

Chapter 7

All that silence said

I smelt vinegar, and thought I was at home. My father always brought us back fish and chips for supper on Fridays and he loved to soak his in vinegar – the whole house would stink of it all evening. I opened my eyes. It was dark enough to be evening, but I was not at home. I was in a cave, but not my cave. I could smell smoke too.

I was lying on a sleeping mat covered in a sheet up to my chin. I tried to sit up to look about me, but I could not move. I tried to turn my neck. I couldn't. I could move nothing except my eyes. I could feel though. My skin, my whole body throbbed with searing pain, as if I had been scalded all over. I tried to call out, but could barely manage a whisper. Then I remembered the jellyfish. I remembered it all.

The old man was bending over me, his hand soothing on my forehead. 'You better now,' he said. 'My name Kensuke. You better now.' I

wanted to ask after Stella. She answered for herself by sticking her cold nose into my ear.

I do not know for how many days I lay there, drifting in and out of sleep, only that whenever I woke Kensuke was always there sitting beside me. He rarely spoke and I could not speak, but the silence between us said more than any words. My erstwhile enemy, my captor, had become my saviour. He would lift me to pour fruit juice or warm soup down my throat. He would sponge me down with cooling water, and when the pain was so bad that I cried out, he would hold me and

sing me softly back to sleep. It was strange. When he sang to me it was like an echo from the past, of my father's voice perhaps – I didn't know. Slowly the pain left me. Tenderly he nursed me back to life. The day my fingers first moved was the very first time I ever saw him smile.

When at last I was able to turn my neck I would watch him as he came and went, as he busied himself about the cave. Stella would often come and lie beside me, her eyes following him too.

Every day now I was able to see more of where I was. In comparison with my cave down by the

beach, this place was vast. Apart from the roof of vaulted rock above, you would scarcely have known it was a cave. There was nothing rudimentary about it at all. It looked more like an open plan house than a cave – kitchen, sitting-room, studio, bedroom, all in one space.

He cooked over a small fire which smoked continuously at the back of the cave, the smoke rising through a small cleft high in the rocks above – a possible reason, I thought, why there were no mosquitoes to bother me. There always seemed to be something hanging from a wooden

tripod over the fire, either a blackened pot or what looked like and smelled like long strips of smoked fish.

I could see the dark gleam of metal pots and pans lined up on a nearby wooden shelf. There were other shelves too lined with tins and jars, dozens of them of all sizes and shapes, and hanging beneath them innumerable bunches of dried herbs and flowers. These he would often be mixing or pounding, but I wasn't sure what for. Sometimes he would bring them over to me so that I could smell them.

The cave house was sparsely furnished. To one side of the cave mouth stood a low wooden table, barely a foot off the ground. Here he kept his paint-brushes, always neatly laid out, and several more jars and bottles, and saucers, too.

Kensuke lived and worked almost entirely near the mouth of the cave house where there was daylight. At nights he would roll out his sleeping mat across the cave from me, up against the far wall. I would wake in the early mornings sometimes and just watch him sleeping. He always lay on his back wrapped in his sheet and never moved a

muscle.

Kensuke would spend many hours of every day kneeling at the table and painting. He painted on large shells but, much to my disappointment, he never showed me what he had done. Indeed, he rarely seemed pleased with his work, for just as soon as he had finished, he would usually wash off what he had done and start again.

On the far side of the cave mouth was a long work bench and, hanging up above it, an array of tools – saws, hammers, chisels, all sorts. And beyond the work bench were three large wooden

chests in which he would frequently rummage around for a shell, perhaps, or a clean sheet. We had clean sheets every night.

Inside the cave he wore a wraparound dressing gown (a kimono, as I later knew it to be). He kept the cave house immaculately clean, sweeping it down once a day at least. There was a large bowl of water just inside the cave mouth. Every time he came in he would wash his feet and dry them before stepping inside.

The floor was entirely covered with mats made of woven rushes, like our sleeping mats. And ev-

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erywhere, all around the cave, to head height and above, the walls were lined with bamboo. It was simple, but it was a home. There was no clutter. Everything had its place and its purpose.

