

KEITH MCLEAN

## Kindness

I LIKE TO GET AWAY FROM it all sometimes, generally somewhere with a river, lake or sea close at hand. After all, even the numbest of men will find time to think when faced with a moving body of water. As Ishmael says, "I thought I would sail around and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen and regulating the circulation." I'm always looking for obscure parts of the world in which to hide away. Increasingly I'm frustrated in my attempts to find peace as the airplane, the package holiday and the gap year have made the globe accessible to the moronic mob. I reserve particular scorn for the modern traveler: backpackers, package tours, the young. Especially the young. That lost tribe—the great unwashed—with their hairstyles, atavistic body piercing and sartorial ineptitude. Lamentably you run into them everywhere: huddled like sheep in a storm, with their sloppy attitudes, their earnestness, their joyous ignorance and fading immortality. They look for adventure in those same far-flung places that I seek out, spoiling them with their marijuana and their Bob Marley and their Velcro-fastened sandals.

I found myself on a beach in a lesser-known Latin American country in a rented jeep. A long drive from the main coastal road down a muddy track led me to a small hamlet on a graceful curve of beach. The place I had been told about was only accessible from the beach at low tide. I drove along the beach and as the sun dropped into the sea like a gobbet of molten glass, I spotted a small collection of bamboo huts partially hidden by a fringe of palms. There was no sign to indicate a hostelry of any sort, no welcome at all, which is just as it should be. I had been given directions to the place by a discerning drinker in a faux-Glasgow pub in the capital. The hostel was owned by an antisocial Basque fellow who had married a black woman and left her to do all the work. The Basque brooded with his Rottweiler, his aguardiente and the unpublishable novel in a shack at the back of the property. The proprietors had no interest in their guests and served a fixed-menu breakfast, lunch and dinner of fish and rice and salad.

I checked into my bamboo hut: a surprisingly large, airy and well-constructed building of concrete and bamboo. It even had mosquito-grilled windows. A thoughtful touch. The bathroom was clean and had an electric shower, which fed off a generator that ran noisily at odd times of the night; though that detail would be irrelevant to anyone but me.

I had brought a suitcase of books—*Lord Jim*, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, *Typee*, *Robinson Crusoe*—briny books for a salty holiday. I stacked them neatly on a small bookcase, put my sharply creased trousers and shirts into a drawer with a yellowing piece of newspaper, arrayed my deodorant, razor, and soap on a shelf by the sink. My four pairs of shoes—sandals, boots, and two pairs of handmade shoes from Jermyn Street—I placed, their tips aligned with the wooden frame, under the bed. My hat, I hung from a wooden peg incongruously struck into the wall at waist height. I thought of a quadriplegic in a wheelchair and felt a shiver of revulsion.

I lay down on the bed and surveyed the order I had wrought. “Everything in its place and a place for everything,” as my grandfather would have said. There was a man: a man of trenchant views, economically expressed; a man who knew right from wrong and the shortest distance between two points. How I missed him! Then for some absurd reason my thoughts drifted to my son. What a disappointment he had turned out to be. A weak, woolly-headed vegetarian with leftist tendencies. I remember the day he came home and announced that he was moving in with his “significant other.” His lover turned out to be a man, *of course*. He thought I would be appalled. I was. By his predictability.

—Aren’t you going to say something? he said, clutching the other man’s soft hand.

—You’re a walking cliché, I said.

—Thanks, he said.

—You’re most uncommonly welcome, I said, as I shut the door on him forever.

Just like my father. I suppose these things skip a generation.

I was the only resident at the beach, so dinner was a quiet affair. The proprietor’s wife was a huge, glistening purple-black woman with scallops of fat that swung hammock-like from her arms when she served the food. It was difficult to tell her age. She looked old, but here at the coast there was a sense of early ripeness and swift decline. She was probably in her early thirties. The Basque put in an appearance as coffee was served. He was a tall, grey-haired man in a football shirt and tight polyester shorts. He came over and announced that he was Spanish, that he was called Arturo and that I would probably not see him again. There was something pretentious about

his lisping Spanish accent, and he had that supercilious air of the Spaniard in Latin America, like he was doing the place a favour just by being here.

