Introduction

An interviewer once asked me this question: *If you were to be stranded on a desert island, what three items would you take?*

I gave this frivolous answer: *A cat, a hat and a piece of string.* Partly because I liked the jaunty, careless bounce of the phrase, and partly because each item has many potential uses, on its own or separately, which makes my choice more than the sum of its parts.

I'd bring the cat for company. The hat for shelter from the sun. The piece of string has multiple purposes, including to amuse the cat, or to keep the hat on in a high wind. There's also a scenario in which I use the hat and the piece of string to make a simple fish-trap (presumably to feed the cat); or a less appealing one in which I strangle the cat with the piece of string and cook it for lunch, using the hat as a makeshift tureen. (To be fair, I can't imagine myself ever wanting to eat a cat, but who knows what might happen if you were stranded for long enough on a desert island?) It occurred to

me that I could probably think up a hundred similar stories featuring just those three items.

The stories in this collection are a little like that too. Though seemingly unconnected at first, you'll find they are linked in all kinds of ways to each other and to my novels. Some take place in locations you may recognize; others feature characters with whom you may be familiar. Some stand alone – for the present, at least – which does not mean that they always will. Stories are often so much more than the sum of their individual parts; to me, they exist like unfinished maps to as-yet-undiscovered worlds; waiting for someone to pencil in the connections as they find them.

As I said in *Jigs & Reels*, short stories do not always come easily to me. Sometimes they drift like flotsam to the shores of that desert island; at other times I bring them home from my travels around the world; or sometimes they rattle inside my head for months – and sometimes years – on end, like coins trapped inside a vacuum cleaner, waiting for me to release them.

In any case, I hope that these may take you a little further into that unexplored territory. Maybe you'll meet some old friends – as I hope you'll find some new ones. Don't forget your cat and your hat – and, with a long enough piece of string, you'll always be sure to find the way home.

River Song

Stories are like Russian dolls: open them up, and in each one you'll find another story. This particular story was written when I was in the Congo with Médecins Sans Frontières. Why I was there in the first place is a story in itself, but while I was in Brazzaville I met a gang of small boys who had devised an ingenious (and perilous) means of earning a living. They would gather by the river under the veranda of one of the city's few surviving restaurants and, for a coin or a handful of scraps, would entertain the diners by leaping into the rapids at the river's most dangerous point and riding the current downstream. These children – none of them older than ten years old – would risk their lives dozens of times a day, often for nothing more than a chicken bone or a piece of bread. What's more, they seemed to enjoy it.

Well, there's always the river. That's what Maman Jeanne says, with that look old people get when they're talking about something you can't possibly understand, like how

an aeroplane stays in the air, or why the Good Lord made the tsetse fly. It's her answer to everything; complaints, questions, tears. Well, there's always the river, she says. The Congo river is always there.

I should know: I've watched it all my life. I know its moods; like a fierce dog that will sometimes play, but goes for the throat if you take the game too far. I know the fishing spots and the best places to swim; the rapids and the shallows; the islets and the sands and where they shot the last hippo, years ago. To hear them talk, you'd think everyone in Brazzaville was there that day – if so, that old hippo should be right there in the Bible, next to the miracle of the *foufou* and the fishes. Still, says Maman Jeanne, fishermen and hunters are born to lie.

Maybe it's the river makes them do it.

It's true that stories collect here. Like the water hyacinth, they float downriver from the north, dividing and flowering as they go. The story of the Three Sorcerers, or the Eagle Boy, or the Devil-Fish, so huge it can snap a hippo's spine, or swallow a crocodile in a single gulp. That, at least, is true; I have a devil-fish tooth to prove it, traded (for a cigarette and half a stick of chewing gum) from a boy on one of the barges. It's longer than my finger, and I wear it round my neck on a piece of wire. Maman Jeanne says I shouldn't; there's bad magic in a devil-fish tooth, and anyway, it's not right for a ten-year-old girl to be hanging around those river barges.

If she was *my* mother, says Maman Jeanne, she would teach me to cook and sew and work my hair into little plaits and cornrows to catch myself a man. *That's the catch for you, girl,*

she says, *not some nasty old devil-fish that you couldn't eat even if you could pull it in*. But I can look after myself, and I don't have to do what Maman Jeanne tells me. Besides, like she says, people may come and go, but the river is always there.

