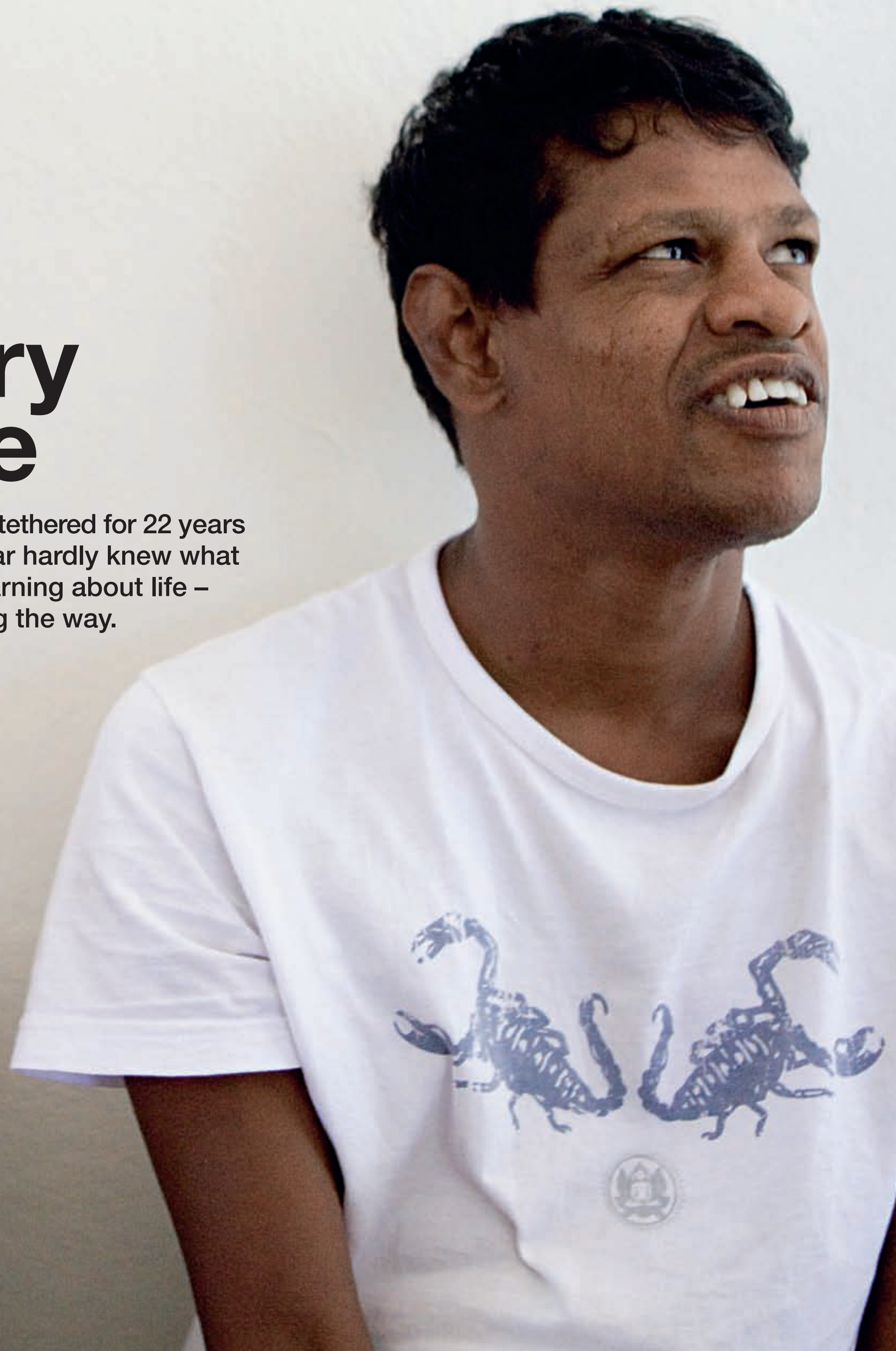
a ministry of one

Caged with chickens as a baby, then tethered for 22 years in an old people's home, Sujit Kumar hardly knew what it was to be human. Now he's learning about life – and helping science along the way.



