing on the edge of the beach, peering up into the branches of a swaying tree before looking back at me and waving.

Thinking feverishly of the first aid manual I found on the bookshelf at home one weekend when I was really bored, I hurried up the beach. Sand slipped away under my feet, so it was likely clumsier than the heroic sprint I was imagining in my head, but at least I wasn't panting when I reached the injured person.

'Hi. Thank you,' said the person, who I could now see was a girl, and who also didn't appear to be injured. 'I was wondering if you could give me a boost?'

My brain was still working so hard on taking in the look of this girl – tall, lanky, wearing an oversized denim jacket and a crooked smile, obviously very cool – that all I managed to say in reply was, 'What?'

Her eyes twinkled, and suddenly I felt like I was in on some kind of intensely private joke. 'So...the wind blew my towel into this tree, and I can't get up there on my own. Could you boost me up?'

I nodded immediately and got down on one knee like I'd seen in movies, interlocking my fingers. The girl grinned at me and planted her foot on my palms, launching herself into the cradle of the tree's branches. She did it so effortlessly that I spent several seconds frozen on the ground in awe, probably looking a bit like a goldfish.

When she leapt down, she had a blue beach towel over her shoulder. 'Thank you so much,' she said. 'I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't come along.'

I smiled and tried for a nonchalant shrug. 'It was no problem.'

'So, do you have a bach around here or something?'

'Yes, just around the corner.'

She nodded and started to walk back onto the sand. 'Sweet. We just bought one.'

I glanced back in the direction of our bach. The sun was almost set, and my parents would probably be wondering where I was, so I said, 'Sorry, I've got to get back.'

'Alright.' She held out her hand for me to shake – so grown-up! 'See you around?'

'See you,' I replied faintly as we both turned and parted ways.

I realised that I hadn't asked her name, but I wasn't going to go back just to ask her. That was too lame, even for me.

And I thought that was it, that I'd just had an interesting, if short, experience that I would tell my friends about on Monday then forget about by the next weekend. I definitely never expected to see her again.

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We didn't return until the summer. For Christmas, we brought some friends out, and I was so distracted by being allowed to barbeque the sausages by myself, a pile of presents that included an expensive new jacket, and Liv getting her foot cut open on a smashed glass, that I didn't even think about the smiling girl I'd met one October evening.

The second time, though, when we came out for the three weeks before school started again, I began to look for her.

In my head, I'd had ample opportunity to glamorise the girl with sparkling eyes who was practiced at springing out of trees, turning her into something impossible. A superhero, of sorts, or maybe a celebrity, safe in the assumption that I wouldn't see her again.

Every evening, I went down to the beach. My parents seemed glad that I wanted to spend so much time outside, so they didn't mind.

I only ever went as far as that tree, thinking perhaps that I might see her swinging out from its twisted branches, a lopsided bandana tied around her head and a pirate's cutlass at her hip. As I said, I'd had a lot of time to twist our meeting into something fantastical.

It wasn't until the second week, when I'd practically given up hope, that I saw her. My family was out on our pathetic lawn, playing a made-up version of cricket. The deck was littered with jumpers and shoes and leaking sunscreen bottles, and the heat had baked the earth beneath us to hard clay.

I was aiming for a home run, sweat sliding down the side of my face in a distracting trail, with Dad yelling encouragement from the wickets, when I spotted her walking up the beach.

I stopped. She had cut her hair, shaved close on one side and left choppy at chin-length on the other. It should've clashed with the floral sundress she was wearing, but it didn't. Instead,

framed by the gently swaying mānuka trees and the cloudless sky, she pulled off a trendy-uni-student-on-holiday-in-California sort of look, despite being none of those things.

By that point, my parents and Liv had realised that we had a guest.

‘Good afternoon,’ Mum called, raising one hand to shield her eyes from the sun.

‘Hi!’ said Not-A-Pirate Girl, her eyes glittering. ‘My name’s Elliette. My family has a bach further down the bay. I thought I’d come and say hello.’

Elliette. It was exactly the kind of name I expected her to have. One that twirled and dipped, that sounded like fresh raspberries or delicately spun sugar.

‘Oh, well it’s very nice to meet you.’ Mum said. The skin on her nose was pink and peeling, and strands of her hair had slipped out of their bun and fell limply around her face.

‘Would you like to come in for some lemonade?’

Elliette grinned and nodded, and just like that she slipped back into my life, as naturally as if she’d been there all along.