There are four of us here, work-working the rapids. Monkey, Catfish, Hollywood Boy and me. Of course those aren't our real names. But names are secret things, full of power. They call me Ngok – the crocodile – because I'm such a good swimmer. And swimming, of course, is what we do.

Right at the edge of our patch, there's a place called Les Rapides. It's a big place, all white, with a balcony looking out over the water. Before the war a lot of people came here, but now it's never more than a quarter full: businessmen in their grey square-shouldered suits, or pretty ladies with dyed hair and flouncy dresses, soldiers, officials, even the occasional *mendele* – white men here for business, I suppose – it's been a long time since any actual tourists came here. They come to eat, of course – *trois-pièces* with *pili-pili* and fried bananas; baked squash with black rice and peanut sauce; crocodile with *foufou* and beans.

It makes me dizzy even to think about so much food; and there are tomatoes swimming in oil, and riverfish stew and *saka-saka* and fresh crusty white bread and hot-fried chicken and manioc and peas. They come to eat – of course they do – but they also come because of the river, because of the rapids. From here you can see right across for miles and miles, right into Kinshasa where the fires burn across the water and the river is a wild thing, prancing and rolling from boulder to boulder and hurling up great gouts of spray. Not as wild

as Hippo Island and the giant yellowgrey jumble of broken water beyond, but wild enough, and it sounds like—

Like elephants crossing, says Maman Jeanne. Big brown elephants with feet like palm trunks. Of course I've never seen an elephant, but in the city zoo there's a skull the size of a lorry cab, all chalk and honeycomb, one splintery tusk lolling from the toothless mouth.

Like Sunday morning, says Monkey; like cathedral voices; like dancing; like drums.

Like helicopters, says Catfish, when he says anything at all. Like mortars and shells and the washboard clatter of gunfire. *Or the noise*, says Hollywood Boy, *of a radio between stations*, that eerie, dead sound of rushing and whispering, scratching and stirring.

The river has a song for everyone, says Maman Jeanne; and no song is ever the same. That's why they *really* come: not for the food, or the view or the shady veranda under the mango trees, but for the river, the sound and the swell and the surge of the river song. I know; and the others are the same. Even Catfish, who is fourteen and thinks he knows so much more than the rest of us. There's more to our business than just business.

Which is not to say we are not professionals. Some people carve wood for a living; some turn to the army; some work the markets, or the cabs, or the side of the road. We work the river. More precisely, we work the rapids.

Our rapids are a highway for all kinds of trade. Fish trappers, stonebreakers, washerwomen, thieves. I know them all: boys with nets, old men in pirogues, scavengers with poles

and sacks. Downriver is the shallow place where Maman Jeanne takes her washing. It's a good swimming hole, too, for babies and women, but we don't swim there. Oh no. We swim further up, from Les Rapides to the stonebreakers' flats, and we don't let anyone else work our strip. We earned that strip, Monkey, Catfish, Hollywood Boy and me. Especially me; partly because I'm the youngest, but mostly because I'm a girl. And, as Maman Jeanne says, girls don't dare, girls don't bare, and most of all, girls never, *ever* ride the rapids.

There are three corridors dividing the rapids on our side of the river. One – we call it the Slide – is close to the bank, sweeping and doglegging breathlessly between the rocks. The second – the Swallow – is much further out, and to reach it you have to swim outwards in a wide curve, skirting a sinkhole and a bad drop over some big boulders. You have to be strong – most of all you have to be quick, because no one can swim *against* the current; all you can hope for is to use the current to swing you far enough out to reach the safety of the corridor. But if you miss by even an arm's length, then the current whips you – with a *shake-shake-snap* like a dog with a rat – right into the sinkhole. If you're lucky and it spits you out again, the ride ends with a quick scuttle down a bumpy little rockslide and no harm done – except maybe for a skinned backside and the sting of laughter from the riverbank. It happens sometimes, though never to me. And sometimes – well. Better not to think of that. *The good God harvests his crop*, says Maman Jeanne, *and all your tears will never bring back a single seed of it.*

The third ride is almost a legend. Far, far beyond the others

– perhaps three times the distance between the Swallow and the bank – it can only be reached from the Swallow itself. Halfway down to the stonebreakers' flats, the current divides over a big pink rock, which we call the Turtle. The Turtle's shell is round, and on one side there's a good smooth ride into the mainstream. On the other, there are underwater rocks – ankle-biters, we call them – but if you're fast – and lucky – I reckon you could break away from the Swallow and ride the river's great round shoulder into the Deep.