I slept the sleep of the just and the well organized. The next day was startling. I always rise just before dawn. It's a matter of self-respect. The light came up quickly, as it does in the tropics, and by seven the sun was blazing in the sky. The line between the sky and sea was as straight as a die, the colour differentiation only a subtle degree of deep blue; the sand was white as salt and the heat took my breath away. A light breeze blew off the sea and played a familiar tune in the palm trees. There is something bracing and uplifting about a day like this. It reflects the way things should be but never are. A world of clean lines, simple certainties. England is so muted, the shades of brown and green so indistinct. It's so hard to understand.

I lay there soaking up the sun, sweating, burning, seeing how much I could take. The sea called to me. I heard its song. It was a cool, infinite song of ease and relief. But I resisted. I believe in mortification of the flesh. Pain makes me feel alive. No one understands this anymore. It is what is missing from the modern world. Everything is so easy; we are too soft. We are pampered and spoilt, even the poor. Especially the poor, for there is no such thing anymore. Hard work, relentless work, painful work, work that lasts a long time, badly paid work. It hurts. Which is the point. It's a matter of self-discipline. How much can you take? The more you can take, the better you will feel. The experts—whoever they are—tell us that we all suffer from low self-esteem these days. If that's what people believe then people need to recognize that it stems from ease. So you need to make it hard. That's what I do. My grandfather taught me that, with the back of his miner's hand. His life was hard. He taught me that his life had been good because of it. He savoured every morsel of food, every drop of drink taken, every precious second of time he spent away from the black hole where he spent his whole life toiling away insensibly like a wet worm. He loved that hole in the ground, and the cage that took him down there, because it taught him the value of everything else. He showed me a suit of his once. It was the only suit he had. I never saw it again until I saw him in it in his coffin. I was surprised by it. It was a wonderful suit, beautifully cut, from the finest wool. It was the silvery grey of the underside of a seagull's wing and as soft.

—Is that not beautiful? He asked.

—Yes, I said.

—It's thirty years old. It took me ten years to save enough money to buy it. Your grandmother never went short because of it. I've worn it twice. I take it out and look at it sometimes. I run my fingers over it and

feel the material and think about the genius of the man who cut it. If I were a crying man, it would make me cry.

So, he was a man who realized how precious his life was and how rich it made him and he told me,

—Your life will be easy and unless you do something about that, it will make you miserable. So you have to make it hard. Then you will be happy.

I forced myself to read on. The sun was merciless. I began to feel faint. Defoe must have been a man and a half! It is said that he wrote over three hundred books, often under pseudonyms. The marvellous thing about *Robinson Crusoe* is the attention to detail. The daily life, the hardships, the ingenuity of man abandoned with nothing but his wits and his spirit. Eventually he manages to do more than stay alive; he carves civilization out of the wilderness. The only false note is the ending. Why would you want to be rescued from that solitary paradise?

Finally—it must have been close to midday—I sat up and staggered to the sea over the blinding, boiling sand. I fell into the ocean and let it enfold me like a mother. It held me, caressed me, soothed me, cooled me, blessed me.

All I saw on the beach that day was this: fishermen in a line along the sand pulling in a large net, two Indians on a bicycle, a black man in electric-green y-fronts riding a horse, driftwood bleached white as bones, empty bottles, a large flat fish attended by four buzzards—large black-headed birds with grey neck ruffs hopping about like nervous pall-bearers. I watched the sun go down that night and thought about *The Meaning of Life*, *The Inevitability of Death*, *The Nature of God*, *Man's Inconsequence* and many other weighty issues and felt as happy as one can in the circumstances.

That night after dinner, I inspected my burns. My shoulders were covered in blisters the size of zip lock bags. I rubbed in some moisturizing lotion and lay down on the cool white sheets and felt that thing I had been looking for, that epiphany that exists between pain and pleasure.

