



WIND CHIMES

BY PAUL MASON

They pushed on, the track beneath their feet soft and yielding. Moss hung from the beech in long wisps – the trees looming out of the fog like watchmen. More than once, Tre spun around, certain they were being followed.

“Can we stop?” pleaded Muse, though it was more a demand than a question.

Tre slowed down and tilted his head, listening for the tell-tale sounds of a squad of Voids.

“I keep telling you we lost them ages ago,” said Muse. “Voids don’t like getting their feet dirty. Besides, we’ve been walking for hours.”

She had a point. They’d covered a fair bit of distance since morning. Tre closed his eyes and caught a glimpse of the pod: the piles of white building blocks, every kid building towers exactly the same. Every one of them hushed by the Examiners. He and Muse had been lucky to escape.

Tre leant against a fallen tree trunk and took a water bottle from his backpack. He handed it to Muse. “The settlement’s at the bottom of this hill.”

“You think your parents will be there?”

“They’ll be there.”

“It’s just that most people who’ve been hushed never ...” Muse stopped.

“You beat them, didn’t you? You were hushed once,” Tre snapped.

“It wasn’t easy.”

“Mum and Dad will have made it. I know.” Tre took a swig of water.

“OK,” said Muse. She pushed at the dirt with her boot. “And they’ll like me?” she asked, not for the first time.

“They’ll like you all right.” Tre smiled. But then he thought back to the last time he’d heard his parents’ voices, and his smile dropped away. It had been an echoey conversation, the transmission more static than words. Dad telling him to keep his head down; garbled scraps about them all being free; a last, frantic “Be yourself, Tre!” And then the Examiners cut the call dead. That was weeks ago.

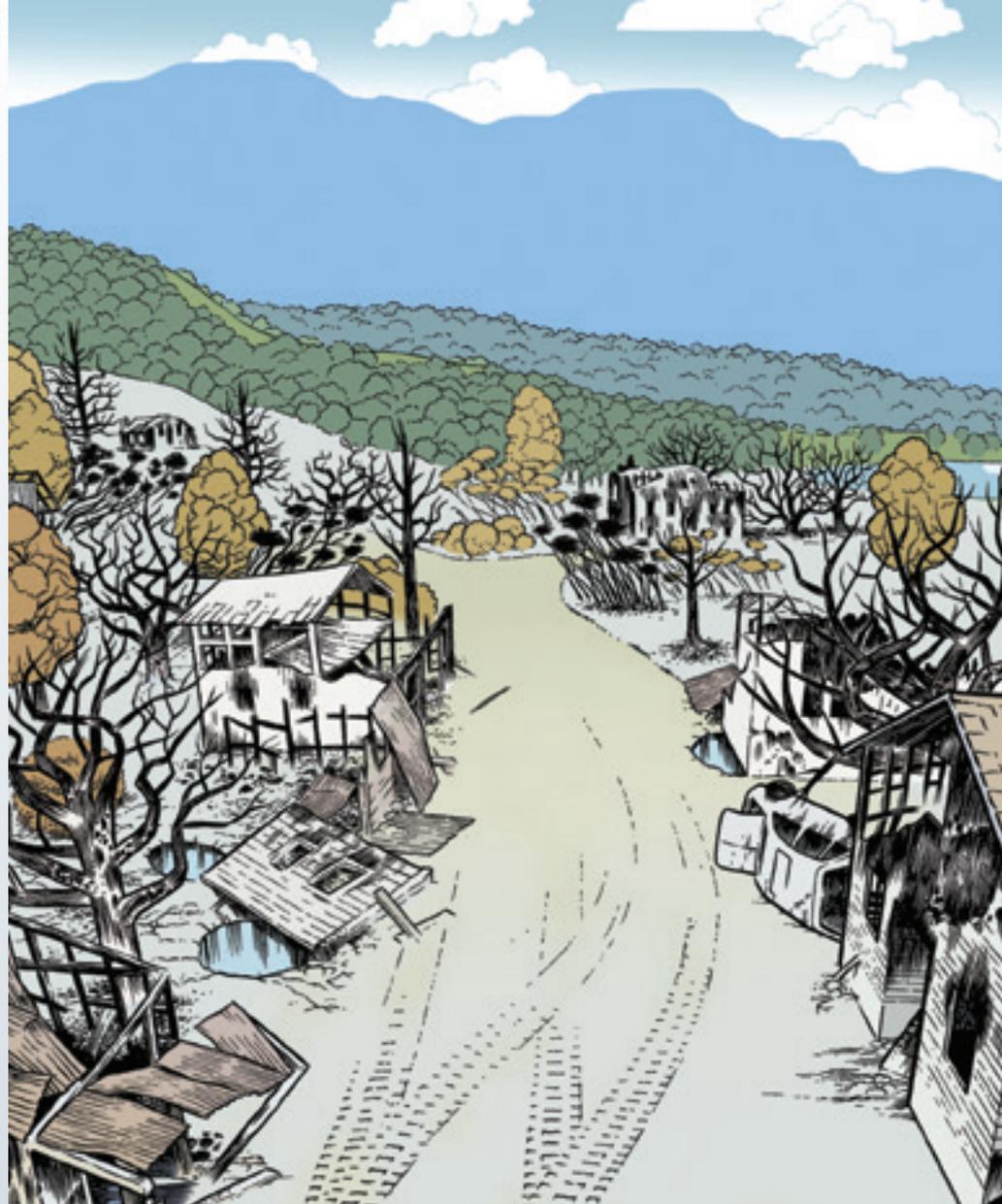
Tre spat on the path. The morning the Examiners came, they had sent two squads of Voids to do their dirty work. It was their boots Tre remembered most: kicking the school door wide open, wood cracking. Kicking over the fish tank. Desks. Kicking the book right out of Mum’s hands, making sure she couldn’t read another word. Everything destroyed by shiny black leather.

