

We sat on the boat, this moored safely by the edge of the great estuary, as the tide ran out beneath us. Thinking of this, of what happened, feels very difficult to me. It is difficult. Because of what happened, eventually, after all of that. And because how it happened must have been my fault - or indirectly mine, for missing some thing I should have done, or not done, or said, or not.

Sometimes I think I am remembering, sometimes only dreaming. Very little of it is clear - and those things which are clear I do not know if I have remembered myself, or been told. Sometimes it is difficult to tell the difference between what I dreamed and what I remembered; the dreams being so alike to what was real - and the reality becoming gradually more like a dream.

Back then seems very far away, but of course very near. I had been travelling on a boat, I think working, I think, because, there were not so many of us on the boat. I can't have been a passenger, since I worked, or did some tasks on the boat. It was a little too small for such a voyage, I think.

We had been travelling for weeks. The boat was small and the journey took so long. I don't mean it was dangerous, only that a bigger boat should have managed the journey in much shorter a time. At least, that's how it seemed to me. The days passed, the weeks passed. And as they passed, every day began to be much like the one before.

After we had left the port, the weather grew warmer. I expected that we should at last have hot days, but they never came. No day was any warmer than the last and no night any cooler. The same sun rose and set, the same moon stuck to the sky at night. I thought I would be able to tell the passing of time by the moon, but I could never quite work out how.

There were others with me, of course. On the boat. There was a woman, I remember, who seemed a little like me. There was a man, who didn't seem anything like me at all. The woman did work as I did. I'm not sure what the man did. There were others there, but I can't remember them. I think they worked somewhere else. Not on deck.

The weather became almost un-naturally calm. The days became long. The sun shone long and evenly down on us, as though on some timetable set by an unimaginative god. Time passed, slowly, eventually. We got bored. I got very bored. My tasks on the boat were so simple as to be completely un-diverting. Above us the sky stayed as a uniform blue. Few clouds crossed it.

Soon I was on my own almost every day. The woman and the man went off - and I only saw them one at once, passing into a doorway, or climbing the ladder. I never asked their names, even after so long. They never asked mine, either. I thought that they too must have been working their passage - and that we must have been travelling to the same place.

The woman and the man at first worked together, then apart. They work work-clothes, like I did. Their clothes became worn and patched, as mine did. Looking at the woman seemed to be looking into a mirror. The man did not look at me. She spoke, he did not. When I spoke, my voice was like hers.

Surely the boat could take us there faster? It seemed ridiculous to go on such a long voyage and to travel so slowly. We worked together at first, then more often alone. I had begun the voyage knowing very little of what I was to do and was concerned I couldn't do my job to the satisfaction of others, but the days passed and I soon realised that I could have done everything with only the simplest instruction - if any at all.

The woman and the man worked on deck, near to me, then further off. Sometimes I could hear them. Sometimes, at first, I thought the woman spoke, but it was only the sound of her working. We all had our tasks to do, though we were not closely watched, only assumed to be working most of the day. It was not hard work.

Perhaps I became complacent, as well as bored. The plain food, the low thrumming noise of the engine, our slow progress and the unchanging weather all combined together. On some days it seemed almost like a dream. The clouds, the sky, the still surface of the sea and the deck merged together in one uniform absence. Sounds died away. The air sat still above me.

The woman walked past on the deck, sometimes. Neither of us spoke. I'm not quite sure why we didn't, but it seemed somehow un-natural. The whole boat began to seem un-natural.

Eventually I wondered, with some irritation, if we might even have stopped dead entirely. I could find no-one about to ask on deck, where my duty kept me. For one moment I stupidly imagined I might be alone, the rest of the little crew having left me. I looked about. Of course we were moving. The engine still sounded, thinly and distantly. Was today any different from any other day?

Perhaps a problem with the engine? That must have been it. They were working on it. That's why there was no-one about. That's why we had slowed so much. There was no-one to ask because they had gone to fix it. They had gone to fix the engine. Not the woman and the man, who worked on deck. The others. Whatever happened, it would have been hard to tell any difference. There wasn't a mark on the sea or in the sky to measure from.

There, definitely. The note of the engine had changed. I could hear it. Definitely. I went back to my cabin - well, not really a cabin. It was a small lean-to construction, up on deck near where I worked. I think I saw the one the woman was in, once. It was almost the same as mine. I don't know about the

man.

In my cabin were my papers, my little book, my boots, my bag of clothes which were washed sometimes, small things I had thought I would need on the journey. Some things seems trivial and a waste to bring, now I looked at them. Only a couple of weeks into the journey I remember cursing myself for not bring a ... a pair of ... a ... but now I can't remember. Either the thing I'd thought of turned out not to be so useful after all, or ... I don't know.

