CHAPTER 12

HOW TO GET OFF GUAM?
1959–1962

In September 1959, the three of us agreed to have a permanent home where we could be settled.

Shichi had appeared to be the strongest of us. He was small but very stoutly built. Around this time Shichi began to suffer from a chill, an ache at the back of his head, stiff shoulders, and occasional stomach-ache, asking us to massage his shoulders; we seemed to have reached our limit, being physically and mentally exhausted after an endless nomadic life and unrelieved tension. We earnestly wanted to be settled somewhere.

For these reasons, the three of us began to dig a much deeper hole than before. From our earlier experience, we selected a spot above the level to which the water table could reach, and which satisfied the other conditions for our security and subsistence. We decided to dig our shelter below a particularly large banyan tree. As we still had only primitive tools, we had to do the job extremely patiently.

A banyan tree has a number of roots descending from branches as high as 6 feet (2 metres) above the ground, and the roots looked like an octopus’s legs. Beneath its main stem, we dug a vertical hole of 20 inches (50 cm) square, 13 feet (4 metres) deep. From its bottom, we dug a corridor of 4 feet (1.2 metres) tall, 3 feet (1 metre) wide and 33 feet (10 metres) long. We dug a lavatory in the middle of the corridor. Following the corridor, we dug the main hall of 11 feet (3.5 m) tall, 10 feet (3 metres) wide and 23 feet (7 metres) long. We dug a further 35 feet (more than 10 metres) for a space to
store foodstuffs and firewood, and made a hearth on a side of the hall near this storage space. We repaired a dead piece of breadfruit tree nearly 4 feet in diameter, the core of which had rotted away like a tube, in order to use it to line a ventilation shaft. Depending on the current of air outside, the air sometimes came in from the entrance tunnel and went out from the ventilation duct, and vice versa. We observed and learnt from this phenomenon.

We also dug a vertical shaft along the root of a pandanus tree, which grew between the corridor and the main hall, in order to pull a bucket of water up and lower it down.

We made a ladder from hibiscus trees with which to climb and descend the entrance shaft. We thought that as long as we went in and out stealthily like an old fox or a shy dog, even the natives would not be able to discover our hole.

From afternoon every day, for three months before the completion of this shelter, the three of us kept digging it alternately. As we had only fragments of a bombshell with which to dig, we were actually scratching the earth away little by little rather than digging. Every other night, we pushed the earth, which we had scratched away so far, to the entrance, and pulled it out of the entrance shaft with a rope. We then carried the earth in baskets on our backs to far away places. When we found a depression on the ground, we removed the surface, filled the depression with the earth, and put back the removed surface. We then camouflaged the place with breadfruit leaves or some other leaves, as had become our practice. We eventually began to use our tribal machetes and the lids of our portable rice cookers in order to cut roots and dig.

Because we dug a substantially larger and deeper hole than before, the task of bringing the earth out of the entrance shaft was particularly laborious. At first, we pulled the rope with our bare hands, which became blistered and too painful to bear. Thereafter, we made a kind of pulley and set it on a branch of the banyan tree hanging over the hole to do the job.

While I was crouching and pushing the earth towards my legs with the lid of a rice-cooker, the ground above me gave way and collapsed upon my back. I stopped breathing for a moment due to the shock. I broke out in a greasy sweat and fainted.