“Do what they say, children,” Mum had instructed while goldfish flapped on the floor. “It will be all right.” But Tre caught the worry in her eyes as Voids forced her onto the transport. Dad was herded into the back, too, his hands bound. Tre recalled a brief moment of feeling glad: at least his parents would be together. Then he was shoved in the other direction, along with the rest of the children. The adults were driven away like cattle.

Muse rubbed his shoulder, stirring him. “Should we make a move?”

Tre nodded. “Not long now. Wait till you see the lake.”

When they were close, Tre ducked off the path and into the bush, Muse close behind. They followed the slope downwards, heading towards the water. When the shore came into view, Tre peered through the ferns. Then he slumped to his knees.



The settlement was wrecked. The row of stalls on the main street, the meeting hall, the schoolhouse, the cabins – in ruins. Burnt into nothingness. The road out of town wore deep tracks, but there was no sign of the transports – or of anyone.

Tre’s head dropped. “Looks like the Voids came back to finish the job,” he mumbled.

“A while ago,” said Muse, eyeing the remains. She offered her arm. “I’m so sorry, Tre.”

Tre looked away, careful not to let Muse see his eyes fill up. “We should check it out,” he mumbled, getting to his feet.

They walked through the town to the family cabin. Tre stumbled over lumps of blackened wood, mounds of cold ash. His mum’s veggie patch out the back had been torched. Swan plants and butterflies gone, too. Beside the wrecked doorway, he found some pieces of burnt driftwood tied with string. Tre lifted the wind chimes out of the ashes.

“Mum was always making these,” he whispered. He dropped them back into the rubble. “I guess they’ve been hushed, too.”

“We should go,” said Muse, taking his hand. “The Voids could come here looking for us.”

“Go where?”

Muse shook her head. The two stood in silence. “Didn’t you say your father built a boat?” she said at last.

Tre’s face brightened. “He did too. Come on.”

Tre led Muse along the lake’s edge and pushed through a clump of harakeke. They found themselves on a tiny beach. A small, wooden row boat lay on the ground, its hull facing the sky.

Tre allowed himself a smile. “Dad was smart to hide it.”

Muse looked across the lake. Dark, forest-covered hills rose sharply into cliffs of grey stone. "What's over there?"

Tre followed her gaze. "Nothing. Just a whole country of bush. There are no settlements, no people ..."

"No Examiners, no Voids," said Muse. "Give me a hand."

Together, they turned the boat the right way up – a pair of oars was wedged in the bottom. They each took a side and heaved the boat along the sand until its bow met the water. Muse threw her backpack into the bottom and climbed in. She reached for the oars.

"You ever row a boat before?" said Tre.

"Nope," said Muse.

"Well, for starters, you're facing the wrong way."

"Story of my life," Muse laughed.

"Here, like this." Tre got Muse to turn her back to the bow and showed her how the oars fitted the rowlocks. Then he shoved the stern, hopping in as the boat floated into the lake.

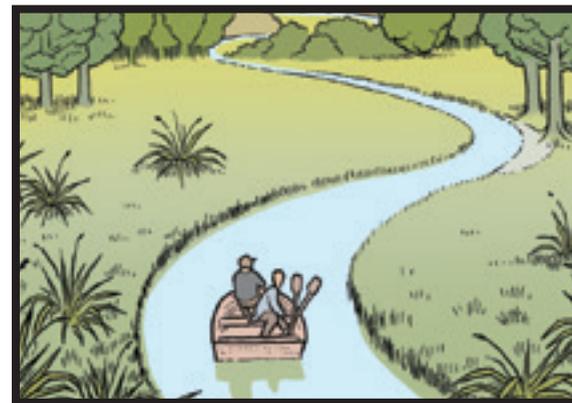
"We want to go there," said Tre, pointing to a spot on the far side. "You can't see it from here – but there's a stream. Pull on your right oar."



Muse dipped the oar into the water and pulled, turning the boat. Then she began to row. It was just the two of them, riding the swell, headed for the wilds. Muse turned her head briefly and smiled.

"You're doing well," Tre said. The tired circles around Muse's eyes seemed to have faded.

The boat pushed on. They were almost there. Tre turned around and gazed back at the settlement. A last look. He tried to imagine the cabin as it was, at dinner time, smoke curling from the chimney, Mum and Dad in the kitchen. The tears came again, and Tre let them.