Story Matthew Fynes-Clinton Photography David Kelly

Sujit Kumar is searching for his voice. His tongue still makes the staccato clicking employed by birdkeepers at feed time, a rhythm he heard incessantly while caged under his home with the family's chickens. But lately he has developed a songbook of utterances: whoops, yelps, screeches and inhaled groans. They are lengthy, ululating notes, some clearly pleasurable and, taken as a whole, apparently measurable.

"He's playing with his voice and enjoying it," says Janet Eales, a Brisbane-based special education teacher attached to an international group of experts assessing Kumar. She believes the elongated nature of the sounds is not dissimilar to the way babies "babble and coo", the precursor to speaking. "It's encouraging," adds leading Queensland speech pathologist Sue Park, another member of his specialist team.

Kumar, 38, is not the same person I met five years ago when I travelled to Fiji as the first Australian journalist to hear his horrendous story of abuse and deprivation. With only chickens for company until age eight, he'd imprinted bizarre bird-like behaviours – pecking food from the ground, folding his arms into wings, sleeping in a roosting position. Then welfare authorities stepped in and moved the feral child to an aged-care facility where, for the next 22 years, Kumar was tied to a grimy concrete corner, hosed down to keep him clean and frequently beaten. His rescuer, expatriate Australian Elizabeth Clayton, says he was rocking back and forth near his putrid bed during their initial encounter in 2002. The vision is seared in her memory.

The last time I saw Kumar, he emitted only random, unconnected sounds. He had an impish streak, grabbing handfuls of Clayton's hair and smirking at her protests. But I found it difficult to discern if he felt happiness – or sadness – in the fuller sense. Clayton told me he fell down hard one day and got to his feet with dampened eyes. That was the closest she'd come to seeing him cry. Today, though, he radiates a life-force that previously wasn't there; as if he's engaged with the world, no longer a spectator. Two pearly front dentures have smoothed the untamed edge, plugging a gap created years ago when a male nursing attendant punched him in the face, breaking his nose and teeth. Kumar seems to relish the new look, smiling widely and more readily. His growing expressiveness includes anger (tantrums), sentimentality (tilting his head on the shoulders of others) and, especially when children are about, jealousy (pushing and shoving).

Five years since my meeting her, Clayton, Kumar's carer and protector, is not the same person either. A former businesswoman from NSW who has lived in the Fiji islands since 1987, her dynamism remains pervasive. If anything, her allegiance to Kumar is stronger and yet their relationship has evolved at a heavy emotional cost.

Over morning tea on the second day of our recent reunion in the capital of Suva, Clayton confesses that she awoke at 3am in tears. She'd rolled out of bed and spent a couple of hours emptying her thoughts onto paper. "This love stuff can't be planned. It's powerful, it's transforming and it's often misunderstood," she penned in reference to Kumar. She chronicled how a decade ago (she had been widowed three years earlier), she'd quit her lucrative contract with Swedish icon Ikea – manufacturing and exporting Fijian timber furniture to Australia – because she wished to be more community-minded; to launch into something "godly, with a small g". Her new direction led her to Kumar. She wrote: "When you do this, people are very likely to question your motives. And to be honest, there is no clear explanation of why and how I do what I do."

Seven hours later, the diminutive 64-year-old sips her cappuccino and says, "I get lonely. Does that surprise you?" Her brew is tepid. She asks the waitress at the Toorak Cafe to make a fresh cup. "Writing to myself helps me to pull myself together," she goes on. "It's just ▶

the loneliness of the fight, for justice for Sujit, because there's not 20 of me around. But … this is where I'm placed and this is where I've made my life."

