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Nation

Terry Practhett

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Extract

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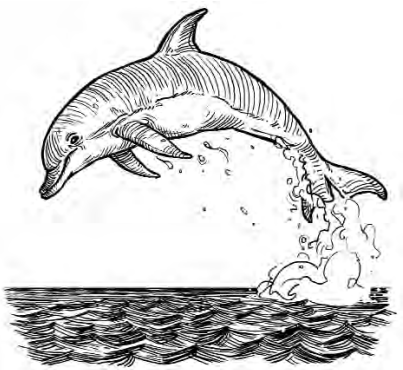
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HOW IMO MADE THE WORLD, IN THE TIME WHEN THINGS WERE OTHERWISE AND THE MOON WAS DIFFERENT

Imo set out one day to catch some fish, but there was no sea. There was nothing but Imo. So he spat in his hands and rubbed them together and made a ball of sea. After that he made some fish, but they were stupid and lazy. So he took the souls of some dolphins, who at least had learned to speak, and he mixed them with clay and rubbed them in his hands and changed their shape and they became people. They were clever but they could not swim all day, so Imo dug some more clay and rubbed it in his hands and baked it in the fire of his fishing camp, and that was how the land was made.

Soon the people filled all the lands and were hungry, so Imo took some of the night and rubbed it in his hands and made Locaha, the god of death.

Still Imo was not satisfied, and he said: I have been like

a child playing in the sand. This is a flawed world. I had no plan. Things are wrong. I will rub it in my hands and make a better one.

But Locaha said: The mud is set. People will die.

Imo was angry and said: Who are you to question me?

And Locaha said: I am a part of you, as are all things. So I say to you, Give me the mortal world, and go and make your better one. I will rule here fairly. When a human dies, I will send them to be a dolphin until it is time for them to be born again. But when I find a creature who has striven, who has become more than the mud from which they were made, who has glorified this mean world by being a part of it, then I will open a door for them into your perfect world and they will no longer be creatures of time for they will wear stars.

Imo thought this was a good idea, because it was his own creation, and went off to make his new world in the sky. But before he did this, and so that Locaha would not have things all his own way, he breathed into his hands and made the other gods so that while the people should die, it would be in their right time.

And this is why we are born in water, and do not kill dolphins, and look towards the stars.



CHAPTER 1

THE PLAGUE

The snow came down so thickly that it formed fragile snowballs in the air, which tumbled and melted as soon as they landed on the horses lined up along the dock. It was four in the morning and the place was coming alive and Captain Samson had never seen the dock in such a bustle. The cargo was flying out of the ship, literally; the cranes strained in their efforts to get the bales out as quickly as possible. The ship *stank* of the disinfectant already, stank of the stuff. Every man that came on board was so drenched in it that it dribbled out of his boots. But that wasn't enough; some of them had squelched aboard with big, heavy spray cans, which spat an acid-pink fog over everything.

And there was nothing he could do about it. The agent for the owners was right there on the dockside with his

orders in his hands. But Captain Samson was going to try.

'Do you really think we're infectious, Mr Blezzard?' he barked to the man on the dock. 'I can assure you—'

'You are not infectious, Captain, as far as we know, but this is for your own good,' shouted the agent through his enormous megaphone, 'and I must once again warn you and your men not to leave the ship!'

'We have families, Mr Blezzard!'

'Indeed, and they are already being taken care of. Believe me, Captain, they are fortunate, and so will you be, if you follow orders. You *must* return to Port Mercia at dawn. I cannot stress enough how important this is.'

'Impossible! It's the other side of the world! We've only been back a few hours! We are low on food and water!'

'You will set sail at dawn and rendezvous in the Channel with the *Maid of Liverpool*, just returned from San Francisco. Company men are aboard her now. They will give you everything you need. They will strip that ship to the waterline to see that you are properly provisioned and crewed!'

The captain shook his head. 'This is not good enough, Mr Blezzard. What you are asking – it's too much. I— Good God, man, I need more authority than some words shouted through a tin tube!'

