

In The Deep. Cassie Hamer

Trinh adjusts her goggles. Doesn't bother to de-fog. The less she sees, the better.

Through misty plastic, sea and sky are an endless, grey soup. White water swirls like soap scum at her feet.

I hate you, she whispers to the sea.

I hate you too, the sea whispers back.

She presses her goggles one last time and wades in. Diving under the first wave she feels strong. The second takes her breath. By the third she is gasping, and there is something else as well - an undercurrent that is coiled around her legs and dragging her into the deep.

Trinh's feet search for the sand in the way of an anchor seeking the sea bed but it refuses to come. As another wave breaks, the white water rushes her nose, eyes, ears and lungs. Her panic is lemonade, fizzing and spitting and fear runs like sugar in her veins. Roaring in her ears. The smell of diesel. Children screaming. Wood splintering. A past that is not hers. That she has no right to fear.

Trinh closes her eyes. Hears the voice of Coach Dunnett.

Chest up. Shoulders back. Eyes to the sky. Let the water hold you.

In this boiling ocean, backstroke is going to save her life. Her favourite. She knows enough not to swim against the current. Knows it will peter out, if she just lets it.

She kicks sideways and feels herself starting to float outside of her body, up into the mauve sky into which the moon is now rising. She sees herself as the seagulls do. Her white round face as a small moon, shining up at the bigger one above.

She gets it now. The trophies and ribbons that give her bedroom a carnival atmosphere mean nothing here. The pool is a puppy dog on her leash. The ocean is a monster that wants to swallow her whole.

After twenty minutes, she is back on the sand. Exhausted and shivering, she takes her towel to the boulders of the break wall, rocks that have spent their day doing nothing but soaking up the sun, and lets the radiant heat warm her bones. The sun is now little more than a golden hump, sinking into the river.

She has been stupid, to swim here alone at dusk. The locals have an expression word for people who do that. Shark bait.

She shivers, but not from the cold or the shock. It is the air around her. It's different. Made heavier by a gaze.

Someone is watching. Disrupting the atmosphere with their eyes.

But when she swivels to look, there is no one. Nothing there. It's like swatting at a fly.

Trinh blows her nose into her towel. Back in the breakwater, the fishing trawlers are heading out, confronting the swell as steadily as shepherds heading out to tend their flock. Later they will fan out across the horizon and string it like fairy lights.

'You late, Trinh,' her father scolds. The air in the kitchen is warm and thick with aromas of coriander, chilli, garlic, and fish sauce. Trinh's stomach growls. Swimming always makes her ravenous but she will have to wait until the dinner rush is over.

'Mama is waiting.'

Trinh clips a plastic flower behind her ear and slips on the scratchy AO Dai that Mama bought from Paddy's Market two years ago and now hangs at least three inches above her ankles.

For the customers, Dad always says. They love that shit.

Shit is the fourth English word he ever learned at the Villawood camp but it's his absolute favourite. He won't say what the other three were and from that, Trinh assumes they are more rude words.

Mama's welcome consists only of a raised eyebrow, which Trinh ignores by grabbing a handful of plastic menus and scurrying over to table 12 where a family of four has just settled in. Her science teacher, Mr Ellis, his wife and two little kids.

'Thanks Trinh,' he says with a friendly wink.

She likes Mr Ellis. He never gets her name wrong. Has never called her Trina. Looks her in the eye. Treats her like she's nothing different. Nothing special. He's never asked her where she comes from, not like everyone else who tends to startle when she tells them.

Cabramatta, they repeat, eyebrows rising with involuntary reflex.

At first, the whole school assumed she was a druggie. But after the first PE lesson in the pool, when she beat the boys over the fifty freestyle, the looks of wariness were replaced by something worse. Something like disdain.

In Sydney, her swimming talent made her something of a minor celebrity. Her parents were proud, even though they skulked about the pool with cat-like nervousness. But here, in this small coastal town, no one's impressed that she can swim a fifty in 27 seconds flat. This town surfs. The pool's for wimps.

Mr Ellis takes the menu and orders a coke for himself, a lemon-squash for his wife, and fanta for the kids.

You know it's cheaper if you just get a jug to share, she wants to tell him.

But Mr Ellis has no need of being told that jugs of soft drink are cheaper than individual drinks and this is why he'll never truly understand. Not really.

At the end of the meal he leaves a ten dollar tip, which is pretty generous for the town and makes her feel uneasy.

‘Tell your Dad he does the best Vietnamese in town.’ Mr Ellis delivers the dad-joke deadpan.

Theirs is the only Vietnamese, though there is a Chinese and an Italian, along with the two pubs, the RSL and the Maccas. All the major continents of the world covered when you think about it. Except Africa. Her Dad wanted to call it *Nguyen’s* but Trinh convinced him that no one would know how to say it, so *Saigon Express* it is.

