

Extract Two



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And now we're bringing you a report on recent conservation work at Tsavo National Park.

Sam watches the images playing on the television of a land that he'll never see, not by physically travelling there at any rate. Part of him doesn't believe it exists, nor any of the other overseas places he sees on the television or that his friends jet to for their holidays. Maybe there is only London and this life he knows, and the rest is just some sort of conspiracy. He has no real recollection of the one or two trips abroad his parents said they took him on when he was much younger and before his condition had set in.

Without much interest, Sam continues to watch the views of bedraggled wildebeest with the sun-dried African bush as a backdrop. Air travel is out of the question for him because the lower pressure in the cabin might cause the cavities in his head to expand, and the consequences could be unpleasant to say the least. As a worst-case they could even explode like sealed containers stowed away in the main baggage hold.

'Pop,' Sam mouths, making no sound, as he thinks about what the neurosurgeon told him and his parents. 'Pop, pop.'

Apart from that, the level of medical support he might require wouldn't be readily available, certainly not if he's several hours drive away somewhere in a Kenyan safari park.

'Not real,' he says to the television screen as a giraffe gallops away from the camera.

He's just trying to work out how these shared experiences could be embedded in people's memories, perhaps by brainwashing them once they've boarded the aircraft, when the door to his room clunks open. He looks at the woman standing there, with a pleasant smile on her face.

'Hello,' she says breezily. She's Japanese and around his parents' age. The woman is wearing a coat and doesn't appear to be any of the hospital or medical staff he's met before, as far as he can remember.

From where he's sitting in his chair beside the bed, Sam nods and smiles back in reflexive politeness.

The woman takes this as a sign that she can come in. She helps a man who is walking with a cane to enter the room. He's also Japanese. They stand there, by the foot of Sam's bed while he remains in his chair. He can see the wildlife program still playing on the television mounted on the wall behind their heads.

They are looking at him so attentively that despite his fatigue, he makes an effort to pull himself up in the chair.

For a moment no one speaks.

He wonders if they've come to the wrong room.

Then the woman gives a small bow. 'We wanted to thank you for what you did,' she says rather nervously. Sam notices that she has tears in her eyes. But there is the look of the deepest gratitude on both her face and that of the man with her.

And something else.

Affection.

For him.

The woman is still speaking. 'It was more than we could have ever hoped for ... those months with her. A miracle from heaven.' She bows again, hands clasped together. 'Thank you, Sam, from the bottom of our hearts.'

'... bottom of our hearts,' the man repeats, a human echo.

Sam is now wondering if some sort of joke is being played on him, or whether they are the kind of people his father is

always warning him about. Con men. Thieves. But they appear so harmless and friendly. Maybe that's how it works.

'We brought some pictures to show you,' the woman says. 'She didn't get seriously ill again for three or four months. She refused any treatment. She was so brave through it all. We were with her to the end. She was just so happy th—'

The man is still smiling, but the woman chokes up. Sam sees the tears streaming down her face before she lowers her head, fumbling to get her handbag open.

Sam now wonders if they're the parents of another child who is very ill, perhaps looking for comfort from someone. But why him? Or perhaps they've both become unhinged by their experience.

As the woman takes her hand out of her bag, there are many photographs in it. She leaves her husband gripping the rail at the end of the bed as she ventures closer to Sam. Ventures closer as if she's a little bit afraid of him. Glancing at the breakfast Sam has hardly touched on the tray, she begins to lay the photographs on the unmade bed so he can see them. He spots a girl in the photos.

Then it clicks.

'Rachel,' he says. He looks up. These are her parents. He does know them. 'Rachel Nishio.'

'Yes,' the woman says, arranging the photographs.

One of the first times he was brought into this hospital for tests, there was a little Japanese girl in the children's ward. She had all the latest gadgets because her father ran the UK arm of one of the largest Japanese electronics companies. Sam remembered that although his posting had come to an end in England and he could have returned to Japan, he opted to stay

on because his family liked it here so much. Sam glances up at him now, recognising him. Somewhat impossibly, the man is still smiling despite his wife's evident distress.

The girl, Rachel, was very ill from a rare chondrosarcoma affecting the skeleton all over her body and was forced to spend even more time in hospital than Sam. In fact, she never seemed to be out of it. When he was brought in, nine times out of ten, she'd already be there. A strong bond formed between them because their bodies were betraying both of them, their bones rebelling and growing in a way that they weren't meant to. Sam and Rachel read stories to each other and did jigsaws together where there always seemed to be a single piece missing from the box.

But Rachel was constantly being subjected to endless rounds of bone grafts, chemotherapy and radiotherapy sessions, and each time Sam saw her she'd gone a little further downhill. When a section of her pelvis was removed and she became unable to walk, he'd push her around in a wheelchair. And if he was well enough, he'd race her up and down the corridors far too fast, much to the chagrin of the nurses.

Giggling and laughing and getting looks of disapproval from the people who worked in the hospital, no part of the building was off limits to them. Sometimes they would even take the service lift down to the sub-basement and sneak around the level where the boilers poured out heat night and day, and the back-up generators hummed away like sleeping dragons. But a favourite destination was the chapel which very rarely had anyone in it so they could talk without interruption.