'I *think* you will find me all the authority you need, Captain. Do I have your permission to come aboard?'

The captain knew that voice.

It was the voice of God, or the next best thing. But although he recognized the voice, he hardly recognized

the speaker standing at the foot of the gangplank. That was because he was wearing a sort of birdcage. At least, that's what it looked like at first sight. Closer, he could see that it was a fine metal framework with a thin gauze around it. The person inside walked in a shimmering cloud of disinfectant.

'Sir Geoffrey?' said the captain, just to be sure, as the man began to walk slowly up the glistening gangplank.

'Indeed, Captain. I'm sorry about this outfit. It's called a salvation suit, for obvious reasons. It is necessary for your protection. The Russian influenza has been worse than you can possibly imagine! We believe the worst is over, but it has taken a terrible toll . . . at every level of society. *Every* level, Captain. Believe me.'

There was something in the way the chairman said 'every' that made the captain hesitate.

'I take it that His Majesty is . . . isn't—' He stopped, unable to force the rest of the question out of his mouth.

'Not only His Majesty, Captain. I said "worse than you can possibly imagine",' said Sir Geoffrey, while red disinfectant dripped off the bottom of the salvation suit and puddled on the deck like blood. 'Listen to me. The only reason the country is not in total chaos at this moment is that most people are too scared to venture out. As Chairman of the Line, I order you – and as an old friend, I beg you – for the sake of the Empire, sail with the devil's speed to Port Mercia and find the Governor. Then you will— Ah, here come your passengers. This way, gentlemen.'

Two more carriages had pulled up in the chaos of the dockside. Five shrouded figures came up the gangplank, carrying larger boxes between them, and lowered them onto the deck.

'Who are you, sir?' the captain demanded of the nearest stranger, who said:

'You don't need to know that, Captain.'

'Oh, don't I, indeed!' Captain Samson turned to Sir Geoffrey with his hands open in appeal. 'Goddammit, Chairman, pardon my French, have I not served the line faithfully for more than thirty-five years? I am the captain of the *Cutty Wren*, sir! A captain must know his ship and all that is on it! I will not be kept in the dark, sir! If I cannot be trusted, I will walk down the gangplank right now!'

'Please don't upset yourself, Captain,' said Sir Geoffrey. He turned to the leader of the newcomers. 'Mr Black? The captain's loyalty is beyond question.'

'Yes, I was hasty. My apologies, Captain,' said Mr Black, 'but we need to requisition your ship for reasons of the utmost urgency, hence the regrettable lack of formality.'

'Are you from the government?' the captain snapped.

Mr Black looked surprised. 'The government? I am afraid not. Just between us, there is little of the government left at the moment, and what there is is mostly hiding in its cellars. No, to be honest with you, the government has always found it convenient not to know much about us, and I would advise you to do the same.'

'Oh, really? I was not born yesterday, you know—'

'No indeed, Captain, you were born forty-five years ago, the second son of Mr and Mrs Bertie Samson, and christened Lionel after your grandfather,' said Mr Black, calmly lowering his package to the deck.

The captain hesitated again. Somehow, that had sounded like the start of a threat; the fact that no actual threat followed made it, for some reason, quite discomfiting.

'Anyway, who do you work for?' he managed. 'I like to know who I'm sailing with.'

Mr Black straightened up. 'As you wish. We are known as the Gentlemen of Last Resort. We serve the Crown. Does that help you?'

'But I thought the king was—' The captain stopped, not wanting to say the dreadful word.

'He is *dead*, Captain Samson. But the Crown itself is not. Let us say that we serve . . . a higher purpose? And to that purpose, Captain, I will tell you that your men will get four times their usual pay for this trip, plus ten guineas a day for every day over the record for the run to Port Mercia, plus a further one hundred guineas on their return. The promotion prospects for every man and officer on board will be much improved. You, Captain, will of course receive enhanced payments as befits your rank and, since we understand your plan is to retire shortly, the Crown will certainly wish to show its gratitude in the traditional way.'