IN NOVEMBER 2002, CLAYTON WAS A NEW-found Christian visiting Suva's bleak, spartan Samabula Old People's Home with a group of fellow Rotarians when one of them took her to the "chicken boy". Kumar was in fact aged 29, and tethered to a wall by a 2m-strip of bed sheeting knotted around his waist – supposedly because of his "uncontrollable ways". Urine and faeces soiled his plastic-covered mattress. Clayton heard how Kumar, an Indo-Fijian, had been dumped at the premises as an eight-year-old following his imprisonment in a chicken pen since infancy. He still slept tucked up and bent down as if roosting, and gobbled food from the dirty floor.

Much of his history, particularly why his parents kept him caged with chickens under their house, is unclear. What is known is that his mother committed suicide when he was three. Three years later, in 1979, Kumar's taxi driver father was murdered and his internment among chickens was prolonged by his grandparents until welfare authorities intervened. In Suva, his elder brother Ram declined *Qweekend*'s interview request, and also did so on behalf of his two sisters.

Kumar had never been declared a state ward; his life was virtually untraceable. "I mean, there's beggars and then Sujit … he's at the bottom tier of all these people," says Clayton's Fijian lawyer John Rabuku. "Social welfare didn't hold any records for him. No files, nothing. On paper, he did not exist. He was a non-person."

A sickened Clayton, who had studied behavioural sciences at university, began visiting him at Samabula regularly. She demanded more civilised conditions and gently introduced Kumar to the foreign concept of compassion. It wasn't easy. "From December 2002 to June 2003, I visited the old people's home continuously," she says, "observing Sujit [but] as he was wild and aggressive, he would often scratch and bite me when I got close."

Clayton pressed on, rounding up volunteer neurologists, occupational therapists, special educators and behavioural therapists from the United States, Australia and New Zealand to visit and evaluate Kumar. She also developed a life and motor-skills program: attending to Kumar for meal sessions, attempting to toilet-train him and teaching him to roll, crawl, climb, stack and throw. From July 2003, therapy lasted six hours a day, during which Kumar was temporarily freed from his bindings.

With Clayton, gradually Kumar forged his first human attachment. However, the partnership still defies definition. They share hugs, mostly at her initiative, but I've watched Kumar spontaneously and tenderly trail fingers over Clayton's brow. She says mother-and-son doesn't quite fit. The substance of what they have is love, but she's learned to be careful.

"I get a bit worried that people think there's a love affair going on here," she says. "That it's an eros love instead of agape [compassionate] love. When I'm out with him in public, I like to have someone with me all the time. And I don't caress him because people will think there's some issue."

Clayton secured Kumar's release from Samabula in 2004, bringing him under her roof. Two years later, he relocated to a supervised government-run residence occupied by disadvantaged boys. "I felt it was important that Sujit grow and develop with people living around him," Clayton says. She was still his patron, devoting her days to him and assuming prime financial responsibility for his needs and rehabilitation.

Then last year, a thunderbolt struck. The Fijian Government's Social Welfare department banned her from direct involvement in Kumar's affairs, forcing her to mount a protracted court action for legal guardianship. As Kumar languished without Clayton's daily attention, the case lurched towards a quasi child custody trial. Several appearances for preliminary arguments took place in the High Court of Fiji (Family Court Division) and, according to Rabuku, Social Welfare was set to unleash a raft of "scathing allegations". The most damaging of these, he says, was an unsubstantiated claim that Clayton had coveted Kumar as a means of self-promotion and, worse, her considerable fundraising efforts were a ruse to line her own pockets. Despite keeping publicly available, audited accounts of Kumar's donations and Trust monies, Clayton was rocked. "Never mind what they've said about you," Rabuku told her. "Forget it. Let's just focus on one point: who can provide Sujit with the better support – financial, medical and wellbeing?"

Rabuku says bad blood had been simmering. "My assessment is that there were junior [Social Welfare] officers involved who just couldn't work with Elizabeth," he says. "They [felt] she was showing them up as incapable of and incompetent in handling [the requirements of] Sujit. It was a tall poppy syndrome."

