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OLD BERTIE

PERRELLA & OSBORN



FREMANTLE PRESS

FAUNA



FORBES-HAMILTON CRAB

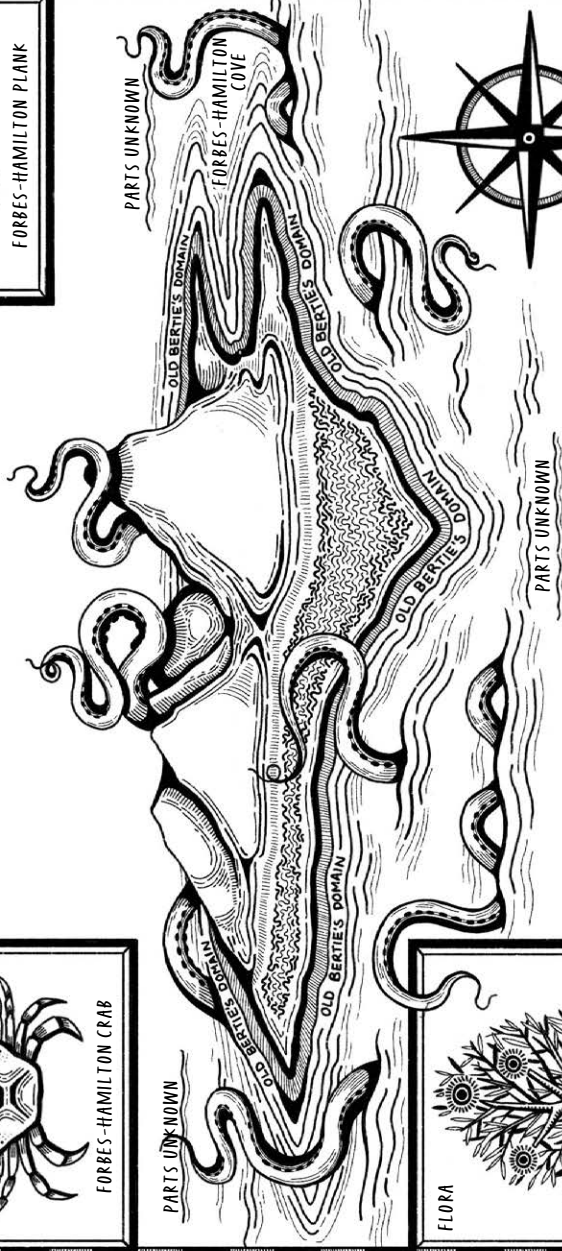
MISCELLANEOUS



FORBES-HAMILTON PLANK

A GENERAL CHART OF THE ISLAND

with notable specimens of flora and fauna drawn from surveys taken by
HAMILTON FORBES-HAMILTON



PARTS UNKNOWN

PARTS UNKNOWN

OLD BERTIE'S DOMAIN

OLD BERTIE'S DOMAIN

FORBES-HAMILTON COVE

OLD BERTIE'S DOMAIN

OLD BERTIE'S DOMAIN

FLORA



FORBES-HAMILTON SHRUB

PARTS UNKNOWN

'LET NOT YOUR EYE LINGER ON THE BLUE PART.'

THE FACTS

I guess the first thing you should know is that my mum was devoured by a Giant Squid.

I'm not sure what it's like where you live, but hopefully that hasn't happened to someone you love.

His name is Old Bertie. The squid, I mean. He patrols the waters around The Island, so, as a rule, you never go in. Because if you do, you're finished. He's been known to tear people limb from limb, pick them up and dash them on the rocks, squeeze them tight and drag them down, or just swallow them whole.

That's Old Bertie for you. We live our whole lives ensconced in an ocean, but we can't enjoy it. Doesn't matter how calm and clear and inviting it might seem—swimming is totally banned. Also off the table is wading. In fact, any immersive interaction with a significant body of water is frowned upon. We can't even fill a bathtub past the halfway mark.

To appease Old Bertie, we make offerings. We chuck them into the salty sea in the hope that on Feeding Day we will be spared his wrath. No one knows exactly when a Feeding Day will happen, but it's when he comes out of the water and roams about, wrathfully. Feeding Days are not pleasant experiences and they cause a lot of angst, and so they tend to

loom large in people's minds.

The thing is, Mum wasn't even devoured on Feeding Day. It was just a regular day. She decided to go for a little jaunt in a boat, right into the Squid's domain, and Old Bertie didn't like that one bit.

Do I wish it hadn't happened?

Absolutely.

Was the whole episode a dark mark against our family's name?

You bet.

Do people look on us with disdain?

Yes, they do.

