NOWHERE ISLAND



Also by Tania Unsworth

The Girl Who Thought Her Mother Was a Mermaid

The Time Traveller and the Tiger

NOWHERE ISLAND



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ZEPHYR
An imprint of Head of Zeus

This is a Zephyr book first published in the UK in 2023 by
Head of Zeus Ltd, part of Bloomsbury Plc

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9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (HB): 9781804540084
ISBN (E): 9781804540060

Cover design: TBC

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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5–8 Hardwick Street
London EC1R 4RG

www.headofzeus.com

For Steph Richardson and Una Flood.
Thank you for the days…





One

Gil escaped just after his twelfth birthday, in the middle of the afternoon. He did it on impulse, although he must have been thinking about it for a while, because he picked the perfect car – an SUV with a single driver and plenty of space in the back. He also picked the perfect time.

They were at a petrol station. Ms Lundy was filling the tank and staring at her phone at the same time. The SUV was six metres away, on the other side of the row of pumps. The driver had got out and was rummaging through her bag for a credit card.

Gil couldn't explain what happened next. It was as if his mind had switched off and left his body to do all the thinking. He grabbed his backpack and silently opened the door of Ms Lundy's car. Then he slipped out and dropped to the ground, crouching as he pushed the door almost – but not quite – shut. Seconds later, he was in the back seat of the SUV. He took a deep breath and lifted his head.

Ms Lundy hadn't moved. The driver of the SUV had finally found her credit card and was peering at the pump, tapping buttons. Gil took the opportunity to scramble into the far back. It was empty apart from a suitcase and a blanket. He crawled into the gap between the suitcase and the seat back, covered himself with the blanket and lay still.

Gil knew Ms Lundy wouldn't immediately return to the car after filling the tank because she'd said she was going to get a coffee from the station store. That would give him a little time.

He listened to the gurgling sound of petrol pouring into the SUV, wondering how long it would take to fill. Perhaps, if he was lucky, the driver would be one of those nervous people who topped up the tank when it was only half-empty.

Or perhaps – if he was even more lucky – the station store would be busy, and Ms Lundy would have to wait to get her coffee. Gil imagined a queue of customers. There were three – no, four – people. The man at the front was buying engine oil, only he couldn't make up his mind which brand. He was heavyset, sweating as he hitched up the waist of his baggy cargo shorts…

Gil spent a lot of time making up stories. Not because he thought it could make them come true, but because – for a few moments – it made them *feel* true. And those were the only moments in his life when he ever felt completely certain of anything.

He concentrated. There was an old woman in the queue, he decided, and a teenager carrying a little kid

who was trying to grab sweets from the display. Ms Lundy was standing at the end, wearing her 'I-have-all-the-time-in-the-world' face, and secretly glancing at her watch every few seconds.

The stream of petrol cut off, and footsteps came around the side of the SUV. The door opened and the driver heaved a sigh as she settled into her seat.

Start the engine! Gil shouted in his head.

He heard muttering and a rustling sound. As if the driver was searching through her bag, wondering if she'd forgotten anything.

You haven't, you haven't, Gil begged, feeling the start of panic. What if the station store hadn't been busy? What if Ms Lundy had gone to the counter, paid for her coffee, and come straight out? She might be walking back to her car right that minute. Raising her hand against the sun, squinting through the windscreen at the empty passenger seat.

'Go! Go! Go!' he whispered in despair.

As if in answer, he heard the soft roar of the ignition. They were moving. Gil felt the SUV make a wide turn of the petrol station on to the exit ramp, the hum of the motorway growing louder and louder. The driver paused, waiting for a break in the traffic, then accelerated to join the flow.

It was too late to turn back. Gil was engulfed by terror. He'd chosen the SUV at random. Ms Lundy would have no idea where he'd gone. And every passing minute was carrying him another mile away. He lifted a corner of the blanket and looked through

the rear window. The sky was completely clear, apart from a cloud, drifting far and free across the blue. At the sight of it, Gil's fear vanished and a surge of exhilaration took its place.

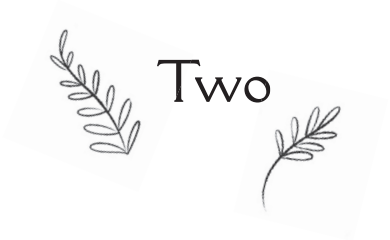
Other people had always decided where he should go. He'd spent his whole life being taken to one place after another. Now, for the first time ever, he wasn't being taken anywhere.

He was going all by himself.

If he'd been able to, Gil would have cheered out loud. Instead, he reached into his backpack and retrieved a dark, yellow pebble.

It was ordinary looking, no different from a million others, except that the ocean had drilled a dime-sized hole right through the middle. Looking through the hole made a strange thing happen. Everything looked much nearer. And at the same time, everything looked much further away.

