



A Gift of Coconuts

A family races against time to prepare their coconut farm for a massive storm surge.

By Melissa Gunn

Illustrations by Molly Mendoza

They used to say that when the ancestors arrived, they lost most of the food they brought with them. It wouldn't grow — it was too cold, you see? I wish they could see us now. Pretty much every crop that failed back then, a thousand years ago, we grow now. Especially coconuts, for the cities farther south. You can make almost everything from coconut. Not that coconut farming's easy. It doesn't pay too well, either. At least, sometimes the pay's good — but then sometimes the pests are bad. Sometimes the trouble is drought. This time of year, storms come through. Storms come through everywhere, but I'm sure they come most of all here. It's shaping up to be another stormy summer. I say as much to Granpop. Typical Granpop, he starts to yarn right away.

"It used to be, storms were in autumn or winter," he began. "Not like this. It's not supposed to be like this. When I was a lad, you'd get one cyclone a summer. At most!"

"Yeah, Granpop, you always say that."

"Don't you get cheeky, Aroha," he says. "You give your elders some respect."

I grin at my sister, who's beside Granpop, making sure he doesn't topple over in a gust of wind. We're all on the beach, watching the waves crash to shore as the swell grows. It's hard to look away, wave after wave coming in. A big one rushes in, faster than we can run — faster than Granpop can hobble, anyway — tugging at our legs. Foam reaches as high as the bottom of my shorts, and the sea drags at me as the wave rushes out again.

"Right, Granpop, that's close enough," my sister says. She's short, but bossy, always. "Let's go back to the house. You can tell us the way it used to be once we've double-checked the solar rigs."

See? Bossy. She's right though: With a storm coming, we need to make sure we don't lose any more solar panels. We're down to the minimum we can run off as it is. We lose another panel or so, we'll have to join a convoy south to get some new ones. No one convoys for fun except my dad. He's always had itchy feet. I reckon he would have traveled the world if he could. But he got stuck here when the flights stopped. Lucky for him he learned to sail, else he'd have lost it. He's out sailing now, checking the marine reserves. Guess he'll be heading for home with a storm on the way.

We retreat from the edge of the sea, taking the short way back, climbing over the carcasses of trees that used to be inland, before the tide rose to meet them. Even Granpop clammers over the stripped, salt-encrusted trunks of poplar and pōhutukawa. He's pretty spry for such an old man. He remembers when the sea was farther away. He grumbles about that as he climbs.

"Shoulda been paddocks here, Aroha. You tell your sister, she should get the land back from the sea gods, Hine-moana and Tangaroa, eh?"

I offer a hand to steady him as he climbs up the final bank. "Nah, Granpop. I think the sea gods can have that paddock. We'll just use what we've got further back, eh?" My sister's more into electronics than appeasing the gods. I know she's just pretending not to hear Granpop so she doesn't have to argue with him again.

Granpop ignores my hand and trudges on up the slope. Halfway up, he stops and curses. There's a white stick half buried in the sand nearby. We missed it, coming down to the sea by the creek. It's our survey marker, washed out again. We're still losing land to the sea. They say there's only a few centimetres rise to go, then things will start to even out. I wonder if Granpop will last long enough to see that happen. He gets so mad about every lost bit. I bend to pick up the survey stick. As I straighten up, I see tears on his cheeks.

"Hey, it's OK, Granpop," I say. "We don't even use most of that land."

He turns watery eyes on me and I know I've said the wrong thing. Thing is, Granpop thinks he should have been able to stop it — the rising seas, the storms, the works. But all the damage that led to those things was pretty much done when he was a kid. He couldn't have made much difference. But he doesn't see it that way. Not when he and Granma planted the trees he's climbing over now.

Unexpectedly, my sister chimes in.

"It's not great to lose land," she says. "But it's not your fault either, Granpop. We know you and Granma did what you could. And look what we've got because of that. We've got the most southerly tropical fruit farm in the world!"

Granpop is still sniffing, but he straightens up. My sister always has a way with words.

