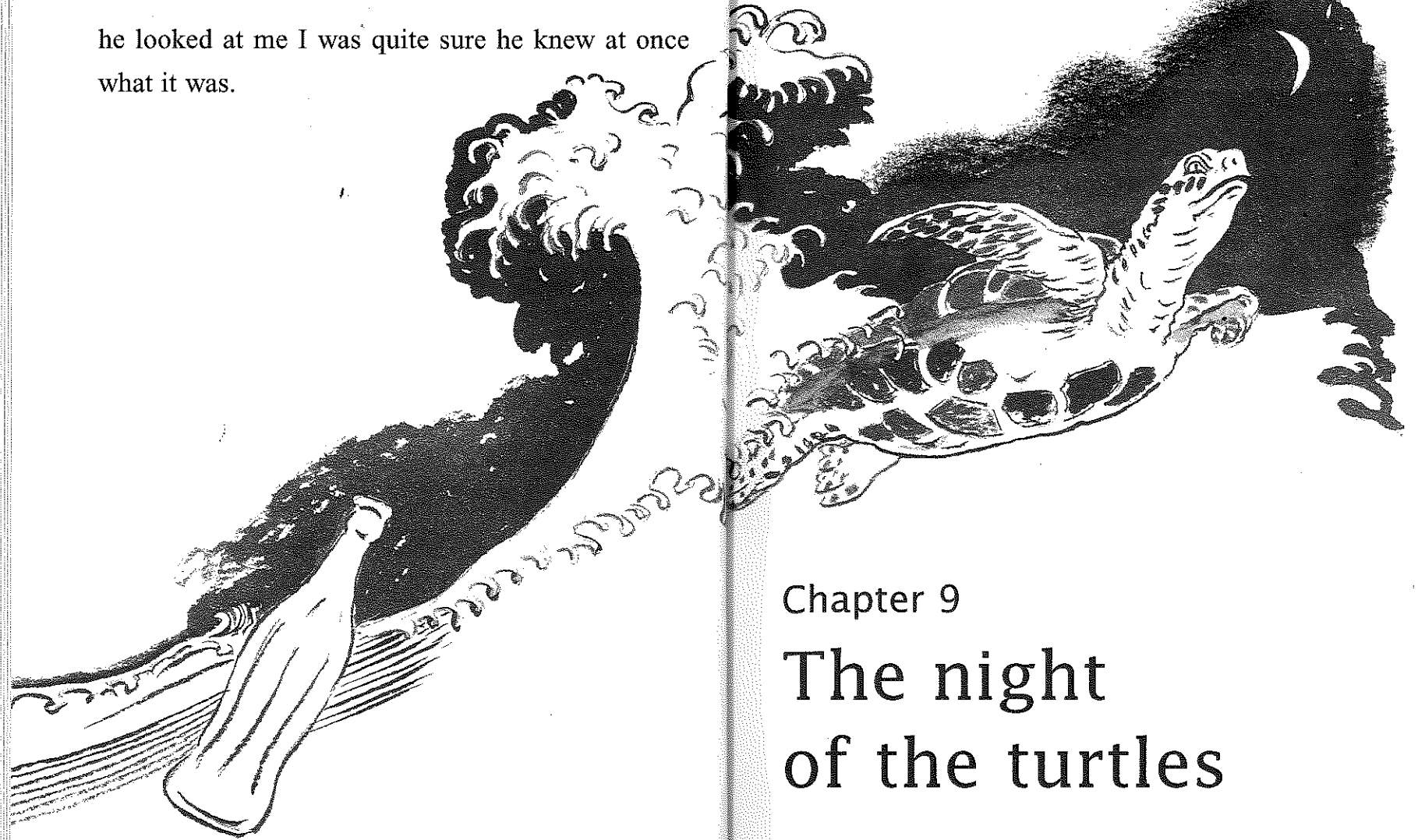


he looked at me I was quite sure he knew at once
what it was.