I've never done it, though I've charted its path, using river junk and clumps of hyacinth, and I'm almost sure I could. No one else has, as far as I know; Monkey says there are crocodiles, but he's just scared. With his crooked leg he doesn't swim as well as the rest of us, and never even rides the Swallow. But he has a rubber ring from a truck tyre, and fits it just as neat as a bird on a nest, so Catfish lets him come. I don't think that's fair – if it had been me, you bet he wouldn't have allowed it – but Catfish is the General, and we have to do what he says. I don't always like that – it's especially hard being a Lieutenant when even Monkey's a Colonel – but Catfish is pretty fair in most other things, and besides, who else would have let a girl join in the first place?

And so, every day between nine and five, we meet up under the balcony at Les Rapides, and we practise our moves. Easy ones, to warm up, with Monkey on his rubber ring and the rest of us bobbing along, yelling. Then comes the trick-tricky stuff – high dives, star-jumps, crocodile, with all of us in a long unbroken chain. We stop mid-morning for a rest. A snack, too, if we can get it; perhaps a dough ball or a slice

of cold manioc scrounged from Maman Jeanne. Sometimes there are small green mangoes on the trees over the veranda, and we throw sticks at them until one falls down. After twelve, though, the company starts to arrive, and we have to be good, or risk losing our business.

Like I said, we work the river. More precisely, we work the *people*: and if you ask me, anyone who can afford to spend a couple of thousand CFRs on a meal is fair game. It isn't begging – we'd never beg – but we can't stop them watching us, can we? And if sometimes they drop a coin or two, or a chicken bone, or a piece of bread, then where's the harm in that? Maman Jeanne doesn't like it, but she turns a blind eye. It's a wage like any other, after all, and it's more fun than breaking rocks.

I was born somewhere upriver. That was before the war – I can't remember the name of the place, or anything much about it, except that there was a house with palm thatch, and chickens running around it, and my mother used to carry me in a sling on her back, and there was a smell – not city smells but a forest smell – of wet mud and trees and rushes and steam from the manioc pots. Maybe that's why I ended up on Hippo Island; it's a fair long walk into town each day, but it feels good to be out of the city at night and to hear the river song as I go to sleep, with its choir of frogs and peepers.

No one else goes there much, except the fishermen. It's supposed to be bad magic. Papa Plaisance says it's the spirit of that last hippo, waiting for his chance to be avenged. Maman Jeanne says it's because things happened there during the fighting. She won't say much, but I can tell they

were bad, because normally Maman Jeanne can talk the legs off a centipede. Still, that was a long, long time ago, three years at least, and the island is a good quiet place now. But most people keep away, and there are stories of ghosts and sorcerers. I've never seen any. Papa Plaisance hasn't, either, and he comes every day in his pirogue. I have seen some pretty good catfish, though; and I'm glad the others stay away. Besides, I like being on my own.

Maman Jeanne has a shack near the other bank. She lives there with Maman Kim, her daughter, and Petite Blanche, her granddaughter. Maman Kim's husband used to live here, but doesn't any more. There's a story behind it, but that's *man–woman bizness*, as Maman Jeanne says, and doesn't interest me much. Papa Plaisance has a shack, too, with a vegetable patch and a workshop under the big mango tree. Papa Plaisance is Catfish's uncle. He makes pirogues, or used to, before the war came, beautiful slim pirogues that sliced through the water without a sound. He's the one who taught me how to ride the current and how to paddle from the stern to keep the little boat from tipping over. He goes out a long way, right into the rapids, and sets his traps among the ankle-biters. Sometimes I have to help him; but it's dull work compared with riding the rapids, and he never pays me anyway, so I sneak past him when I can, and make my way alone upriver.

