

A. T. Cairns

Island

“So you found me—.

Tell me, just for curiosity; was it deliberate? Were you actually searching for me? Or was it simply chance, an accident: did you, looking perhaps for some out-of-the-way world in which to relax—or even work—come here and then discover, afterward, I had preceded you?

No? The first? I'm flattered—really; very pleased and very flattered. I thought I had been forgotten long ago. . . .

Most people *do* think I'm dead? Yes, I'd expected that—only reasonable; after all, it's been a long time since they've heard from me. I suppose there must be a whole generation now who have grown up considering me some shadowy figure from an even more indistinct past. If they remember at all—.

They do? They still know me? How pleasant; how pleasant to find that after all this time: even posthumously, so to speak. 'Posthumously pleasant . . .'; an interesting phrase—.

Please excuse me; an old man's mind: it tends to detour along directions of its own, and you must have better things to do than listen to my meanderings. No; it's very good of you to say so, but I'm sure you must. A girl, perhaps, waiting for you at the beach?

Ah, I see I've hit a chord. The young always have so much to do; so little time. As if they were, all of them, afraid they were going to die before they were thirty. . . .

Which, in its way, I suppose is true enough.

Still, something is left. I saw that look: the young lady who brought our drinks. Attractive, isn't she? Oh, I talk to her—and to the cats who come here because it's the one place they're sure to be fed, and to the trees—did you know I have the only trees on the island; I even had to import the soil they grow in—or the occasional companionable gull . . . though I must admit she provides certain diversions they are not really capable of.

That shocks you? I was just testing; you *are* very young. Old men don't lose their appetites, you know—sometimes not even their abilities: just that firm skin and fine body your friend on the beach no doubt admires so much. That's one difficulty with civilization; women become so much more particular, and less discriminating.

Still, you'll learn soon enough: I wouldn't have believed it either at your age. Dead, eh? Well—well, well, well . . . well!

You're a journalist, you say—by profession or vocation? What I mean is; is it a means or an end? Have you the not-uncommon ambition of becoming a writer—an artist perhaps—someday?

Yes; yes, of course you have, otherwise you wouldn't have come all this way: not just to see me. It will make an interesting item, but nothing for the front pages; not after so long.

A pilgrimage; an act of homage? You really mean it, don't you? You're far too young to lie convincingly.

Ah, you're smiling: you remember my old reputation. Tell me; were you afraid, knocking at my door? When you'd finally smoked me out, were you just a little apprehensive facing the old demiurge in his den?

Come now, don't be embarrassed! Again, I'm extremely flattered. You aren't a poet by any chance?

Anyway, I like you! And you've arrived, as it happens, just at the right moment. I had a feeling someone would—life arranges itself—but I'm glad it's a man I can talk to.

A beautiful spot isn't it, ray island? Away from everything, but not too far; isolated without being cut off. Even the people; familiar enough to be comfortable yet sufficiently different to remove one a dimension: their dress, their customs, their speech—do you know that, all the time I've been here, quite deliberately, I've never learned a word of the language—their thought. Not *too* different, not alien; but, again, not quite what one is accustomed to. As I say, a beautiful spot; almost a paradise . . .

But isn't it rather quiet? Don't I get bored? After the old times—.

Ah; now we *are* coming to it. Circuitously, by a wandering, irrelevant route, but we get there. After the old days . . .

You've read some of my books? All of them? Oh come now, surely not! I *was* rather prolific; people used to wonder, the way I lived, how I found time. And many of them—the books—, most perhaps, were not . . . shall we say up to my standard.

Now tell me, *why* did you read them? What interested you most? The story, the plot? The characterization? The thought, the 'philosophy'; if you could call it that?

Or something else—the background, the description? The worlds I'd visited and explored and tried to evoke—at least as much of them as I could?

Which was it held you; eh? Oh, I see . . . you *do* surprise me—.

Anyway, all that travelling, the devouring of realities and experiences, the expeditions and adventures that made such a stir; it wasn't only for publicity or display you know. Oh, it caught the public's fancy and sold my books—for the wrong reasons; I wonder, now, if they're beginning to be read for the right reasons—and, almost incidentally, made me quite wealthy; enabled me to do much as I pleased.