We slipped into the night. The engine seemed even more distant. The deck was empty, as it had been all through the day. I stood outside my cabin. The sun set quickly, as it always did. The smell of the sea remained, everything stayed as it always did. I came into my cabin to find my book, which I did not read, to pull off my jacket but leave my shirt, to sit on the metal frame of the bunk and to look down and out ... as I had done for days and weeks before.

Usually I slept well, or normally, I should say. For many days I would fall asleep and think I'd never dream, though I woke not feeling quite a rested as I should have. My place was well enough, though. I had food to eat, plain though it was - and space enough. As every day became the same, I grew used to any little difference.

The wash of the seas on the boat, the run of the engine and the otherwise quiet became well-known to me. These sounds changed hardly at all in the night - and rose only a little in the morning. I began to wake, earlier than I should. It was still dark, then.

Not a sound had changed, except for the engine. The moon rose. The moon was full. The moon was still full. I must have been mistaken, then, because it can't have stayed like that for so long. But it seemed like it had; hung there in the same place, a full moon as it had been yesterday and as I expected it tomorrow.

I dreamed, in that night. Normally I didn't remember dreams, or forgot them very soon on waking. Now I remember: I dreamed of the simplest, plainest thing - or where I had come from when I first came onto the boat. I never thought why I'd not dreamed of where we were going to. Why would I dream of something as ordinary as that?

I dreamed of packing, leaving the town and going to the city. I dreamed of visiting the dock and waiting for the boat. I dreamed even of my surprise at seeing the boat, which I thought would have been bigger. I dreamed the voyage, on the voyage, ... I dreamed my whole journey until I woke. This was really a remembering, not a dreaming.

With a horrid jolt, I sat up in the bunk. And now I remember this, it seems

entirely like a dream. A panic came over me. In the dark, where I had woken so many times before, there seemed some unknown menace. The noise of the engine had risen to a hard grinding, quite unlike anything I had heard before. Perhaps the repairs had not gone well.

I tried to stand, but the deck had tilted up under my feet and I fell back towards the bunk. Pulling myself up again, the whole cabin seemed mis-shapen. The engine screamed. I pushed out toward where the doorway should have been, but found only the smooth metal of the side-panels of the boat. I turned, aimlessly, until I found starlight.

The night sky was not it's usual and accustomed inked blue, but broken into irregular strips by cloud. I couldn't remember ever seeing the sky like that before - either on our journey, or before. The layers crawled and skidded past the stars, some parts darker than before, some weirdly lighter as though the dawn was coming here and there, but not together.

No moon. I fell out onto the deck. It seemed to move. Like waves. I felt unsteady and felt for the railing. I wasn't there. I turned again, sure that I would only be facing my cabin again, but a field of stars was thrown up and the deck fell away beneath my feet. Every part of the boat that had become familiar, even tedious to me, rebelled. The deck, the bunk, the woman and man no longer there after so long working alongside me.

Nausea came over me. Where was everyone? Why would no-one help? Everything that had been so familiar darted or slipped from it's place, or appeared mis-shaped or mirrored. I stood again, unsteadily. I moved as carefully as I could towards the centre of the boat. The deck plunged away again and the stars wheeled.

Everything became in a moment still. Stars, sea, the air, the night - stopped, with me suspended in it. Hung, my legs put up where they should have touched the deck and arms outstretched to the sea below. The boat stood silently, pitched up, stuck in the sudden sea. The engine stopped it's noise. Everything seemed immediate and close. I could see the metal of the panels, up-ended; the unrecognisable constellations; the railing, from the wrong side; all pinioned together.

Slowly, the air moved about me. Slowly, I looked up to see the waves falling down on me. I felt, for the first time since I had left the city, as myself. I felt at ease. I felt entirely relaxed - even happy. I was certain that this was an end, to something.

I can't remember falling further into the water. I can only remember coming up, slowly, without effort. I turned to see the boat fall suddenly, then rise. No-one called. Neither did I call. I turned again as the waves hid it and I rose. The

stars rose and fell with me. The few lights the boat showed slewed and fell away, then back, then ... no, now they were stars.

I couldn't tell when I was in the water - it was as though the sky and the sea were of the same stuff. If I was in the air, I fell slowly - if I was in the water, I did not feel it as an encumbrance. Certainly I did not fear drowning, though I imagined I might drown. But I was not afraid of that. Not because I was brave, or that I didn't think I would drown - but for some other reason I could not tell.

