

Ishita

The girl who listened to the waves

By Claire Delahunty



 **SISU**GIRLS

Ishita tried to concentrate on doing her homework, but the 500 words she had to write by the end of the week just weren't flowing. "Who I want to be" was the topic of her project, and the right answer had her just a little bit stumped.

She could hear the honking and humming of Mumbai traffic flowing down her street. She didn't need to look outside to know she would see a hot, dusty sun looking back at her.

How she longed to be somewhere green and quiet—perhaps somewhere with cool, blue water? Somewhere the only sound was of waves and seagulls, circling their way across the sky.

Ishita looked down at her hands, resting on the open pages of her schoolwork. Usually she loved to write, and she had always thought she would become a journalist. That's not so hard to plan for! But today the words refused to come. Instead, she noticed, she had absently squiggled endless little foam-capped waves across the margins of her paper.

Peering closely at the lines her blue pen had made, Ishita fancied she could almost smell the sea.

With a sigh, she gave in to the heavy feeling of her head, lowering her cheek to rest across the coolness of the paper. Ishita knew she shouldn't sleep, with so much work to do. But perhaps just a quick nap would help her to find the right words for her homework. Resigning herself to waking up with pen marks on her face, Ishita laid down her head and let her mind drift away.

It seemed like just seconds later that she was woken by a tickle of fresh breeze in her hair. She stirred, slowly, unwilling to surface from her nap so soon. As she moved, it felt like she was lying on something warm; something shifting slightly beneath her. Sitting up and blinking, Ishita could hardly believe what she saw ... Looking down at her hands, which had been resting just a minute ago on the pages of her school book, she saw the tips of her fingers submerged beneath golden grains of sand.

Blinking, and turning her stiff neck to the right, her eyes confirmed what her ears had already told her. The sea! Just a few steps away—glorious crashing waves rolling up the shore towards her, before darting back out to the big, mysterious ocean.

Looking to the left, shrubs and gently nodding trees formed a border at the edge of the sand. Carefully checking to the left and right again, Ishita blinked at the glittering sea and glanced down once more at the sand below her hands.

She could feel the sun warm on her face and arms and legs as she realised her school uniform of a few hours before had somehow been switched for swimmers.

Feeling suddenly very guilty to be so far away from home and study, Ishita scanned the length of the beach for signs of anyone else. How would she get home? How long would it take? And where exactly was she??

Apart from the sun winking high in the sky, and the sound of the waves, Ishita could see no other clue as to where she might be. There were no signs of people on the beach. She might have to walk up to the water, Ishita supposed, and ask a passing fish for directions!

Laughing softly to herself, Ishita's eyes finally fell on something long and solid lying on the beach just a little way from her.

At first it looked like nothing more than a big piece of driftwood, which had once had a coat of paint on it. Light blue, the object almost matched the sea—maybe it was a piece from an old boat? Ishita walked towards it curiously. What an odd shape it was. Smooth, long and widest at the middle. It was a sort of oval shape

with pointy ends. And even more odd, a little fin jutted out from the side facing upwards.

Ah-ha! She had seen this before, in videos and magazines. Kneeling down to get a better look, she brushed sand away from the varnished surface of ... a surfboard!

When she flipped it upright, the board was nearly as tall as her, but it was surprisingly light. She could carry it under one arm, and she was surprised to realise that it felt very comfortable when she tucked it beneath her armpit. Before she knew it, her feet were heading towards the water, just a few metres away.

The waves rushed in around her feet, and Ishita was surprised that she was only a little bit afraid as she looked out to the horizon, far away. She had learned to swim when she was small, but her arms and legs had always been slim, like twigs. She had always struggled to move fast through the water. But here today, she could feel energy and power in her limbs.

As though the waves were telling her what to do, whispering encouragement, Ishita plunged into the water, and rolled herself on top of the board. As the water lapped around her, soon it was deep enough to paddle further out to sea. She used her arms, feeling the muscles in her shoulders flex and burn. This was hard work!