Still, it had a purpose; all of it. Even I didn't realize it at the time, though I suppose I must have guessed the truth long before I accepted it.

At first, I thought it was just the nature of my gift, the way of my talent. Some men, some artists if I may use the term—Faulkner was one—can stay in one place all their lives and from a single acre, a small circle create a universe.

Then there are others—your Hemingway is the obvious example—for whom the opposite is true. They need the whole world; and even that, often, is not enough

Which was my situation. I suppose partly it was a residue of the lyric impulse—I'd started out to be a poet, you know; even had a slim volume published once, though I don't imagine you've read *that*.

Anyway, though I could construct my *people* easily enough—someone, she's dead now, once told me I had a hundred different personalities in me—for the setting, the background of the canvas—which, with my old poetic instinct, always seemed to me the most important—I had to draw from life

You look puzzled. Perhaps you don't find anything so unusual in that—perhaps you do the same thing yourself; one of your reasons for coming to this remoteness. Be patient; it's simply the way my mind works: slowly, with, frequently, too much detail. That was one of the qualities my prose used to be criticized for; moving too obliquely; being, for all its richness, too elaborate and opaque. Well, possibly it's true; I'm too old to change my coat now.

Where was I? Still at the beginning? Perhaps, then, we should start there

I'd written three books before one was accepted; five before I had a success. You didn't know that? Oh yes; it doesn't come all at once: it takes time.

Meanwhile, I'd kept moving. I'd had the foresight to get enough training when I was young—as an architect; I even built this house—to make a living just about anywhere I went. So, after each book I'd gone on—to a different country, a different society, a different life. It was pure instinct at the time; I had no idea *why* I was doing it; and quite ruthless, as only the young can be ruthless. Each break, like each volume, was complete: friends, even the closest, as well as cities and acquaintances; I never wrote or answered their letters or intended to see any of them again. I must have hurt many people during those years.

And yet, as I say, it was all intuitive; without any intentional malice, or conception why I was doing it. It simply seemed to me that every work finished represented a chapter of my life that was done with; that was closed and that I did not care to reread.

I suppose it was the fact that success *was* rather slow in coming which prevented me from having a glimpse of what was happening. I would just settle down somewhere, make friends, experience, get to feel, to know and perhaps to understand as much as possible, write my book, and move on. It was as uncomplicated as life seemed to me then.

I must have been about thirty-eight when, after my second success, I was invited by a college which had once tolerated me for a year to come back and give a course of summer lectures. Like you have, it caught me just at the right moment. It had been almost two decades since I'd seen the city where I had been born, and, as they do, the years had blurred the worst experiences and exaggerated the best.

Also, like most authors I had built my first book about that period, the confusion of my youth. After receiving the offer I reread the work—something I'd never done before. With all its defects and extravagances it brought back that part of my past with peculiar intensity, an almost painful nostalgia. By the time I got on the plane I was as excited as a boy.

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It's odd, looking back, that even after what I found I should have had no real idea what it meant. I simply put it down to time and distance; the changes that had taken place in myself and in that world in almost twenty years.

I'd been prepared, of course, for a negative as well as a positive reaction; pain as well as pleasure—the differences I would find, probably, in the land-and-city scape, and, certainly, in the friends who, when I'd left, had been hardly out of their teens. I had even foreseen a revival of the

old, really very terrible memories that, as much as anything else, had driven me away.

In other words, I had been ready for everything except what I found:—Nothing.

At first I thought it was just a temporary indifference; perhaps even a form of shock, a subconscious shutting-out after all those years. I revisited the scenes and places which had been closest to me—my home, the graves of my parents, the valley, unchanged, where I had walked so often—recalled, tried to relive those experiences which had seemed, at the time and even, reread, in my book so intense, so beautiful or so terrible—looked up my old acquaintances, settled into prosperity and mediocrity

It made no difference. Six weeks went by, and nothing came. There was simply emptiness; a vacuum: a desert, not only of the emotions and the senses, but of the mind as well. When I left at the end of the summer I knew I could never return; that it was a world that was closed to me forever.

