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TODAY MIGHT BE the day that Jack comes home, Nim thought, and the day to make Alex Rover's raft.

She jumped out of bed.

'Oh, no you don't!' her knee screamed and she sat down again even faster. Her knee was puffy and hot, red with oozy blood and yellow with pus.

'Yuck!' said Nim, but she got up again.

Very slowly, she hobbled down to the rocks with a breakfast coconut. Fred had remembered her promise. 'You'll pop!' Nim exclaimed after the fifth piece of coconut, but Fred went on eating.

Washed up on the beach, just below Selkie's Rock, were two purple caps with ridiculous fish on top. 'That's an easier way to call Galileo!' said Nim and picked them up.

Behind the caps was a big piece of driftwood and under the driftwood was a torn piece of fishing net.

Nim and Jack hated fishing nets, but – 'The raft!' said Nim.

The net was torn too jagged to make one big bag, but she could cut four squares and make two smaller rafts instead.

The net cord was tough and slippery. After a few cuts Nim had to get her sharpening-stone, drawing her pocket-knife across it the way Jack had taught her, one side and then the other, faster and again till sparks flew and the blade was smooth and fine.

The sun said it was long past lunchtime when she finished cutting. Her knee hurt too much to go up to the vegetable garden, so she ate the last banana with some limpets and seaweed from Shell Beach, and drank the juice from a coconut, because there was no water left either.

Then, sitting in the shade of a palm tree, she knotted the squares down the sides and across the bottom. She flicked the net – knot and pull – and Fred peek-a-booped from side to side. Selkie grabbed the end of the net in her teeth and tugged.

It's not easy working on something when a sea lion is playing tug-of-war with the other end. It took a long time to finish the two bags, then a long, sore limp to Keyhole Cove.

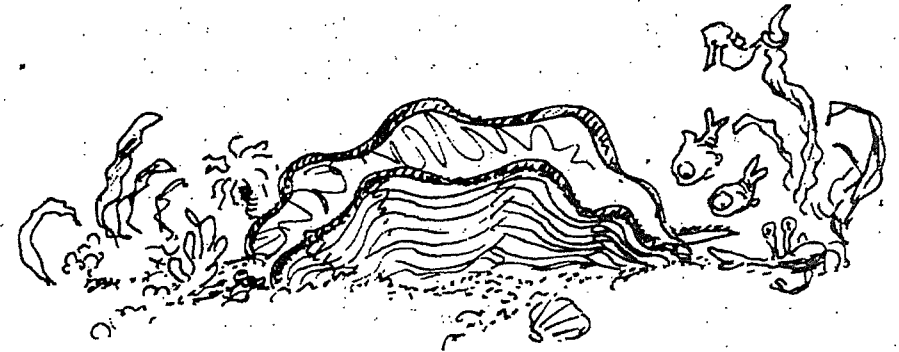
Selkie and Fred jumped in to help fish out the coconuts, which would have been more helpful if they hadn't kept playing coconut football instead.

'Stop being STUPID!' Nim screamed.



Fred sank to the bottom and hid behind a giant clam. Selkie humphed onto the reef with her back to Nim.

Nim, feeling smaller than the limpets she'd eaten for lunch, crawled up beside her. 'I'm sorry,' she whispered.



Selkie could never stay angry for long, but Fred could. Nim had to dive three times before she could coax him back up.

When she had all the coconuts on the rocks, Nim loaded ten into each bag and tied knots across the top so they couldn't escape. The sun was low over the sea by the time she dumped the second bag back into the cove and climbed on top.

The first three times she tried, the bag-raft ended up on top of her instead of the other way around. The fourth time Nim won.

She lay on her stomach and Fred rode on her back; she paddled once right round the cove, but she was in more of a floating mood today and the raft was good at that too.

But not with a sea lion on top. Selkie thumped onto the other one and sank straight to the bottom.

'Try both together!' said Nim, trying not to laugh.

Nim held the rafts and Selkie hauled herself on. She floated across the cove, nosing herself off the shore and bumping from reef to rocks. She liked it so much, she forgot to tease Fred; she could have played there all night, but:

'Sun's nearly set!' said Nim. 'Email time.'

From: jack.rusoe@explorer.net
To: aka@incognito.net
Date: Wednesday 7 April, 18:25

Dear Alex Rover,

This morning I found an old fishing net, so I made two rafts because I thought it would be easier than one big one. They are lots of fun to ride; Selkie liked them so much she barked till her throat was sore!