They also use Mum's devouring as a spicy talking point. A cautionary tale: Roberta Jones took a boat out there, against the rules, and paid the price.

'Oh, I saw her get taken,' they say, their chins low, their eyebrows high. Their pupils sort of flicking off to the side. 'Yep. Old Bertie rose up and his mighty tentacle wrapped around her and just yanked her in. She never stood a chance.'

People say things like that all the time. I think they get off on it.

So, that's the vibe around here. Don't go into the water. Don't even *look* at it. It's an attitude that's summed up in our famous motto: 'We look not out, but in.' A sort of maxim or dictum. A precept, if you will.

Not that I follow it.

I mean, I know I should, but I can't help it.

I look out.

At some point, it became a daily obsession, going up to

Craggy Peak. Up there, you can observe it all. You can look back down and see the whole place laid out. The Town Square, The Mayor's Chambers, the Cage of Shame. Even right across to my home in the Arse End.

But when I'm up on the peak, I sure don't spend my time looking in. I focus out on the water. To the naked eye, it's just a wild and empty expanse. Jagged rocks. Choppy waves. But with my binoculars, on a clear day, there it is. Unmistakable. The other island.

I have named it The Island Over There. It's where Mum was heading in the boat.

Of course, I keep these secret excursions to myself. I certainly don't tell Dad. Trust me, if I said, 'Hey Dad. I spend a lot of time imagining that Mum is still alive and that she's strolling around living her best life on that island that only I can see when I'm up at Craggy Peak, even though you've told me never to go up there,' it would *not* be well received.

Look, I know this is a lot of information, but it's important that I give you the basic facts so that I can move forward with my story without you getting confused. Like, halfway through this, I don't want you saying something like, 'She seems stressed out. Why doesn't she take a soothing swim in the water?'

Well, I can't, because of the bloodthirsty squid.

'That ate your mum?' I hear you ask.

Yes. Now you've got it.

Of course, I'm sure you've got something similar going on where you live.

I'm sure it's pretty standard, really.

SONG OF THE SQUID

Before things really started to change, my life was fairly routine. Now, I don't know how they run the schools where you live, but this is the way they do it on The Island. We get sent to this building every day. You're supposed to sit there while the teacher talks and writes things on a board. At the end of it, you're supposed to have all this knowledge. To find out who knows what, they do tests and then, based on those, they assign you a number from One to Five that lets everyone know whether you are smart or whether you are dumb.

I am a Five.

'Smart.'

But the truth is I am only a Five because I'm good at memorising things. I figured it out pretty early on. To play the game, exactitude was the key. Write down, verbatim, what the teacher has said. Don't add in your own hot takes.

Don't try to get clever.

It wasn't a hard concept to discern. The signs were all around us. Literally. First day of each year, Mrs Jamieson, the head teacher, would size us all up, then chalk a line on the door frame and reiterate that you had to be at least *that* tall to offer an opinion. Only Stephan Van Pham, after he'd had a significant mid-year growth spurt, came close. Then, one day,

he woke up with a particularly unruly case of bed hair. It was sticking out so much, that—technically—as he entered the classroom, he'd finally breached the line. He'd achieved what so many of us had dismissed as mere fantasy: he was free to speak his mind. But how would he use this newfound power?

We waited.

Our teacher sensed the atmospheric change. She threw her hands out to pre-empt the impending utterance. She opened her mouth as if to say, *Oh no. No you don't.*

She was too late.

Van Pham let loose with a cascade. Like his mouth couldn't keep up with the volume of competing ideas flooding his brain. He gave forth on homework, curriculum, the general classroom vibe. But it was his vitriolic jag on our school uniform that would live long in our collective memory. In his opinion, the shirt was 'too blousy', the collar 'too floppy', the big bowtie 'a total joke'. He wasn't crazy about the stockings either.

'I mean, what are we supposed to be wearing here?' he cried. 'Mini sailor suits? We can't even go in the water!'

They shaved his head that very day. We watched him emerge from the nurse's office. His teeth were gritted. His stubbled scalp marked red by sheep shears requisitioned from Popolo's farm.

After that, his mum pulled him out of school. The next time I saw him, his hair had grown back. He was pushing a barrow full of onions down the street, wearing his dad's hand-me-downs and a work-smock flecked with farm dirt.

He seemed happy.

With tight lips, the rest of us progressed to Senior School. It was the same school, they just moved us to a different room. There was no chalk line on that door. Mrs Jamieson said that she was respecting our newfound maturity. No need for the visual reminder, she intoned. Our silence was assumed.

Mrs Jamieson would talk about the 'old days' a lot. There was a lot of speculation about what exact time period she was referring to, because I know for a fact that she taught my parents, my parents' parents, and all of the other teachers. She had used the phrase 'new-fangled' to describe a toaster.