Behind him, Sir Geoffrey spoke and coughed at the same time: 'cough*knighthood*cough.'

'I'm sure Mrs Samson would like that,' said Mr Black.

It was like torture. Captain Samson had a mental picture of what would happen if Mrs Samson ever found out that he had turned down the chance of her becoming *Lady* Samson. It didn't bear thinking about. He stared at the man who called himself Mr Black and said quietly: 'Is something going to happen? Are you trying to prevent something?'

'Yes, Captain. War. The heir to the throne must set foot on English soil within nine months of the monarch's death. It's in Magna Carta, down in the small print or, rather, the tiny writing. The barons didn't want another Richard the Lionheart, you see. And regrettably, since an infected waiter served the soup at the king's birthday party, the next two living heirs to the throne are both somewhere in the Great Southern Pelagic Ocean. I believe you know it well, Captain?'

'Ah, I understand now! That's what's in those boxes,' said the captain, pointing. 'It's a load of English soil! We find him, he sets foot on it and we all shout hurrah!'

Mr Black smiled. 'Well done, Captain! I am impressed! But, alas, that has already been thought of. There is a sub-clause, too. It stipulates that the English soil must be firmly attached to England. We may declare the succession overseas – even crown the man if necessary – but his presence *will* be required on English soil within this time period for full ratification.'

'You know, Mr Black, I thought I knew all of Magna

Carta, but I've never heard of these clauses,' said Sir Geoffrey.

'No, sir,' said the Gentleman of Last Resort patiently, 'that is because they are in the *ratified* version. You don't think barons who could hardly write their name could come up with a complete set of sensible rules for the proper running of a large country for the rest of history, do you? Their clerks put together the full working Magna Carta a month later. It's seventy times bigger, but it is foolproof. Unfortunately, the French have a copy.'

'Why?' asked the captain. Yet another coach had pulled up on the dockside. It looked expensive, and had a crest painted on the door.

'Because if you don't succeed in this enterprise, Captain, it would then be quite likely that a Frenchman would become King of England,' said Mr Black.

'What?' shouted the captain, forgetting all about the new coach. 'No one would stand for that!'

'Wonderful people, the French, wonderful people,' said Sir Geoffrey hurriedly, waving his hands. 'Our allies in the recent unpleasantness in the Crimea and all that, but—'

'Oh, we are the best of chums with the French government on this one, sir,' said Mr Black. 'The last thing they want to see is a Frenchman on any throne, anywhere. It wouldn't do for our Gallic brethren. There are those in France who do, though, and we think it would be a good thing for all concerned if our new monarch could be brought here with a minimum of fuss and a maximum of speed.'

'They killed the last king they had!' said Captain Samson, who wasn't going to waste a good rage. 'My father fought against 'em at Trafalgar! Can't have that, sir, not at any price. I can speak for the men on that, sir! We'll break the record again, sir, coming and going!' He looked around for Sir Geoffrey, but the chairman had hurried down the gangplank and was fussing around two veiled figures who had got out of the coach.

'Are they . . . women?' asked the captain as they swept up onto the *Cutty Wren*'s deck and went past him as if he were of no importance whatsoever.

Mr Black shook some snow off his own veil. 'The smaller one is a maid, and I take it on trust that she is a woman. The tall one, whom your chairman is so eager to please, is a major stockholder in your shipping line and, more importantly, is also the mother of the heir. She is a lady indeed, although my limited experience of her suggests that she is also a mixture of Boadicea without the chariot, Catherine de' Medici without the poisoned rings and Attila the Hun without his wonderful sense of fun. Do not play cards with her, because she cheats like a Mississippi bustout dealer, keep sherry away from her, do everything she says and we might all live.'

'Sharp tongue, eh?'

'Razor blade, Captain. On a lighter note, it is possible that *en route* we might catch up with the heir's daughter, who thankfully was already well on the way to join her father before the plague struck. She is due to leave Cape Town today on the schooner *Sweet Judy*, bound for Port

Mercia via Port Advent. The captain is Nathan Roberts. I believe you know him?'

