

The Tree, The Sea and Me

By Piers Torday

1. A Picture

The summer the thing happened was also the summer my grandmother died. We went to clear out her house. I was twelve years old, and my parents had promised I could keep one thing to remember Nana by. She had lived in a country cottage held together by climbing roses, ivy, and love. House martins made nests behind the solar panels every year, and there were beehives in the garden. Here she had also grown beans, carrots and very delicious potatoes - a few of which she left out for passers-by.

There were so many things I could have taken to remind me of her; her old gardening gloves, the battered picture book we loved to read together, or even a jar of homemade honey.

But I didn't take any of them.

Instead, I took the painting.

It hung high on the far wall of my bedroom when I stayed. Nana never got the curtains to close properly, so the moonlight always fell on this picture as I drifted off to sleep.

A child on top of a palm tree on an island, looking out to the horizon.

2. The Thing That Happened

We went back home to the city and hung the picture in my room in our flat, so I could see it from my bed as I went to sleep, this time lit by street lamps and the searchlights in the sky.

Sometimes I dreamed about the child and the tree in the middle of the sea. Not long after that, the thing happened.

Government announcements were on loudspeakers in the streets, our phones pinged with messages, and leaflets flooded the letterbox. We had to gather on the quayside by nine am the following morning, with only essential possessions.

I wanted to take the painting. My parents disagreed, saying it was too big. So I carefully dismantled the frame, removed the picture, and folded it to slip inside my pocket.

3. The Journey

There weren't enough spaces for everybody on the ship, as promised, and there were fights. Eventually, the army was called in. Somehow, we got on board. Others had taken all the beds that night before we even got close, so we slept curled up on a metal floor along a corridor on one of the lower decks.

I say "slept", but it was hard with all the swaying, shouting, and screaming.

So I took out the picture, unfolded it, and stared at the scene as the rhythm of the ship rolling on the rising waves of our flooding planet gradually lulled me asleep.

4. The Tree

That night I dreamed I was the child in the picture. From the top of the tree, I could see that my island was one of many dotted all over the ocean. I clambered down to explore and discovered that my tree was in the centre of an incredible garden, boasting the strangest and most beautiful plants I had ever seen. A treasure trove, shining with white and red flowers, dripping with golden fruit. I was starving and helped myself to a few of its riches. There seemed more than enough to go around.

I strolled about, touching the soft leaves and grasses, smelling the sweet fragrances and savoury herbs, and breathing the island's fresh air. With every step, I became calmer, happier, and more relaxed.

After a gulp of water from a sparkling fresh stream, I set out to discover the rest of this magical place. Monkeys hooted at me from the treetops, and birds with rainbow feathers hovered over the flowers. Some deer trotted down a path into a forest beyond, and I followed them.

The path led down through the trees to a gleaming white beach, where I paddled in the crystal clear shallows for a while, looking at all the different fish swimming about my ankles. And as the fish swam and the waves lapped back and forth on the shore, ideas started floating into my head.

5. The Sea

What a place this would be for me and my parents to live in now our city had gone! It was so peaceful and beautiful and had everything we needed.

We could sleep on hammocks between the trees...and make shelters from fallen branches and leaves. The garden would feed us, and the herbs could heal us. And we would only take what we needed, looking after the plants and animals as Nana had taught me.

Then other thoughts came, shouting across one another in my head.

What about all the other people on the boat? Where would they live? Where would the children go to school? Who would look after us when we got sick? What would everyone do for a job? Could we make sure the thing never happened again?

More and more thoughts swam in, the shouting getting louder and louder.

Which was when I realised I was no longer dreaming.

6. Me

We were all in the water, shouting for help, crying out to each other in the dark. Something had happened to the ship, which was on its side, like a big grey sinking whale. I held hands with my parents in a ring, and we trod water to stay afloat.

It was strange at such a time to think about anything other than staying alive and helping others do the same, but I wondered what had happened to my painting. Who knows, but I may have spotted some sodden fragments drifting away on the waves before us.

Then, as the sun slowly rose over the dark sea, everything changed.

In the distance, I saw an island with a palm tree.

And I knew what we had to do.