The bow forced its way through a fringe of reeds, and with a rustle, the feathered stalks closed in behind, swallowing them. A moment later and they were hidden, the old life just a memory. Tre guided Muse on the oars, steering the boat upriver around the bends. Thick bush hung over them on both sides. The water of the stream was clear and still.

"It's like a secret," said Muse looking around. "You'd never know it was here."

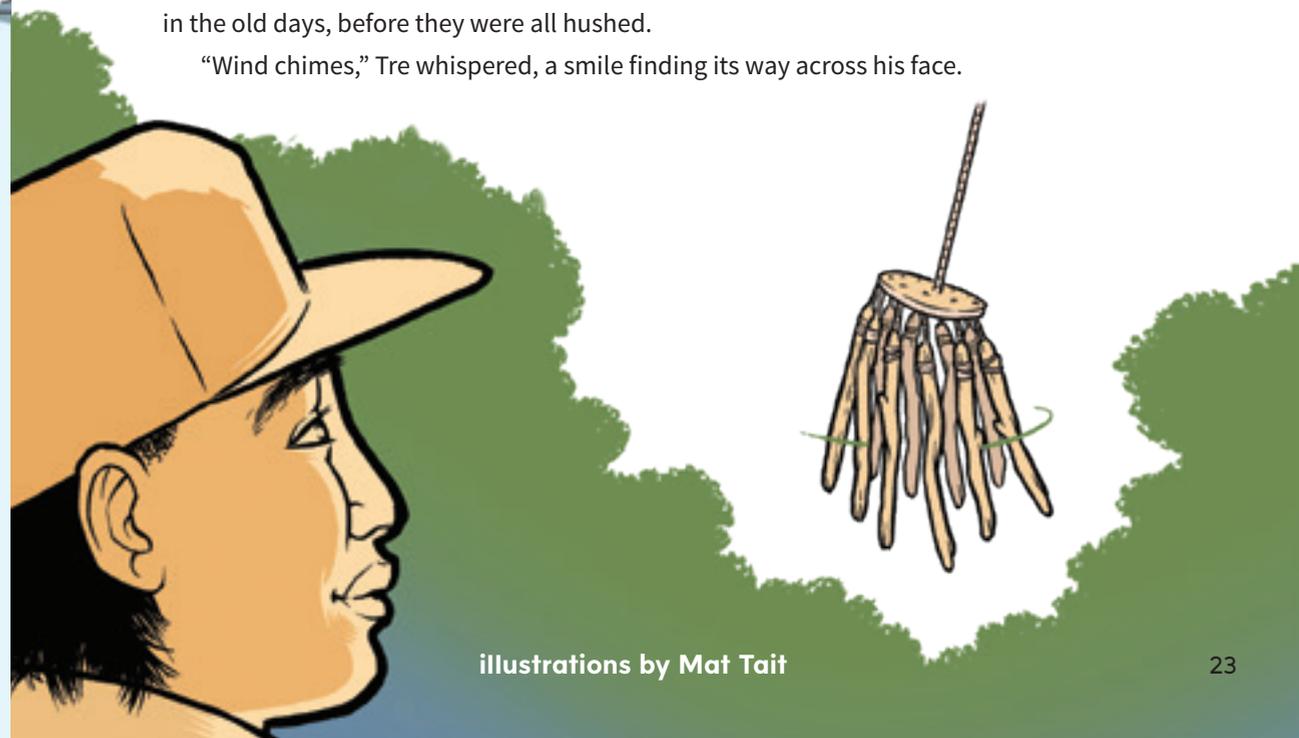
"Dad found it fishing one day," said Tre. "A bit further up you can catch tuna."

"Never had eel before," said Muse.

"Shh!" said Tre suddenly, his chest tightening. There had been a noise – coming from the bush up ahead. A rattle carried on the wind. A clunk. It came again. Tre stiffened, searching the gloom for clues.

Then he pointed into the trees, his arm trembling. Dangling from a branch, pieces of driftwood clinked together, making music – a gentle chorus. A song from the cabin porch in the old days, before they were all hushed.

"Wind chimes," Tre whispered, a smile finding its way across his face.



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by Paul Mason

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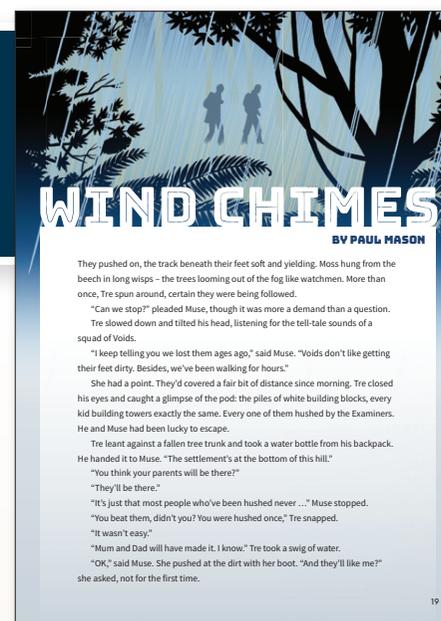
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