We climb over the lip of the land together, heaving Granpop over the last bit of dune edge where the kikuyu grass hides a sandy overhang. He's too old to go down to the sea, but he gets agitated if we leave him behind. The wind

blows loose sand in our faces, stinging, but that's not all bad. We need salt and sand to grow our coconuts, after all. Tāwhirimātea, the wind god, is giving us a helping hand with that.

Once we're over the top, my sister takes charge.

"Right, Aroha, you get Granpop back to the house. I'll get the kids to help me with the storm lashings. Make sure Mum knows we're back; she'll be in the tunnel houses."

I do a mock salute. "Ma'am, yes ma'am," I say, and she makes a face at me before taking off at a run, bellowing for the younger kids to come help, this instant, now. The kids are a ragtag group of cousins and younger siblings. It's one big family running the farm.

Granpop and I make our way through the coconut groves — carefully, a falling coconut can be lethal and the wind's getting up a bit — and then through the banana plantations. I touch a trunk here, a thick purple petal there. It's a sort of reassurance. The trunks aren't old. Bananas grow fresh ones after they've fruited, but the bananas have been here a long time, since Granpop was young. They're what started off the whole farm. Once the bananas began to grow well, Granpop decided to try some of those ancient crop failures. We've got lots of different bananas, papaya — you name it. Even mango. That nets a good price in the markets down south, where it's still too cold for it to grow. They say the cities used to import bananas from the tropics by the container load. We still get the odd ship coming in, but no one thinks it's worth bringing bananas back. Who wants expensive overseas fruit when you can have local low-carbon produce?

The wind-ribboned leaves of the bananas are banners in the breeze right now, the rustling sound of them just like the sound of the sea. It keeps me up some nights, wondering if the sea has come that bit farther, storm surging up the hill. I imagine the waves tearing out our crops, battering at the house. It's a secret fear I've never spoken aloud, but I shiver at the thought. Granpop, who's been muttering under his breath all this time, stops and looks at me.

"You feel it, don't you," he says. "Tangaroa wants to reclaim this land."

My eyes go wide and I think my mouth must match them because the warm wind dries my tongue.

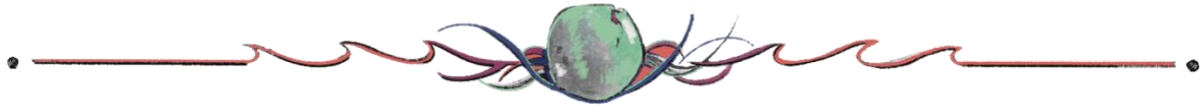
"No need for lollygagging," Granpop says, dragging the word out of some ancient vault of memory. "I see you thinking it. Only thing is, what you going to *do* about it?"

I don't know what to say. Do I claim he's wrong? I sputter incoherently, and his gnarled hand closes over my arm.

"One of these days the storm will come," he says. "The big one. Then we'll see who believes in the gods."

He's off again. I wish he wouldn't go on about gods. Whether they're here or not, gods aren't something we can reason with. I'd rather keep on planting trees, eat what we grow right here in front of the house, keep life simple. But Granpop keeps on at me. I think the latest land slip has shaken him. We're not so far from the sea. The creek goes right by the house, so a bad storm surge would be a big problem. Bigger now than it was when Granpop was growing up here. Everything's a bigger problem now. But we adapt, because we have to. It's our way to make the best of things.

"Come on into the house, Granpop," I say. "Let's get a cuppa."



Our water is heated by the sun in pipes on the roof, which is fine unless we get days of storm. It's one of the things Granpop set up when he was young. It's amazing how well it's lasted. Yesterday was sunny, so the water comes out steaming. We sip our kawakawa tea, its gingery taste soothingly familiar. We grow a bit of what Granpop calls "real tea" — camellia, that is — but our winters are too warm for it, really. Granma used to drink most of what we grow — said she never could get used to kawakawa. Granpop would tease her about her ancestors going too far with tea plantations. She'd protest, laughing all the time she told him off for being prejudiced. It's nearly a year ago she passed, but I think I'll always miss her. Granpop even more, of course. I reckon that's why he's a bit unhinged these days. Emotional. Lots of things set him off.