Now, on this one particular day, she watched us enter the classroom with a keen eye. If we had all been standing on the same level, she'd be the shortest one in the room, but the way the classroom worked was that there was a little platform at the front where she gave her instruction. She called it her dais, and from up there, as we filed forth in silence, she eyeballed us.

I took my seat at a hard wooden desk and placed my satchel between my legs. I always kept my bag close by, locked between my feet. If someone found out what was inside, I'd be undone. Investigated, interrogated, and severely rebuked. What was my controversial cargo, you might ask. Drugs? Weapons? Scathing caricatures of local personalities? No. I carried a pair of old binoculars. Mine now, formerly Mum's.

My classmates shuffled in and sat elsewhere, leaving the desks either side of me empty. I didn't really meet anyone's eye. I just stared vaguely at the portrait of the Explorer that hung above the board. Next to that was a photograph of the Mayor, his distant descendant. And in between, the school's

crest: a symbol of Old Bertie, his two mighty tentacles outstretched, his eight smaller arms just kind of dangling there. In his left tentacle he held the word ‘Memorisation.’ In the right, ‘Regurgitation.’ As Mrs Jamieson called them, ‘The two pillars of pedagogical excellence.’ It took me a while to find out what pedagogical meant—I had to look it up in a dusty dictionary. It meant teaching.

As far as memorisation and regurgitation went, I knew those terms well.

With the class assembled, Mrs Jamieson led us in a rousing rendition of the ‘Song of the Squid.’ Yet another example of something that needed to be memorised. We stood and sang along:

*His tentacles touch each of us,
And yet he wants for naught;
Except a monthly offering
That all good men bring forth.
His benevolence knows no bounds
And happily he sleeps;
Appeased by our deference
And the offerings he keeps.*

The word ‘appeased’ was pronounced appea-zed, for the purposes of rhythm. And the reference to ‘all good men’ was understood to mean everyone. Again, for rhythmic purposes. It was evidently snappier to sing ‘all good men’ than ‘all good men, women and children over the age of nine.’

Mrs Jamieson put her whole body into it, really feeling

every note. Gyrating. I mean, no one wants to see a teacher gyrate, but she was right up there, centre view, and we couldn't exactly look away. I had to admit, her voice was actually quite good. Probably because it was imbued with real passion.

Personally, I'm not the best singer. I know which notes I can't hit, so I had the sense to pull back when it got to those moments. But some of my classmates, the less pitch they had, the louder they got. I mean, behind me was Jacinta. She was comprehensively tone deaf. Her contribution was, honestly, just off-key screaming.

After the ceremony of the 'Song of the Squid', it was straight into an assessment. No chit-chat. No small talk. No lively back and forth. Just the resonant thump of test booklets being slammed down on each desk. It was quite something to go from a cacophony of noise to dead silence in mere seconds, but that's the way Mrs Jamieson liked it.

That day, it was History. Before I'd even started it—before I had even looked at it—I knew I was going to ace it. Why? Because it was pretty much the same test Jamieson always gave. The key aspect was being able to recall the story of how The Island was founded. Not *a* story but *the* story. The story of the Explorer. The story that was key to our whole way of life. Because without him, there'd be nothing. It went like this:

Hamilton Forbes-Hamilton was a great man. An explorer. An inventor. A natural philosopher. He referred to himself as a visionary.

It was his skill alone that saved those shipwrecked souls that landed on these shores so long ago. The legend has it

that they huddled together in fear, while he went ahead to explore this new terrain. He found a source of fresh water and built the first shelter from the remains of the ship. And he got a lot of pats on the back for his efforts.

The weird thing was, he hadn't even been the ship's captain. Most reports suggest he'd been a reclusive voyager. He had kept to himself, content to study his books and compose his experimental free-form poetry. But in the midst of crisis, he became more forthright. While others wallowed in anguish and fear of the unknown, Forbes-Hamilton sucked in lungfuls of the salty sea air, and espoused the virtues of a new beginning.

As if enveloped in a kind of fever, he would stay up all night, using candlelight to make his notes—mapping contours, cataloguing flora and fauna, and naming all he could find, such as the Forbes-Hamilton Shrub, Forbes-Hamilton Cove, and the Forbes-Hamilton Crab.

There were those that remained wary of the great man's wisdom and who questioned his general credentials. Until, one fateful evening, some passengers came running wildly back into camp, scared out of their wits. They had been bathing in the shallows by the light of the moon, when something spooked them. 'There's something out there,' they cried.

Hamilton's eyes lit up. He was not afraid.

