

MADDY WEST
AND THE
TONGUE
TAKER

BRIAN FALKNER

ILLUSTRATED BY DONOVAN BIXLEY

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For Annie, with love

The Doctor

When Maddy started speaking Japanese, her mum took her to the doctor.

The doctor was a gentle, grey-haired man with gold-rimmed glasses that made him look intelligent. Maddy liked the doctor immediately.

“So what is the problem today?” the doctor asked, smiling kindly at Maddy.

“She’s speaking in foreign tongues,” Maddy’s mum said, but the word “foreign” had a strange ring to it, as though it brought a bad taste to her mouth when she said it.

The doctor frowned and for some reason began to examine Maddy’s ear.

“What kind of foreign tongues?” he asked. There was no bad taste to the way he said it.

“Japanese,” Maddy’s mum said. “At least, I think it was Japanese. It might have been Korean, or Taiwanese, or even Chinese.”

It had been Japanese, but this conversation seemed to be between her mum and the doctor, so Maddy didn't butt in to tell them so.

"So you've been speaking a foreign language?"

The doctor raised an eyebrow at Maddy then turned back to her mum.

"I don't quite understand. What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to ..." Maddy's mum stopped. It was quite clear that she wasn't sure what she wanted the doctor to do. "I want you to ... to ... to fix her."

The doctor looked from Maddy to her mum, then back again.

"I don't think she's broken," he said. Maddy could have hugged him on the spot.

"Well, I want you to do *something*," Maddy's mum said.

"All right," the doctor said. "I suppose we could run some tests."

"Tests, good. Yes, tests," Maddy's mum said.

“Would it be all right if I spoke to Maddy alone for a moment first?” the doctor asked.

“Alone? Why?” Maddy’s mum narrowed her eyes. It made her look like a cat.

“I think it will help,” the doctor said.

“Oh.” Maddy’s mum looked sideways at Maddy but stood up. “How long will it take?”

“As long as it takes,” the doctor said.

Maddy’s mum narrowed her eyes even further at the doctor.

Maddy was starting to like him more and more.

Maddy’s mum walked over to the door, opened it and left. The doctor stood and closed the door softly.

“What kind of tests?” Maddy asked.

“Oh, there are no tests,” the doctor said. “I just said that so your mother would wait outside. I hope you don’t mind.”

“I thought that,” Maddy said with a smile. “And no, I don’t mind.”

“Now.” The doctor sat on the corner of his desk and looked at her over the top of his spectacles. “How old are you, Maddy?” “I’m nine,” Maddy said, “and a half.”

“And a very important half it is,” the doctor said. “And you speak Japanese? Do you speak any other languages?”

“I don’t know,” Maddy said. “How many other languages are there?”

“There are hundreds of them,” the doctor said. “Too many for any one person to know. I myself learned French at school and have a little smattering of Polish from my grandmother. I once knew a person who could speak five languages.”

Maddy wasn’t really listening; she was visualising a smattering of Polish, which sounded like something that had once happened when she was helping her mum clean the dining table.

“Would you like to hear some French?” the doctor asked. “It’s a beautiful language.”

“Yes, I honestly would,” Maddy replied.

He chuckled. "That's quite extraordinary," he said.

"What is?" Maddy asked, convinced she was about to learn some great secret that only doctors knew.

"You are," the doctor said.

Maddy considered that. She wasn't sure if he was being nice or rude.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Well, when I asked you if you would like to hear some French," the doctor said, "I asked it in French."

Maddy quickly thought back. Yes, the doctor had said, "*Est-ce que tu aimerais entendre un peu de Francais?*"

So that was French!

"In fact, everything I said from then on was also in French." The doctor smiled.

"Wow," said Maddy.

"And you answered in French also," he said, and went to sit back in his chair, which puffed and wheezed as he did so. Maddy thought that the doctor should lose some weight, but also that a doctor would

know that without having to be told by a nine-year-old girl. So she said nothing.

“Do you also speak Polish?” the doctor asked, and from the sound of the words, Maddy guessed this time he was speaking Polish.

She answered using the same kind of words. “I guess so, if this is it.”

“Well, I never,” the doctor said.

He pushed a button on a small metal box on his desk. It answered with his nurse’s voice, although it sounded distant and tinny.

“Gabby, would you come in here for a moment please,” he said. “Certainly, doctor,” the voice said.

The door opened and the nurse entered. “Yes, doctor,” she said.

“Maddy, this is Mrs Head,” the doctor said. “Mrs Head, I seem to remember you telling me that you spoke Spanish.”

“I learned it at school, and I practised a little last year when we went on holiday to Majorca,” she said.

“Would you mind practising a little on Maddy?” the doctor asked.

“I’d be happy to,” Mrs Head said. “Does she speak Spanish?”

“I think we’re about to find out,” the doctor said.

Mrs Head sat down on the chair next to Maddy, the one that her mum had been sitting on.