Sam doesn't know what had become of Rachel, although she'd been so very ill the last time he'd seen her, he wouldn't be

terribly surprised if she had died. When he'd asked them, Mr and Mrs White either didn't seem to know, or perhaps weren't saying.

But here is Rachel in these photos, standing unassisted in the lapping waves on a beach with no wheelchair in sight. Sam has never seen her like this, looking so well. With her burnished skin and sleek black hair she's stunning.

'Hair!' Sam blurts out without meaning to. She had lost it all from the chemotherapy treatment.

'Yes, she was so happy to get it back. She loved her hair,' the woman says.

Sam studies the photographs more closely. It had grown back? He knows how unlikely that is. Her hair in the photographs could be a wig, but it looks far too real. 'She's cured,' Sam says under his breath, as he sees that Rachel's body in her bathing suit shows not the slightest trace of the many operations she's endured, and indeed her limbs are lithe and strong. 'So she's better?' Sam asks the Japanese woman.

There's a delay before she answers. 'She was. Better than we could have prayed for. We took her to see her grandparents in Okinawa and had a wonderful, wonderful time there.' The woman is wringing her hands together so aggressively that her fingers are turning red. 'Then we returned here to England as the cancer resumed, just as you said it would. She wanted to be in this country – she said it was her home.'

'She made her choice,' the man says from the foot of the bed, speaking his own words for the first time. 'No more treatment. We respected her for that.'

As Sam scans along the line of photographs he sees now that indeed she seems to become ill in them again. He reaches

out and picks one up where she's back in a wheelchair and her face is very gaunt.

'Yes, that's near the end, after it had spread again,' the woman tells him. 'She passed away last month. We didn't want to trouble you with the news.'

Sam opens his mouth, wanting to say something, but the man speaks first.

'No, because we swore we'd keep what happened secret,' he says. 'We would never break our promise to you.'

The woman doesn't seem able to control herself any longer and can't stop crying, her face shiny with her tears.

Sam is completely thrown by all this and beginning to wonder if he's been out of it for longer than he thought, rather than just the previous night when the bleeding knocked him for six. It's all still a bit of a blur, even when they took him to be X-rayed.

But what's going on here is bigger than last night.

'I ...' Sam bursts out, his brow furrowed.

'I'm so sorry we've disturbed you,' the man interrupts, holding up a hand. 'We shouldn't be here but, you see, Rachel spent so much time in this hospital that the staff have become our friends. One of the registrars told us you were in,' the man explains. 'And we thought it would be okay to visit you, just for a moment.'

'Yes, sure, of course ... I had a nosebleed that ...' Sam tails off, wondering why he's telling them this.

'But we don't want to break our promise to you, so we will never contact you or speak of this again,' the man says. 'Scout's honour.' He raises his arm, twists a palm towards Sam, then extends two fingers in the usual salute. This gesture is

so incongruous that Sam thinks he has to be joking, but his expression is grave.

The woman suddenly shoots out a hand and clasps one of Sam's, making him start. Her speech is broken into breathy snatches. 'I can't tell you how grateful we ... no, we will never tell, just as you asked ... thank you, Sam.'

There's a small silence when no one talks. The woman lets go of Sam's hand.

The man coughs. 'A photo – you should have a photo. So you have a keepsake to remember Rachel by.'

The woman goes to pick one out. 'Yes, have ...'

'No, there ...' the man directs, pointing at the bed. 'That one.'

The woman passes Sam an alternative photograph. It's the one in which Rachel is on a beach and looks so well.

The woman quickly collects together all the other photographs and bundles them into her handbag.

They both begin towards the door.

Sam can't contain himself any longer. 'Is this about something I've done?' he asks, his voice edged with desperation. He's trying to understand.

'On my honour we will tell no one. Not a soul. Goodbye,' the man replies, with another smile of gratitude. Then he looks away because he has to help his wife to the door as she's so overcome with emotion. The man pauses for a moment in the doorway and turns again to Sam. 'And also give our thanks to the girl who helped you, helped that day with Rachel.'

'Girl?' Sam asks, holding the photograph. The gloss surface is streaky from Mrs Nishio's tears. 'What girl?'

The door closes behind the Japanese couple, leaving Sam

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alone with the television again. He's missed the report on the safari park and now there's some footage of a hedgehog at night, which appears to be munching on a pulpy slug.

Sam lets his head slump against the backrest of his chair, so mired in confusion that he wonders if he's losing grip on his sanity.

'What was that?' he asks the empty room, trying to work out what Rachel's parents were talking about, and whether he'd forgotten some incident. 'What the heck was that?' he almost shouts because he's so upset and also rather frightened. How could whatever he'd done be so important to them and to Rachel. And why doesn't he have any recollection of it? No, none of it makes any sense at all.

As the news about Rachel's death sinks in, he studies her photograph. When he happens to turn it over to look at the back, there's something there – closely handwritten lines in Japanese. He regards these for a moment then, with a last glance at Rachel on the other side, thrusts the photograph into his dressing-gown pocket, trying his best not to cry.