Chapter 9

The night of the turtles

There fell between us a long and aching silence. Kensuke never once reproached me for what I had done. He was not angry or sullen at me. But I knew I had hurt him to the soul. It wasn't that we didn't speak

– we did – but we no longer talked to one another as we had before. We lived each of us in our separate cocoons, quite civil, always polite, but not together any more. He had closed in on himself and wrapped himself in his thoughts. The warmth had gone from his eyes, the laughter in the cave house was silenced. He never said so – he did not need to – but I knew that now he would prefer to paint alone, to fish alone, to be alone.

So, day after day, I wandered the island with Stella, hoping when I returned that he might have forgiven me, that we could be friends again. But always he kept that distance between us. I grieved for my lost friendship. I remember I went often now to the other end of the island, to Watch Hill, and sat there and sat there, no longer looking out for ships, but rehearsing aloud my explanation. But no matter how much I rehearsed it, how I reasoned it, I could never convince even myself that what I had done was anything other than treachery. In the end, as it turned out, it was Kensuke who explained it to me.

We had just gone to bed one night when Tomodachi came to the mouth of the cave and squatted there. She had done this once or twice lately, stayed for

just a few minutes, peered in at us and gone off again. Kensuke spoke up in the darkness. ‘She lose Kikanbo again,’ he said. ‘She always lose her baby. Kikanbo very wicked baby.’ He run off a lot. He make Tomodachi very sad mother.’ He clapped his hands at her, shooping her away. ‘Kikanbo not here, Tomodachi. Not here.’ But Tomodachi stayed, I think for comfort more than anything else. I had noticed before with the orangutans, how they would often come to Kensuke when they were upset or frightened, just to be near him. After a while Tomodachi slunk off into the night and left us alone again, with the din of the forest and the silence between us.

‘I think many thoughts,’ Kensuke said suddenly, out of the silence. ‘You are sleeping, Micasan?’ He had not called me by my name for weeks, ever since the Coke bottle incident.

‘No,’ I said.

‘Very good. I got lot to say. You listen. I talk. I think many thoughts. When I think of Tomodachi, I think of your mother. Your mother, she too lose her baby. She lose you. That very sad thing for her. Maybe she come looking, and she not find you. You not there

when she come. She think you dead for ever. But she see you in her mind. Now as I speak maybe she see you in her mind. You always there. I know. I have son too. I have Michiya. He always in my head. Like Kimi. They dead for sure, but they in my head. They in my head forever.'

For a long while he did not say another word. I thought he had gone to sleep. Then he spoke again. 'I tell you everything I think, Micasan. It best way. I stay on this island because I want stay on this island. I do not want go home Japan. Different thing for you. You want go back home across the sea, and that right thing, good thing for you. But not good for me. For me, very sad thing. Many years I live alone here. I happy here. Then you come. I hate you when you first come. But after little while you are like son to me. I think maybe I like father to you, you like son to me. I very sad now when you go. I like talk with you. I like listen. I like sound when you speak. I want you stay here on this island. You understand?'

'I think so,' I said.

'But you do one very bad thing. We friends, but you not tell me what you feel. You not say what you do.

That not honourable thing to do. When I find bottle, when I read words, I very sad person indeed. But after little while I understand. I think maybe you want stay here with me, and you want also go home. So when you find bottle, you write message: You do not say what you do because you know it make me sad. I right, yes?'

'Yes,' I said.

'You very young person, Micasan. You paint good picture, very good picture, like Hokusai. You have long life waiting for you. You cannot live whole life on this island with old man who die one day. So, thinking like this, I change my mind. You know what we do tomorrow?' He didn't wait for me to answer. 'We start build new fire, big fire. We ready then for when we see ship. Then you go home. And also we do another thing. We play football, you, me. What you say?'

'All right.' It was all I could say. He had in just those few moments lifted the whole weight of guilt off my shoulders and given me such happiness, such new hope.

'Very good. Very good. You sleep now. We do lot of work tomorrow, lot of football also.'