My sister comes in while we're still drinking.

"Come on," she says. "We need more hands on the solar. Some of the stands have rusted, so we'll have to fix them before the wind gets up any more."

"Got any timber left?" I ask.

She makes a face. "Nah. We'll use the giant bamboo."

"You make sure it's well secured then," Granpop pipes up. "Bamboo's lightweight. It could turn into a flying spear in the hands of Tāwhirimātea if it gets loose."

Typical Granpop, coming up with nightmare scenarios we really don't need. I mean, he's right: It *could* happen. But it won't. Plus, gods, y'know?

I make sure Granpop's settled with an oat cracker and more tea. He may be spry, but he sleeps a lot too. I go to the porch to get my gloves. The bamboo round the back of the house grows faster than trees could, and it's actually a great building material, but the splinters from it are like nothing else. I liked it when we had timber, long planks of pine from the forestry, but trees are too precious to waste on timber for solar. We've been using up a stash of planks that Dad bought years ago. Guess they're all gone now.

The wind whips at my hair as I emerge from the house. My hair will tangle into a nightmare of salty curls if I leave it out in the wind, so I hastily bundle it back, tying it with a strip of flax.

"Dad back yet?" my sister asks as I join her in the solar field, the one place we don't encourage plant growth. A sheep baas as though in answer, and we both crack up. The sheep keep down the kikuyu, which would otherwise smother the panels. They provide wool and sometimes milk for us. They're pretty chatty, too. But I shake my head at her question. I didn't see Dad's boat's mast down at the dock at the mouth of the creek when I left the house. He's been out doing fish counts in our marine reserve. After the big fish stock crashes when I was little, heaps of new reserves were set up. But you can't breed fish from nothing. Dad's main job is keeping an eye on what's left, hoping that some of it takes off again soon. There's other stuff he does too, taking water samples and sea temperatures, but it's pretty much all counting.

One side benefit of the job is that he clears the kina barrens. Kina are sea urchins. Free protein for us, more habitat and less competition for the fish. One day there might be enough for folks to eat fish again, but meanwhile it's kina all the way. Trouble is, Dad gets all enthusiastic when he's collecting kina and doesn't always check his marine

weather forecasts. But this isn't the time of year for kina — that's spring — so he should be just counting fish, no distractions.

"He must have taken shelter down the coast," I say. "It's getting too windy for him to dock in the bay. Or maybe he's anchored out."

Neither of us speaks the worry we feel. Dad should have been back before the wind got up so much. Our bay isn't sheltered from an easterly storm like the one that's on its way, though, so he could have taken the boat somewhere with better moorage. Talking about it won't change anything. We can't afford a satphone and there's no cell coverage in our bay, so until Dad docks somewhere, he's out of comms.

"You help the kids here, I'll start at the other side," my sister says. It's a familiar drill. We clean the panels regularly, but repairs tend to slip with all the other work involved in keeping the farm going. So every storm, we end up here in the solar field, making last-minute repairs. We work until we meet in the middle. The wind's howling now. We shout to be heard.

"You done?"

"Yep. Seen Dad?"

"Nup."

Conversations in a gale aren't super wordy. We herd the kids back inside. They're glad to go, which says something about the strength of the storm on its way. Mum's still out, though. The tunnel house holds our most tender plants, things like cocoa and vanilla that — even in the warmer climate we have now — still can't grow outside. Cocoa nets an even better price than mango, so it gets coddled through both droughts and storms.

It's my auntie who gets the kids set up with tea and bananas, then shuts the kitchen door behind her.

"You heard from Derek yet?" she asks. Derek is my Dad. My sister and I look at each other.

"No, we've been outside, how could we?" my sister says.

My aunt's face looks pinched somehow. "The new forecast is just in," she says. "The storm's been upgraded to a Category 6."

If Granpop weren't still asleep he'd accuse me of lollygagging again, but it's worse than that. Beside me, my sister gasps. For once she has no words. Category 6 is worse than a cyclone. It's going to be bad, really bad, here on land. No one should be out on a boat.