After eight months, the dispute ended as abruptly and dramatically as it had ignited. The state withdrew its opposition to Clayton's application and, on November 18 last year, Justice Anjala Wati signed orders granting the Australian full guardianship of Kumar. Rabuku says the resource-strapped bureaucracy was resigned that it could never win a battle centred on Kumar's best interests. Clayton reflects: "Most people would be fighting to get him into welfare care – not out."

The litigation and separation from Kumar flushed out the opinions of others in a manner that startled Clayton. Her closest friend in Australia told her: "Elizabeth, your season's over with Sujit. You've done enough for him. Just get over him. Just leave him." Clayton says her daughter in Melbourne, who has two children, has also had trouble accepting her life of dedication to Kumar. "And the worst thing people would say," she adds, "was 'go and find yourself someone else to help'." It's like you lose a puppy and someone says, 'Oh, here's another puppy.'"

The court case over, Kumar's new permanent address is Clayton's white-walled home at Suva Point, one of the more salubrious districts in a harbour city of 88,000. Clayton is adamant her

Therapy sessions … Sujit Kumar during a motor skills workout (*left*); and (*opposite*) with his guardian, Australian expatriate Elizabeth Clayton.

purpose has always been to provide him with a safe environment and better quality of life. But now she has fences to mend. Although informed she had visiting rights, she saw Kumar only twice between March and November last year due to a combination of departmental obfuscation and self-preservation. "I would go in [to the welfare home] like a mother with the hairs on her head standing up," Clayton says. "He was losing weight. He was being given tablets with mildew on them. For my own health, I just couldn't keep going there. I could have really gone under."

Kumar, well-drilled in abandonment, "didn't want to know" Clayton after the court case. "I was Sujit's one and only attachment," she says. "The first person he was really close to. So I'm sure he experienced loss, and it's been very difficult renewing those connections. He needs to trust me again. It's been a process."

As the dust settles and routines are rejuvenated, Kumar's remedial team is eager to return to its potentially groundbreaking research. A core group stays in contact. Professor Harry McConnell, a Griffith University neuropsychiatrist, Sue Park and Janet Eales are in touch with Professor Margriet Sitskoorn, a clinical neuropsychologist from Tilburg University in the Netherlands. Eales and Park are chiefly concerned with monitoring and progressing Kumar's speech and motor aptitude, Sitskoorn has a special interest in the brain's capacity to recover from trauma, and McConnell consults on drug treatments that might better address Kumar's epileptic condition.

There are core questions underpinning their work: could a feral child, raised among chickens and denied the opportunity to embed language in the first few years, preserve the neural infrastructure crucial for speech? Could this wiring be reactivated in adulthood, perhaps the ultimate coup for a burgeoning science known as brain plasticity? Is there still time for Kumar to reach past his animal influences and ghastly ordeals to become, as a psychologist once put it to me, a test case for humanity?

> “Sujit's story shows how environment influences behaviour.

IN SPITE OF THE IMPROVEMENTS I NOTICED, Clayton is concerned that during their months apart Kumar was mostly left to his own devices – squandering some earlier advancements. He doesn't abide utensils at mealtimes any more, eating messily with his hands, and won't head to the toilet when his body calls (once in the bathroom, he has always required help).

He is curling his arms at the elbows again, like wings: behaviour Clayton thought she had straightened out. Although a series of MRI scans have shown Kumar's brain to be structurally normal, doctors can't rule out some intellectual impairment. His epilepsy was diagnosed only a few years ago. "We can see that certain parts [of his brain] involved with his epilepsy are a bit smaller," says Sitskoorn, 44, "but we don't see clear damage to the brain that can explain why he is not speaking. And this is support for the hypothesis that most of the damage to his development has been done because of social deprivation."