The next morning we began building a beacon on the hilltop above the cave house. We used most of the pile of firewood we had collected for the cooking fire and stored in the dry at the back of the cave – he even sacrificed some of his best pieces of driftwood. It wasn't far to carry it, so before long we had enough to make a sizeable fire. Kensuke said it would do for the moment, that we could find more from the forest, more and more each day as we wanted. 'We soon have fire so big they see in Japan maybe,' he laughed. 'We have lunch now, then sleep, then football. Yes?'

Later that afternoon we set up sticks in the sand for a goal and took turns at shooting at each other. The ball was very soft, and so it didn't bounce any better on the sand than it had back on the mud of the recreation ground back home, but it didn't matter. Kensuke may have carried a stick, he may have been as old as the hills, but he could kick a football well enough to put it past me, and often too.

What a time we had. Neither of us wanted it to end. With a crowd of bemused orang-utans looking on, with Stella interfering and chasing after every goal scored, we were at it till darkness drove us at last back

up the hill. We were both too tired to do more than have a long drink of water, eat a banana or two and go to our sleeping mats.

It was after our reconciliation that I came to know Kensuke better than I ever had before. His English became more and more fluent, and he clearly loved to speak it now. For some reason he was always more happy to talk while we were out fishing in his outrigger. We did not go out that often, only when the fishing was so poor in the shallows that we needed to catch big fish for smoking and keeping.

Once at sea, the stories simply flowed. He talked a great deal of his childhood in Japan, of his twin sister and how the worst thing he'd ever done was to push her out of the tree in their garden, how she'd broken her arm, how when he painted that cherry tree it always reminded him of her. But she too had been in Nagasaki when the bomb fell. I remember he even told me the address of where he lived when he was studying in London – No. 22 Clanricarde Gardens, I have never forgotten it. Once he had gone to watch Chelsea playing football and afterwards he'd sat astride a lion in Trafalgar Square and been

ticked off by a policeman.

But it was Kimi and Michiya he talked of most, about how he wished he could have seen Michiya grow up. Michiya, he said, would have been nearly fifty by now if the bomb hadn't fallen on Nagasaki, and Kimi would be exactly the same age as he was, seventy-five. I rarely interrupted him when he was like this, but once to comfort him I did say, 'Bombs don't kill everyone. They could still be alive. You never know. You could find out. You could go home.' He looked at me then as if it was the first time such a possibility had ever occurred to him in all those years. 'Why not?' I went on. 'When we see a ship and we light the fire and they come and fetch me, you could come too. You could go back to Japan. You don't have to stay here.'

He thought about it for some time, but then shook his head. 'No,' he said. 'They are dead. That bomb was very big bomb, very terrible bomb. Americans say Nagasaki is destroyed, every house. I hear them. My family dead for sure. I stay here. I safe here. I stay on my island.'

Day after day we piled more and more wood on the beacon. It was massive now, bigger even than the one I

had built on Watch Hill. Every morning now before we went down to the pool to wash, Kensuke would send me up to the top of the hill with his binoculars. I always scanned the horizon both in hope and in trepidation. I longed to see a ship, of course I did. I longed to go home. But at the same time I dreaded what that would mean. I felt so much at home with Kensuke. The thought of leaving him filled me with a terrible sadness. I determined to do all I could to persuade him to come away with me, if and when a ship came.

At every opportunity now I talked to him of the outside world, and the more I talked the more he seemed to become interested. Of course, I never spoke of the wars and famines and disasters. I painted the best picture of the world outside I could. There was so much he didn't know. He marvelled at all I told him, at the microwave in our kitchen, at computers and what they could do, at Concorde flying faster than the speed of sound, at men going to the moon, and satellites. These things took some explaining, I can tell you. Some of it he didn't even believe, not at first.

The time came when he began to quiz me. In particular he would ask about Japan. But I knew very

little about Japan, only that back home in England lots of things, including our microwave, had 'made in Japan' written on them: cars, calculators, my father's stereo, my mother's hair dryer.