As I got better, Kensuke would go off, and leave me on my own more and more but, thankfully, never for too long. He'd return later, very often singing, with fish, perhaps fruit, coconuts or herbs, which he'd bring over to show me proudly. The orang-utans would sometimes come with him, but only as far as the cave mouth. They'd peer in at me, and at Stella, who always kept her

distance from them. Only the young ones ever tried to venture in, and then Kensuke only had to clap at them and they'd soon go scooting off.

During those early days in the cave house I so much wished we could talk. There were a thousand mysteries, a thousand things I wanted to know. But it still hurt me to talk, and besides I felt he was quite happy with our silence, that he preferred it somehow. He seemed a very private person, and content to be that way.

Then one day, after hours of kneeling hunched over one of his paintings, he came over and gave

it to me. It was a picture of a tree, a tree in blossom. His smile said everything. 'For you. Japan tree,' he said. 'I, Japanese person.' After that Kensuke showed me all the paintings he did, even the ones he later washed off. They were all in black and white wash, of orang-utans, gibbons, butterflies, dolphins and birds, and fruit. Only very occasionally did he keep one, storing it away carefully in one of his chests. He did keep several of the tree paintings, I noticed, always of a tree in blossom, a 'Japan tree', as he called it, and I could see he took particular joy in showing me these. It

was clear he was allowing me to share something very dear to him. I felt honoured by that.

In the dying light of each day he would sit beside me and watch over me, the last of the evening sun on his face. I felt he was healing me with his eyes. At night, I thought often of my mother and my father. I so much wanted to see them again, to let them know I was still alive. But, strangely, I no longer missed them.

In time I found my voice again. The paralysis gradually lost its grip on me and my strength flowed back. Now I could go out with Kensuke,

whenever he invited me, and he often did. To begin with, I would squat on the beach with Stella and watch him spear-fishing in the shallows. So still he stood, and his strike was lightning fast. Then one day he made me my own spear. I was to fish with him. He taught me where the bigger fish were, where the octopus hid under the rocks, how to stand still as a heron and wait, spear poised just above the water, my shadow falling behind me so that the fish were not frightened away. I tell you, spearing a fish for the first time was like scoring a winning goal for

the Mudlarks back home – just about the best feeling in the world.

Kensuke seemed to know every tree in the forest, where all the fruit grew, what was ripe and what was not, what was worth climbing for. He climbed impossible trees nimbly, foot-sure and fearless. Nothing in the forest alarmed him, not the howling gibbons swinging above his head to drive him off their fruit, not the bees that swarmed about him when he carried down their comb from a hollow high in a tree (he used the honey for sugaring and bottling fruit). And

always his family of orang-utans came along, shadowing us through the forest, patrolling the tracks ahead, scampering along behind. All Kensuke had to do was sing and they'd come. They seemed almost hypnotised by the sound of his voice. They were intrigued by me and by Stella, but they were nervous and we were nervous, and for the time being we kept our distance from one another.

One evening, quite unexpectedly, as I was watching Kensuke at his fishing, one of the young ones clambered on to my lap and began

to examine my nose with his finger, and then he investigated my ear. He pulled it rather harder than I liked, but I didn't yelp. After that the rest followed suit, using me as if I were a climbing-frame. Even the older ones, the bigger ones, would reach out and touch me from time to time, but thankfully they were always more reserved, more circumspect. But Stella still kept a certain distance from them, and they from her.

In all this time – I suppose I must have been some months on the island by now – Kensuke had said very little. The little English he did speak

was clearly hard for him. When words were used between us they proved to be of little help in our understanding of each other. So we resorted for the most part to smiles and nods, to signing and pointing. Sometimes we even drew pictures in the sand to explain ourselves. It was just about enough to get along. But there was so much that I was burning to find out. How had he come to be here all alone on the island? How long had he been here? And how had he come by all those pots and pans and tools, and the knife he always wore in his belt? How come one of his wooden

chests was stuffed with sheets? Where had they come from? Where had he come from? And why was he being so kind to me now, so considerate, when he had clearly resented me so much before? But whenever I ventured any such question, he would simply shake his head and turn away from me like a deaf man ashamed of his affliction. I was never quite sure whether he really did not understand, or just did not *want* to understand. Either way I could see it made him uncomfortable, so I probed no more. Questions, it seemed, were an intrusion. I resigned myself to waiting.

