

The Village

BY PAUL MASON



The resort hid behind a fringe of palms that overlooked a curve of powder-white sand. The guests were busy: working on tans by the pool, booking kayaks and massages, snoozing. At night, they ate too much and drank too much and listened to bad music as if the rest of the world didn't exist. It was an adults' place, and Ava was bored.

On the third day, she noticed a sign at the far end of the bay. It pointed along a track that led through the rocks, then up over the headland. Ava told Mum about it.

"What ruins?"

"The sign just says ancient ruins. Want to come and look?"

Mum lowered her magazine. "Ask your dad," she said.

"He said to ask you."

Mum glared across the pool, to where Ava's dad was talking business with some man he knew from work. They both knew it would be impossible to drag him away.

"I can go by myself," Ava said.

"Good idea, love. Don't forget to take water."

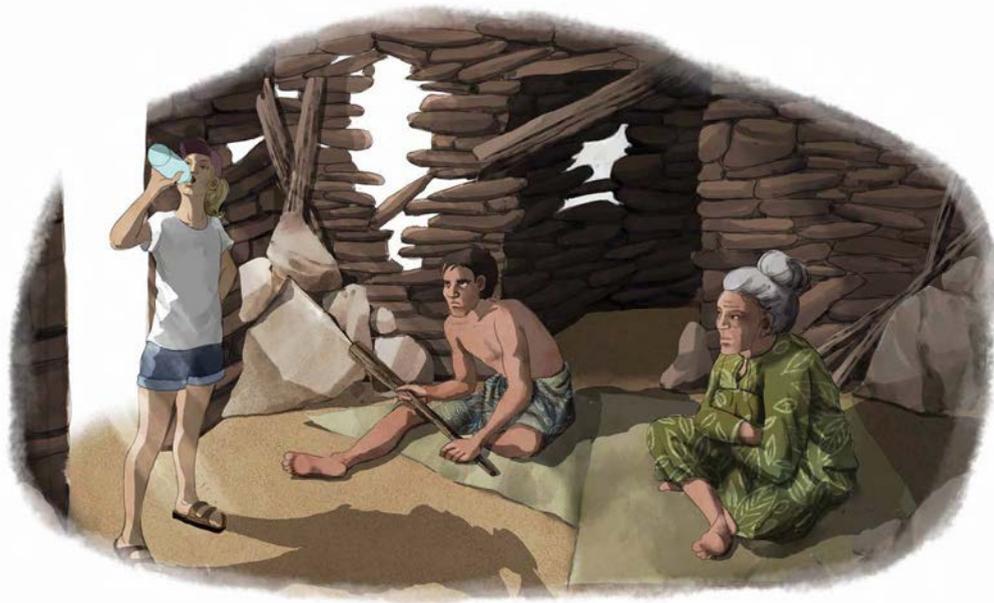


The track climbed quickly, the dusty path hemmed in on both sides by sharp, volcanic rock. Rust-coloured dirt coated Ava's sandals and stuck to her skin. It was baking hot, and the landscape was dry and bleak, the scrappy bushes more thorns than leaves. The lushness of the resort seemed odd now – and so far away. Ava glanced back and saw that she was already on her own. No surprise that guests wouldn't come here. It was a lonely, unfriendly place of heat and sweat.

At the top of the next rise, Ava spotted shapes camouflaged against the red rock. The ruins. She left the track to take a closer look at the low, tumble-down walls and skeletons of buildings, fashioned from the lava itself. The houses were clustered round a well in a central courtyard. Once, people would have come here to collect water and talk – but something felt wrong about this place. Abandoned homes on a forgotten, dried-out hillside ... what had happened here?

Ava stepped through a doorway and let her fingers brush against the brittle rock. She looked round the room and tried to imagine who had lived in this place.





Hanini hurriedly pushed himself upright. A girl with pale, pale skin and hair the colour of dried grass had emerged from nowhere.

“Who are you? What are you doing here? Go away!” he demanded. She was a trespasser. Why hadn’t the dog barked?

