

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 paintbrushes, 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 everywhere, 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, footsure 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 coconut. 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 paint-brush. 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 practised, 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.

Chapter 8

Everyone dead in Nagasaki

I was overjoyed. I had found a part of me that I thought I had lost for ever. "Now," Kensuke said, beaming at me. "Now you happy person, Micasan. I happy too. We go fishing. I tell you very soon where I find this ball. Very soon I tell you everything. Little fish not so good now. Not so many. We need big fish sometimes from deep sea. We smoke fish. Then we have always plenty fish to eat. You understand?"

The outrigger was a great deal heavier than it looked. I helped Kensuke drag it down the beach and into the sea. "This very good boat," he said, as we lifted Stella in. "This boat never go down. I make myself. Very safe boat." He pushed us off and jumped in. I never ceased to be amazed at his extraordinary agility and strength. He rowed with a single oar, standing in the stern of the boat, more as if he was punting. Very soon we were out beyond the shelter of the cove and into the swell of the open sea.

Clutching my beloved football, and with Stella at my feet, I sat watching him and waiting for him to begin his story. I knew better than to pester him by now. The fishing came first. We baited our lines and settled silently to our fishing, one over each side of the boat. I was bursting to ask him about the football, about how he'd found it, but I dared not, for fear he would clam up and say nothing. It was some time before he began, but when he did it was well worth waiting for.

"Now I tell you everything, Micasan," he said, "like I promise. I am old, but it is not long story. I am born in Japan, in Nagasaki. Very big town, by the sea. I grow up in this town. When I young man I study medicine in Tokyo. Soon I am Doctor, Doctor Kensuke Ogawa. I very proud person. I look after many mothers, many babies too. I first person many babies see in world. Then I go to London. I do studies in London, Guy's Hospital. You know this place?" I shook my head. "Of course I learn speak little English there. Afterwards I came back to Nagasaki. I have beautiful wife, Kimi. Then I have little son too, Michiya. I very happy person in those days. But soon war comes. All Japanese men are soldiers now, sailors maybe. I go to navy. I doctor on big warship."

A fish tugged on his line and took his bait, but not the hook. He went on as he rebaited his hook. "This war very long time ago now." I did know something of a war with Japan - I had seen it on films - but I knew very little about it. He shook his head. "Many die in this war. This war very terrible time. Many ships go down. Japanese army win many battles. Japanese navy win many battles. All Japanese very happy people. Like football, when you win you happy. When you

lose, you sad. I go home often, I see my Kimi and my little Michiya in Nagasaki. He grow fast. Already big boy. We all very happy family."

"But war go on long time. Many Americans come, many ships, many planes, many bombs. Now war is not so good for Japan. We fight, but now we lose. Very bad time. We are in big sea battle. American planes come. My ship is bombed. There is fire and smoke. Black smoke. Many men burned. Many men dead. Many jump off ship into sea. But I stay. I am doctor, I stay with my patients. Planes come again. Many more bombs. I think I am dead person this time for sure. But I am not. I look all round ship. All patients dead. All sailors dead. I am only person alive on ship, but engine is still going. Ship moving on her own. She go now where she want to go. I cannot turn wheel. I can do nothing. But I listen to radio. Americans say on radio, big bomb fall on Nagasaki, atomic bomb. Many dead. I very sad person. I think Kimi dead, Michiya dead. My mother live there too, all my family. I think they all dead.

"Soon radio say Japan surrender. I so sad I want to die." He fished in silence for a while before he began again. "Soon engine stop, but ship not go down. Big wind come, big storm. I think I die for sure now. But sea take ship and bring me here on this island. Ship come on to beach, and still I am not dead."

"Very soon I find food. I find water also. I live like beggar man for long while. Inside I feel bad person. I think, all my friends dead, all my family dead, and I alive. I not want to live. But soon I meet orang-utans. They very kind to me. This very beautiful, very peaceful place. No war here, no bad people. I say to myself, Kensuke, you very lucky person to be alive. Maybe you stay here.

"I take many things from ship, I take food, I take clothes, sheets. I take pots. I take bottles. I take knife. I take binoculars. I take medicine. I find many things, many tools also. I take everything I find. When Kensuke finish, not much left on ship, I tell you. I find cave. I hide all things in cave. Soon terrible storm come, and ship go on rocks. Very soon she go down.

"One day American soldiers come. I hide. I not want to surrender, not honourable thing to do. I very afraid too. I hide in forest with orang-utans. Americans make fire on beach. They laugh in the night. I listen. I hear them. They say everyone dead in Nagasaki. They very happy about this. They laugh. I very sure now I stay on this island. Why go home? Soon Americans, they go away. My ship under water by now. They not find it. My ship still here. Under sand now, part of island now."

The rusting hull I had found that first day on the island! So much was beginning to make sense to me now. A fish took my line suddenly, almost jerking the rod from my grasp. Kensuke leaned across to help me. It took many minutes of heaving to bring the fish to the surface, but between us we managed to haul it in. We sat back exhausted as it floundered at the bottom of the boat at our

feet. It was massive, bigger even than the biggest fish I'd ever seen, the pike my father had caught in the reservoir back home. Kensuke dispatched it quickly, a sharp blow to the back of the neck with the handle of his knife. "Good fish. Very good fish. You very clever fisherman person, Mica. We good together. Maybe we catch more now."

But it was many hours before we caught another, though it did not seem like it. Kensuke told me of his life alone on the island, how he had learned to survive, to live off the land. He learned he said mostly by watching what the orang-utans ate, and what they did not eat. He learned to climb as they did. He learned to understand their language, to heed their warning signals - the darting eyes, the nervous scratching. Slowly he built a bond of trust and became one of them.

