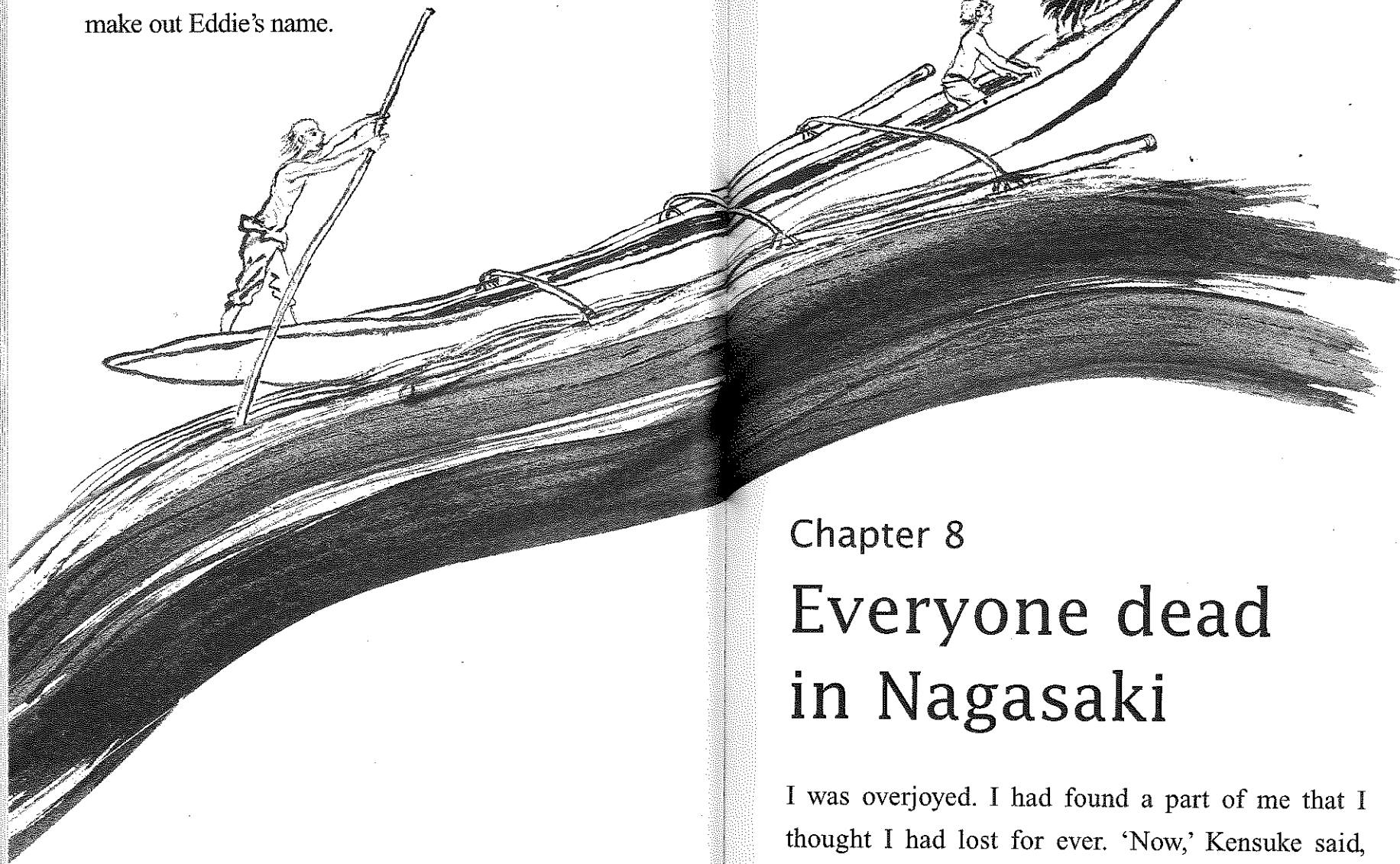


cracked and discoloured, but in places I could still just make out Eddie's name.



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 cave 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.

