

Solitaire

The storm tossed him ashore. Without the rage of the sea he might have drifted further on the ocean current - and died of dehydration, or sunstroke, or the sucked belly of starvation. In the bay where the palms danced devil-frenzied and the sand was pitted with heavy hits of rain, the sea swung his legs around higher than his head and left him there on the beach, slumped between life and death in that fragile state where things can go this way or that between waves - lying so still that the hole-digging ghost crabs higher up the beach went on with their toil. Plovers trotted forward and back, pecking on the tide, and flies investigated his moist eyes before leaving him for open mussels. And in and out ran the sea, quietening now, almost timid - while he lay, an exclamation, on the beach: or, rather, in the fall of his limbs, a question mark.

A question that was answered by a groan, and a spasm, and a sudden vomit of sea water and bile. The crabs shot to cover as he shaped himself another way on a jigsaw of granite outcrop, like a drunk in a bus station nuzzling hard pillows. Lightning flashed the sky to the sound of distant thunder, but nothing would move him until his body had recovered enough to let consciousness in.

He came to somewhere else. Sand granules still stuck to his limbs but he was off the beach and lying on squat-leaved grass beneath the shade of a broad tree. His head throbbed to the sea's rhythm, and when he tried to stand it was as if he had stepped aboard a bucking raft. The pit of his stomach took a three-sixty degree churn, and he had to grab at the trunk of a tree to stay balanced on the sides of his feet. 'No-ooo-oo!' he croaked out, the world twisting as he gripped. But he clung to his mast until the sea calmed and the raft beneath him stilled - and he could crouch to the ground and clutch his head; while slowly, slowly, slowly, nothing went around any more.

He had a raging thirst. His tongue was swollen and his mouth felt cracked with dryness. He needed water - but where was he? No shirt! What state was he in? He looked

down at himself and groaned with the headache of dehydration. There was rough sand down the front of him, grey boxers, bare feet, nothing in his sucked belly – and nothing in his head. Again, where was he? And wherever he was, what was he doing there? How had he got to this place? He stood and looked down at himself, saw every crease, mole, and sprigging hair – with no idea in the world where he'd come from.

He had stood to a headache, now he crouched again as it throbbed on. But did any change of position clear his befuddled head? Did it, hell! Not that he needed answers right now, there was no one around to explain himself to: this way were trees, bushes, and the sound of a bird; that way the roar of the sea. unsteadily, like learning to walk, he made for the beach: to see there on the sand, wedged between flush patterns of dark rock above the line of the tide, something he seemed to know, something he'd recently known very closely – a small, black, covered dinghy, ripped open on the rock and gasped out. So was that anything to do with him being here?

And where was here, anyway? Was there a village nearby, a town, somewhere to get food and clothes? He walked up the beach again and came to a small, natural bowl in the granite outcrop, filled with clear water. He dipped in a finger and tasted it. Not salty: it was rain, not sea. Cupping his hands, painfully he drank from it, those first sips like acid as they trickled round his swollen tongue and opened up his throat. The second handful was better, and the third refreshing – but he wouldn't overdo it. Instead, he found some shade and rested until he felt just about good enough to set off along this coast and find some people.

So, which way to go, left or right? From facing the sea he set off to his right. He could see that this part of the coast was a bay, about eighty metres across, with large smooth granite boulders at either end. In this direction there was an obvious passage between two of the boulders, so he headed for it – through there could be a pathway to people. But once he was beyond the boulders the beach disappeared, only smooth rock with waves breaking, and clumps of tall, overhanging trees, fronds of palms with green coconut clusters, and the sudden site of a nut bobbing in the water like a black head. There was no path, but there was a way. Moving from the sea but keeping it to his left

hand side, he walked between trunks, through clumps, over rotting logs and round steaming, mossy boulders. Ferns were everywhere: while his feet made no complaint at what they trod upon. His soles were as tough as rope.

On he went, pushing through the next spider web and round the next rock, certain that the next time he looked up he would see signs of people. But, nothing. Along the coastal way push was often clamber, and soon he was sheened with sweat. To his left, there was always the sound of the sea, sometimes near, sometimes distant; to his right, trees, flowers, bushes, fruits, leaf-rot beneath his feet - and rising up way above him an incline of granite boulders and tropical growth.

His eyes smarted with sweat as they strained to focus on the way ahead along the coast. And it was a pleasure when rain began to fall, nothing heavy, but refreshing and short. Still thirsty, he licked the fresh wet off a curve of palm fronds and trekked on, with no idea where he was heading, or towards whom.

The next beach was different from the one he'd left behind. This was shaded in small coral at the nearer end, but as he walked across the sand to cool his feet in the water, the surface was smoother than before: and what came into his head was 'talcum powder'. He pushed on. He didn't know the time, it was just hanging over him - a flat, whitish daylight but somehow with more the feel of afternoon than morning. This beach was longer than the first one with a spread of rock-free sand bordered by a line of palm trees curving out seaward for light. It was more open than the first, and he searched the wideness of the sea for signs of boats - but there was nothing to be seen; nothing but sea. Waves broke on a reef a hundred metres out, and closer-by the shallows were patched dark with weed and spiny sea urchins. Paddling was nowhere in his mind, though: what was driving him was help: someone to tell him where he was.