'I "made in Japan" person,' he laughed. 'Very old machine, still good, still very strong.'

Try as I did to trawl my memory, after a while I could find nothing more to tell him about Japan, but he would still keep asking. 'You sure there no war in Japan these days?' I was fairly certain there wasn't and said so. 'They build up Nagasaki again after bomb?' I told him they had, and hoped I was right. All I could do was to reassure him as best I could, and then tell him the same few things I did know about over and over again. He seemed to love to hear it, like a child listening to a favourite fairy story.

Once, after I'd finished expounding yet again on the amazing sound quality of my father's brilliant Sony stereo that made the whole house vibrate, he said very quietly, 'Maybe one day before I die I go back to my home. One day I go back to Japan. Maybe.' I wasn't sure he meant it, but it did mean that he was at least considering it, and that gave me some cause for hope.

It wasn't until the night of the turtles though, that I came to believe Kensuke was really serious about it.

I was fast asleep when he woke me. 'You come, Micasan. Very quickly you come. You come,' he said.

'What for?' I asked him, but he was already gone. I ran out after him into the moonlight and caught him up halfway down the track. 'What are we doing? Where are we going? Is it a boat?'

'Very soon you see. Very soon.' Stella stayed at my heels all the way to the beach. She never liked going out in the dark very much. I looked around. There was nothing there. The beach looked completely deserted. The waves lapped listlessly. The moon rode the clouds, and the world felt still about me as if it was holding its breath. I did not see what was happening until Kensuke suddenly fell on his knees in the sand. 'They very small. Sometimes they are not so strong. Sometimes in the morning birds come and eat them.' And then I saw it.

I thought it was a crab at first. It wasn't. It was a minuscule turtle, tinier than a terrapin, clambering out of a hole in the sand and then beetling off down the beach towards the sea. Then another, and another,

and further down the beach dozens of them, hundreds I could see now, maybe thousands, all scuttling across the moonlit sand into the sea. Everywhere the beach was alive with them. Stella was nosing at one, so I warned her off. She yawned and looked innocently up at the moon.

I saw that one of them was on its back at the bottom of the hole, legs kicking frantically. Kensuke reached down, picked it up gently and set it on its feet in the sand. 'You go to sea, little turtle,' he said. 'You live there now. You soon be big fine turtle, and then one day you come back and see me maybe.' He sat back on his haunches to watch him scuttle off. 'You know what they do, Mica. Mother turtles, they lay eggs in this place. Then, one night-time every year, always when moon is high, little turtles are born. Long way to go to sea. Very many die. So always I stay. I help them. I chase birds away, so they not eat baby turtles. Many years from now, when turtles are big, they come back. They lay eggs again. True story, Micasan.'