The boat loomed up, fell towards me and blackened out the sky. I fell into it and a wave passed. I turned, again. The boat showed another side, suddenly much further off. The waves took me up to show the top-lights touch the dawn horizon, then disappear. The boat fell away completely, save for the resumed but irregular call of the engine.

The sound of the sea rose and the other sounds faded. Just as I thought I had seen the last of it, the boat appeared again, rolling up between troughs. The horizon wheeled about and the boat resolved into something more solid. The waves fell and rose around it, but it no longer moved. It flattened, lengthened, lightened. Soundlessly, the boat appeared as a shore on which the waves - some way off - were breaking. I fell beneath the water.

I cannot tell how much time passed. Minutes only. Though it seemed later to be longer, since the sky had turned from a sudden black to a steady lifting blue. I fell beneath the waves again. I did not feel any fear, though I'm sure I should have done. I did not struggle. I let the sea lift me and release me. I had no expectation of reaching the shore, if any shore was there.

I felt almost as though I might fall asleep, or dream myself into some other state. Perhaps I had never woken from some dream aboard the ship. Perhaps I was still in my bunk, about to wake and step out onto the smooth, un-moving deck. Sleep usually came very easily on the boat.

Soon, I closed my eyes. I opened them to see the last stars leave the sky. My eyes closed again. I could hear the waves breaking, somewhere - but too far off for me. I settled myself to let go here, listening to the hush of the water and aware the sun might rise without me there to see it. I felt as though I might just sleep, leaving everything, forgetting everything. The world was nothing to me and I nothing to it. It had always been this way and I was only then knowing it to be true.

The waves carried me up, then down again. I felt no danger, though I should have done otherwise. It would have been an easy thing to let go - I knew I could not get back to the boat and I did not know how I might reach the shore. I couldn't tell if I was being carried away, or towards ...

And as I closed my eyes again, I thought I saw the boat, or the shore, or something like it, or a rock, or - some form moved in the water before me. It passed nearby, then slowed. A rowing-boat? A large canoe? I rolled up to face it - surely some very simple raft, though the bottom of it seemed all of one construction. It seemed to hover over the water, stopped.

I felt light, kept up in the water. Floating in a sort of very pale blue, not like any water I had seen before. I suppose I must have been coming towards the shore. I did not panic. The form moved towards me. The blue water became white. It came close again - and a hand and then an arm came down to the water. With a light grasp, I was lifted up. The white water became the sky. Suddenly heavy, out of the water, my eyes closed again.

I rose as the sun rose, dripping light. A strong single arm had taken me easily from the water and put me down quietly at the foot of the little raft, or canoe, or what-it-was. I laid on one side, able only to glance up against the light. I felt almost as though I had been pulled back from something I would rather have continued into. The sun resolved into lamp-light, coming from some place above me but behind some other shape.

We began to move, though quite how I could not make out. A figure sat high above me on the little raft, guiding us towards the flat shore. It seemed wholly still, making no movement or sound. It wore one piece of clothing; something like a close-fitting cloak or long cape, which hung down low about the wearer's ankle. Presumably it was holding a tiller beneath this, but I could not see. I could not see the lamp itself, but a soft light showed the edges of whatever thing we travelled on.

I may have spoken, or even just tried to speak - though if I had made no sound I could not tell, or I cannot remember. Even if I had, the figure made no response and no movement toward me. We approached the shore, the water becoming entirely transparent. As the flat sand came towards us, instead of the waves breaking, the surface of the sea was like a pond, entirely still.

Our little vessel seemed to slip from the surface of the sea onto the surface of the land. The figure was standing. The figure appeared on the sand and I followed, pulled up by some relaxed force. Despite everything that happened, I felt quiet and at rest. The noise of the sea seemed far off. I was on a beach, not on a beach. I had left the sea, almost.

The strand stretched out in both directions, equally flat and un-interrupted by rocks or weed from the sea. We seemed the only people there - almost the only ones who had ever been there. I looked down and saw my footprints being swallowed again by the sand. Wherever we walked we left no trace. The lamp-light led the figure and the figure in turn led me.

Behind me the sea was very quiet, almost as though there was no tide or waves. The colour of the sea and the colour of the sky merged together; the stars above mirrored in the surface below. In front was the beginnings of an island: the sand leading to a surprisingly straight line of low trees. There were no lights anywhere, nor any sound, save for the stars and the sea.