Gil raised the pebble to his eye and stared at the sky until his heart settled and his breath grew calm.



Two

It was deliciously cool in the SUV, even under the blanket. Gil almost fell asleep listening to the soft drone of the air conditioning.

In twenty miles take exit fifteen on the right, towards route eighty-two east.

'Okay, okay,' the driver said in a loud voice. 'You told me that already.'

Gil heard a rustle of plastic. 'I might as well have that sandwich,' she announced in the same loud voice. 'Half of it, anyway…'

She must be lonely, Gil thought, *talking to herself like that*. Or maybe she just liked to imagine she had someone real to chat to, for the same reason Gil liked to imagine things. To make the world seem okay.

He wondered what Ms Lundy had done when she'd found him gone. At first, she'd think he was in the bathroom, or stretching his legs. She would have waited for a few minutes, then gone to look. But the

petrol station was small. It wouldn't have taken Ms Lundy long to realise he wasn't there and call for the police.

Poor Ms Lundy. Gil hoped she wouldn't get in trouble. She'd always been kind to him. He knew this didn't mean much, because it was her job to be kind to him, but he appreciated the effort she made.

'I know you're going to be happy in the new place,' she'd said as they set out that morning. 'I'm sure it will be fine this time.'

Gil could have pointed out that she'd said the same thing about the last place she'd taken him. But he didn't.

He was much too kind himself, to say something like that.



Gil was five years old when his parents were drowned in a kayaking accident. Nobody could explain how it happened. The weather that day was warm and clear, without a breath of wind, and the sea shone like a mirror. As Gil's mother and father set off across the bay, there was nothing to break their reflection but the dip of their own paddles. Yet they were never seen again. One minute they were there – two dots on the bright horizon – next minute they were gone.

Gil could remember bits and pieces of his life before the accident. But his memories were so few, and he had gone over them so many times, that they'd grown thin, like a coat patched and patched again,

until almost nothing of the original was left. All he knew for sure was that his parents had loved him with all their hearts.

He was an only child, and his mum and dad were only children too, so Gil had no relatives to look after him when his parents died. Instead, Ms Lundy was put in charge of his case. She was a social worker, and the first thing she did was send him to a temporary foster home.

Gil didn't remember much about the foster home, except that he was given an orange teddy bear with eyes like two fried eggs. Gil had a feeling he was supposed to love the bear, but he didn't. No matter where he went, its enormous eyes seemed to follow him. He tried stuffing the bear under the bed, but he could still feel it staring. Through the bedsprings and the mattress, all the way up to where he lay, alone in the strange-shaped dark.

When Ms Lundy came to pick him up, Gil tried to leave the teddy behind, but the lady who'd been fostering him ran out of the house at the last minute.

'You forgot your toy!' she said, thrusting it into his arms.

The teddy sat on Gil's lap, staring at him as they drove away.

'That's a cute bear,' Ms Lundy said.

'I hate it,' Gil cried. And before Ms Lundy could stop him, he rolled down the window and threw the bear from the car. It hit the black top in a blur of orange fur, bounced and vanished from sight.

The instant it was gone, Gil felt terrible. He pictured the bear lying on the side of the road, ugly and unwanted, with no one for company but the wind in the grass.

It's okay, he told himself as they sped away. *Someone will find it. A girl with weird, too-big eyes will pick it up and love it because it looks just like her.*

Even at five years old, Gil was good at making up stories.

Over the next few years, he was sent to foster home after foster home, always hoping that he would be adopted. Somehow, it never happened. One couple discovered they were having twins and couldn't look after Gil as well. Another had to change their plans because of illness and a third failed to meet the strict rules of adoption. As Gil got older, the search became even more difficult, because most people were looking for a younger child to take care of. Not a boy who'd be a teenager in a year or two.

By the time he was twelve, Gil had lost count of the number of homes he'd stayed in. And despite Ms Lundy's cheerful promises, he had also lost hope.

He was tired of being shuffled from place to place, never knowing how long he would stay, or where he'd go next. He was tired of always having to be on his best behaviour. Most of all, he was tired of telling himself the same story; the story of how – one day – he would find a family where love wasn't doled out like pocket money, to be taken away when you did something wrong. Somehow or other (the precise details were

always changing) Gil would become part of this family. Not because he was good, or clever, or tidy or polite or got on well with others or it happened to be convenient, but because that was just the way it was.

The story had comforted Gil when he was small, but it didn't any longer. In fact, it made things worse, because the gap between the story and reality seemed to widen with each new place he went.

As he sat waiting for Ms Lundy to fill the tank before taking him to yet another stranger's home, with a history he would never learn and a collection of family photographs to which his would never be added, all Gil knew for sure was that he couldn't go through it again. Anything would be better than that.

Even getting into a random car, with no idea where it was going, or what he would do when it arrived.