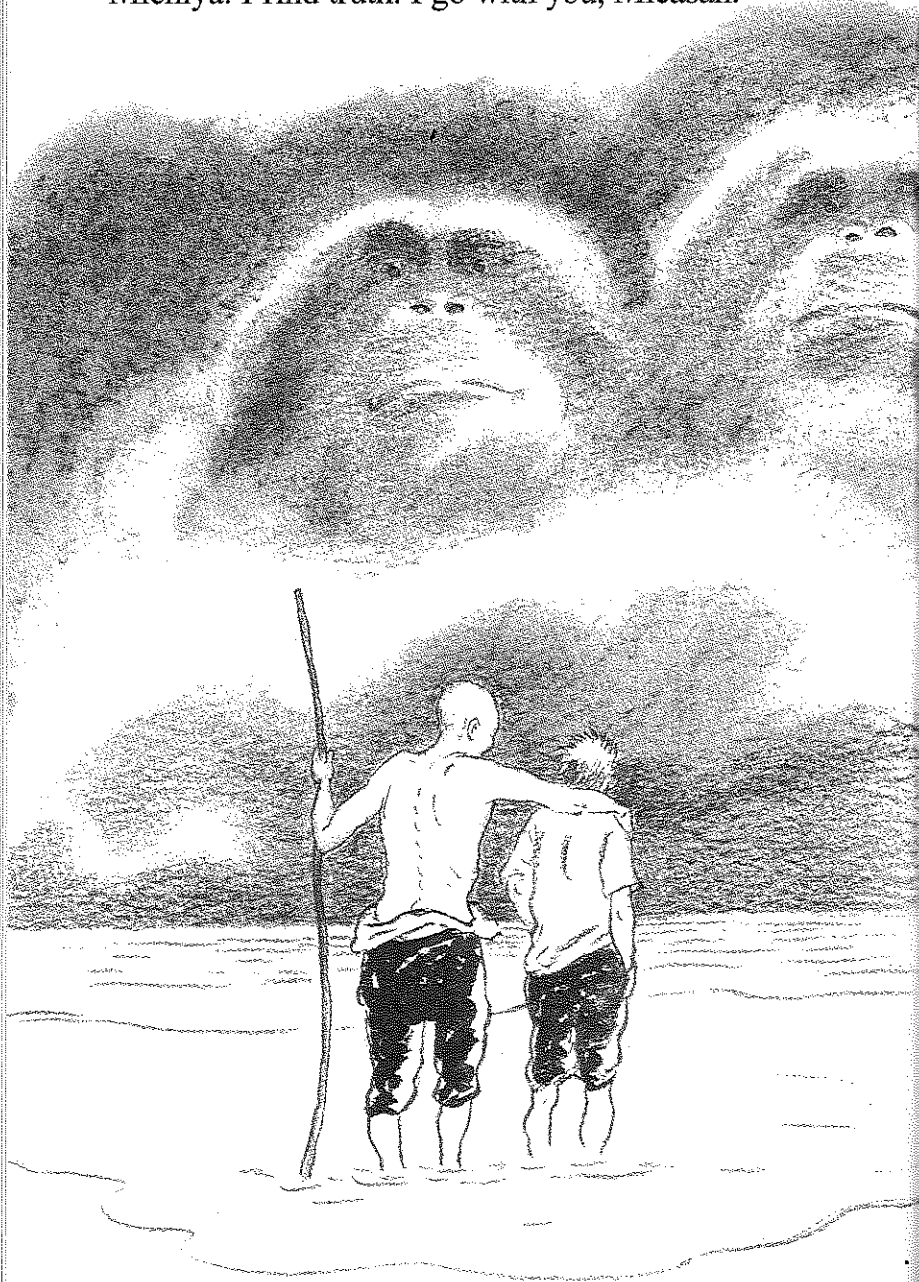
All night long we kept our vigil over the mass birth, as the infant turtles made their run for it. We patrolled together, reaching into every hole we found

to see if there were any left, stuck or stranded. We found several too weak to make the journey, and carried them down into the sea ourselves. The sea seemed to revive them. Away they went, no swimming lessons needed. We turned dozens the right way-up and shepherded them safely into the sea.

When dawn came and the birds came down to scavenge, we were there to drive them off. Stella chased and barked after them, and we ran at them, shrieking, waving, hurling stones. We were not entirely successful, but most of the turtles made it down into the sea. But even here they were still not entirely safe. In spite of all our desperate efforts a few were plucked up out of the water by the birds and carried off.

By noon it was all over. Kensuke was tired as we stood ankle deep in the water watching the very last of them swim away. He put his arm on my shoulder. 'They very small turtles, Micasan, but they very brave. They braver than me. They do not know what they find out there, what happen to them; but they go anyway. Very brave. Maybe they teach me good lesson. I make up my mind. When one day ship come, and we light fire, and they find us, then I go. Like turtles I go. I go with you.'

I go home to Japan. Maybe I find Kimi. Maybe I find Michiya. I find truth. I go with you, Micasan.'



Chapter 10

Killer men come

Shortly after this the rains came and forced us to shelter for days on end inside the cave house. The tracks became torrents, the forest became a swamp. I longed for the howl of the gibbons instead of the roar of the rain