Oddly though, as I say, it never occurred to me then *why* it was closed: I suppose because it was such a simple truth—or one that was so unacceptable. Again I thought it was merely distance, maturity and experience which had removed me from that time and that place. I was sorry to lose it—like most, it had been a love-hate relationship—but there were plenty of other countries I had lived in and written about and wanted to go back to someday, and more I still had to see. ‘World enough and time . . .’.

As chance would have it, it was over two years before I touched familiar ground again. There was a great deal happening then along a great many frontiers, and I was still young enough to want to see and record it all.

Not as young as I had been, though. Finally I overdid it; took one chance, one journey too many. A single bullet, just after my fortieth birthday; not even marginally mortal, but painful and sobering. Too much work, too many lives—it brought things to a head, made me slow down and begin to think.

I had to recuperate, and I needed a rest. Suddenly I was homesick. Not for where I had been born—I knew that was gone—but for certain other corners where in a curious, particular way I had been comfortable; where I had seemed to belong.

There was one place especially—I remember when I first saw it it seemed the most perfect spot on earth. The countryside was inexpressibly beautiful, the city old and not too large and more-or-less bypassed by the present. There were paintings and fine buildings to look

at when I was in the mood, good company and wine, the sea an easy drive, at night the sky clear, the stars close and thick.

In short, Utopia. When I got off the train I was quite literally weak with anticipation. That was when I began to touch the truth.

Again I wouldn't believe it at first, though it was there before my eyes, as clear as words on a page. It seemed too much, too terrible: not only in what it was but in what it meant, its inevitability.

Yes, that was the hardest to accept; the unconquerable inevitability of it. I remember standing on a certain hillside which had been as close to ideal as any I had ever known, trying to grasp it: the nullity, the absolute, unmoving indifference. It was the same as when I had gone back to where I had been born—worse. There, there had been a possible explanation; an outgrowing: here, this excuse was no longer possible. This world, the life, the experiences I'd had here were not things that *could* be outgrown. In an effort to recapture what I had felt I found a copy of the book—perhaps my best—I'd written from those experiences, read it, sitting on the same balcony where I had put it all down.

I knew then what had happened; though, of course, I still wouldn't accept it. The lines, the words were as alive as ever, as immediate and intense; but the place itself was not: it was empty. By some osmotic—vampiric might be a better term—process the life it contained had, for me, been sucked dry, transferred to the pages I had composed.

The discovery frightened me—terrified me. In an effort to disprove it I made a form of desperate pilgrimage; a journey to other parts of the world I had loved and recorded. It was no use, though; they had, all of them, become the books I had made of them: I had exhausted them, or the limits of my experience of them, in the words I had written. With each work I *used up* a certain part of the earth—said everything there was to say, everything *I* had to say, about it; mined all it meant or could mean to me. When the book was published the potential was drained; like land that, carelessly, has been farmed to desert.

Finally there was nothing to accept but the truth. It was perhaps the darkest time of my life. Suicide would have been easy then, but I no longer had the initiative even for that . . .

Then, almost by accident, I returned to a spot I had loved but had *not* written about—for one reason or another the right images, the appropriate characters and ideas had never come together in my mind. It had become a project indefinitely and repeatedly postponed—a fact that had bothered me at the time.

Now I found that it was salvation—or at least a stay of execution. This place still retained its validity; I could still be happy there.

No, it wasn't this island; that came later. Eventually the images and ideas materialized and I wrote the book.

You see, I had no choice. Why didn't I just bypass this oasis I'd discovered, leave it alone? Easy enough to say—but if it turns out you are a real artist, you'll find it isn't that simple. Not that simple at all

Anyway, first of all I just sat down and rested—basked! You can't imagine the relief, the release it was merely to find somewhere I could *feel* again; where I was alive.

Because that is the one essential, of course. Oh, the mind, knowledge, intellect; these play their part: but it's the feeling that brings the life—the indispensable intensity—to any work of art; that *is*, really, any work of art. Almost anyone can put a string of words together, even skilfully; any, pardon me, competent journalist; but you know how close to enough that is. And that was the thing about these other spots I'd written out: I had used them up; they were, quite literally, for me, dead.

