

The Parenting Index

1500 words

Rawhiti

Settling back in the morning sun taunted by the smell of campsite bacon, this would be sweet except for the yelling, though Mum is totally right. Our old banger overheated and shook to bits getting here. The car could barely pull away with the heavy trailer carrying *Te Aplysia* (a sixteen-foot, gaff-rigged, day sailer), and Jade's ancient optimist (*Argo*), stuffed full of camping gear. Toss in five people and a dog – you could smell the clutch burning as the car struggled over rubble roads to get here. It's mental to try it again, Mum is refusing to drive the car, I refuse to go in it.

Little Brother Daniel is hiding in the car, he hates boats, Jade is doing the indignant pout that only girls of a particular age can carry off. Mum is determined; it won't be long.

"That's settled then!"

Mum has her way so I start dragging *Te Aplysia* toward the sea. We'll sail from Rawhiti to Opuia, but what about *Argo*?

Mum hasn't finished, "Zach and I will tow *Argo* to Opuia, we'll have lunch while we wait for you. You'll feel too sick for lunch."

Dad scowls, "I'm not happy. I know you are strong and you can sail without me, but towing a lump like *Argo*? Rawhiti is almost off the edge of the world, it's not like a harbour."

"I wouldn't drive the trailer back over that road, Zach spewed all the way here, he won't want to go by car. I am trying to help us all out! We have never capsized this boat, we are *not* in danger."

Te Aplysia was built for disabled sailors. Mum and Dad stepped a bigger mast and secondhand sails, but even so, we couldn't tip the thing over for Mum to teach us how to right it. Dad can't argue with that.

Indy (I'm Not Dead Yet) leaps into the boat, she goes wherever Mum goes. I tie *Argo* to the painter and Mum plops the compass into its bracket. Leaving the others packing up, we tack slowly out, saving the embarrassment of trying to start the temperamental Seagull. Sprawling over the bow to get a toasting from the sun, I settle on reef watch. Mum is concentrating on the compass. The tide is in our favour; all we have to do is miss the Paramena reef. Drifting slowly into Albert Channel we set the sails as the breeze evaporates completely – we are barely moving.

Slinking silently past Urepukapuka, I am mesmerised by the patterns of sunlight on water but a sudden drop in temperature grabs my attention, then a squall knocks us sideways. I scramble to my feet. With the tiller lashed, the old mainsail takes the strain and rips, flogging like the blades of a helicopter in the sudden storm. Screaming wasted instructions we each cannot hear “grab the...lash it” the sky turns dark, it feels close. Wrestling the tattered sail on board in silence against the roaring wind, Jade’s old wooden tub bucks like a bronco and is filling with water – it will drag us down like a massive anchor.

“Cut it loose” I yell – but Mum will have none of it.

“You know how much Jade loves this boat, I wouldn’t dare!”

I’m not game to say it out loud but she quickly got sick of sailing that boat over the holiday. Pulling *Argo* close, we bail it with a bucket. I have forgotten the reef, Indy is cowering under the bow. Have we passed the Paramena reef or been blown back to face it again? Urepukapuka Island has vanished into the fog. Wet and cold, we wrap up in oilskins before tacking north using the jib. Finding ourselves washed up on a beach beats hitting a reef.

A steep cliff pierces the mist, and a slither of beach comes into view, ‘sandwiched’ between rocks. Hhhmmm sandwiches, I’m dreaming about the fading chance of lunch.

When we are as close as we dare, Mum throws the anchor, then the dog. We jump oilskins and all. The water is unexpectedly warm, but the waves swamp us. Indy beats us to the beach, but I can see that Mum is not happy as she looks back at the boats.

“Those boats will smash on the rocks,” she says, wading into the sea. “I’ll shift the anchor.” Indy is rolling on a dead bird. I’m sure there are rules about listening to the weather report before you set out. Piss poor parenting is rampant in my family.

Mum’s yellow coat disappears under the waves. At last I see her leaning into the boat. I have a bad feeling about this beach, I’m relieved to see her swimming back.

Mum staggers onto the beach waving the emergency chocolate! Parenting skill index rises. I want to share my chocolate with stinky Indy. Then I remember NEVER GIVE CHOCOLATE TO A DOG. She tries to warm herself against Mum while we wait for a lull in the storm.

‘Smash’ we turn towards the sound of shattering glass.

There *is* someone on the beach – a bloke with a heap of empty beer bottles hiding behind a beer-crate windbreak.

“I will see if he knows where we are”, says Mum walking towards the stack of crates. I can tell that he is not interested and although mum can hold her own, I’m worried.

“Tramp or drunk?” I ask.

She says to ignore him, but that's hard, this beach is tiny, I have no idea where we are, these islands all look the same to me.

“Mum hadn’t you better phone? Dad will be dead worried.”

Mum pats her shorts pocket.

OMG “your phone was in your pocket!”

Parenting skill index drops several points. In fact Mum has screwed this up monumentally. This counts as child endangerment! We are stuck on a minuscule beach with a drunken sailor. He doesn’t have a boat and there is no way he could have climbed down the cliff. He kicks aggressively at the empty beer bottles. I bet someone made him walk the plank.

“Mum – I think we should go. That dude is getting worse.”

“The sea is still rough Zach, the tide will have turned by the time we reach Tāpeka Point, wind against tide, it’ll be a battle.” But least she agrees we should leave.

Treading water we shove Indy into the boat, then haul ourselves in. I hoist the jib and Mum lifts the anchor. At no time have we tried the motor. The Seagull never starts when anyone is watching. *Argo* shifts in the opposite direction with each tack – hopefully this is Te Rawhiti Inlet. I’m back on reef lookout, Mum’s gripping the tiller and Indy is under the bow. I yell “Tāpeka” as I get a glimpse of it, thankfully we are well past the reef but the waves from the north are huge, dark and unforgiving as we crash into them.

“Going about!” shouts Mum, turning towards Opuā.

We hold on tight, the wind now coming from two sides, the sea is a lot like a broken rollercoaster, going backwards. Mum tries to steer into the waves to stop the boat rolling, but as I watch I can see *Argo* rising into the air high on a wave from the north. I am unable to manage a squeak let alone a yell! *Argo* is on a trajectory that will take off her head! In slow

motion it misses Mum by millimetres as she turns, alerted by my sudden loss of skin colour. *Argo* crashes into the mast trapping Indy under the bow, before sliding back into the water.

The mast is cracked, the jib will make it worse but we need steerage. I furl the jib to the size of a handkerchief while Mum fights with the tiller. We stare at the Seagull. You *have* to start. Pull.....pull.....pull....there's a sputter, I know there is. Pull.....pull.....pop, pop, pop, putter, putter. The engine is no match for the sea but when the propeller *is* in the water it moves us forward, and each time *Argo* is thrust upwards and forwards by the waves, Mum flattens the tiller before *Argo* smashes into the stern, just getting away with it each time.

Out of the gloom the Pahia ferry crosses our bow without knowing we are there. Feeling the thud of the huge motors, the diesel infused wash dumps over us. I'm totally over this trip but as we limp into Opuia, our car is weirdly heading towards us. Dad made it home, unloaded, got dry clothes and back in the six hours since we left Rawhiti. Dad's parenting points go through the roof – but secretly, I want to be adopted by the people at the boat ramp café – they opened up just to give us tea and bacon butties.

Making it home, warm and safe, Jade surveys her wrecked boat.

"I would have cut *Argo* loose, I'm over sailing anyway."