'What, old "Hallelujah" Roberts? Is he still afloat? Good man, mark you, one of the best, and the *Sweet Judy* is a very trim vessel. The girl is in safe hands, depend upon it.' The captain smiled. 'I hope she likes hymns, though. I wonder if he still makes the crew do all their swearing into a barrel of water in the hold?'

'Keenly religious, is he?' said Mr Black as they headed towards the warmth of the main cabin.

'Just a tad, sir, just a tad.'

'In the case of Roberts, Captain, how big is a "tad"?'

Captain Samson grinned. 'Oh, something about the size of Jerusalem . . .'

At the other end of the world the sea burned, the wind howled, and roaring night covered the face of the deep.

It takes an unusual man to make up a hymn in a hurry, but such a man was Captain Roberts. He knew every hymn in *The Antique and Contemporary Hymn Book*, and sang his way through them loudly and joyously when he was on watch, which had been one of the reasons for the mutiny.

And now, with the End of the World at hand, and the skies darkening at dawn, and the fires of Revelation raining down and setting the rigging ablaze, Captain Roberts tied himself to the ship's wheel as the sea rose below him and felt the *Sweet Judy* lifted into the sky as if by some almighty hand.

There was thunder and lightning up there. Hail rattled off his hat. St Elmo's fire glowed on the tip of every mast and then crackled on the captain's beard as he began to sing, in a rich dark baritone. Every sailor knew the song: '*Eternal Father, strong to save, Whose arm hath bound the restless wave*,' he bellowed into the storm, as the *Judy* balanced on the restless wave like a ballerina. '*Who bidd'st the mighty ocean deep, Its own appointed limits keep . . .*'

How fast were they moving? he wondered as sails ripped and flapped away. The wave was as high as a church, but surely it was running faster than the wind! He could see small islands below, disappearing as the wave roared over them. This was no time to stop praising the Lord!

'*Oh hear us when we cry to Thee, For those in peril on the sea*,' he finished, and stopped and stared ahead.

There was something big and dark out there, coming closer very quickly. It would be impossible to steer around it. It was too big, and in any case the helm didn't answer. He was holding it as an act of faith, to show God that he would not desert Him and hoped that in return God would not desert Captain Roberts. He swung the wheel as he began the next verse, and lightning illuminated a path across the restless wave and there, in the light of the burning sky, was a gap, a valley or cleft in the wall of rock, like the miracle of the Red Sea, thought Captain Roberts, only, of course, the other way round.

The next flash of lightning showed that the gap was full of forest. But the wave would hit it at treetop height. It'd

slow down. They might just be saved, even now, in the very jaws of Hell. And here they came . . .

And so it was that the schooner *Sweet Judy* sailed through a rainforest, with Captain Roberts, inspired to instant creativity, making up a new verse explicably missing from the original hymn: '*Oh Thou who built'st the mountains high, To be the pillars of the sky*—' He wasn't totally certain about '*built'st*', but '*bidd'st*' was apparently acceptable – '*Who gave the mighty forests birth*' – branches cracked like gunshots under the keel, thick vines snatched at what remained of the masts – '*And made a Garden of the Earth*' – fruit and leaves rained down on the deck, but a shudder meant that a broken tree had ripped away part of the hull, spilling the ballast – '*We pray to Thee to stretch Thy hand*' – Captain Roberts gripped the useless wheel tighter, and laughed at the roaring dark – '*to those in peril on* the land.'

And three great fig trees, whose buttressed roots had withstood centuries of cyclones, raced out of the future and came as a big surprise. His last thought was: Perhaps *who* raised *the mountains high* would have been a better line in the circums—

Captain Roberts went to Heaven, which wasn't everything that he'd expected, and as the receding water gently marooned the wreck of the *Sweet Judy* on the forest floor, only one soul was left alive. Or possibly two, if you like parrots.

On the day the world ended Mau was on his way home.

It was a journey of more than twenty miles. But he knew the way, oh yes. If you didn't know the way you weren't a man. And he was a man . . . Well, nearly. He'd lived for a month on the island of the boys, hadn't he? Just surviving on that place was enough to make you a man . . .