At the end of the dinner rush, Trinh and her dad take up position on milk crates out the back of the restaurant. Under the single spotlight, she gets a start on the trigonometry homework while her dad lights up a cigarette. From the kitchen come the strains of traditional Vietnamese music. Trinh’s not sure if it’s the crappy tape deck or if that’s the way the music is supposed to sound, but the melody is scratchy and drowns out the woody calls of the currawongs. She’s given up on rubbishing his music. He says it’s the sound of home, but to her it is a sound that makes her feel she will never belong. Anywhere.

The morning is soft and purple as the Jacaranda petals being crushed by the wheels of Trinh’s bike. The whole town is blooming with them and as she cycles up hill, she passes under pockets of purple rain where the petals are starting to fall. At the top, the water tower sits above the dumpy town like a concrete crown, but the view is 360 degrees. You see everything - the town, the river, the breakwater, the beach, the ocean and the horizon. Through the breakwater the trawlers are returning, coasting along a

sea that's as flat as a sheet. If she had time, she'd go for a swim, but Mama likes her prawns straight off the boat.

Bike resting between her legs, she counts the trawlers.

Seven.

She counts again.

Still seven.

One missing. Definitely one missing.

Down the hill she pedals so fast her hair lifts behind her like a kite.

She is flying.

The marina is buzzing. Fire trucks. Police. Lights, but no sirens. Trinh dumps her bike in the dirt and hurries to the jetty. The trawler is half-submerged under water at a 45 degree angle as if caught mid-fall. The fire brigade has deployed a boom on the water to catch the petrol but the water is slick with oily rainbows.

The fishermen huddle, scratching their beards and muttering. Their prawn guy, Steven, is at the centre. Mama likes his catch the best though Trinh can't taste any difference at all. She bites down on her lip and tugs at his all-weather jacket. 'What happened?'

Steve breaks out of the circle. 'The trawler? She just came back in and sank.'

'For no reason?'

He smiles. 'There'd be a reason, Trinh.'

'Like what? A leak or a hole or something?'

'Maybe. But I guess that's beside the point now.'

'I guess.' She wants to shake him. Make him answer. How can he just accept it like that?

‘Three kilos today?’

She takes the prawns and puts them in the mini-esky that sits on the basket at the front of her bike. Her father will be fishing for flathead off the breakwall, and she’ll drop them off with him. Save her the trip home.

Halfway out, she senses someone behind her, feels that weight in the air again, so she slows to get a look and let whoever it is get up beside her.

And there he is.

Casually tossing her hair, Trinh takes a good look. That guy. She’s seen him before, surfing in the afternoons. He’s good at it. Doesn’t go to her school, she knows that, but she doesn’t know if it’s because he’s too old, or because most of the indigenous kids just don’t.

‘Hey,’ he says.

‘Hey,’ says Trinh.

‘I saw you yesterday.’

‘So you were the one perving.’

‘Making sure you didn’t die.’

She snorts. ‘Like I would let that happen.’

Trinh has slowed. Her father is less than 200 metres away. She and the boy wheel about each other like birds in the sky.

‘I’m doing the ocean swim on Saturday,’ she says.

‘Not like that you’re not.’

‘Why?’ She stops pedalling and he stops in front of her.

‘You’ll die,’ he says matter of factly.

Up close, his eyes are watery green. ‘Meet me here this arvo.’

‘Why?’ In Sydney, she would have said no. But here she has nothing to lose, and the boy seems genuine.

‘I’m gonna show you something,’ he says. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Trinh.’

‘I’m Jed. Four o’clock. Okay?’

She nods and as he wheels away from her she has the sense of a tide, withdrawing.

In home science they make scones and Trinh is paired with Kelly McDonald who’s nice enough but insists on making her own dough even though all the other pairs are working together. When the scones come out of the oven, Kelly’s are perfect, golden puff balls, while Trinh’s are mean and small, like bullets.

The teacher gives Kelly nine out of ten. Trinh gets a four.

‘I thought your dad was a chef,’ says Mrs Gallen, fingering the scone as if it may be toxic.

He’s actually a lawyer. Or, he was a lawyer. Before me.

Trinh could teach Mrs Gallen how to cook a stir-fry. When Dad makes it, he tips little strips of meat into the wok which seize and shrivel and jump about in the pan, like they’re trying to escape the scorching heat. When she asks him about Vietnam, he’s like the meat in the wok, so she doesn’t ask any more. The only time he mentions law is when he tells customers in broken English that Trinh will be leaving town next year to study law at Sydney University. In those moments, his eyes are like marbles and Trinh doesn’t have the heart to tell him it’s not what she wants.

‘Yes, Mrs Gallen. My dad is a cook,’ Trinh pauses. ‘But he’s not very good at it.’

Mrs Gallen smiles and changes her mark to a five.

Shoulder to shoulder, Jed and Trinh stand at the water's edge. Feet kissing the suds.

'That flat patch. Where the waves aren't breaking. That's a rip. It's the water that's been dumped on the sand, trying to get back out again fast as it can. You don't swim in that. Not unless you want an express ticket to New Zealand.' He smiles.