Today I got to Les Rapides early, an hour after daybreak. The others weren't there yet, and I sat on the bank and waited, chewing on a piece of bitter bamboo shoot and watching the river for devil-fish. There was no one else

around, except for an old man with a pirogue, and a few birds flying low over the brown water. I'd been there for an hour before Monkey turned up with his rubber ring, and by then I'd already gathered that something was wrong. I'd have known it even without the way Monkey looked at me, all sideways and sly-fashion, with that little smile that means bad news for someone not him. He's always been jealous of me, I know. Perhaps because I'm a better swimmer; perhaps because my legs are long and straight, while he has to walk short and twisty-style on his crooked foot.

'Where the others, Monkey?' I said.

'Coming soon,' he told me. 'Papa Plaisance call us round. Give us dough balls for breakfast.'

Well, *that* was a surprise, for a start. Old Papa never gives out food for free. I wondered what he wanted, and why he'd asked my friends to eat, but let me go to Les Rapides alone.

'Papa say you wasting time,' said Monkey, bringing out the remains of his dough ball and beginning to eat it. 'He says there's money to make on the river.'

'What, fishing with *him*? I leave that to the ones who don't swim so well.'

Monkey's eyes narrowed. 'Well,' he said, 'Papa say he don't want you hanging around here any more. He tell Catfish. You work for him now. No more Rapids.'

I could hardly believe it. 'Papa Plaisance, he's not my family,' I said. 'He has no right to decide what I do. Just because Catfish's uncle says so, doesn't mean I have to do his work for free.'

'*He* tell Catfish,' repeated Monkey stubbornly. '*I* tell *you*.'

'But *this* is my business,' I said, hearing the silly little shake in my voice.

'Not any more,' said Monkey. 'The Rapids belong to the Catfish gang.'

There was a silence as I let that flow past me. Monkey ate his dough ball, watching me with that look in his eyes, expecting me to cry, perhaps, I don't know. Anyway, I didn't give him that satisfaction. 'You just the errand boy,' I told him haughty. 'Where's the General?'

He gave a shrug in the direction of the stonebreakers. 'Don't go there, Ngok,' he warned as I began to climb down towards the path. 'You not welcome.'

'You want to stop me?' I shot over my shoulder.

Monkey shrugged again, and followed me at a distance, limping. 'You'll see,' was all he said, and even then I pretended not to hear him.

I found the others down by the rockbreakers. Catfish wouldn't look at me, and Hollywood Boy was playing jump-stone across the swim-hole and pretending cool. 'Monkey tells me you don't want me on the Rapids any more,' I said, attacking straight away, before Catfish could find his voice.

Catfish said nothing, just picked at his feet and wouldn't look.

'Cat got your tongue?' I said.

Catfish muttered something about not wanting to hang with little girls.

'The Rapids are mine as much as yours,' I said, hearing that sound in my voice again, halfway between tears and devil-fish rage. 'You can't stop me if I want to be here.'

But he could, and he knew it. Three against one; besides, on land they were bigger and older and stronger than me, even coward Monkey with the bent foot. Still, I didn't care. Let them try, if they were men enough. I fingered my devil-fish tooth on its wire and prayed; *devil-fish, send me your spirit to make me strong.*

'Go home,' said Catfish.

'You want to stop me? You just try.' And then a sudden inspiration halted me, fresh and strong as a voice from God. God or devil-fish, anyway, I couldn't tell, but it was so clear that it took my breath, and then I started laughing, gaspy-style, till the boys must have thought I was crazy.

'Why you laughing, Ngok?' said Hollywood Boy, looking a little uncomfortable now. He should be; I'd seen him try the Swallow just last week, and he took it wide, bumped over the Turtle and ended up on his face in a mudhole. Catfish is better; but Monkey never tries the long rides, and I knew I could beat any of them – maybe even Catfish – on a good day, and with the devil-fish tooth to bring me luck.

'You want the Rapids for yourself?' I said, still laughing. 'We'll make a deal, boy. We see who's the best. We let the river decide.'