Well, surviving, and then getting back.

No one ever told you about the Boys' Island, not properly. You picked up stuff as you grew up, but there was one thing you learned very soon: the point about the Boys' Island was that you got *away* from the Boys' Island. You left your boy soul there and got given a man soul when you got back to the Nation.

You had to get back, otherwise something terrible happened: if you didn't get back in thirty days, they came and fetched you, and you'd never be a man, not really. The boys said it would be better to drown than be fetched. Everyone would know you'd failed, and you'd probably never get a wife, and if you did get a wife she'd be a woman none of the real men wanted, with bad teeth and smelly breath.

Mau had lain awake for weeks worrying about this. You were allowed to take only your knife to the island, and he had nightmares about building a canoe in thirty days with just a knife. It couldn't be done. But all the men in the Nation had done it, so there had to be a way, didn't there?

On his second day on the Boys' Island he'd found it.

There was a god anchor in the middle of the island, a stone cube half buried in sand and soil. Heavy vines grew over it and wrapped around a huge tabago tree. Carved

deeply into its dry bark in the language for children were the signs: MEN HELP OTHER MEN. Next to it, wedged into the wood, was an *alaki*, a carved black stone on a long handle. Hold it one way, it was an axe. Hold it the other, it was an adze, good for hollowing out a log.

He pulled out the axe, and learned the lesson. So had many other boys; Mau climbed the tree one evening and found the hundreds of marks all the way up the trunk where generations of grateful boys had left the axe, or one like it, for those who came after. Some of them would be Grandfathers now, up in the cave on the mountain, back home.

They would be watching, with eyes that could see for miles, and perhaps they watched him when he found the log, well-seasoned, and not too well-hidden among the pandanuses at the back of the little island. When he got home he'd say he found it, and everyone would say that was lucky, and perhaps the god had put it there. Now he came to think about it, his father and a couple of his uncles had gone off fishing near the island early one morning without inviting him to come with them . . .

It had been a good time. He knew how to make fire, and he'd found the little freshwater spring. He'd made a spear good enough to get fish from the lagoon. And he'd made a good canoe, firm and light, with an outrigger. All you had to build was something that would get you home, but he'd worked on this canoe with knife and skateskin so that it whispered over the water.

He hadn't rushed his last day as a boy. His father had

told him not to. *Clean up the camp*, he'd said. *Soon you will belong to a wife and children. That will be fine. But sometimes you will look back fondly on your last day as a boy. Make it a warm memory, and be back in time for the feast.*

The camp was so clean that you wouldn't know he'd been there. Now he stood in front of the ancient tabago tree for the last time, the axe in his hand and, he was sure, the Grandfathers looking over his shoulder.

It was going to be perfect, he knew. Last night the stars of Air, Fire and Water had been in the sky together. It was a good time for new beginnings.

He found a clear place in the soft bark, and raised the axe. For a moment his eye caught the little blue bead tied to his wrist; it would keep him safe on the journey home. His father had told him how proud he'd be on his way back. But he would need to be careful, and not draw the attention of any gods or spirits to himself. It was not good to be between souls. He'd be like *mihei gawi*, the little blue hermit crab, scuttling from his shell to a new one once a year, easy prey for any passing squid.

It was not a nice thought, but he had a good canoe and a calm sea, and he would scuttle fast, oh yes! He swung the axe, as hard as he could, thinking: Hah! The next boy to pull this out will *deserve* to be called a man.

'Men help other men!' he shouted as the stone hit the bark.

He'd meant it to have an effect. It did, far more than he expected. From every corner of the little island, birds exploded into the air like a cloud of bees. Finches and

waders and ducks rose out of the bushes and filled the air with panic and feathers. Some of the larger ones headed out to sea, but most of them just circled, as though terrified to stay but with nowhere else to go.