She stayed late into the evening, the perfect guest. She even complimented Dad’s cooking, which is horrible unless it’s barbequed.

It wasn’t until she was leaving that we got to talk alone, though. I’d only just about got over the shock of seeing her again, the numbness and disbelief fading to reveal a bone-deep delight at being interesting enough for her.

‘So, Jane,’ she said as we trailed down to the beach, ‘how long are you staying here?’

I tucked my hands into the front pockets of my shorts. ‘Another two weeks.’

‘Fantastic! I’ll drop ‘round tomorrow then?’

I loved that she said things like ‘fantastic’ where I would have just gone with ‘cool’. I also loved that she wanted to see me again.

‘Yes! We could go swimming?’

‘Sounds good.’ We’d reached the end of the path, so she turned to me and held out her hand. ‘It was nice to meet you properly, Jane.’

‘You too,’ I replied as I shook her hand.

Then she was off, the hem of her dress fluttering in the hint of a sea breeze, glancing over her shoulder to smile one last time at me before she melted into the soft, purple shadows of dusk.

And so began the two most interesting weeks of my life.

Elliette and I met up every day, usually at my place, but occasionally at our tree. We swam in the sea until our fingers wrinkled and our hair ties were crusted into our hair by all the salt. We trekked higher into the bush for a better view of the bay then ran back down, dodging snarled roots and stones until we collapsed in a giggling heap, out of breath. Elliette brought me back to her family's back and we danced to her dad's ancient Crowded House CDs in the living room, the sunny floorboards creaking as we spun.

I felt alive and happy and impossibly grown-up, or like a real version of the perfect British children going on adventures who appeared in so many stories. The approaching end of our holiday didn't concern me. Those days seemed to last forever.

One night we lay on the beach, the sand cold on my bare arms, and stared up at the sky. There were so many stars that I struggled to pick out any constellations except the Southern Cross.

As we lay there, listening to waves shuffle across the sand, we talked in hushed tones about the films we liked and the weird things our friends did, or about how peach rings are the best sour lollies.

'Look!' Elliette whispered. 'See that bright yellow one up there? That's Saturn. At this time of year, the path of its orbit means it sets before midnight. If we watch long enough, we'll see it disappear behind the horizon.'

I followed the direction of her finger, smiling when I spotted the gold spark of a planet. 'I've never seen Saturn before. Except for in photos, of course.'

She turned her head so that she faced me. Her eyes had lit up, dappled with specks of moonlight and bright with determination. She said, 'Let's come back out here tomorrow night, and I'll bring my telescope. I'll show you a Saturn that's even better than in the photos.'

'Okay.'

Yet when sunset rolled around once again, I was sitting alone on the porch, and the sky was empty of stars.

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After that wonderful summer at the bay, I only ever saw Elliette once more.

It was raining, and I'd forgotten an umbrella. I hunched my shoulders over the 12-inch David Bowie vinyl I'd just bought from the record shop and walked as fast as I could down the street. Water soaked through my shoes and tights, turning my toes to ice-blocks.

I was thinking about postage stamps, of all things, and how many I'd need to send this record to my sister in Wellington. The last thing on my mind was the lovely but ultimately painful days I'd spent with a mysterious girl out in the Sounds, which was perhaps why what happened next was such a shock.

My shoulder collided with somebody, and I startled out of my thoughts, muttering, 'Sorry.'

The person I'd crashed into had shoulder-length blond hair and nice blue eyes, and she was wearing an oversized denim jacket. For a moment I was thrown back seven months. All I could hear was the crash of waves; salt lingered in the air and on my tongue, sharp and clean. Blue skies and golden sand. Wild bees and sunscreen and tomato sauce.

'Watch where you're going,' Elliette sneered now, except it couldn't be her, because the Elliette I knew wouldn't sneer. And then she leaned over to her friend and, shaking her head, said, 'Bloody kids.'

I was frozen, barely feeling the rainwater that trickled down the back of my collar, as Elliette and her friend continued past without another look in my direction.

My face burned despite the rain, though I wasn't sure why. *Kid?* I wasn't even that much younger than her.

The truth hurt. I had already long since accepted that I hadn't meant anything to Elliette, but having her say as much to my face was like lemon juice on a cut.

What could I do? She was already half a street away from me, and I didn't think anything I said would make a difference anyway.

She didn't even recognise me.

I tilted my head to look at the angry sky, from which Saturn had long since disappeared, blinking away raindrops, then I hugged the David Bowie album closer to my chest and walked on.