Kumar's tragic circumstances go directly to the nature/nurture conundrum: the brain's genetic programming for verbal communication versus the human interaction needed to receive, interpret and produce language. Sitskoorn says the equation is seldom clear-cut. "It's never only genes and it's never only environment," she says. "But Sujit, who has human genes and developed as a chicken, is an amazing story of how strongly the environment influences your behaviour."

Sitskoorn says that when Clayton found him, Kumar made clucking noises and hopped on one leg. "He had developed all kinds of things that normal children do not develop," she says, "but he didn't develop the things normal human beings do develop. We know from studies with Romanian orphans that social deprivation has an effect on the development of your brain. And we know that in different parts of your life, you need certain information exposure to develop language and motor, social and emotional skills. Sujit was not exposed to any of this."

Child behaviourists usually categorise birth to five years as the most critical period to learn language and communication skills. "Children all over the world listen to the same babble and just pick up language naturally," says Eales. "They used to say that if you missed those sensitive periods, that was it."

But Sitskoorn is at the vanguard of a modern scientific principle, brain plasticity, that is sweeping away old dogmas about the regenerative power of the brain. "We thought you were born with a certain kind of brain and no new neurons or new connections would come," she says. "Now we know new networks, new synapses between different brain cells, come into existence. Even in the adult years, probably up to death. That's very important news."

Especially for Kumar. Sitskoorn says his transformation in the past five years has been remarkable. Notwithstanding last year's disruptive events, she says intensive regimens of fine and gross motor activities and relentless social interaction and behaviour reinforcement have "humanised" Kumar. Sitskoorn asserts Kumar is "very strong proof" of the action of brain plasticity. "Sujit has developed many motor skills," she says. "He can climb stairs, jump on a trampoline, kick a football."

With a little prompting, he'll shake your hand. He is dexterous enough to hold a cup by the handle, lift it to his lips, neatly drain the contents and set down the vessel with precision. Before Clayton turned up, Kumar didn't know how to sit in a chair. He also now understands what it is that people eat, and the diversity on offer. Here, Sitskoorn observes, Kumar is exercising a key human awareness: the ability to choose. She has witnessed him walk to the fridge, open the door and remove an egg to signify he wants it cooked pronto.

Says Clayton: "When I first met him, he was a scavenger. He'd scratch around and look for food and ate cigarette butts, cockroaches. He didn't know the difference between food and filth. Now he's selective with his food. If I give him water, he'll look in the glass, [uninterested] you know, and then I'll have to give him milk."

Sitskoorn reiterates that there is one indispensable ingredient to Kumar's progress. "It's love," she says. "We all have social brains, and people sometimes do not understand that the brain really needs human love to grow and develop. Empathy, trust and friendliness are hugely important. One of the key factors for Sujit is the love he's getting from Elizabeth ▶

and his caregivers." (A sequence of trained Fijian carers has toiled alongside Clayton.)

Yet amid such promise, odds are fast fading on Kumar learning to speak. Clayton believes he has grasped a suite of basic words and phrases: shirt on, close the door, up, down. But Sitskoorn doesn't think he comprehends words, and if he's unable to process them, he's never going to return them in the form of speech. She says it is more likely Kumar has familiarised certain actions and contexts, with the accompanying language rendered meaningless. "I think that he does understand bodily behaviour or motor behaviour," she says. "So when you pick up a set of keys, he'll understand 'we're going in the car'. But in my opinion, he's not understanding the language.

"It's the one facet of [neuro-]plasticity that is not working for him. After eight years of being exposed to language, so much and so deliberately, he's showing no sign of speaking. I'm very sceptical about him ever being able to talk. I think it is too late."

Sitskoorn says the sound and language testing she has conducted on Kumar indicates "he's not deaf … he can hear very well. But it seems more difficult for his brain to process the profound language sounds." She has not played him chicken noises, but would consider it in the future. "Do different chicken sounds have different meaning for him?" she asks. "That would teach us something about whether he was ever able to learn language skills."