Maddy thought she was pretty, with happy eyes, but used too much make-up.

“I am asking if speaking Spanish you thank you please,” Mrs Head said.

Maddy laughed.

“Did you understand her?” the doctor asked.

“A little,” Maddy said.

“Interesting,” the doctor said. “Mrs Head, would you please try again.”

“Speaking the Spanish difficulty without language motor car,” Mrs Head said confidently.

“How about that time?” the doctor asked Maddy.

“No, sorry, I couldn’t understand her,” Maddy said.

“Thank you, Mrs Head,” the doctor said.

She rose and went back to her office.

“Japanese, French, Polish, but not Spanish.” He made some notes in Maddy’s file. “Now that is very interesting.”

“Actually, I think I do speak Spanish,” Maddy said after the door to the office had shut.

“You do? I thought you said you didn’t.”

“What I said was that I couldn’t understand Mrs Head,” Maddy said. “I think I speak Spanish, but I don’t really think that she does.”

The doctor chuckled again and made some changes to the notes in the file.

“What are we going to do with you?” he asked. Maddy didn’t know the answer to that question.

Just then the door opened and Maddy’s mum stood in the doorway. She did not look pleased.

“How are these tests going?” she asked.

“Very well,” the doctor said. “You have a very charming and talented daughter.”

“Humph,” Maddy’s mum said, which wasn’t a word in any language that Maddy could understand, but her mum always seemed to say it when she was annoyed and didn’t know what else to say.

“But it’s not only Japanese that she speaks,” the doctor said.

“She speaks another language?”

“A lot. In fact, so far I haven’t managed to find a language that she *doesn’t* speak.”

“That’s not right, is it?” Maddy’s mum said. “Can you do something about it?”

“To be honest, I don’t think there’s a problem to solve,” the doctor said. “A talent like this could be very valuable.”

“No. It’s not natural. It’s not...” She seemed to catch her breath. “Valuable?”

“I mean, in a useful kind of way,” the doctor said, but Maddy’s mum didn’t seem to have heard him.

“Valuable?” she said again.

“No, I simply meant ...” the doctor began, but Maddy’s mum walked over and took Maddy’s hand, pulling her up out of the chair.

“Thank you, doctor,” she said. “How much for today?”

“Er ... please see Mrs Head on the way out,” the doctor said. He was frowning.

Maddy caught his eye and winked at him to let him know that everything would be all right. He broke into a grin and shook his head.

“What an extraordinary young lady,” he said.



An Invisible Friend

If not for Maddy's mum, that might have been the end of that and Maddy might never have gone on a dark and dangerous adventure.

Maddy's mum was a tall, thin lady with high, sharp cheekbones and bouffant red hair that took hours of blowing and brushing and huffing and puffing in the morning to keep that way. Her name was Gertrude. It was a rather old-fashioned name that had been handed down for generations in her family, but which Maddy had somehow skipped (for which she was grateful).

Maddy hadn't skipped the red hair though but, unlike her mum's, Maddy's was a jungle of thick, red spring-like curls – and no amount of huffing and puffing or brushing seemed to make any difference. She had also inherited her mum's rather fierce temper, although Maddy tried to keep that under control. Sometimes it felt to Maddy that there was a wild

animal caged inside her and she had to be careful not to let it escape.

When they got home from the doctor's, her mum disappeared into her bedroom and shut the door. Maddy could hear her talking on the phone, but she knew that when her mum shut the door, it meant she didn't want to be disturbed.

"Not unless there's a fire!" her mum had once said, quite abruptly, when Maddy had interrupted her to ask her something.

What that really meant, Maddy knew, was, *Not unless it's super important!* And there was nothing important, so she knew she should leave her mum alone for a while.

Instead, she climbed up onto the desk in her bedroom, opened the window and crawled out onto the fire-escape.

It was metal and cold, and always left a crisscross pattern on the palms of Maddy's hands and her knees, which Kazuki called *alien skin*.

She ran along the fire-escape, being careful not to look down. You could see through the metal grille all the way to the ground below, and it was a very long way down. When Kazuki came to visit her, he never used the fire-escape because he was afraid of heights. He always took the elevator down to her floor and knocked on the front door instead. But Maddy liked using the fire-escape.

She tapped on the window of Kazuki's bedroom, where he was sitting, reading a book.

Kazuki, like Maddy, enjoyed reading books. Kazuki's books were written in a Japanese alphabet that went from the top to the bottom of the page, and across from right to left, instead of left to right. Maddy found them hard to read because she kept going the wrong way.

Today she could see that he was reading an English vocabulary book. It was one of his books from school.

Kazuki's English was very poor, even though his family had moved to England over a year ago.

His older brother Tsuji spoke good English and Kazuki's teachers couldn't understand why Kazuki hadn't picked it up as well.