Our life together was always busy, and regular as clockwork. Up at dawn and down the track a little way to bathe in the stream where it tumbled cold and fresh out of the hillside into a great cauldron of smooth rocks. We would wash our sheets and clothes here, too (he'd made me my own kimono by now), slapping and pounding them on the rocks, before hanging them out to dry on the branch of a nearby tree. Breakfast was a thick pulpy fruit juice which seemed different every day, and bananas or coconut. I never tired of bananas, but very soon became sick of co-

conut. The mornings were spent either fishing in the shallows or fruit gathering in the forest. Sometimes, after a storm, we scoured the beach for more of his painting shells – only the biggest and flattest would do – or for flotsam to join the stack of wood at the back of the cave. There were two stacks, one clearly for firewood, the other, I supposed, reserved for his woodwork. Then it was home to the cave house for a lunch of raw fish (always delicious) and usually breadfruit (always bland and difficult to swallow). A short nap after lunch for both of us and then he would

settle down at his table to paint. As I watched I became so engrossed that the failing light of evening always came too soon for me. We would cook a fish soup over the fire. Everything went in, heads and tails, a dozen different herbs – Kensuke wasted nothing – and there were always red bananas afterwards, all I could eat. I never went hungry. When supper was over we would sit together at the mouth of the cave and watch the last of the sun drop into the sea. Then, without a word, he'd stand up. We would bow solemnly to one another, and he would unroll his sleeping

mat and leave me to mine.

To see Kensuke at his work was always a wonder to me – he was so intent, so concentrated in everything he did. But watching him paint was best of all. To begin with he would only let me kneel beside him and watch. I could sense that in this, too, he liked his privacy, that he did not want to be disturbed. On the table in front of him he put out three saucers: one saucer of octopus ink (for Kensuke, octopuses were not just for eating), one saucer of water and another for mixing. He always held his brush very upright and very

steady in his hand, fingers down one side, thumb on the other. He would kneel bent over his work, his beard almost touching the shell he was painting – I think perhaps he was a little short-sighted. I would watch him for hours on end, marvelling at the delicacy of his work, at the sureness of his touch.

Then one rainy afternoon – and when it rained, how it rained – I found he'd set out a shell for me, my own three saucers and my own paintbrush. He took such a delight in teaching me, in my every clumsy attempt. I remember early on I

tried to paint the jellyfish that had attacked me. He laughed out loud at that, but not in a mocking way, rather in recognition, in memory, of what had brought us together. I had always liked to draw, but from Kensuke I learned to love it, that to draw or paint I first had to observe well, then set out the form of the picture in my head and send it down my arm through the tip of the brush and on to the shell. He taught me all this entirely without speaking. He simply showed me.

The evidence that he was a considerable craftsman was all around me. The cave house must

have been entirely furnished by him, fashioned mostly from flotsam: the chests, the workbench itself, the shelves, the table. He must have made the rush matting, the bamboo panelling, everything. And on close examination I could see it was all perfectly finished, no nails, no screws, just neat dowelling. He had used some form of glue where necessary, and sometimes twine as well. Ropes for tree-climbing, fishing-spears, fishing-nets and fishing-rods were stacked in one corner (though I'd never yet seen him use the rods). He had to have made them all.

He'd made his own paint-brushes as well, and I was soon to find out how. Kensuke had a favourite orang-utan, a large female he called Tomodachi, who would often come and sit by him to be groomed. Kensuke was grooming her one day just outside the mouth of the cave house, the other orang-utans looking on, when I saw him quite deliberately pluck out the longest and darkest hairs from her back. He held them up to show me, grinning conspiratorially. At the time I didn't really understand what he was up to. Later, I watched him at his work bench trimming

the hairs with his knife, dipping them in the sap I'd seen him tap from a tree that same morning, cutting out a short length of hollow bamboo and then filling it with Tomodachi's hair. A day later the glue had hardened and he had a paint-brush. Kensuke seemed to have found ways to satisfy his every need.