It went on like that for a week. Sun, sea, books, fish, birds, driftwood, sunsets, Black men on horses, Indians on bicycles, the burr of the insect world at night. Bliss, in a word.

The second week a couple of young men—surfers—and a girl arrived. One of them had what appeared to be a palm tree growing out of his head. A white Rastafarian! Marcus Garvey, Haile Selassie, Ethiopia. Let them see Africa, whatever that meant. Let them walk the streets of Addis Ababa. God help them!

The first night they were amiable and wanted to talk. They'd had a few beers and they sought me out, hidden though I was behind *Lord Jim*.

—G'day mate! Said one stunningly blank-faced youth.

Australians! What can you say about Australians? Both men were tanned and fit and were in the dinning room topless. They were freckled and covered in that downy furze peculiar to Antipodeans. I said nothing, just carried on reading ... "Jim sat on the trunk of a felled tree, and pulling out his pipe began to smoke" ... hoping Conrad's miraculous words would protect me from this assault.

—We're from Australia, said the other, and held out his hand.

You don't say!

I let it hang there for a moment and looked up into a face as untroubled as a sand dune: a face without evidence of worry, effort or a single original thought. He stood, left hip thrust out, right hand on the table in front of me. His ease infuriated me. In the background I noticed music playing. "Redemption Song." What else?

—"Jim sat on the trunk of a felled tree, and pulling out his pipe began to smoke" .... I read it aloud at them.

The young men stared at me. Their young girl, who stood a pace behind them like a concubine, hung her head and twirled and picked at her split ends. They backed away slowly without taking their eyes off me, as if I might make an unexpected move or something.

—Chill, mate, I heard one say. Then they went and perched on the bar stools and chattered gaily amongst themselves like chimpanzees at a tea party.

I ate the fish. It was like ashes in my mouth. I returned to my cabin and that night, for the first time, was attacked by insects, savage sand gnats with a bite like a scorpion.

The next day I maundered on the beach cursing my luck. Of all the people one could have ended up with! I spotted an empty bottle up where the tide leaves its line of debris—a whisky bottle with 'High Times' written on the label. I picked it up and sniffed it. It still smelt foully of spirits. That night I didn't go into dinner. I waited, hoping they'd leave, but they were in the bar until after eleven. So I went without. Nothing wrong with that; cleans out the system. I watched them on the beach from behind my mosquito screen, watched them build a driftwood fire and dance around it like savages.

The Australians had a dog. Did I mention the dog? A small bearded mutt with a face you could just slap. The surfers and their girl were all over it, of course, letting it lick their faces and talking to it and other anthropomorphic nonsense. One day something happened to the dog. They lost the dog. Pure carelessness, of course. They seemed to love the dog, but the fact was they didn't. You lose a pair of gloves, not something you love.

They were frantic for a day or so. They had the unhappy owner out with his moronic Rottweiler and a gang of blacks beating the palms and mangrove swamp from dawn till dusk. Then after a couple of days the two men and their girl subsided into a defeated torpor. They even asked me if I'd seen the flea-bitten mutt. I said I had not and commiserated with them. Perhaps that was over-egging the pudding.

Eventually they left, returning me to my solitary idyll. One elemental, solitary day followed another and I relaxed again into the bleak certainties of Conrad and Defoe and Melville.

The day before I left, I checked under my hut to see if there was any smell, but it looked like I'd done the job right. That night, as the sun set, I wrote a note, put it in the bottle and threw it into the receding waves. Just my name, the date, the location. I returned to my hut and thought about my ex-wife, my ex-son and that small dead dog. I had only wanted to help. It was a kindness that I had done them.

The next morning I took my last stroll on the beach at daybreak and found the bottle of 'High Times' back up with the other sea-litter. I picked it up and out of curiosity shook out the note. It was still dry and the handwriting was just about legible. It said simply, 'HELP.'