The figure stood again at the foot of several regular dunes, which rose only a little from the beach. Short grass and salty plants sat beside a thin path. I followed, not knowing where we were approaching but feeling no concern. I had no wish to look for the boat. I had no wish to be anywhere but where I was - even though I had no idea where it was I had been brought, or what might be behind the dunes.

The figure always stayed some short way beyond me, as though marking some limit beyond which I could or should not come, or some space into which it preferred me not to put myself. It made no gesture, but seemed intent that I come with it. It was not insistent, but compelling. I did not feel threatened, but I did feel that the figure was clearly stronger than me: after all, it had lifted me clear from the water quite easily with one arm.

Thinking of it now, I cannot remember ever having seen the figure move, though clearly it cannot have stayed ... we must have travelled without me noticing, or having my mind fixed on some other thing. Perhaps I had my eyes closed from time to time. Perhaps I had been looking down at the path in the dark to check my way. Perhaps I couldn't tell how the time passed, or if it had passed at all.

The air was again quite still. There was a light salt of the sea, though little else. The dunes rose and fell evenly for a way, then thicker grasses came up beside the path. One last dune parted us from the memory of the sea and we passed into a path approaching a line of short, dark-green shrubs. The figure stood beneath a tree, where the path came near to it. The path tended upward for a little way, the trees gathering close to it, so close that the figure dipped a little now and then.

A mist hung about us. A bird called, far off. The trees were unrecognisable to me: thick, dark leaves that drew low to the earth. Each tree seemed quite like another - glossy, somewhat squat and long-grown. Any sound I made by walking was made quiet by them. The figure still would not speak. I wondered if it could at all. Perhaps my asking anything of it was useless.

A little way on and the trees fell away. We came into an opening, where the sun spotted the ground with shadows, ovalled by the leaves. The place was a little damp, it seemed. Moss over-grew most of the path, even where the sun passed over it. It was hard to see where the path ended and the trees began.

Part-way through the clearing what I thought to be a hut sat leaned towards a tree. As we came closer, it resolved into a small, low building of one storey. It was hard to tell what was inside and what was outside. A verandah ran almost all the way around, with a dark wooden surface over very broken flagstones. The stones merged entirely with the ground around them, so much so that sometimes they appeared deliberately placed, sometimes not.

Slowing to look a little more, the flagstones became almost like the rise and fall of waves around the hut - dark and massy beneath my feet. The moss formed a felt over most of the path, right up until one small step up to a bare entranceway. Even though we were out in the open, it had the feeling of a tunnel.

I stood in the entrance, lost between the outside and in. Outside, there was no sound of the sea and no smell of it either. I thought there should have been. There certainly should have been. A strange effect made the interior as quiet and flat as outside. There was no echo, no any feeling that I was in a room.

I hardly knew that we had passed through a doorway, but we clearly had. The figure sat at some sort of bench, or window-seat. The floor was covered with a sort of matting, from the doorway right up to the edges of the room. By the figure, a recess into the ground showed a pot, or brazier, low under which a pile of embers glowed.

Looking in, I saw that the floor opened up towards the sandy ground below the planking: almost as though we were in an outside courtyard looking down. The whole place seemed built around the brazier, as though that was the fixed point around which everything had come to be. Small heavy metal tools lay by it, though I could not tell what they were.

The first communication the figure made was to motion me to sit. I put myself at the other end of the bench. Between us, the bench grew wider, rather like a tray. There rested two jars, very roughly made. The figure passed a hand over them, mentioning me to drink. It was warm, a sort of tea, but not tea. When I put it down, I saw there were several discs, like oat-cakes, but thicker. They were made of some compacted, greenish stuff.

Although I should have been exhausted, hungry, I found myself eating one as though only sampling some offered delicacy, for the sake of politeness. There was a fruit, cut in pieces that might be eaten all at once. It was pink, translucent, like a white peach or a lychee. It had a smell that was something other than floral; sweet, but almost like wood.

Of course I was tired, or think I must have been tired, though my mind was not on that. I did not find my situation alien, or fascinating, but oddly calming. I had not, of course, been there before, or any place like it - but I felt at ease with



my surroundings entirely. Almost as though I had visited it a long time before and forgotten for many years.

The figure watched, or seemed to watch. And, when it had finished, made some slight but formal motion to me. I felt I must acknowledge the help I had been given, but couldn't think of anything to say. I looked up, for the figure was a good head taller than I. I only thought to mirror the gesture made to me, which seemed too little, but also enough to satisfy the situation.