By the time we made for home that evening with three huge fish in the bottom of the boat - tuna I think they were - his story was almost finished. He talked on as he rowed. "After Americans, no more men come to my island. I alone here many years. I not forget Kimi. I not forget Michiya. But I live. Then year ago, maybe, they come. Very bad people, killer men. They have guns. They hunt. They shoot. I sing to my orang-utans. They come to me when I sing. They are very frightened. They come all in my cave. We hide. Killer men not find us. But in forest they shoot - you told me name - gibbon monkeys. They shoot mothers. They take babies. Why must they do this? I very angry. I think, all people killer people. I hate all people, I think. I not want see people again.

"Then one day I need big fish to smoke, I go fishing in this boat. Wind blow wrong way. I go far out. Sea pull me away very strong. I try to come back my island. It is no good. I am old. Arms are not strong. When night come I am still far away. I very frightened. I sing. It make me brave. I hear shout. I see light. I think I dream. Then I hear another song in sea, in dark. I come quick as I can. I find you and Stella and ball. You very nearly dead person, Micasan. Stella very nearly dead dog." So it had been Kensuke who had pulled me from the sea, Kensuke who had saved me. It had simply never occurred to me.

"In morning," he went on, "sea bring us again near my island. I very glad you not dead. But I very angry person too. I want to be alone. I not want to see people. For me all people killer people. I not want you on my island. I carry you. I leave you on beach. I leave you food. I leave you water so you not die. But you make fire. I want people stay away. I not want people find me here on my island. Maybe they come. Maybe they shoot orang-utan, shoot gibbon monkey. Maybe they find me, take me away too. I very angry person, I put out fire. I not want speak to you. I not want see you. I draw line in sand.

"Big storm come, biggest I ever see. After storm, sea full of white jellyfish. I know these jellyfish. Very bad. They touch you, you very dead. I know this. I say, do not swim, very dangerous. Very soon I see you make big fire on top of hill. I think you very wicked person. I very angry now, and you very angry too. You

swim in sea. Jellyfish sting. I think for sure you dead person. But you very strong. You live. I bring you into cave. I have vinegar. I make from berries. Vinegar kill poison. You live, Mica, but for long time you very sick boy. You strong again, and we friends now. We very good friends."

So that was it, the whole story. He stopped rowing for a while, and smiled down at me. "You are like son to me now. We happy people. We paint. We fish. We happy. We stay together. You my family now, Micasan. Yes?"

"Yes," I said. I meant it and felt it too.

He let me take the oar, and showed me how to row his way, standing up, feet planted well apart. It wasn't as easy as he made it look. Clearly he trusted me to get us back, for he sat back in the bow of the outrigger to rest and fell asleep almost at once, his mouth open, his face sunken. He always looked even older when he slept. As I watched him I tried to picture his face as it must have been when he first came to the island all those years ago, over forty years. I owed him so very much. He had saved my life twice, fed me and befriended me. He was right. We were happy, and I was his family.

But I had another family too. I thought of the last time I had been out in a boat, of my mother and my father and how they must be grieving for me every day, every night. By now they must surely believe I was drowned, that there was no chance I could be alive. But I wasn't drowned. I was alive. Somehow I had to let them know it. As I struggled to bring the outrigger back to the island that afternoon, I was filled with a sudden powerful longing to see them again, to be with them. I could steal the boat I thought. I could row away, I could light a fire again. But I knew even as I thought it that I could not do it. How could I ever leave Kensuke now, after all he had done for me? How could I betray his trust? I tried to put the whole idea out of my mind, and I really believe I would have too. But the very next morning, I found the plastic Coke bottle washed up on the beach, and after that the idea of escape came back and haunted me day and night, and would not leave me be.

For some days, I kept the Coke bottle buried under the sand, whilst I wrestled with my conscience or, rather, justified what I wanted to do. It wouldn't really be a betrayal, not as such, I told myself. Even if the bottle was found no one would know where to come to, they'd just know I was alive. I made up my mind I would do it, and do it as soon as I could.

Kensuke had gone off octopus fishing. I had stayed behind to finish a shell painting - or so I had told him. I found an old sheet at the bottom of one of his chests and tore away a small corner of it. Then I knelt down at the table, stretched it out and painted my message on it in octopus ink:

To: The *Peggy Sue*, Fareham, England.

Dear Mum and Dad,

I am alive. I am well. I live on an island. I do not know where. Come and find me.

Love, Michael

I waited until it was dry, then I rolled it up, dug my Coke bottle out of the sand, slipped in my message and screwed the bottle up tight. I made quite sure Kensuke was still intent on his fishing, and set off. I ran the entire length of the island keeping always to the forest, so that there was no chance Kensuke could see where I was going or what I was up to. The gibbons howled their accusations at me all the way, the entire forest cackling and screeching its condemnation. I just hoped Stella would not bark back at them, would not betray where I was. Fortunately she didn't.

At last I reached the rocks under Watch Hill. I leaped from rock to rock until I was standing right at the very end of the island, the waves washing over my feet. I looked round me. Stella was the only witness. I hurled the bottle as far out to sea as I possibly could. Then I stood and watched it as it bobbed away and out to sea. It was on its way.

I didn't touch my fish soup that night. Kensuke thought I was ill. I could hardly talk to him. I couldn't look him in the eye. I lay all night in deep torment, racked by my guilt, yet at the same time still hoping against hope that my bottle would be picked up.

Kensuke and I were at our painting the next afternoon when Stella came padding into the cave. She had the Coke bottle in her mouth. She dropped it and looked up at me, panting and pleased with herself.

Kensuke laughed and reached down to pick it up. I think he was about to hand it to me when he noticed there was something inside it. By the way he looked at me I was quite sure he knew at once what it was.