"Your uncle Nikau has stepped down the wind turbine. Hopefully, we won't lose any blades this time." My aunt is back to business, her tone clipped. Her message is clear: We don't have time to worry, we need to prepare.

"Marama, go check on your mum, she should be done fussing over those plants by now. Aroha, help me with the bees." My aunt is the one who looks after the animals. She doesn't have much patience with plants, even though they are the mainstay of the farm. I don't even consider protesting today, even though the bees are my least favourite thing on the farm. Stinging insects. Who thought of domesticating those? I like the honey though, and they're handy for pollination, so I don't grumble too much as we suit up and make sure every hive is strapped to its rocky pad. Auntie gets me to put a lump of concrete on top for good measure. Even though the wind is warm, funnelled down from the tropics, it's so strong that my cheeks are chilled and I'm moving clumsily by the time we get to the final hive. The bees are all inside. Although I stumble and fall heavily against the box that contains the nasty things, they don't bother to emerge. I can't decide if I am relieved or concerned that they aren't venturing

out. Maybe relieved. Last thing I need is a bee sting. Auntie and I collect Mum on the way back to the house. She's in the subtropical orchard, banging in extra stakes by some of her favourite saplings.

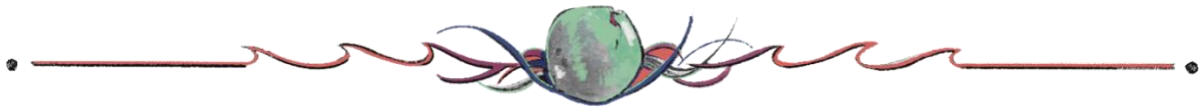
"Come on in, Alice," Auntie says. "We'd better get things straightened out inside."

Mum hits the stake extra hard with her sledgehammer before turning to face us. Raindrops hit us as she does so, huge heavy drops that soak our bee suits instantly. It's probably just my imagination that the rain mingles with drops already on her face. No one mentions Dad. We all gaze out to sea as we trudge home through the gathering gloom, leaning into the wind.

Stepping inside the mudroom at the back of the house, the relief from the wind and rain is enormous. I hadn't realized till this moment how hard I'd been working just to stay upright.

"Reckon we should sleep in the shelter?" Auntie asks Mum. The shelter is a sort of concrete shed, about the only concrete on the farm.

Mum is silent a moment longer. The wind screams while she thinks. There are no windows in the shelter, so no view. No way of keeping an eye on the farm. No way to see if Dad makes it into the bay. But it's getting late, and it's too dark and wet to see much anyway. Mum nods at last. "We'd better. Just in case." No need to say in case of what — we all know. Any storm above a Category 4 is likely to tear the roof off the house, at the least. The tropical plants can more or less take it, but we can't, and despite our best efforts, the house probably can't either.



We go into the big lounge where my sister has been keeping the kids entertained — with stories, as it turns out, reading aloud from our precious store of real paper books. She's fed everyone too. There are dirty bowls perched on armchairs and tables. Granpop is snoring in his chair, but he wakes up with a snort when my sister stops reading.

"Carry on," he says. Then he sees us dripping in the doorway. He wakes up all the way. "Bad, is it?" he asks.

Mum just nods. I reckon she doesn't trust her voice just now. No one's saying it, but Dad's chances are slim, at best.

"Right, everyone, I want you to get the grab bags I know you've kept up to date," Auntie says, taking over. I'm glad I don't have to be the leader. There's a chorus of gasps and protests. We all have a grab bag with emergency gear. But for the kids, especially, it's hard to take seriously. Plus, they grow all the time. I'd bet most of the clothes in their grab bags don't fit. Still, so far we're just sleeping in the shelter as a precaution. Too-tight T-shirts won't matter. Everyone scatters to get their bags. In the silence that remains, I hear the wind, and rain on the roof.

Granpop is still sitting in his chair. I realise his face is screwed up more than usual. Tears run down his cheeks, glistening in the lights. No need to ask why. "It's OK, Granpop," I say. "He'll get back somehow." My voice cracks on the last word. I don't really believe it.