As the others cowered in their makeshift dwellings, Hamilton Forbes-Hamilton ventured forth, alone, to wade back into the shallows. When he returned to camp, he told of what he had seen.

'I went down there,' he began. 'First, I saw nothing. The

waters were dark. Then, a few bubbles. I said to myself, “What’s this?” I waded further out. I knew it was getting weird. And scary. Further I went. Suddenly, a great beast rose before me! I looked him dead in the eye. With his mighty beak, he snapped at me, but I stood firm.’

‘What was it?’ cried the people.

‘It was a Giant Squid. His name is Old Bertie.’

‘He has a name?’

‘All beasts have names! These are his waters.’

‘Will he kill us all?’

‘Almost certainly.’

The people wondered how they might be spared from his wrath.

‘Leave immediately?’ they enquired.

‘Quite the opposite,’ Hamilton explained. For he had the answer: ‘From this moment forth, we will live in great solemn gratitude and, I guess, worship—if that’s not too strong a word—of this Great Squid and we will build monuments in his honour, and from time to time we will make offerings.’

‘And in return he will not kill us?’

‘That’s right! And, also, in return, he will allow us to live here under my wise guidance. This fruitful land is now our domain. But the untamed waters are his.’ And then, he uttered those famous words for the first time.

‘From now on, we look not out, but in!’

With that phrase, Hamilton Forbes-Hamilton silenced the nay-sayers, cemented his newfound leadership, and established that they would henceforth live peacefully on The Island.

So, I knocked off the test in about five minutes, put down my pencil, and waited. I could sense Jacinta looking over at me. Her uniform was always immaculate, and she had on one of her extra-large bows which seemed to shimmer in the light. It touched the desk and framed her face in a curlicue. Made mine look like a sad floppy string. When I glanced back at her, it was clear she was stumped. It was like her eyes were pleading with me, saying, *Come on, help me out here*. She wanted answers.

I just didn't get it. The story of the Explorer was something we had been taught since we were little. Sure, each year, we would be expected to pick up more and more intricate detail—and it could get a bit obscure. What sort of pen nib he wrote with, how many types of sand he had catalogued. But the basic facts were always the same. Yet Jacinta had been a Three as long as I'd known her. A middling student who could never break through to a solid Four. I knew that frustrated her. But I thought, if she really wanted the answers from me, she should have had the sense to sit next to me. It would actually be easy to sneak a peek at my paper if she was sitting at the closest desk. But she wasn't willing to do that. No one was.

She was sitting next to Carlo—a One. He was spending his time constructing elaborate doodles. They did in fact depict some of the events of the founding of The Island—I could make out what looked like Old Bertie and the Explorer sitting down and having a chat on the rocky headland. Carlo really brought them to life. You could see the facial expressions and everything. His bold, clear lines gave the

scene a sense of movement, even. He had talent. But I knew that wouldn't fly with Mrs Jamieson. She demanded full words and sentences. At fifteen years old, Carlo's doodles weren't going to cut it.

As for Jacinta, still craning her neck in my direction, I had to turn my back on her. It's not like helping her would do me any favours in the popularity department anyway. I'd long ago given up on ever having friends. And the only risk I was willing to take was secretly scaling Craggy Peak.

I flipped my test paper upside down and felt Jacinta cutting me with her eyes.

Up on her dais, Mrs Jamieson was running a pen over a stack of papers. Probably the test we did last week. She was frowning and shaking her head, and then making quick, violent strokes on the page. At one point she looked up from what she was reading and stared out into nothing, then closed her eyes, kept them shut for a while, and vented out a long, slow breath. Then she looked back down and continued with her work.

If she hated marking so much, why did she give us so many tests?

I figured she must have her reasons.

With nothing else to look at, I stared out the window. It would have been nice if it showed some glimpse of the coast. A little hint of sand or sea. Instead, it was just a little courtyard with a small bronze sculpture on a plinth. The one of a miniature Explorer side-by-side with a miniature Old Bertie, smiling on as a miniature student climbed a miniature ladder. The kid had a book in one hand and gripped a rung

with the other. The ladder didn't go anywhere, it just ended in empty space, but I think it was supposed to represent the idea of educational success.

Some of the youngest students were moving past with their papier-mâché projects. A cavalcade of bulbous and misshapen squids. I'd made one myself when I was their age. Dipped paper strips in glue, slapped them on a balloon and let it all harden. Added newspaper tentacles and bright paint. I'd taken it home and proudly presented it to Mum. She smiled at me and said that I'd done a very fine job. I wondered where we should display it in the house. She said she wondered too.

Then she put it in the back of a cupboard, and it was never mentioned again.