That made them stare. Monkey looked scared; Hollywood Boy laughed. Only Catfish was quiet, serious. 'What you mean?' he said at last.

'I mean a challenge,' I said. 'The Catfish gang against the Ngok gang. Winner takes the Rapids. Loser goes back to Papa Plaisance.'

Monkey sniggered. 'You got to be crazy,' he said.

'Crazy perhaps, but I can swim like a crocodile.'

Catfish frowned. He doesn't say much, and when he does, people listen. He was the General, after all, and he knew that a good General can never turn down a challenge. Do that once, and people start to think you're afraid. Twice, and nobody obeys orders any more. Three times, and you're a dead man.

'What kind of a challenge?'

'The big one,' I said at once. 'The Deep.'

There was a long silence. Then Catfish nodded once. 'OK,' he said, and without looking back at me, he stood up and began to walk upriver towards Les Rapides.

Reaching the swimming place, I thought the Deep looked darker and more distant than ever before. The river was already swollen from last week's rain; patches of water hyacinth, some as large as boats, rushed by on the sour-smell water. In a month the long rains will come; then the Rapids will be too dangerous to ride, even for a good swimmer. During the rainy months even crocodiles die in the tumbling rapids. Now was too soon for that time, though not too far away either, and I was beginning to feel a little nervous as we reached our strip – no customers eating there now, not yet, but a waiter laying out tables under the big mango tree, and the smell of roasting something drifting down from the open kitchen.

'You sure?' said Catfish, looking at me. His face was calm, but I thought he was sweating; maybe the heat, or maybe something else, too. Monkey stood at his side with the rubber ring under his arm, his eyes round open with all the whites showing.

'You scared?' I said.

Catfish shrugged, as if to suggest that the Deep was just another long ride to him and not the biggest, furthest and most dangerous section of the near Rapids.

'OK then.' We looked at each other.

'You first.'

'No, you.'

His face was like wood, stiff and brown and expressionless. 'OK then. We go together.'

'No, man,' said Hollywood Boy in dismay. 'That's too risky!' In a way, he was right; those long rides were safer when taken alone, for the distance has to be calculated absolutely precisely, and even an inch to the wrong side can mean a lethal sweep into a sinkhole's gullet, or a battering run over the ankle-biters. Two swimmers together will clump, like weed islands, breaking the current and risking disaster.

'All right,' I said. 'Both together.'

Even on a day with nothing to prove, we practise before we try the big runs. A couple of runs down the Slide, perhaps; a crocodile or two, some jumps, and then we are ready to try the Swallow. Today, there was none of that childishness. Monkey sat on the bank and watched, his legs tucked into his rubber ring; Hollywood Boy sat hunched under the arch of Les Rapides, and Catfish and I observed the river, occasionally throwing in objects – a plastic bottle, a piece of wood – to gauge the speed and the course of the distant Deep.

Neither of us wanted a practice run. It would have shown weakness, somehow; though I knew it made our chances of

success so much smaller. By rights we should have done the Swallow a dozen times or so before we even attempted the Deep – but only the heat of my anger was keeping me there in the first place, and I didn't want the river to put a damp on that before I was ready.

Twenty minutes, and I could feel it beginning to ebb. Catfish was still watching, testing wind speed and water, occasionally glancing quick-quick at me to see if I'd lost my nerve. I prayed again to the devil-fish god – *speed, courage, luck* – and shot Catfish a big, bright smile. I don't know whether it fooled him; either way I wasn't waiting any longer, and I stood up, tucked my skirt around my legs and tied it in place and said, 'Ready?'

'You crazy, man,' said Monkey with gloomy satisfaction. 'If the river don't get you, the crocodiles will.'

'Crocodiles don't like fast water,' I said, looking beyond him towards the far corridor. You could hardly see it now for reflections: a bare strip, smoother than the rest, simmering gold in the distant haze. It was pretty, I thought; pretty like the back of a shining snake. And like the snake, it had a bite.

'Still ready?' He was counting against it; I could see it in his eyes.

'As ever,' I said, and both together we stepped back to give ourselves maximum run. One-two-three steps, hands almost touching, and we were at the edge; a fourth and I flung myself far out into the air, riding far beyond the Slide, landing feet first with a *plunk* of air on to the tail of the Swallow.

