

Letters to the Silent Island

By Emma Scott

Once there was a tiny green island, adrift in a wide blue sea. On the island was a lush forest, a sandy white beach, a small wooden hut with a roof that leaked when it rained, a table, a chair, and a man.

How did the man get there? He could not recall. How long had he been there? He was not sure. How old was the man? He was neither old nor young. In his mind he was young; he had the same thoughts, feelings and opinions he had in his youth. But when he rose from his chair, his knees would tell him loudly that he was much older than he thought. If there had been a mirror on the island – which there was not – his reflection would have been a stranger.

The man was neither happy nor sad. He had a pleasant enough routine that he repeated every day. Wake, wash, eat, sleep. This routine kept him alive and well. No more, no less. But what more did he need? And so, he existed in this state, suspended between young and old, between something and nothing, for many years.

And he was content.

Being alone meant privacy, peace, and contemplation. All the things that, when he truly was a young man, he craved. And so, one day, when a small fishing boat passed by, his reaction was one of irritation that someone might intrude on his island. What if they make for the shore? What if they stepped off their boat and onto his perfect beach? What if they realised how lovely island was, and wanted to share it with him? The thought made the man anxious, so when the face of a small boy appeared over side of the boat, and his arm waved ‘hello’, the man turned away and pretended not to see. When the boy’s voice called out a greeting, the man pretended not to hear.

Eventually, the boat disappeared over the horizon and the man breathed.

Then he sighed.

Then he realised; that was the first boat he had seen in a very long time, and the first voice he had heard in even longer. When would he see or hear anyone again?

The next day, another element had worked its way into the man’s routine. Wake, wash, eat, look for the boat, sleep. As this new ritual played out day after day, something in the man started to change. Without him really noticing how or when, aloneness became loneliness, and his remote little island no longer felt like the gift it once did. Privacy became isolation. Peace was replaced by torment. Contemplation led to regret.

He spent more and more time scanning the skyline, hoping to see a tiny dot grow into a boat.

Eventually, just as the man's hope was all but gone, the little fishing boat did reappear, like something from a dream. The man was so excited and thankful for this second chance to make a connection with another human. He moved as fast as his creaking joints would allow, down to where the water met the sand, and prepared himself.

The boat came closer, and the little boy's head popped up as it had before. The boy waved. The man waved back. The boy shouted 'hello'. But when the man opened his own mouth, he found he could not speak. So out of practice was he, and so neglected were his vocal cords, he found he could not form a single word. In return for all the solitude and reflection it had provided him, the island had taken the man's voice in return.

All he could do was continue to wave uselessly, as the little fishing boat floated silently away.

Of course, the boy was not alone on the boat; he was with his father. As the man's tiny green island faded into the distance, the boy asked his father about the man who lived on it. How did he get there? Nobody knew. How long had he been there? Since anyone can remember. Is he not lonely? He probably likes his own company.

But the boy was not so sure about that. He also lived on an island with lush forests and pristine beaches. But there was more than one house, and lots of people lived in them. There were him and his parents, his siblings, their neighbours, their neighbours' children. Some of them even had pets. He was rarely alone, never wanted for company, and felt sorry for the man because he must feel nothing but loneliness.

The next day, the boy paused a game he was playing with a little girl who was one of the reasons he never felt lonely, and told her about the man on the next island. The boy wondered why he had not answered when he called 'hello'. The girl thought perhaps the man used to live in the sea, because she knew a story about a mermaid who was so sad and desperate to live on the land that she traded her voice for human legs. Maybe the man had done the same so he could have the whole island to himself.

Once again, the boy was not so sure.

He had seen something in the way the man had waved. The only thing the man was desperate for was someone to talk to. And so, the boy and the girl wrote the man a letter. They thought very carefully about what to write, and described in vivid detail their life on their island. They drew a little map, and family trees to show how they were all connected. They described the games they played and the books they read. And they asked every question that popped into their heads about the man and his island.

They had great fun writing the letter, and when it was done, they rolled it up tight and fed it into an old glass bottle. Together, they took it to the edge of the water, and with great ceremony, threw it to the sea. The sea snatched it up, and took it away for the children.

A few days later, the man – who was standing on the shore hoping for a glimpse of the fishing boat again – instead saw the sun glancing off the glass bottle, which came bobbing towards him, before a wave delivered it onto the wet sand.

Curious, the man yanked out the cork stopper, and the satisfying *pop* it made was followed by an altogether more glorious sound. It was the sound of voices. Children's voices; giggles, whispers, questions and stories oozing like vapour from the neck of the bottle. As the breeze carried the voices away, the man pulled the letter out and read, and re-read it carefully.

That afternoon, with a smile on his old face, he sat at his table and wrote a letter back. He told the children all about his island and about himself. His mind unlocked memories so he could answer all their questions. So engrossed was he with the words flowing from his pen, he was unaware that he was saying them out loud, and that his voice – quiet and thick from lack of use - was being absorbed by the paper along with the ink.

By the time he was satisfied with his reply, it was dark. Just as the children had done, he rolled his letter up tightly, returned it to the glass bottle and sealed it in with the cork. The sea was a black void by then, so the man did not see when he tossed it into the waves, how it carried the bottle surely in the right direction.

Also unknown to the man, every day since launching the bottle, the children had stood on the shore hoping to see its return. You can imagine, therefore, their delight and excitement when their patience was rewarded.

The boy and the girl rushed into the waves, snatched the bottle from the surf, and took it to a quiet spot beneath the trees to open it.

When they did, at first they thought they imagined a small voice. It was so quiet, like a voice made of sand. They leaned close to each other, the neck of the bottle between their ears. And there it was; the voice of the man. They pulled the letter out, unrolled it, and followed the words with their fingers as the man's voice told them his story and answered all their questions. They read and re-read, and listened and re-listened to his words long after bedtime, when tiredness overcame them, and they fell asleep under the stars.

When they woke up, the boy and girl agreed that, while it was satisfying to have their letter replied to, the answers from across the sea only made them more curious. And so it was that the boy, the girl and the man started a conversation that lasted many months. With each letter the man received, his feeling of loneliness grew smaller and smaller. And with each reply the children received, the man's voice grew louder and stronger.

One night, when all the island's children were tucked up in their beds, the boy's father went to check on his son. He found the boy clutching a sheaf of paper, which he prised gently from the boy's tiny fingers. For the rest of that night, the boy's father and mother pored over the words, and as they did, they thought they heard a distant voice reading them aloud. The words painted a picture of a long and fascinating life, but one that had become small enough to fit onto one tiny island. They thought of the man, alone in the wide blue sea and as the sun rose, the boy's father made a decision.

As soon as it was light enough, he readied his little fishing boat and set sail for the next island.

When he returned, he was not alone. And from that day forward, neither was the man.