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Opening extract from
Bringing the Summer

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Julia Green

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Bringing the Summer

JULIA
GREEN



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Also by Julia Green

Breathing Underwater

Drawing with Light

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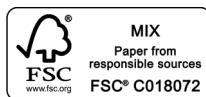
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One



It's the end of August, my last day on the island of St Ailla.

'I'm just going out,' I call to Evie as I slip out of the back door, on my way to the shed to pick up my wetsuit. 'One final swim!'

'Keep an eye on the time, Freya,' she calls back from the kitchen. 'The ferry leaves at eleven.'

I run down the lane past the farm to the campsite, turn left through the wooden gate into the field, up the earthy track between flowering gorse bushes that smell like coconut. At the top of Wind Down I stop like I always do at the turf maze; I walk carefully round the ridged path into the middle and back out again. It's part of my ritual of saying goodbye.

I turn into the wind and start running over the short grass towards Beady Pool. There's no one here. I peel off my clothes, wriggle into my wetsuit. The water is freezing even though the sun's out today, the sea a brilliant turquoise. I swim out, overarm, as far as the end of the line of rock, and then back, more slowly,

breaststroke. This is the last time I'll swim in the sea this year. I turn on to my back and let myself float, arms outstretched, eyes open to the wide blue sky. For a moment I let myself drift, held by the water, surrounded by light.

Finally, when it's time to go, Evie and Gramps walk me down to the jetty. *Spirit*, the small island boat, is already waiting to take passengers over to Main Island for the ferry. Evie and Gramps hold me between them for a long goodbye hug.

'Take care, sweetheart,' Gramps says. 'Come back to see us soon.' He wipes his eyes with his sleeve. 'You're leaving with the swallows, Freya.' He points to the row of birds lined up along the telephone wire at the top of the jetty.

'They're just practising,' Evie tells him. 'They're not going yet. They're not quite ready for that long journey south.' She squeezes his hand. 'And they'll be back next year, even the young ones. Straight back to the nests where they were born.'

She hugs me one last time. 'It's been so lovely having you here all summer it's hard to let you go!' She laughs. 'But you know what they say: one door shuts and another one opens!'

I find a seat at the back of the boat, like I always do, so I can watch my grandparents getting smaller and smaller, and the gap of sea between us stretching bigger and wider. I wave until they are tiny dots, and then I turn and I face the other way, looking forward.

It's as if I've got two lives, my island life, and my

normal one, back on the mainland. This is the moment when I cross over, one to the other. It's always hard. But it's like Evie says: another door opening. The beginning of something new.



Two



The train's packed. At each station, more people pile in. The luggage racks are spilling over with bags and beach stuff, surfboards propped up at the end of the carriage. The over-breathed air is thick with the smell of suntan lotion on hot skin. I'm pressed in the window seat in Coach A, the quiet carriage at the front of the train, my book open on the table before me unread, just wanting to be home, now. There's still at least two and a half hours to go.

A sudden jolt shakes the train, followed by the stink of brakes as the train judders to a long-drawn-out stop. For a moment, everyone is silent. It feels as if the train might tip over. Are we about to crash? I am suddenly deeply afraid, alert to danger even though nothing else happens: the train simply stops. The acrid smell of the too-hard braking seeps through the train.

The train manager's voice comes over the intercom: a man's voice, kind and oddly human, shocked by his own words which come out in a rush and say too much, too soon: 'Someone's walked out on to the line!' before

he reverts to the usual train-manager language: 'There has been a fatality. There will be a severe delay to your journey.'

A babble of voices. All around me, people start getting their phones out, as if desperate to speak, to tell someone close to them. They repeat the exact same words: *someone walked out on to the line . . . fatality . . . delay*. The woman opposite me tuts. 'It's the driver you feel sorry for.'

I look out of the window. Because I'm in the front carriage, I can see it all unfold. The train manager struggles into a bright orange vest, talking into his phone at the same time. Another man joins him. The manager steps back on to the train and his voice comes again, over the loudspeaker system: 'Could the relief driver who is travelling on this train please come forward, and bring two cups of tea for the drivers from the buffet as you come through.'

The little detail of the cups of tea brings the tragedy horribly into focus. I can imagine everything, of course: the driver, traumatised, needs his sweet tea. He won't be allowed to drive the train. In my too vivid imagination, already tuned into death and disaster, I'm with him in the front of the train as he sees the person step out, as he applies the brakes, as he closes his eyes, because it takes *miles* for a train at that speed to stop and there is nothing, nothing he can do . . .

The driver climbs down from the cab, and the manager moves over to stand beside him. Two of the three men light cigarettes. A man holding two paper cups of tea walks slowly through our carriage

and everyone goes quiet again, watching. He joins the men at the side of the track. The drivers sip tea. They've got their backs to the train; I can't see their faces.

We wait. People talk. A girl on the other side of the train carriage says she saw something fly past the window; she'd thought it was just a piece of wood, but now she thinks it was a shoe, or something . . .

Another announcement. 'We apologise for the severe delay to your journey this afternoon. British Transport Police have now arrived.'

I text Mum to say my train's going to be really late. I don't tell her why. She texts me back. **Can you get a taxi from the station? Dad and I have to go out. Sorry. See u later. Love Mum xxx**

A policeman turns up. He writes things down in a notebook, nodding. I take in more details of the driver; grey hair, a beard, middle-aged, blue short-sleeved shirt, railway uniform. The other men seem to be looking after him, in their particularly male way: cigarettes, a joke, even; standing very close without actually touching.

The policeman pulls on latex gloves. He walks away, and I imagine him picking things up . . . pieces up . . . my mind shuts down then. I'm trying not to think about what might be left, scattered along the track or caught under the wheels . . .

'We have nothing further to report. We apologise for the severe delay to your journey. Engineers are still inspecting the train for any damage caused by the incident.'

The idea that the *train* might be damaged . . . My brain reels.

Even as it happens, I see what I'm doing. It's as if I'm noting everything down, committing the details to memory, as if I might be called upon as a witness, later. Or is it my own way of keeping the real truths at a distance, so I don't feel anything?

Eventually – an hour, maybe an hour and a half later – the train limps slowly into the next station. We all have to get off. The platform's crowded with people: trains delayed in either direction; no one going anywhere.

I stand, almost dizzy, on the platform with my bag, and I do not mean to, but I do see the front of the train, and the huge dent. I hug myself and weep.

I suppose I am attuned to death, and grief, and the tragic moment that splits the world in two. It happened in my own family, when my brother, Joe, died in a boating accident at the island I've just travelled from. Bit by bit, we've pieced our lives together again, and that's not what I want to write about now, because I did all that two years ago, when I was fourteen, and that's all over. But I suppose, thinking about it now, it's why the death of an unknown person under the wheels of the train I just *happened* to be travelling on, wouldn't leave me alone. I kept thinking about it, and wondering *why*, and wondering *who*.