I sank, went under; felt the tow of the river, far greater

beneath than on the surface, and pulled my feet up fast. Catfish was somewhere very close, I knew; but I couldn't afford to look for him just then. With all my strength I stretched out, leaning forward, kicking my feet, reaching for the current like a lifeline. Downriver the Turtle shrugged its giant pink shoulder out of the water and I struck out for the Swallow, knowing that if I reached the Turtle from the wrong side I would miss the opening, and be dragged into a mess of sinks and ankle-biters – that is, if the river didn't crush me like a rotten egg.

Behind and to the left of me, further into the corridor, I could sense Catfish striking and panting. He was strong, but he was heavy, too; I raised my feet from out of the drag-water and kicked along ahead, light as a lily. Neither of us spoke; there was water in my nose and mouth; water in my eyes and all I could think of was the corridor that drew me, spinning and gasping, closer to the Turtle and the sink on either side.

Bump-bump-bump. A little bump-slide, a string of round rocks scattered under the surface like the bones in a skinny man's spine. I rode them, losing speed and breath, and then the Turtle was already on me, its smooth sweep of Swallow ride on the bank side, its rough tangle of uncharted territory on the other. I took a deep breath. Braced – and kicked out at the Turtle just as the river swelled me over the top, pushing out with my long strong legs and boosting myself into the unknown. The current was stronger here than ever before, sucking at my legs in hot–cold bursts, and there were stones here, stones and rocks I did not recognize, striking my feet and legs and skinning my left shin from instep to knee.

Ankle-biters. I'd expected no less; but these were whole-body ankle-biters, reaching up out of the depths like the teeth of the river. I tucked my legs up, kicking, and still they bit; behind me, Catfish cried out, but I could not see why. And still the Deep seemed twice as far, twice as fast as ever before, like some road in a story about castles that move and countries that vanish overnight only to reappear somewhere else, on the other side of the world, perhaps, under a magic cloud-carpet of snow.

Once more I prayed to the devil-fish tooth – *bring me far, bring me fast* – and boosted myself as hard as I could away from the rocky strip. Beside and behind me, I saw Catfish do the same; but as I shot forward I saw him slip – slide away towards a crookleg gully that swept back into the Swallow – while I sailed ahead of him, quick and straight as one of Papa Plaisance's pirogues, over the danger zone and into fast, smooth water.

The Deep! I could see it now, and in my path; the curve of my course would lead me straight towards it now, using the very speed of the river to fling me across, as a boy may use a purse-sling to throw a stone. I opened my mouth in a blaze of triumph – *Wheee!* – then I sat on the river, hugging my knees the way Monkey does when he rides his rubber ring, and let the river take me, far out and far away, into the corridor.

It felt like flying. Flying and falling and dreaming all in one; with the heavy water riding black on yellow-brown beneath me, and small pieces of river debris stinging and lashing against my burning skin. But it was a wonder; for a moment there I was not simply *in* the river; I *was* the river;

I sang its song; and the river sang back to me in its many voices, and if I'd wanted to, I believe I could have swum all the way over to Kinshasa and nothing – not even crocodiles – could have touched me.

And then I looked back. I shouldn't have done it. I was almost there, my fingers combing the skirts of the Deep. But I looked round, perhaps to check if Catfish had seen my triumph, and the joy fell away from me in a sudden cold.

Catfish had slipped, as I'd first thought, into the crookleg gully that led back to the Swallow. If he'd stuck to that run, he would have been all right; it was a straight, smooth channel that bypassed the Turtle and brought the swimmer back into the long, clean corridor towards the swimming hole. But Catfish hadn't stuck to the run. Instead he had tried to boost himself back; a desperate, impossible move against the current. The river had stopped him; first tumbling him on to his back, then dragging him back towards the Turtle, the rocks and the black sink between. Too late, Catfish had understood his mistake; I could see him clinging, all dark head and skinny arms, round an exposed spike of river rock as over him the water heaved and hurled, bucking like some bareback creature that does not want to be ridden. I saw all this in an instant: the angry river; Catfish clinging on for his life; the gullet of darkness below. With a little more speed, he could have made it past the sink; but he had lost his momentum and his nerve. Now he clung, slip-slipping on the greasy stone, and wailed soundlessly over the howl of the river song.