Eales and Park maintain Kumar may possess the potential to verbally communicate. "Will he ever speak in a sentence? No," Eales says. "But will he come up with a sound for words … ?" Park continues: "A sound such as 'arrr' for Elizabeth, meaning 'Aunty'? I think if he could use vowel sounds that were consistent – something for food, something for toilet – that would be brilliant. He's moving towards that, if he's moving towards anything."

Park, 57, who works with neurological childhood speech and language disorders, says Kumar's time with the birds created other issues that would affect his speech. She points to his darting eye movements, which stem from ultra-vigilance honed in the chicken flock. "[Kumar's] prime modus operandi was searching and hunting for food – and looking out for the dangers," Park says. "So he's not necessarily tuning into voices and sounds. He looks around the room because it's not his natural instinct to pay attention."

Sitskoorn says a functional brain-scan technique called Diffusion Tensor Imaging (DTI) might provide the answer. The magnetic resonance technology can trace the state of the neural pathways for language, or detect whether they even exist. Discussions are afoot for Kumar to undergo DTI, possibly in Queensland.

"The brain cells connect with each other through tracks," Sitskoorn says. "And you can look at the white matter around the tracks to see whether he has the networks necessary to process and produce language."

Should the scan reveal the worst, Sitskoorn will not be bowed. "Sujit," she says, "shows very clearly that even if you have the most horrible past, your quality of life and all sorts of skills can improve. So I see him as a very hopeful case."

BACK AT THE TOORAK CAFE, CLAYTON IS chewing over the implications of the court's guardianship decision. "I knew it would predetermine the rest of my life in that I have to care for him," she says. "I have to find the finances to do that, either through fundraising or my own resources. I won't be able to travel much. I have to cope with what people might think are my motives. Even though my motives are solid. I have to cope with being a person [characterised] as out of the box, not mainstream, off with the fairies … someone who's quirky or whatever."

Her longstanding confidant Berenado Vunibobo, a former Fijian government minister and, until last year, the country's United Nations representative in New York, maintains Clayton's professional sacrifices for Kumar were misguided from the outset.

At her entrepreneurial zenith, Clayton had 137 employees in a factory exporting up to 20 containers of furniture a month. "That brings its own advantage to Fiji," 78-year-old Vunibobo says. "To this day, I never stop reminding her that she made a serious error of judgement. Now, it's a narrow focus. A focus almost on one individual. And you wonder whether the talent she has should be so confined in its use."

Another tropical shower is passing over as I leave Vunibobo's two-storey house. Clayton is driving with Kumar next to her, a hollowed blue plastic cup – his favourite toy – swivelling on his right index finger. The digit has an arthritic-type backward slant. In his early years, a foraging Kumar would use it like a claw to break up food.

"I'm not in this for a cause," Clayton explains. "I'm not doing it for anything else but *his* needs. People like big ministries, but I don't need that. In a spiritual sense, it's a ministry of one. God has put him in my path and I'm going to help him."

We drop into a supermarket for supplies. After several minutes, Kumar wriggles from Clayton's clasp, shrieking and biting down on his left hand as he runs between the counters and aisles. Clayton catches up and mollifies him, but there's nothing wrong. It's just what Kumar does sometimes. Then, without warning, a strongly built Fijian man who has witnessed the performance takes six determined strides towards Kumar. Clayton holds on a little tighter. The man is grim. Several other customers watch as the man thrusts his palm upon Kumar's forehead and pronounces: "In Jesus's name, I rebuke you."

Clayton turns ashen. We hurry through the checkout. "That was seriously scary," she says, wheeling out of the carpark. "What he was doing was trying to stop the 'evil spirit' in Sujit from jumping into him. That's what you're up against. Shocking … shocking."

She throws Kumar a sideways glance. Whenever they cruise the potholed streets, he is prone to repeated squeals and she is forever nattering. "Sujit, what are you doing? Yes, we'll have to cut your nails. You like coming in the car, don't you?" On this occasion, the short trip home is peculiarly hushed. ■

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