'That's what you swam into yesterday.'

'I meant to swim into it. I wanted to get out quick.' Trinh folds her arms.

'Well you're a bloody idiot.'

'I'm the bloody idiot that's gonna win the ocean swim.'

Jed sighs. 'You know why people drown?'

Because they get on leaky boats.

'Because they panic,' he says. 'They fight it. You've gotta go with it. Accept it. It's bigger than you.'

Trinh rolls her eyes. 'I know. I know. It's your religion, right. Spiritual and all that. You surf for the love, right?'

'Partly.' He shakes his curls and grins. 'And for the chicks.'

In the shallows they splash and porpoise through the waves. Easy. Then, Jed dives in front, goes deeper.

'C'mon,' he calls to her, the sun glistening off the golden tips of his dark curls. 'Let's get out the back.' He dips under a wave and Trinh waits for him to resurface. Five seconds. Ten. Nothing. Just an ocean full of nothing but water. No life at all. She is about to gulp at the air when suddenly he is beside her again.

'C'mon slowcoach.' He splashes Trinh and she shakes off the water.

‘Do you mind if we just stay here?’

‘kay.’ Splashes her again, and off he dolphins, this time towards the shallows.

Trinh exhales.

Race day is perfect. No wind. No clouds. Everything clean and pure. The swell is subdued. Obedient. Waves are rolling in, rhythmic and regular. The sand is crowded. Busy. It smells of zinc cream and rubber caps. As Trinh trudges towards the start line, she wants to be sick, or do a wee. Maybe both

The starter raises his gun.

When it sounds, Trinh bounds in with the rest of them. The water is a washing machine of legs and arms, waves and kicking. She gasps for air and finds nothing but water. Jed’s words come to her.

Get to the edge. Find the clear water.

It’s easier out wide. There, she can put her head down and swim like mad. Like she’s taking the express ticket to New Zealand. In the water, she keeps her eyes closed and takes only an occasional look around to see that she’s still on course. This way, she can almost pretend she’s back in the pool. Like the black line is still there, absorbing all her thoughts so that her mind is nothing but blackness.

Another look up. Quick scan left, right. She’s around the second buoy now. Headed back towards the shore, back into the impact zones where the waves are breaking. Beneath her, the water swells and surges until it has no choice but to break. When it does, it does so gently and she is carried, careful as a mother, right to the shore.

Trinh crosses the finish line, her heart large in her chest. She sinks to the ground and the sand clings to her back, thighs and legs like a second skin. Pale and golden.

At that moment, she realises the ocean is still teeming with bobbing heads. On the beach, there is almost no one else around.

Trinh curls up on the sand and closes her eyes.

She wishes Jed was by her side. She'd like to thank him, now that all the races are done. Her breath is back to normal and the thought of what is about to happen warms her from within. The loudspeaker crackles. Sun glints off the gold of the medals. She straightens her shoulders.

'Third place in the under 18 girls section.' The Surf Club president stops. Squints at his clipboard. Looks sideways, making wrinkles in the skin on his fat, sausage neck. He takes the loudhailer away from his mouth, but not quite far enough. *What kind of fucken name is this*, the loudspeaker whispers into the crowd. There are titters, and the President clears his throat.

'Third place in the under 18 girls section is Treen-a Na-joo-yen.'

Trinh shuffles through the crowd, bumping shoulders. Wanting to disappear into the sand.

A mocking voice reaches her. *Nice work, Trina-No-win.*

The Club President shakes her hand but doesn't meet her eye. She bows her head for the medal and when the cool metal touches her skin, she shivers. The applause has died before she gets back to her place in the crowd.

In the afternoon, the beach is deserted, save for the empty sunny-boys that were given out after the race. The weather has closed-in. No trawlers going out tonight. Not in this mess. But Trinh knows Jed will be here, and he is, huddled into the breakwall, barnacle-like, with his hoodie pulled down over his ears and hands jammed into boardies.

Into him, Trinh leans in. He's her shelter.

'You did it,' he says quietly.

'You were there?' She minces grains of sand between her fingers. 'What a fucking joke.'

He looks at her, silent, and nods his head towards the town. 'The shit I've been through in this place,' he breathes and shakes his head.

For a moment, they are silent, and Jed pushes off the rock.

'C'mon.' He holds out his hand and nods toward the ocean.

'You serious?'

His hand is there and Trinh takes it.

As they walk down the beach to the water, feet squeaking in the sand, she feels her mum and dad beside her. They are staring out to the horizon, and the leaky boat, and the big emptiness. Seeing what might be, if only they can be brave enough.

Near the water's edge, Jed lets go, rips off his hoodie and bolts towards the waves.

'Last one in's a rotten egg.'

Laughter bubbles up from within her as Jed leaps through the waves.

The water is at Trinh's feet now. She cups some in her hands, lets it cascade over her head. Christens herself.

I don't hate you, she whispers.

I don't hate you either, the sea whispers back.

And into the rushing white-water, Trinh dives. Head first.