

Prologue

The sun has set. The colours of the ocean have dimmed from blue and jade glitter to a silky gleam by faint moonlight. Two stand at the ship's rail. Below them a whale boat nudges the side of the vessel, loaded high with boxes and crates, everything they own. He has said all along that they don't need it all. She has clung to her things, her last link with home.

Nothing is familiar. The voices of the men in the whaleboat below speak a language they do not understand. They do not recognise the perfume that drifts from the land, of wild lime and vanilla. They have never seen the place that will become home and have only just met the man who will be their colleague. They barely know each other, this groom and his bride, and after three months of marriage are still learning to read the other.

The ship's captain has warned them. He is not willing to go any nearer to the island for fear of the reef and the rocky coast and as soon as they have climbed down into the whale boat he intends to set sail and be gone. Perhaps, for a wild moment, the girl thinks, I can't do this – this small ship is not comfortable but it could carry me home. It is only for a moment. She is not really afraid. With her upbringing, if any girl can do this, she believes that she can.

In the distance against a dark smudge of land there is a pinprick of lamplight. Another woman is waiting for them, longing for company, ready with food and a welcome. They have been told that it will take hours of rowing to reach her. The young husband is eager, excited to be so close to their destination. He clambers quickly down the ladder and drops into the whaleboat among the dark shapes of their cargo and the shadowy figures of the team of rowers. There is scarcely room for them to sit but he turns and reaches up to his bride who is edging backwards down the ladder, hampered by her long skirts.

She jumps down into his arms. In the darkness, it is hard to tell which of them is supporting the other.