"This world doesn't seem safe anymore, Aroha," Granpop says. "I remember when folks died of boredom and old age in retirement homes."

"Must've been amazing, Granpop," I say. "Doesn't seem realistic." But I know Granpop was born near the end of the last golden age, when people lived practically forever and had more stuff than they knew what to do with. That's the way *his* parents went. I think about the fact that he's maybe lost a child tonight, and me my father, and it's more than I can bear. "Come on, Granpop. Let's get you to the shelter." There's a quaver in my voice, but there's only Granpop to hear. No shame in it. I hold out both hands, and for once he takes them, clinging on to me. His hands are worn, wrinkled, hard slabs of leather, gripping mine fiercely. Together we make our way to the door of the shelter. It used to be separate to the main house, but during some storm or other, Mum and Dad decided it was too dangerous, going outside to get to a stronger shelter. Now it joins the main house through a tunnel. Granpop called it our bit of trench warfare, since we made it by digging a trench and covering it over. The kids and I had the time of our lives using the open trench as cover for games. Granma called it our ha ha, and told us servants used trenches like that so they couldn't be seen, on big old estates over where *her* ancestors came from. That stopped our games pretty quick, we didn't want to be servants, even though maybe we've got the estate thing happening. After that the covers went on and the grass grew over, and now it's just the shelter tunnel. Funny the way that happens. I remembered our games as we shuffled through the dark, Granpop breathing loudly behind me. I can hear the wind more than I should, it starts to blend in with Granpop's breath. Suddenly the roof of the trench peels back, kikuyu grass flapping wildly, lashing our faces. It's tough stuff, but not tough enough for this amount of wind. I grab at Granpop and connect with his arm.

"Duck!" he yells at me, his voice all hoarse and strained.

I do as he says, and realise that the wind is still going over the top of our trench. Something sails overhead and lands with a thunk. Then another. That one lands in the trench, just missing me. I shine my headlight at it. It's raining coconuts.

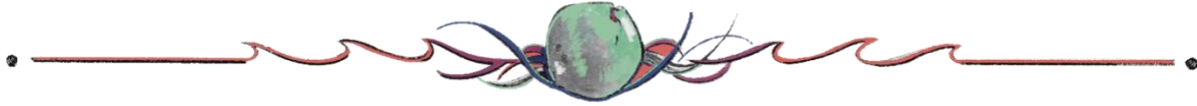
"Throw it back, Aroha!" Granpop yells.

I shake my head. Sounds like Granpop's lost it at last. But there's no point in arguing with him. I throw the coconut over the lip of the trench and we hurry on. The last few meters of trench make me realize I never want to be in a real war. Granpop and I run, dodging a barrage of rain interspersed with a heavy fire of green coconut shells. We hammer on the door to the shelter — of course there's a door, it wouldn't be watertight otherwise — and fall over each other to get inside when Auntie opens it. It takes all three of us to force it closed again.

Once we're inside and up the few stairs to the shelter, I start to laugh hysterically. My sister eyes me as she goes around the kids with Mum, making sure everyone is accounted for. She doesn't say anything for a change. Uncle's over at the computer, making sure the power-down is happening smoothly and probably checking the forecast, too. Granpop makes his way over to a bunk and eases himself down like he's seen it all before. Maybe he has. It's cozy in here, if a bit claustrophobic. Dimly lit, rows of bunks on every wall, a big battery that the solar field keeps charged, and a computer in one corner. No windows, but it's ventilated. Mum leaves the kids and comes over with a cup of tea for me, and I get control of my breathing as I sniff the fragrant liquid.

"Thanks, Mum," I say. "Any word from the other farms, Uncle?" Because of course we're not the only ones here in the north growing stuff. We have a network with other farms like ours.