Before me, the Deep was an arm's length away. Its song

too was deafening – *come to me, Ngok* – but there too was my friend, and though it tore me inside to abandon the dare, I knew I could not leave him to be swallowed by the sink.

I pushed away, back into the rocks. For a second, the Deep clung to me, singing its song; then it spat me out as hard as a child spitting out a pawpaw seed, and I shot away, skimming the rocks with my knees, towards the Swallow. It was risky, I knew. I would have to follow Catfish most precisely, and without losing momentum, grab him from where he clung without letting the sink inhale us both. A second's miscalculation and we would go under, never to surface. An inch to either side, and I'd miss him altogether. I prayed to the devil-fish one last time – *oh please, devil-fish, may my aim be true* – and taking a deep breath, sitting squarely on the wave and with my lungs filled to bursting, I skidded down the final run at top speed towards Catfish.

He must have seen what I was trying to do. He grabbed my hand and dropped his grasp from the rock, and I let my speed take us both, like bottles on the water, shooting right over the nasty sink-hole and into the harrow of ankle-biters.

'Hold on, Catfish!' I could hardly hear myself over the river song. But his hand was in mine and I held tight, both of us yelling as the rocks bit into our legs and feet. The river was laughing now, I could hear it; a low chuckle of rocks and pebbles, like drums around a campfire. And the Swallow was smoothing out again; slowing, easing out towards the swimming hole. The stones fell away under our feet; Catfish dropped my hand and began to swim, slow and limping-style, towards the shallows.

The others were waiting there for us, unsure of what they had seen.

'What happen, man?' said Monkey impatiently, as Catfish and I lay out on the dry stones of the rockbreakers' flats and examined the cuts and scrapes on our legs.

I looked at Catfish. He didn't look back. His face looked more wooden than ever, except for a big scrape over one eye that had probably come from his hitting that pointy rock.

'Did you reach the Deep, Ngok?' said Hollywood Boy, his voice quivering with excitement. 'I thought I saw you, maybe, but you were too far for me to be sure—'

This was the time to speak, I thought. To reveal how I'd touched the Deep – actually *touched* it with the tips of my fingers, like a mythical fish no one ever catches except in dreams. If I told them, then I'd be General. Catfish would go home to Papa Plaisance. Les Rapides would belong to me.

Catfish still wasn't looking at me. His face looked closed, like a rock.

'Well?' said Monkey. 'Did you win?'

There was a long silence. Then I shook my head. 'Nah,' I said. 'I nearly did, but the Swallow pulled me in. Call it a draw, man. Nobody won.'

Hollywood Boy looked disappointed. 'Hey, Ngok,' he said. 'You lost your magic tooth.'

I reached for it then, but I already knew it was gone. Maybe the river took it back; or maybe it was the spirit of the devilfish, taking what was due.

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We still work the river, the four of us: Catfish, Monkey, Hollywood Boy and I. There was a little tension with Papa Plaisance at first, but Maman Jeanne unexpectedly took my side – unlikely, I'd have thought, but it seems Papa was in her bad books over some unpaid work.

The river is ours again, for the moment – at least that strip of it that runs from Les Rapides to the stonebreakers' flats – and we work it every day, though no one has ever attempted the Deep since then. Maybe we will again, some day. Catfish is still the General, though he doesn't give orders in quite the way he once used to, and I've seen a gleam in Hollywood Boy's eye that tells me there may one day be another challenge. Not from me, though. Not again. Foolish to imagine I might ever have been a General – it's bad enough trying to keep up with the boys – though I can see it in their eyes sometimes: that awe, that knowledge of something dared, some secret glimpsed, some glory almost won. One day, perhaps, I'll find it again.

Meanwhile there's always the river, as Maman Jeanne says, with its sleepy silences and its terrible rage and its song that keeps on going, and going, and going, carrying spells and dreams and stories with it all the way into the belly of Africa and out again into the open, undiscovered sea.