Mau walked through them as he went down to the beach. Bright wings zipped past his face like hail, and it would have been wondrously pretty if it weren't for the fact that every single bird was taking this opportunity to have a really good crap. If you're in a hurry, there is no point in carrying unnecessary weight.

Something was wrong. He could feel it in the air, in the sudden calm, in the way the world felt suddenly as though something heavy was pressing down on it.

And now it hit Mau, knocking him flat on the sand. His head was trying to explode. It was worse even than that time when he'd played the stone game and had hung on too long. Something was weighing down on the world like a big grey rock.

Then the pain went as fast as it had come, with a zip, leaving him gasping and dazed. And still the birds swarmed overhead.

As Mau staggered to his feet, all he knew was that here was not a good place to be any more, and if it was the only thing he knew, then at least he knew it with every nail and hair of his body.

Thunder rolled in the clear sky, one great hard bolt of it that rattled off the horizons. Mau staggered down to the tiny lagoon while the noise went on, and there was the canoe waiting for him in the white sand of the water's

edge. But the usually calm water was . . . dancing, dancing like water danced under heavy rain, although no rain was falling.

He had to get away. The canoe sloped easily into the water, and he paddled frantically for the gap in the reef that led to the open sea. Beneath him and around him, fish were doing the same thing—

The sound went on, like something solid, smashing into the air and breaking it. It filled the whole of the sky. For Mau it was like a giant slap on the ears. He tried to paddle faster, and then the thought rose in his mind: *Animals* flee. His father had told him so. *Boys* flee. A man does *not* flee. He turns to look at his enemy, to watch what he does and find his weakness.

He let the canoe slide out of the lagoon, and easily rode the surf into the ocean, and then he looked around, like a man.

The horizon was one great cloud, boiling and climbing, full of fire and lightning and growling like a nightmare.

A wave crashed in the coral and that was wrong, too. Mau knew the sea, and there was also something wrong with that. The Boys' Island was falling way behind him, because a terrible current was dragging him towards the great bag of storms. It was as if the horizon was drinking the sea.

Men looked at their enemy, yes, but sometimes they turned round and paddled like mad.

It made no difference. The sea was sliding and then, suddenly, was dancing again, like the water in the lagoon.

Mau, trying to think straight, fought to get the canoe under control.

He'd get back. Of course he would. He could see the picture in his head, small and clear. He turned it around, savouring the taste of it.

Everyone would be there. *Everyone*. There could be no exceptions. Old, sick men would prefer to die on mats at the water's edge rather than not be there, women would give birth there if they had to, while watching for the homecoming canoe. It was unthinkable to miss the arrival of a new man. That would bring down terrible bad luck on the whole Nation.

His father would be watching for him at the edge of the reef, and they'd bring the canoe up the beach, and his uncles would come running up, and the new young men would rush to congratulate him, and the boys he'd left behind would be envious, and his mother and the other women would start on the feast, and there would be the . . . thing with the sharp knife, where you didn't scream, and then . . . there would be everything.

And if he could just hold it in his mind, then it would be so. There was a shining silver thread connecting him to that future. It would work like a god anchor, which stopped the gods from wandering away.

Gods, that was it! This was coming from the Gods' Island. It was over the horizon and you couldn't see it even from here, but the old men said it had roared, back in the long ago, and there had been rough water and a lot of smoke and thunder because

the Fire god was angry. Maybe he'd got angry again.

The cloud was reaching up to the top of the sky, but there was something new down at sea level. It was a dark grey line, getting bigger. A wave? Well, he knew about waves. You attacked them before they attacked you. He'd learned how to play with them. Don't let them tumble you. Use them. Waves were easy.

But this one was not acting like the normal waves at the mouth of the reef. It seemed as though it was standing still.

He stared at it and realized what he was seeing. It looked as if it was standing still because it was a *big* wave a long way off, and it was moving very fast, dragging black night behind it.

Very fast, and not so far away now. Not a wave, either. It was too big. It was a mountain of water, with lightning dancing along the top, and it was rushing, and it was roaring, and it scooped up the canoe like a fly.