He left the beach and searched on beyond. However big this country was, somewhere it had to have a town, a community, and - come on! - some people. So it was push onward. His way led him inland again, and uphill - hands and feet time, pulling himself up by tree trunks, clambering over greened rocks, slipping on wet leaves -

taking him through a rainforest, just the odd bird calling, and silken webs where rainwater dripping off the leaves alerted small spiders. At first he'd stopped to clear them with a chop, but now he crashed on, regardless.

And a new, terrifying thought suddenly churned him. Here he was, trekking noisily on - but what if this was hostile territory? What if right now he was being tracked and lined up for an attack? Which was crazy thinking! Why should anyone want to hunt him down? He wasn't much of a threat in his boxers. And, anyhow, wouldn't they have done it by now? He went on, still climbing the only way to go, up and from the sea, until the net of light at the tops of the trees told him he was coming to some sort of summit - with a great hope of a good view. From the peak he might see dwellings, and roads, a way to go for help. Please!

But the summit was more than a kilometre off through difficult terrain - and when he got there, step by slippery step, the view was totally hemmed in by cloud, clinging around his shoulders like a wet sheet. He could still hear the sea somewhere below him, nearer again now, but going down would be trickier than the climb up. A slip on sodden ground and a twisted ankle would leave him helpless up here. He needed a walking stick, but he could see nothing promising. The fallen boughs were rotten and the bamboo was hollow: until after a good search into denser growth he came across a tree with a likely branch the thickness of a walking-stick. He set to and bent the green wood over, twisting it backwards, forwards, sideways - until finally he broke it free and snapped off the leafy end, gripping the stick firmly as a third leg to help him down through the rotting leaves to where the sea sounded close again.

Was he still going in the same direction? Well, how was he to know? The sun was hiding away, but by going for the light and the louder sea, he came through the final fringe of forest to open land. Civilised, man-made open land. 'Great!' he shouted, and shocked himself with the sound of his voice. In front of him was a concreted area about the size of a tennis court, except that it was square, not rectangular. This was different from the surface so far, this was man-made, the sort of place where people lived. And on the further side of the concrete oblong, set off some way along a narrow path,

was a lowish building with a corrugated iron roof. He ran to it, but cautiously, a run that could suddenly swing him back the way he'd come and take him legging for the cover of the trees. 'Hí!' he shouted. 'Anyone about?'

Too low for living in, this building had a wooden door but no windows. He put his head inside like a cautious cat. What would he see - signs of people, or of an animal? But it was empty, apart from a tall drum smelling of fuel. Outside again, now he saw where a branch of the concrete path led to a wire-fenced garden with a gate about fifty metres away. But the gate had a lock on it, and it wasn't a garden, nothing grew in it, there was just a slatted wooden sort of kennel in the middle, with a sloping roof and a small padlocked door. What on earth was this? And then his eye went to a wire running from the compound to a tall pole, on the top of which was - nothing! He took a close look at the rusty lock and the spider webs that bound the gate to the rest of the fence; and he puffed out his cheeks in disappointment. This wasn't a place anyone visited every day. Nor every week. Nor... And there by the gate to the compound he hunkered down and held his head in his hands. This was not good! This was so heavily not good. Because this place needn't even be visited every month, or every year!

So what could he do except press on? He walked beyond the concrete compound and into the soft scrub again, still keeping the sound of the sea to his left, still going in the same forward direction. But this scrub was all that there was: there were smaller shrubs and it was more grassed, so less strenuous to push through, with sweet smells - and thud!

What was that? He was being followed! Had someone jumped down from out of a tree! Had a wild animal landed? He swung about him in panic - to see a shining yellowy-brown coconut rolling down a slight slope towards him. Coconut - not a man, not a hunter; but a lesson that in terrain like this, as well as your stare ahead you needed eyes for your footing and eyes above you for the monster of all nuts that could drop down and fracture your skull.

What seemed to be the natural way ahead now moved him nearer to sea level again, where he could see more of the hard rock that formed this land. Granite? He was coming to another beach. Well, who knew? This beach might have people on it...

Or not!

He rounded a high, rough outcrop, ten times taller than he was, and squeezed down through a crack to more boulders, worked smooth at their lower levels where the sea had changed them. Now he was on the beach. But what was that? There ahead on the sand and flat granite lay a washed up creature - which could be a large seal, black and shiny. Cautiously he went towards it, it could still have attack left in it, a goring or a tusking for a nosy land kid. When it suddenly flapped. He jumped. A fin? A limb? No, a small gust up the beach had just puffed up what it was: what it had been: a black, punctured, rubber dinghy.

He had been here before.

'What?' He was on the beach he'd started from. He'd kept the sea to his left throughout his trek for help - but he'd not been travelling consistently either to the north or to the south, but to west and east as well. He had trekked full circle, like a lost soul in the Sahara. Which, by never losing the sound of the sea, told him only one thing: he was on an island: an island which seemed uninhabited.

So was this island the place where he belonged?