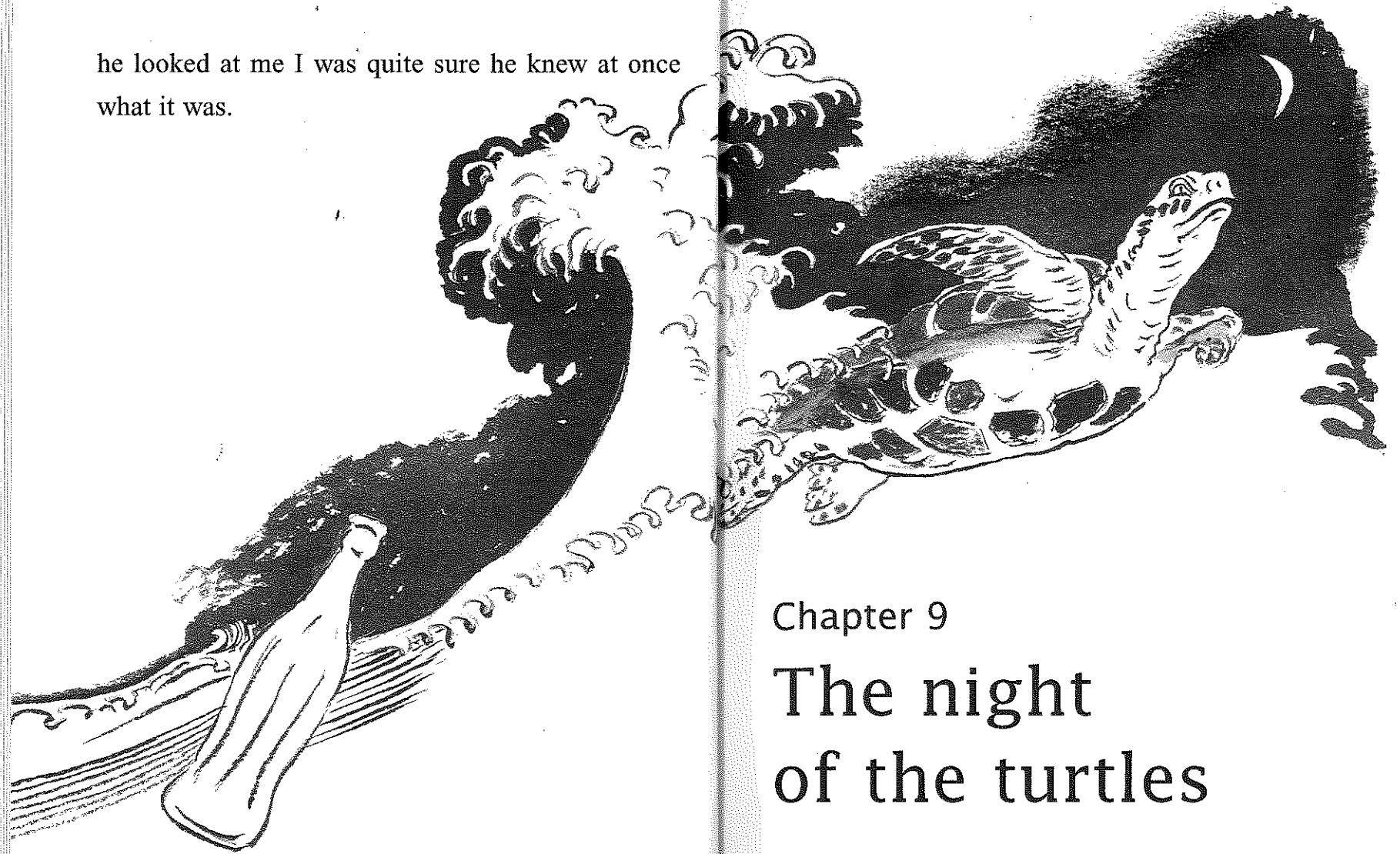
At last I reached the rocks under Watch Hill. I leaped from rock to rock until I was standing right at the very end of the island, the waves washing over my feet. I looked round me. Stella was the only witness. I hurled the bottle as far out to sea as I possibly could. Then I stood and watched it as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



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