Soaring up into the towering, foaming curve of the wave, Mau thrust the paddle under the vines that held the outrigger and held on as—

– It rained. It was a heavy, muddy rain, full of ash and sadness. Mau awoke from dreams of roast pork and cheering men, and opened his eyes under a grey sky.

Then he was sick.

The canoe rocked gently in the swell while he added, in a small way, to what was already floating there – bits of wood, leaves, fish . . .

Cooked fish?

Mau paddled over to a large *hehe* fish, which he managed to drag aboard. It had been boiled, right enough, and it was a feast.

He needed a feast. He ached everywhere. One side of his head was sticky with, as it turned out, blood. At some point he must have hit it on the side of the canoe, which wasn't surprising. The ride through the wave was an ear-banging, chest-burning memory, the kind of dream you are happy to wake up from. All he'd been able to do was hold on.

There had been a tunnel in the water, like a moving cave of air in the roll of the giant wave, and then there had been a *storm* of surf as the canoe came out of the water like a dolphin. He would swear it had leaped in the air. And there had been singing! He'd heard it for just a few seconds, while the canoe raced down the back of the wave. It must have been a god, or maybe a demon . . . or maybe it was just what you hear in your head as you half fly and half drown, in a world where water and air are changing places every second. But it was over now, and the sea that had tried to kill him was about to give him dinner.

The fish was good. He could feel the warmth entering his bones. There were plenty more, bobbing with all the other stuff. There were a few young coconuts, and he drank the milk gratefully, and began to cheer up. This would be a story to tell! And a wave that big must have washed up at home, so they'd know he wasn't lying.

And home was . . . where? He couldn't see the Boys'

Island. He couldn't see the sky. There were *no islands*. But one horizon was lighter than the other. The sun was setting over *there* somewhere. Last night he'd watched the sun set over the Nation. That had to be the way. He set out steadily, watching that pale horizon.

There were birds everywhere, perching on anything that floated. Mostly they were little finches, chattering madly as the canoe went past. Some of them even fluttered over and perched on the canoe itself, huddling together and staring at him with a sort of desperate, terrified optimism. One even perched on his head.

While he was tying to untangle it from his hair, there was a thump as something much heavier landed on the stern of the canoe, causing the finches to scatter and then flutter back because they were too tired to make it to anywhere else. But they kept as far away as possible from the new passenger, because it wasn't particular about who it ate.

It was a big bird, with shiny blue-black feathers and a white chest, and little white feathers covering its legs. Its huge beak, though, was brilliant red and yellow.

It was a grandfather bird, and good luck – to people at least – even if it did slow Mau down and ate one of his fish. Grandfather birds had learned not to be frightened of people; it was bad luck even to shoosh one away. He could feel its beady eyes on the back of his neck as he paddled onwards. He hoped it might *be* lucky. If he had some luck he could be home long before midnight.

There was an 'Erk!' as the grandfather bird took off

again with another of Mau's boiled fish in its beak, making the canoe wallow for a moment. Well, at least I'm a bit lighter, Mau thought. It's not as though I need the fish in any case. I'll be filling up with pork tonight!

The bird landed heavily on a log a little way ahead. Quite a large log, in fact. As he drew nearer Mau saw that it was a whole tree, even with its roots, although a lot of its branches had been torn off.

He saw the axe, tangled, rising out of the water. But part of him already knew he was going to see it. The sight of it raced towards his eyes and became, just for a moment, the centre of the turning world.

The grandfather bird, having juggled the fish so that it could swallow it whole, took off in its gloomy is-this-really-worth-it way and flapped away with its big, slow wings nearly touching the scummy water.

With its weight gone, the tree started to roll back. But Mau was already in the water and caught the axe handle as it was pulled under. Holding his breath, he braced his legs against the tree's trunk and tugged. Oh, he'd been clever, hadn't he, that moment a hundred years ago now, slamming the axe hard into the tree to show the next boy what a big man he was . . .

It should have worked. With his last mighty heave the axe should have come free. That's how it should have been, in a perfect world. But the swollen wood had gripped it firmly.