Well, now I was alive again! That was sufficient for a while—like the heat of the sun after a long winter.

Then, when I had rested, recuperated, I began to take stock. As I say, the mind has its place.

I caught that look. No, don't apologize; I understand. Why all this fuss about a few lost paradises? This is a considerable planet; no one could possibly exhaust its potential in a dozen lifetimes. True enough—.

True enough; but the truth of youth: universal rather than considered. It's a big world: but only certain parts of it are really accessible. And of these only so many are particularly unique—you'd be surprised how much repetition there is, in nature as well as man. The gods are not actually all that inventive

And, finally, there are our own limitations; the boundaries of our private tastes and interests. The Orient for example—China, Japan, the South Seas—; because of some lack, some hiatus in my character, my understanding, they meant nothing to me. A whole quarter of the globe barren, eliminated; just as, on another plane, the beauty of mathematics is forever beyond me.

So, after I had rested a bit, I considered my situation. There were places, already too many, I knew and loved but to which I could never return. Then there were others that, for political or physical reasons, were out of reach—when I was young, you know, I always wanted to climb Everest—; and, finally, those areas, such as the Far East, which through some gap in my own nature were sterile.

This left two reserves—the spots which I had intended to but never had visited, and a few, like the one where I was, that I could respond to but had never put down on paper.

Calculated, my reserves were frighteningly low. Remember, this had been my whole life; exploration, experience, and the transmutation of that experience into what I hoped was art: I had never had any desire for an everyday existence—a wife, children, a home—and I knew I never would have. Variety, singularity, my work; these were my only elements, the last—the most important—dependent on the others.

Of which only so much remained; a diminishing fund. Very well—conservation! I had always been prolific, prodigal; I would trim my sails: one book, one new world every two years; no more. That way I should be able to go on till I was about sixty-five—an age beyond which, then, I had no desire to survive.

Again, though, it was not so simple as I imagined. I had, remember, lived at a hurtling pace—I had thought, by my own choice. Now I learned how true *this* was as well. In eight years my reserves were all but gone.

It was impossible! I could talk, think about one new book, one country every two or three years; but I was driven and soon realized I always had been. When I wasn't working or experiencing I was helpless; like an addict deprived of his drug.

Gradually it became almost as bad as when I had first discovered the truth: I was forced across a steadily, relentlessly diminishing circumference of experience. Each novel meant one more place to which I could never return, one more circle I could never share.

And then I found this island. Before the end, before I had used up everything. As soon as I saw it I knew what it was.

Refuge; survival. By now I *wanted* to survive, even an animal existence. Life, just by itself—.

No; it wasn't easy. After I'd lived here awhile the old urge, the necessity to *use* it, to recreate, render it all, of course, returned. This time though I resisted—bargained, sidetracked, compromised. I threw in my reserves, one by one, to keep it at distance; building meanwhile, carefully, my defences.

And I succeeded. On my fifty-sixth birthday my last book was published; over twenty years ago. Since, I've been . . . as you see me now.

Oh, it comes; the impulse, the 'inspiration'. Sometimes intolerably—and then I toss it a bone; an image, a thought, a description, a few sentences. But never the whole, never all of it . . .

So that, always, there is a little left. Each year a bit less; but, then, each year there is less of me as well—.

The sunset—yes, I suppose it *is* very beautiful; but I gave it that last summer. A few months before, the hills; much earlier the sea, which I never go down to now. The night sky with its stars went long ago, and the town. Still, the people are kind: they bring everything I need to the house. Only last Fall it took the windmill across the road, the grove of olives at the Spring solstice

It's comfortable here on the porch, though. And it *has* been very pleasant talking with—to, I suppose, is the better word—you this afternoon. You will come again—tomorrow perhaps: bring along some of your work if you like and I'll have a look at it, if an old man's opinion means anything to you. Oh, and that young girl of yours—I'd like to meet her. They don't mind if you only wear your bathing costume walking through the town.

You'll excuse me if I don't see you to the gate. There's a curious carving on it, very old—did you notice when you came in? I was trying to describe it on paper only yesterday”