Uncle nods almost absently, his eyes still glued to the screen in front of him. He's watching a satellite image of the storm. It makes a hypnotic spiral on the screen. "Most people are sheltering now," he says. "Storm got too big, too fast. There's a few people caught out." He doesn't mention Dad, but I see his eyes flick towards Mum, then back to the screen again. "The wind'll shift south, then west, before we get a break." I know without him saying, that's when we'll go out to look for Dad again. It's too dangerous outside for rescue work now — the coconut hail would have told me that, if the wind hadn't. But Uncle goes on. "The tide's a couple of hours off high. Aroha, Marama, can you get some sandbags down into the stairwell?" That's when I realize that we're not out of the woods. Not Dad, not us. Because when the high tide comes in with a storm surge, nowhere on the coast is safe.



Two hours later I lie in the dark listening to the water. The wind has died down, but only because the eye of the storm is right over us, Uncle says. Outside, rain probably still pelts down, thunderous in its own right, but unheard because of the waves. Waves are breaking around our shelter, and I've never been more terrified. We can't get out with all that water out there. We can only hope the shelter holds. Water has already seeped through the sandbags I piled earlier, and we don't have any more. The dirty brown liquid is lapping at the top of the stairs. Everyone's in their bunks, except for Uncle, who's been taping electrical cables high up, just in case. Someone sobs. It might have been me.

"Come on then. Alice. Let's waiata," Granpop says suddenly. Mum sits up in her bunk, hunched over because the bunk above her is so close.

"Alright," she says. Her voice reflects the weariness we all feel, but she starts the singing. First, a song we all learned at school, something about togetherness. Then the anthem, because that's a sort of togetherness too. She falters and Auntie takes over with some pop songs. Then it's Granpop's turn. He sings a shanty song for weary sailors. We all join in on the chorus; he's sung this song to us so many times we don't need to think about it. Then it's a song about a big whale — that one's for Tangaroa. Typical Granpop. We sing on until our voices are hoarse. It drowns out the sound of the storm and the waves. Finally, Uncle stands up. There's a bit of squelching. The water did come in, but it's not too bad. Nothing's fizzled or sparked so far.

"Tide's going out. Time to go check on things."

Most of the kids are asleep. Auntie is too. Uncle smiles at her a moment before turning to us. "Guess they'll be alright for now," he says. "Who's coming out?" My sister and I get to our feet. So does Mum. I wonder how we're going to get out — even if the tide's going out, the trench is probably still full of water. But Uncle pushes back the chair by the computer, places the computer itself on the chair, and starts to unscrew the wall panel.

"We had an escape route all along?" I ask disbelievingly. My sister and me, we're likely to take over the farm one day. We should have known about this.

"We'd have told you sometime, once the kids were old enough not to sneak into the shelter," Uncle says. He taps the side of his nose. "Secret squirrel, eh?"

I make a face at him. I'm too old for that sort of thing and he knows it. Uncle inserts his screwdriver into a crack at the bottom of the panel. The whole thing comes off, revealing a sort of trapdoor, which he opens. It's well above floor level, and ringed with silicone. Whoever put it there thought it through. Uncle leads the way out. We have to push through a banana palm — that must have hidden the trapdoor from view. It's that predawn semi-dark outside, not much to be seen yet. What we can see is bad enough. Coconuts appear as light grey lumps, everywhere. The house is still there, to my relief, though it's missing half the roof. There are watermarks halfway up the walls, same as on the shelter. As the light grows we see more damage, but all of us head for the sea first off. It's harder going than usual; lots of bananas are down. Not the coconuts though. They're standing tall, despite losing half the crop to the wind. That wind is beginning to rise again — the storm must be on the move. The edge of the paddock is a *lot* closer than it used to be. But as soon as we reach the sea's edge, our attention is all taken up by the sight of a sail in the choppy waters of the bay. My sister is the first to speak.

"Hurry up!" she says. Bossy, always. "It's Dad!" We tear down the sandy slope, because it *is* Dad, rowing ashore in a tiny dinghy.

There are hugs, of course, and tumbling exchanges of news. We all go back to the shelter. Dad's been up all night battling the storm and needs to sleep.

He smiles at everyone. Granpop's crying.

"Funny thing," Dad says. "I lost my compass, GPS, everything. Thought I was a goner. But this morning, something bumped on the hull. There was a trail of coconuts floating on the current all the way home. Like a gift from Tangaroa."

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