The girl didn’t move. She just stood there, her curious eyes searching every corner of the room. Hanini reached for his staff. “I’m warning you!” he called out.

“Who are you talking to?” grumbled his grandmother, stirring from her nap and sitting up. “And why are you waving that stick?”

Hanini stared at his grandmother and then at the girl. She stood no more than an arm’s length from him. “Her!” he hissed. “That girl.”

“Girl?” croaked the old woman. She looked round the hut. “You’re having a dream. We’re the only ones here, you know that. Go back to sleep.”

Hanini swallowed. *Was he dreaming?* “You don’t see her?” he asked.

“I see a hungry, thirsty boy haunted by ghosts.”

Hanini rubbed his eyes, but the pale-skinned intruder hadn’t moved. Fear coursed through his body. What kind of trickery was this?

The girl raised a strange-looking gourd and drank. Hanini watched her swallow, over and over. Her thirst sated, she turned and left. Grandmother was right. This was a spirit come to goad him.

He got to his feet, curious now, and followed at a distance. His dog was still fast asleep in the sparse shade of a bush. The pale skin was poking round in the house next door. What right did she have?

“You won’t find anyone there,” he shouted at her back. “There’s no food. No water. They’re all gone. There’s no one to torment. You might as well go.” Hanini heard his own words, and his heart dropped. It was true. The others had fled long ago.

He remembered standing on the rocks, watching them leave; the sun blazing, his mouth dry, the hard-hearted drone of insects in his ears. The villagers had pushed their canoes through the swell, calling back that they would return for them – the orphan boy and his crippled grandmother – but their words had felt empty. Once they were beyond the horizon, Hanini was sure he’d never see them again. Not that the pale skin cared. Now she was drifting through what was left of their village. She was taunting them. It was an insult.

“I said go!” he called again. “Can’t you see we have nothing?” He gestured at his vegetable patch – the limp plants thirsty for water, always thirsty – at the dusty food bowls, the empty well.

Hanini stumbled towards her, swinging his staff. Once, twice, three times through the air. He hoped it would be enough to scare her away, but the spirit stood still. Now he was close enough to see the sweat on her skin, her white teeth that glared in the sunshine. He swung with all his strength, but as he finally struck the spirit, the staff passed through her body, and she disappeared.



Ava stumbled, her feet slipping on gravel, and she fell, her hand crashing into a sharp rock. She cried out, but there was no one to hear. Blood trickled from her palm and melted into the dust. Ava opened her bottle and rinsed the cut, gasping as the water hit her raw flesh.

She got to her feet. Apart from the cut, she was fine. She took a last look at the derelict village before finding her way back to the track. She needed to get away.



Ava drank a glass of cold water while Mum rubbed cream and patched her up with plasters. “No more wandering off,” she said. “I don’t know why you bother with ruins. We’ve got everything we need right here.”