Maddy thought she knew. Tsuji was confident and outgoing and had made a lot of friends at school, so he was always speaking English. But Kazuki was quiet and shy and hadn't made any friends at all, so he didn't get to practise English that often.

Maddy tried to speak English to him, but it made for difficult and slow conversations so, as often as not, they would speak in Japanese.

"Hi, Maddy," Kazuki said (in Japanese).

"Open the window," she said (also in Japanese), and when he did, she climbed inside.

Kazuki was ten and his room was covered with posters of things that made no sense to Maddy, like scary-looking Japanese men called samurai, with strange, bald haircuts and long swords; and other men wearing black pyjamas and black hoods that covered everything except their eyes. They had swords too and

were called ninja. When Kazuki grew up, he wanted to be a ninja warrior.

“Where did you go today?” Kazuki asked.

“To the doctor’s,” Maddy answered.

“Oh,” Kazuki said. “Did he give you any medicine?”

“No,” she said.

“Good,” he said. “I hate medicine.”

“Me too,” said Maddy.

“My birthday present from Uncle Kiyoshi arrived today,” he said.

It had been Kazuki’s birthday the day before. Maddy had made him a colourful birthday card, and he had got a new catcher’s mitt and a baseball from his parents.

“What did your uncle give you?” Maddy asked.

“A ninja suit!” Kazuki said. “It’s really cool. It’s black and it has lots of secret hidden pockets.”

“Cool!” said Maddy.

“And it can make me go invisible,” Kazuki said.

“That’s exciting,” Maddy said. “Invisible! Honestly?”

“Yes!” Kazuki said. “And no one can see me, and I can do anything I want.”

“That’s amazing,” Maddy said, trying not to sound too sceptical.

“Yes, and when I am invisible, Mum can’t see me at all. Today I sneaked a biscuit out of the jar while she was in the kitchen, and she never saw anything.”

Maddy thought that Kazuki’s mum’s biscuits were terrible and tasted like seaweed, but she was too polite to say so, either to Kazuki or to his mum.

“You have to show me,” Maddy said.

The ninja suit was all black. Black trousers, a black tunic and a black belt. Attached to the back of the tunic was a black hood which pulled down over his face.

Only Kazuki’s eyes and hands were visible when he put it all on. Then he put on some black gloves and that just left his eyes.

“Okay, now I’m going to go invisible,” he said.

Behind the face mask, Kazuki’s eyes closed, and his brow furrowed in concentration.

“There!” he said. “Can you tell where my voice is coming from?”

“From your mouth, silly,” Maddy said. “I can still see you as plain as flour.”

“Oh.” Kazuki looked disappointed. “Perhaps I did it wrong.”

He concentrated even harder, then opened his eyes and said, “Where am I now?”

“Right there,” Maddy said, pointing at him.

“It’s not working,” Kazuki said. He looked like he was about to cry.

“Wait,” she said. “Let me turn around, and you go invisible when I’m not watching.”

“Yeah!” Kazuki said. “That’s got to be it.”

Maddy turned around and counted to three, then turned back.

Kazuki was gone.

“I can’t see you,” she gasped.

“I told you!” Kazuki said.

He was standing in the corner of the room. He had moved so quietly that Maddy hadn't heard him. He was standing so still in a shadow that at first she hadn't been able to see him, until she had looked right at him. It wasn't really invisibility, she thought, but it was quite extraordinary all the same.

"That's fantastic," she said.

"Now I can be a real ninja," Kazuki said, pulling his hood back.

Maddy looked around at the ninjas on the posters on Kazuki's wall. She thought that to be a ninja warrior you would have to be strong and fierce and brave, but Kazuki was more quiet and gentle. Maddy couldn't imagine Kazuki as a fierce ninja warrior.

"And I'll be able to sneak right into Tsuji's room and play tricks on him," Kazuki was saying.

Maddy laughed. Tsuji was older and bigger than Kazuki and often picked on him.

"That sounds scary."

“But when I have my ninja suit on, I won’t be afraid,” Kazuki said.

Maddy nodded.

“You’re lucky that you don’t have an older brother,” Kazuki said.

“I guess,” Maddy said.

“How come you don’t have any brothers or sisters?” Kazuki asked.

“I’m not sure,” Maddy said. “I asked Mum and she said it was because they couldn’t afford any more kids. She said I was very expensive.”

Kazuki laughed. “When you say it like that, it sounds like she bought you in a shop.”

Maddy laughed too. “I guess your mum and dad could afford to buy more kids than my mum and dad,” she said.

“I guess so,” Kazuki said. “Or maybe you were just really expensive, because of how you can speak lots of languages.”

“I don’t know about that,” said Maddy. “She’s not happy about it.”

“I think it’s just because she doesn’t understand,” Kazuki said. “People are afraid of what they don’t know.”

“I suppose,” said Maddy, and she gave Kazuki a small hug because she knew he was really talking about himself.