In Keyhole Cove I could ride sitting up but it's easier lying down, especially if your Hero was out at sea with big waves.

Fred and I rode together, and the raft floated so well we would have been dry if we hadn't got so wet getting on! Fred's not very heavy.

Selkie needed two rafts or she sank to the bottom. She's a bit heavier than Jack, so if your Hero is about that big he could float on a raft with twenty coconuts. If I'd known that, I would have made just one big raft

after all, because Selkie sometimes slipped down the middle and I had to hold the rafts together for her to get on again. But I guess your Hero wouldn't bounce as much as Selkie!

From Nim

From: aka@incognito.net
To: jack.rusoe@explorer.net
Date: Wednesday 7 April, 13:29

Dear Nim,

Robinson Crusoe couldn't have done better! I'll stop worrying about how my Hero could swim to the island if he was tied up in a sack. He can do exactly what you've done -- though he'll find a piece of net just the right size for one big bag, so he won't have to fall down the middle like poor Selkie!

Here's the scene: he's gasping on the beach, realizes that he's lying on a fishing net -- and, as he sits up, is nearly bonked on the head by a falling coconut. Phew! That was close! he thinks. Then -- 'Aha!' and he makes his raft and paddles bravely out to sea to defeat the Bad Guys...

Which reminds me -- how did your game work out yesterday?

Yours, Alex

Alex waited, but Nim didn't answer. She'd turned the Internet and laptop off and was already asleep.

What kind of dog weighs more than a man? Alex wondered. Selkie must be huge! And Fred must be a dog too; I can't imagine a cat riding a raft.

She stared out of the window. From the forty-first floor, she could see a long way, but no matter how hard she tried she couldn't see Keyhole Cove or a Hero on a coconut raft.

And for just a moment, Alex wished that she could be a person who *did* things instead of writing them . . . who could sail across seas or live happily on a tropical island.

But Alexandra Rover was a dreamer, not a doer. She was stuck in place like a train on a track, as much a part of the city as the Post Office steps.

IN THE MORNING Nim's knee was hotter and fatter, with red lines streaking round the ooze.

She didn't want to walk anywhere or do anything, but she had no water to drink and no food to eat, so Fred climbed on her shoulders and she pulled her wagon slowly up to the vegetable garden. She filled her bottles from the waterfall, cut off a bunch of bananas and picked some strawberries, and rode back down the hill.

Selkie huffed anxiously. 'I'll feel better after a swim,' Nim said.

So they swam round to Turtle Beach. Chica was grazing for seaweed, but she stopped to play a very lazy game of coconut football – though it was more like catch, because nobody could be bothered to wrestle for the nut.

The tide was going out and when they'd finished the game, Nim lay on her stomach and dug for clams with an old shell, while Selkie and Fred galumphed around the wet sand and Chica watched and nodded.

When she'd scooped out enough for dinner, Nim made a fire, baked her clams and split the coconut for dessert.

Fred darted his nose under her arm and nearly got bopped on the head with her coconut-breaking rock. 'Get out of the way, you greedy dragon!' she teased and broke him off a piece.

Shining there, like a perfect surprise, was a round, creamy pearl.

Nim stared, not wanting to touch or move it. Jack had told her that sometimes, once in a lifetime or so, a coconut could make a pearl just the same way an oyster did, but Nim had never thought she'd see one.

Fred finished his own coconut – snapped – and the pearl disappeared.

And Nim felt as if everything good in her life had disappeared too, and she knew it wasn't true and she knew it was silly, but she cried till her shirt was soggy and her breath was hiccupy and the tears didn't know how to stop.

Fred sat staring with his mouth full of coconut and pearl.

Selkie *whumped* him on the back with her flipper – and chunks of coconut and the pearl flew out of his mouth.

Nim gave one last hiccup and took the pearl back to the hut.

It was even more beautiful when it was clean; more wonderful than a shell's gleaming inside whirls, because it was whole and perfect. 'A Lucky Pearl,' Nim whispered, because anything so rare must be lucky, and to be beautiful and rare must be the luckiest of all.

She put it on a piece of stroked-smooth driftwood in front of her mother's picture and, since it was nearly sunset now anyway, turned on the laptop.

The light glowed, the computer hummed, but just as she clicked the email box open, the screen went black. She'd forgotten to charge the battery.

The pearl didn't seem so lucky when she couldn't tell Alex Rover about it.