We were silent at our painting one day, the rain thundering down on the forest below, when he stopped, put down his paint-brush, and said very slowly, in a very measured way, as if he'd thought about how to say it for a long time, 'I teach you

painting, Mica.' (This was the first time he had ever called me by my name.) 'You teach me speak English. I want speak English. You teach me.'

It was the beginning of an English lesson that was to last for months. Every day, dawn to dusk, I translated the world around him into English. We did what we had always done, but now I talked all the while and he would echo every word, every phrase he wanted to. His brow would furrow with the effort of it.

It was as if by saying each word he simply swallowed it into his brain. Once told, once prac-

tised, he would rarely forget, and if he did, he was always very annoyed with himself. Sometimes as I enunciated a new word, I noticed that his eyes would light up. He would be nodding and smiling almost as if he recognised the word, as if he was greeting an old friend. He would repeat it again and again, savouring the sound of it before committing it to memory for good. And, of course, the more words he knew, the more he tried to experiment with them. Single words became clipped phrases, became entire sentences. His pronunciation, though, never did improve,

however hard he tried. Michael was always Mica – sometimes Micasan. Now at last we could talk more easily to one another, the long silence in which our friendship had been forged was over. It had never been a barrier between us, but it had been limiting.

We were sitting by the cave mouth one sunset, when he said, 'You see now if I understand, Micasan. You tell me story, story of you, where you live, why you come here my island. From baby to now. I listen.'

So I did. I told him about home, about my

mother and father, about the brick factory closing, about football with Eddie and the Mudlarks, about the *Peggy Sue* and our voyage round the world, about football in Brazil and lions in Africa and spiders in Australia, about my mother being ill, about the night I fell overboard.

'Very good. I understand. Very good,' he said when I had finished. 'So, football you like. When I little, I play football too. Very happy time, long ago now, in Japan, in my home.' He sat in silence for some moments. 'You very long way from home, Micasan. You very sad sometimes. I see.'

So, I make you happy. Tomorrow we go fishing and maybe I tell you my story too. My story your story, maybe same story now.' The sun had suddenly gone. We stood up and bowed to one another. '*Oyasumi masai*', he said.

'Good night,' I said. It was the only time of the day he ever spoke Japanese, though he did sing in Japanese – mostly. I had taught him 'Ten Green Bottles', which always made him laugh when he sang it. I loved his laugh. It was never loud, more a prolonged chuckle; but it always warmed my heart.

The next morning, he picked up two of his fishing-rods and a net, and led the way into the forest. 'Today we catch big fish, Mica, not small fish,' he announced. He was taking us to the part of the island where I had been washed up all those months before, but rarely had cause to visit since, because there was little or no fruit to be found there. We had to beat a difficult path through the forest before joining a cliff path that wound its way down to a hidden sandy bay. As we emerged from the forest on to the beach, Stella ran off, bounding at once into the shallows,

barking at me to play with her.

Suddenly, Kensuke caught me by the arm. 'You look, Micasan. What you see?' His eyes were full of mischief. I didn't know what I was supposed to be looking for. 'Nothing here, yes? I very clever fellow. You watch. I show you.' He made for the end of the beach, and I followed. Once there he began to pull and tug at the undergrowth. To my surprise it simply came away in his hands. I saw first what looked like a log lying in the sand but then, as he dragged away more branches, I saw it was part of a boat, an outrigger, a long wide

dugout with a frame of outriggers on either side. It was covered in canvas which he folded back very slowly, chuckling to himself as he did so.

And there lying in the bottom of the boat beside a long oar was my football. He reached in and tossed it to me. It was softer now and much of the white leather was cracked and discoloured, but in places I could still just make out Eddie's name.