Looking back at the shore, she could see it moving further and further away, and somehow she knew what she had to do. Ishita had watched videos of surfers catching waves, balancing so gracefully on their boards and riding the movement of the sea back in to shore. She wasn't sure how long she had until it was time to go back to reality, and find a bus to take her back home. For now, she had just one goal: to catch a wave.

Ishita found that lying on the board and paddling slightly across the waves was easier than plunging into them head-on. By shifting the weight of her body and the directions of her paddle strokes, it was possible to steer.

Little schools of silver fish darted below her as the water got deeper, and she let them guide her towards a rolling pattern of big waves. Her arms had been working hard, but she was still finding the strength to move out in the ocean. How exhilarating to feel the force of the waves, and yet move through them, like a tiny, purposeful speck.

Following the fish, Ishita saw just what she needed rolling in from further out. A big lazy wave was headed her way, and she instinctively began to turn the board around. How did she know what to do? She didn't have any more time to wonder as the wave came closer and closer, and she began to paddle away from it, facing back to the shore. Suddenly it caught her! The wave swelled underneath her and Ishita knew this was the most important part. Her board started to rush as the wave pushed it forwards, and she readied herself to stand up. Bracing her hands, Ishita pushed herself in one jump, up onto her haunches. She looked like a little rabbit, paws up, waiting to unfold her legs. Quick! The board was moving faster and faster. With her heart thumping, Ishita made the final jump to stand on her two feet, on the slippery surface of the board. Arms spread wide for balance, she crossed the face of the wave and travelled along its curved length, which raced towards the shore.

A smile as huge as the crescent of pale sand ahead, broke across Ishita's face. This was like flying! Her knees bent slightly to keep up with the wave's movement, and suddenly she could see the shallowness of the water ahead. This flying came naturally, but how on earth was she meant to get off now?

She felt a little wobble start in her knees as the shore came closer, and suddenly the feeling of flying changed, and she pitched into knee-deep water, head-first. An overwhelming salty flavor filled Ishita's mouth, and her eyes stung. Her body felt the tumble and bruise of being flung so unceremoniously from the surfboard. As she fought to turn her body the right way up, Ishita reminded herself not to panic. She was in the shallows after her wild ocean ride. She simply needed to stand upright and take a gulp of cool, fresh air.

As she turned her cheek towards the sun above, Ishita was surprised not to find the warmth she expected, emerging from the water. Instead, she felt a rustle of paper as she lifted her head. The sea breeze was gone, replaced by the air being swished about by the ceiling fan of her bedroom. At home!

For the second time in just one afternoon, Ishita looked around her in bafflement. What had happened to the beautiful ocean, and the wild wave she had been riding?

Where on earth did all the sand go?

She jumped almost out of her chair as the bedroom door opened, and Ishita's mum peered in, frowning.

"It's hot in here my dear, I've brought you some cool water." Ishita's mother said.

“How is the project going?”

Making a huge effort to hide the recent confusion from her face, Ishita smiled at her mum.

“It’s going great, actually. I know just what I am going to write.”

And as her mother closed the door and Ishita was alone again, she picked up her pen and started to write.

I want to teach others about the feeling of flying on the water.

Ishita Malaviya is India’s first professional female surfer. She has been surfing for almost a decade. Ishita was born in Mumbai, and graduated from journalism at Manipal University. She began surfing in 2007 during her first year of university, when she met a German exchange student looking for some surf. She was part of the first Summer Swell Challenge, a surfing event held in 2012 in Pondicherry, India.

At the age of 22, Ishita and her partner Tushar founded the Shaka Surf Club and moved permanently to Manipal, Karnataka. The pair also run a surf camp called Camp Namaloha. Ishita dedicates her time to teaching people about swimming, surfing and water safety. She is also a crusader for her local coastal ecosystems, as well as the burgeoning surf scene of India.