

INTO THE BLUE

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AT THE BEACH

How much spit is in the ocean? Blair wonders this as he wades out, clutching his snorkel and mask in one hand, GoPro camera in the other.

The water is icy but for ages it's only knee-deep and almost glassy, no waves. He sloshes further out into the blue. The chill of the water climbs his legs and creeps over his hips, and he feels every drop.

Only when he's waist-deep does he spit into his mask. He juggles the camera under one arm as he pushes bubbling saliva across the inside of his visor, just like the instructor told them. It's slimy and squeaky at the same time, and it's gross, even though it's his own spit.

Around him, other kids rinse their snorkel masks too.

‘Kick gently,’ the instructor reminds them. ‘Breathe slowly and mindfully. Stay aware of your surroundings, but most importantly, relax.’

Because it’s so super-simple to be gentle and slow and mindful and aware and relaxed, all at the same time, and especially when your skin is rippling with goosebumps and you’re about to dive into an ocean of other people’s spit. Blair tries to catch Drew’s attention, so he can make a rolling-eye face.

Drew is already wearing her mask. She jams in her snorkel, then arcs her arms and dives forward, so she’s soon floating on the surface of the water. Blair shivers. He needs to dive in. Now. Drew is a year older and Blair will be older too if he doesn’t go soon.

It’s not their first time snorkelling, but it’s their first time snorkelling here, without their

parents, on an actual wreck.

‘It’s too cold,’ one girl says. Samaira is holding her elbows high, as if that will somehow warm the water. Some of the other kids clearly agree, wavering thigh-deep, as if they’ve changed their minds and decided they no longer want ‘to experience the ocean in all its beauty and wonder,’ the way it promised on the website.

Blair remembers that *oh-no* feeling as Mum called him across to her phone. It was a few weeks ago, one night after dinner.

‘What do you think of this?’ she’d said. ‘For this school holidays?’

‘Snorkelling?’ He’d tried to fill his voice with all the disbelief of someone who preferred not to suffer extreme frostbite. ‘In September?’

September isn’t swimming weather and Mum must know this. It’s not like she doesn’t spend half her life obsessed with the forecast. But Mum and Dad are always looking out for what they call ‘fresh

and exciting' things for Blair to do on the school holidays. And so here he is.

'Come on,' says the instructor. She points out deeper, to where a couple of metres of rusting iron pokes out above the water. 'I want to see all of you over there, exploring.'

Exploring.

Blair imagines the rusted post jolting, sees it rising from the sand with an entire ghost ship attached. Water drips from the seaweed growing on its hull. Fish flip frantically off the deck, fighting for freedom beneath the waves. And the mighty *Omeo* sails again, shining like a thousand diamonds in the September sun.

'Blair?' says the instructor. 'You ready?'

Blair pulls his mask over his head and positions his snorkel. 'Entering hyperdrive,' he says, speaking through the snorkel, so his voice echoes like an alien. Samaira laughs and another kid honks into his snorkel like a train.

Suddenly Blair pushes forward, plunging face-down into the freezing water. Alive. Pinpricked with cold. And gliding, just like the website said.



It takes a while for his eyes to adjust to the watery haze. Soon he can see long rippling patterns in the white sand. Strips of seagrass cut lines of blue and gold, green and aqua. Sunlight seems to reflect off every grain and every dust mote, sparkling like fairy lights.

Blair searches for the orange of Drew's boardies through the wash of the water. Drew is Blair's cousin, and her parents *loved* the idea of a snorkelling day. So did Drew.

And you know what? It's not actually that cold, once you get in.



Soon Blair and Drew are kicking side by side, out towards the looming shadow of the old boat. Apparently it's been half-buried in the sand for over a hundred years. He imagines the crash: the crew on deck, all yelling orders and pulling on ropes, desperate to steer the mighty vessel from the shallow water. Too late! The boat ploughs into the sand, the deck tilts, half the crew are catapulted overboard, faces wide as they fly through the air. Lucky it's only a few metres to the shore. Still, it'd be hard to swim with your pockets filled with gold.

Blair's not certain the boat carried gold. But any hundred-year-old boat is probably filled to the brim with doubloons and pieces of eight and whatever. Why else would it have run aground?

Something grabs at his arm.

An alien-snorkel voice echoes, 'Fish! Fish!'

It's Drew, pointing wildly.

It's their first fish of the day, a striped one, about the size of Blair's palm. It's hanging out between

the seagrass and the rock. Blair gives Drew a thumbs-up and points his GoPro at the fish as they kick forward. Well, not *his* GoPro exactly, but—

Suddenly, as if that one fish has opened a door into another world, Blair is plunged into a shimmering cloud. Hundreds of tiny fish, a school, all darting and twinkling like shooting stars, lit by the sun and spiralling as if Blair is inside some sort of space-and-time wormhole. He can see each fish's glimmering eye, the shimmer of each fish's fins. He's right in the centre of the cloud, whirling and dancing and dizzy, like when he used to spin around and around as a little kid, giddyng his brain just for the fun of it, until all that was left was his heart.

He wants to float right here forever.

But as quickly as it arrived, the school is gone. Swimming past him to explore another part of the wreck.

The wreck!

It's right beneath them now, all long lines and waving weeds. Blair glides overtop, flying with the fish and the curves of the ship until—

Wait.

The GoPro.

His brother's GoPro, to be precise.

Marcus is four years older than Blair, so he doesn't have to do anything 'fresh and exciting' in the holidays. Apparently he's allowed to just sit in front of whatever screen he wants. Sometimes that's a games console, sometimes it's his phone. Recently, it has been his precious GoPro. He scored a part-time job at the fruit-and-veg shop and saved for half his life to buy that camera.

That camera which is ... where, exactly? Blair was holding it, just before.

He sucks in an involuntary breath, nearly chokes as salty water floods his snorkel. Suddenly he's coughing and upright, yanking off his mask as he treads water above the wreck.

Drew pops up next to him. ‘You okay?’

There’s a tight feeling in Blair’s head, an acrid taste in his mouth. ‘The GoPro.’ Cold floods his body, and it has nothing to do with the water. ‘I must’ve dropped it.’

Drew’s eyes go wide. Because Drew understands. She understands all too well.

If Marcus’s GoPro is lost, Blair’s totally dead.

Because Marcus is totally going to kill him.

And then Blair’s parents will kill him too.

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