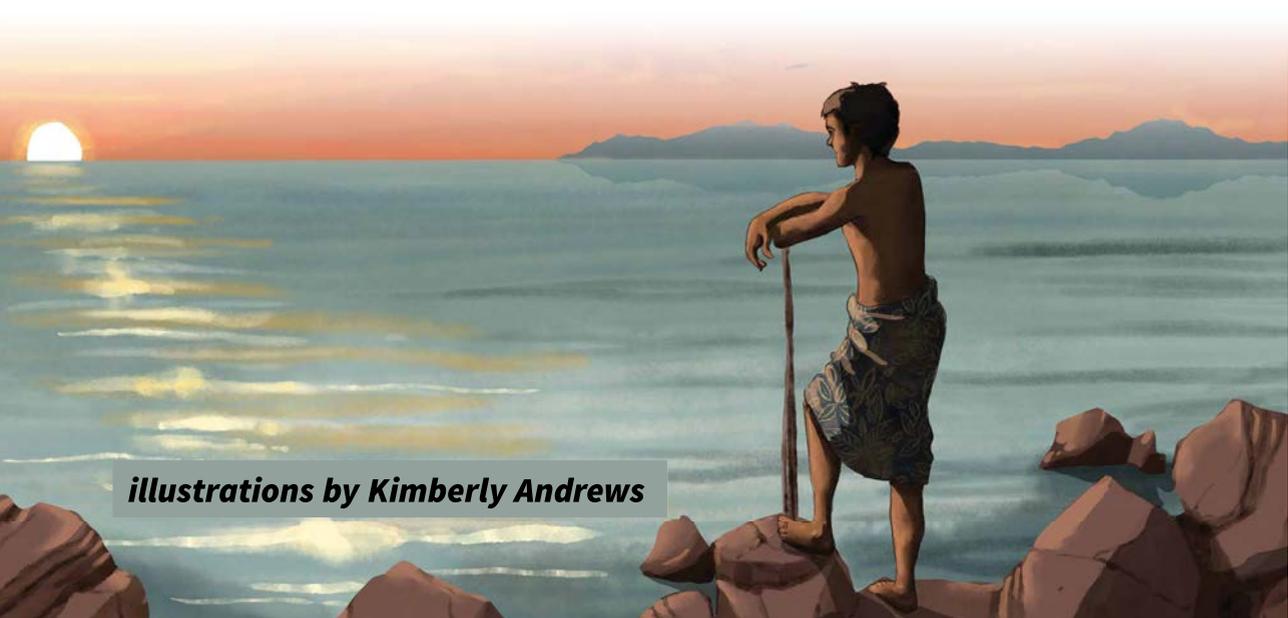
Ava looked round the resort. Sprinklers drenched carpets of grass. Waiters in crisp white shirts took orders for food. Guests at the swim-up bar clung to their glasses as if they were life preservers. She thought back to the dusty track, the hillside scorched dry, the crumbling remains of homes.

“More than we need, Mum,” she said.



On the hillside, in the house with crumbling walls, Hanini settled himself on his mat. His grandmother lay silently next to him. He felt tired again. Hungry. Seeing the spirit had taken all the strength out of him. Later, when it was cooler, he would go and find some water. Perhaps catch a fish. Stare out at the horizon to see if the canoes were on their way back.

But for now, he would sleep.



illustrations by Kimberly Andrews

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by Paul Mason

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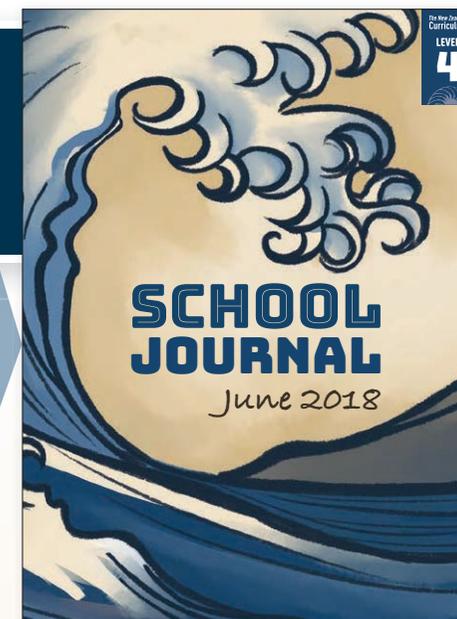
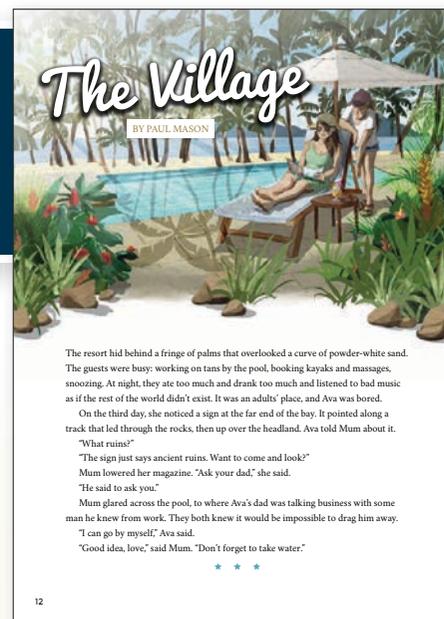
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