Mau dived again three more times, and came up every time coughing and spitting sea water. He had a deep,

angry feeling that this wasn't right; the gods had sent the axe to him, he was sure of that. They had sent it to him because he was going to need it, he was *certain* of it, and he had failed.

In the end he swam back to the canoe and grabbed the paddle before the grandfather bird was out of sight. They always flew back to land at night, and he was pretty certain that there couldn't be much of the Boys' Island to go back to. The tabago tree was hundreds of years old and it had roots thicker than Mau's waist. It looked as though they had practically held the island together! And there had been a god anchor among them. No wave should have been able to shift a god anchor. It would be like moving the world.

The grandfather bird flapped onward. Ahead of it, the thin line of the horizon grew redder, redder than any Mau had ever seen before. He paddled on as fast as he could, trying not to think about what he was going to find ahead of him; and because he was trying *not* to think them, the thoughts ran around in his head like excited dogs.

He tried to calm them down. Look, the Boys' Island was hardly anything more than a lump of rock surrounded by sandbanks, was it? he thought. It wasn't any good for being anything but a fishing camp or a place for boys to try to be men. The Nation had mountains – well, one good one – had a river, there were caves, there were whole forests, there were men who'd know what to do!

Wouldn't they? And what *could* they do?

But the little picture of his man-soul feast flickered in his head. It wouldn't stay still, and he couldn't find the silver thread that dragged him towards it.

Something dark drifted in front of the sunset, and he almost burst into tears. It was a perfect sunset wave, rolling across the red disc that was just sinking below the horizon. Every man in the Islands of the Sun had that image as his manhood tattoo and in a few hours, he knew it, so would he.

And then, where the wave had been, there was the Nation. He could recognize its outline anywhere. It was five miles away maybe. Well, he could do another five miles. And soon he'd see the light of the fires.

Paddling faster, eyes straining to see the darker shape in the strange twilight, he made out the whiteness of the surf over the reef. And soon, please, soon *he would see the light of the fires*!

Now he could smell them, all the smells of the land except the one he wanted, which was the smell of smoke.

And then, there it was, a sharp little tone in the scents of sea and forest. There was a fire somewhere. He couldn't see it, but where there was smoke there were people. Of course, if the wave had come this way there wouldn't be much dry wood. The wave wouldn't be bad here, not here. He'd seen big waves before, and they would make a mess, and splinter a canoe or two. All right, this one had looked *really* big, but waves did when they went over the top of you! People had gone up the mountain and brought down dry wood. Yes, that's what had happened. That was

certainly what had happened. He had worried about nothing. They would be back soon.

That was it. That was how it would be.

But there was no silver thread. He could make the happy pictures in his mind, but they were out there in the dark, and there was no path to them.

It was almost fully dark when he entered the lagoon. He could make out leaves and branches, and hit a big lump of coral that must have been broken off the reef by the wave, but that was what the reef was for. It took the pounding of the storms. Behind the reef, around the lagoon, they were safe.

With a little kiss of crushed sand, the canoe touched the beach.

Mau jumped out, and remembered just in time about the sacrifice. It should be a red fish for a successful journey, and this journey had to be called a success, even if it was a very strange one. He hadn't got a red fish but, well, he was still a boy, and the gods excused boys many things. At least he'd *thought* about it. That must count.

There were no other canoes. There should have been many. Even in this gloom, things looked wrong. There was nobody here; nobody knew he was standing on the shore.

He tried anyway: 'Hello! It's me, Mau! I'm back!'

He started to cry, and that was worse. He'd cried in the canoe, but that was just water escaping from his face and only he knew. But now the tears came in big sobs, dribbling from his eyes and nose and mouth, unstoppably. He cried for his parents, because he was afraid, because he

was cold and very tired, and because he was fearful and couldn't pretend. But most of all he cried because only he knew.

In the forest, something heard. And in the hidden firelight, sharp metal gleamed.

Light died in the west. Night and tears took the Nation. The star of Water drifted among the clouds like a murderer softly leaving the scene of the crime.