what I was witnessing – had passed them by.

Then, one morning, as suddenly as the storm had begun, it stopped. The sun blazed down from a clear blue sky, and the forest symphony started up where it had left off. I ventured out. The whole island steamed and dripped. I went at once up Watch Hill to see if I could see a ship, perhaps blown off course, or maybe sheltering in the lee of the island. There was nothing there. That was a disappointment, but at least I found my beacon had not collapsed. It was sodden, of course, but still intact. Everything was sodden. There could be no fire now until it had dried out.

The air was hot and heavy all that day. It was difficult to move at all, difficult to breathe. Stella could only lie and pant. The only place to cool off was the sea, so I spent most of that day lolling lazily in the water, throwing the occasional stick for Stella to keep her happy.

I was lying in the sea, just floating there and daydreaming, when I heard the old man’s voice. He was hurrying down the beach, yelling at us as he came and waving his stick wildly in the air.

‘Yamero! Abunai! Dangerous. Understand? No swim.’ He did not seem to be angry with me, as he had been before, but he was clearly upset about something.

I looked around me. The sea was still heaving in but gently now, breathing out the last of the storm, the waves falling limp and exhausted on to the beach. I could see no particular danger.

‘Why not?’ I called back. ‘What’s the matter?’

He had dropped his stick on the beach and was wading out through the surf towards me.

‘No swim. Dameda! Abunai! No swim.’ Then he had me by the arm and was leading me forcibly out of the sea. His grip was vice-like. There was little point in struggling. Only when we were back on the beach did he at last release me. He stood there breathless for a few moments. ‘Dangerous. Very bad. Abunai!’ He was pointing out to sea. ‘No swim. Very bad. No swim. You understand?’ He looked me hard in the eye, leaving me in no doubt that this was not meant as advice, this was a command that I should obey. Then he turned and walked off into the forest, retrieving his stick as he went. Stella ran after him, but I called her back.

I felt at that moment like defying him openly. I
would charge back into the sea and frolic as noisily, as provocatively as I could. That would show him. I was bristling at the outrageous unfairness of it all. First, he would not let me light my fire. Then I was banished to one end of the island, and now I wasn’t even allowed to swim. I wanted to call him every name I could think of. But I didn’t. I didn’t go swimming in the sea again either. I capitulated. I gave in, because I had to. I needed his food, his water. Until my secret beacon of wood dried out, until the next ship came by, I would have to do as he said. I had no choice. I did make a mansize sculpture of him lying in the sand outside my cave, and I did jump up and down on him in my fury and frustration. It made me feel a little better, but not much.

Until now, except for occasional gut-wrenching pangs of homesickness and loneliness, I had by and large managed to keep my spirits up. But not any more. My beacon stayed obstinately damp. Every day I went up Watch Hill hoping to sight a ship, and everyday the sea stretched away on all sides, empty. I felt more and more isolated, more and more wretched. In the end I decided not to go up onto Watch Hill any more, that it just was not worth it. Instead I stayed in my cave and curled up on my sleeping mat for long hours during the day. I lay there drowning in my misery, thinking of nothing but the hopelessness of it all, how I would never get off this island, how I would die here, and my mother and father would never even know what had happened to me. No one would, except the old man, the mad man, my captor, my persecutor.

The weather stayed heavy and humid. How I longed to plunge into the ocean, but I dared not. He’d be watching me for sure. With every day that passed, in spite of the fish and fruit and water he continued to bring me, I came to hate the old man more and more. Dejected and depressed I may have been, but I was angry too, and gradually this anger fuelled in me a new determination to escape, and this determination revived my spirits. Once again I went on my daily trek up Watch Hill. I began to collect a fresh cache of dry leaves and twigs from the forest edge and squirreled them away in a deep cleft in the rock so that I would always be sure they were dry, when the time came. My beacon had dried out at last. I built it up, higher and higher. When I