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UNSEASONABLY HOT

It is unseasonably hot. We say that every year as if surprised while the Earth burns. Mr Ernest clicks through holographs about global warming. He has deviated from the curriculum again, onto his crusade to Save the Planet. We don't mind. It's our future, and we share his point of view. The curriculum needs to be updated anyway. The ceiling fan circulates pockets of warm air around the room. It's matchstick hour for me. I yawn politely into my hand and pinch my cheek to help me focus.

"We've passed tipping point," Mr Ernest says, slumping. He sighs, tightening his ponytail. "The past ten years have been catastrophic." Unlike our English teacher, Miss Freestone, he takes long pauses as he considers what he wants to say next. He scratches his head, waves the remote, strolls the room. He is ineloquent but sincere. The content he curates communicates what he can't quite express. Video clips showing the devastation caused by melting polar ice. Floods, greenhouse gases and rising sea levels. Wildfires, hurricanes, pandemics and mass extinctions flash before our weary eyes. His classes are depressing, but what he says matters more than anything else he could teach us. He clears his throat. "Our perfect blue marble—" he says gravely, "our very existence is under threat."

While the blinds are drawn, and a hologram is screening, Tui slides me a note. *You coming to the School Climate Change Strike in two weeks?*

Wouldn't miss it! I scribble and slide it back.

She scratches a few more hurried words. *Meet me at lunch to make the banner? Mrs Pai said we can use the Arts room if we tidy up after.*

Heck yeah! I write, followed by a smiley face emoji.

Tui and I have been discussing this for weeks. She is passionate about the environment, Aotearoa in particular. She says Māori are losing their cultural practices as their sacred areas are developed. She first caught my attention when she told me straight up, "I express my outrage through art." Her passion is contagious.

Tui is a painter, a poet and a songwriter. I'm artistic too, and a reasonable writer, but not like her. She has uninhibited freedom in her brushstrokes and a poetic written voice. I like how she fires me up about the environment. Some people say it's too late to do anything, Grandpa included.

That's fatalistic. I can't think that way. Doing something helps me deal with anxiety about the things I can't control. Things like the wildfire that burnt down a small town in Otago. Or the flood that uplifted the main road in our suburb last autumn, like it was peeling off a Band-Aid. Things I can't control include: clinging to a boyfriend everyone thinks is a babe and having parents who think I'm like fourteen or something. I'll be eighteen next year, but they're too preoccupied to notice the passing time.

After the lesson, Tui says, "Catch ya at lunch." We traipse off to our different classes.

In English, I sit with my best friend, Mia. She is treating me like her doll, as usual, tugging at strands of hair and plaiting them into a French braid. Our teacher, Miss Freestone, dances as she speaks. She stares at the ceiling in the far corner of the room, clutching for a word, plucking it from the ether and starting up again. Her eyes flit back and forth as she tries to articulate the threads in her complicated mind. She bounds around the room, arms flying, frizzy hair bouncing, and her words levitating. We are enchanted.

"You, girls, are in charge of your own bodies. You need not consent to anything with which you are not comfortable. Remember our heroine from last term?"

She is digressing.

She goes off on a tangent about the *Heroine's Journey* as a literary structure. "Remember her? Instead of needing to pursue love to feel whole, our heroine integrates her masculine and feminine—supported by her network—of course, and in finding inner balance, she brings outward transformation to her world. To be a change-maker, you need to first find yourselves, girls." Some of the boys groan, but she shuts them down with a look that says, "Do you want the lecture about your anti-feminist stance?" They glare at her and swallow their thoughts.

Mia tugs a wayward strand of my hair, double twists hair-band around plait and scrapes her chair around next to mine. Miss Freestone ignores us and continues to orchestrate her symphony of words. Mia leans in close and whispers into my ear, "'You're in charge of your own body', Miss said. She's giving you a licence to get cosy with Liam." Her warm breath almost bursts my eardrum, and her words are embarrassing. I have always low-key believed I should wait until marriage. I guess you might say I'm old fashioned. I dig my elbow into her side, and she yelps. Miss Freestone stops mid-sentence, sighs, raises her pierced eyebrow at us, then continues. We're not juniors, and she tends to treat us as adults. Still, I wilt under that look.

“As I was saying, ladies and gents, for the next twenty minutes, I want you to start making notes for your comparative essay on female stereotypes from your chosen film, book and poem. Remember our discussion yesterday about critically examining pervasive stereotypes?”

We all gaze at her. Slightly overwhelmed. I blink.

She appraises us. “Any questions?”

The usual teacher-pleasers shoot their hands up like weeds, giving Mia and me a chance to let out a muffled giggle. Miss is distracted during the question period, and Mia whispers to me about the party.

“You've got to come! Tell your parents you're coming, no matter what.”

“I can't, Mia. It's Gran's birthday, remember?”

“What's the big deal about celebrating your late grandmother's birthday? I mean, she's dead.” She rolls her eyes at me.

I feel something rising, and I can't hold it in. I squawk in a loud guffaw that spins Miss Freestone's head around like her neck is made of rubber.

“That's it you two—move apart, now.”

I give Mia a fake glare and pick up my laptop, sliding my feet over to a spare chair in the back corner of the classroom. Mia is sitting up straight, eyes lowered in mock deference, but I can see her back is shaking.

We share a dark, sarcastic sense of humour. Somehow her comment is even funnier because she knows I loved my Gran. We were all heartbroken when the Virus took her. Grandpa has a heaviness about him now, and going to visit him in the country feels, dare I say it, like a burden. Mum had insisted I join them this weekend.

“You know we need to cheer Grandpa up on Gran's birthday,” she had said in that cajoling tone I couldn't counter.

My mind wanders to Liam. He'll be at the party with his peanut-butter tan, and hazel-green eyes. I'll ask Mia to keep an eye on him, and if anyone gets too flirty, she can spill her spritzer down their pretty little shirt. She's solid like that.

I never fail to jump when the bell rings. Are they entirely necessary? Couldn't we have a computer-generated wind chime? We've got all the other tech. It's like a silicone city here. I slide my laptop into my shoulder bag and race out, hoping to chat to Mia about the party before splitting off to our different classes. I smile sweetly at Miss and shrug as I exit. I suspect I'm her pet. She can't suppress smiling back, shaking her mop in mock disapproval. Mia is charging out the door as I catch her.

“Keep an eye on Liam for me,” I say.

"No trouble," she says, "I hope his friends are half as cute as he is." She winks.

"Hey!"

Her laughter booms as she turns right for Drama class while I turn left for Biology. "Laters," we both say, grinning.

Excerpt from "Call me Madeleine"

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