The figure sat still, unmoving. I sat, too. I felt content and quite well. I felt better, really, than I had done for at least a month, maybe several months. Maybe a year. I felt no sense of happiness, but a sort of restedness and a slight intimation of possibility - as though I had been to in a situation that I had wished and worked for, for some long time. I felt as though I had come near to realizing some goal, or that I had just overcome a series of obstacles. There seemed nothing else to do.

But, thinking on it, I couldn't think of a thing that would have made me think that way. I should have been exhausted, or in a panic, or anything other than the way I felt then. But there I sat, on my end of the bench, if it was a bench. At the other end, a figure who had pulled me from the water, away from what I knew would be the end. An end.

"Where would you like to go?"

This was undoubtedly the first voice I had heard since the woman had spoken on the boat. And then it wasn't even to me, but to the man in my hearing. I couldn't even see them, since they passed beyond the end of the deck-side I worked. As the woman's voice was like mine, so the figure's voice was like hers. It was almost as if I had spoken the words myself, so alike to me they sounded.

I noticed the hand - thin, long fingers. The ends stained a little, yellow. The skin was cracked, not from age but from exposure to the elements, or to work.

Then, for the first time, I wondered if the figure was a man, or a woman. It had never seemed ... now I had some doubt, or question, as though if I had guessed incorrectly I could trust no more about him - or her. The figure was clearly stronger than I was - and taller. But this now didn't mean it was a man. Neither did the voice mean it was a woman. I answered in a voice surprisingly even in tone.

"I don't want to go anywhere."

There was a clear moment of silence. I couldn't think what to say. There didn't seem to be anything I should say. Or course I wasn't from there. In fact, I

didn't even know where I was. Should I tell who I was and how I had come to be there? That seemed unnecessary. Only that we were weeks away from the port - and I was on, presumably, an island small enough to have been a stop on our way. The island was supposed to be unvisited. Wherever I was, I wasn't supposed to be.

We seemed to sit for some time. How long, I could not tell, though it must have been quite a time in all, since a light had started to come in at the deep windows. I began to look about. In the corner of the room was a large vase, coloured white and light blue, very faded. It was covered with a craze of cracks. By it, almost under it, was a small metal bell, cast in dark metal and with an imperfection running through it.

As far as I could see, there was little else in the room. No other furniture, no storage-places, only a short dividing partition that could be folded and taken down. I could not see what was behind it. The only light came in where the windows should have been, but there was no glass, only open shutters. The corners of the room were dim, the light falling in patches at my feet.

The figure sat. I wondered if it would speak again. I thought I should only speak in answer to it. The strange sounds of the room made me feel as though I was outside, even though there was a low roof above me. There was a constant low sound of water, flowing past, but not the sea. I couldn't see anything that might be the source. It felt as though we were only in a slightly ordered version of the natural world.

At last, after some time sitting, I stood. The figure stayed. Was I supposed to do something, or go somewhere? I felt no urge to leave, but wondered again where I might properly be. Wasn't there something I wanted? I looked towards the entranceway and found the figure standing outside, on the path. For a time I thought I might simply stay there. The figure eventually might offer me instruction. It seemed right to trust it.

But, slowly, I stood and walked to the verandah. The figure's height was slightly lowered here, since I was still on the wooden panels raised up by the doorway. For a few moments, we were equal, in height at least. It felt at the same time alien and familiar, as though meeting someone who I had not met for many years, but straightaway recognised. It made again no movement and spoke no more.

The path led in two directions, the way I had come up would be back to the sea - the way up the low slope led higher into the trees. The figure stood at the edge of these, waiting. Or, marking my way? I couldn't tell if I was being invited, or compelled, or only shown directions I could take if I had chosen them. The further away I walked, the more I felt that I had left something behind. Although, looking down, I realised that I wore only the clothes I had when I lay in my

bunk in the boat - my working overalls, which I had not taken off.

As soon as I had passed the figure and gone under the first tree, I turned to see it back by the low construction we had sat in. It did not raise an arm, nor did I. I stood for a while, looking, then turned away to walk. I thought that this must be the right way, since the other path led only back to the sea. I didn't suppose I should sit on the shore, waiting for some other boat to pass. Perhaps we had come too close to the shore and the boat had struck a reef. No others would deliberately make that approach.

The path up into the trees seemed the only way. There was a path, so there must be something for it to lead to. Some other people, a settlement, somewhere I could go for ... help? I might find a change of clothes, at least. I looked back to see the figure standing by the entrance of the room. It was the last I saw of that place.

The air stayed still and light as I walked up. It was a very low slope, hardly noticeable until I had walked for at least an hour, to turn and find that the path led long and far below, back to the sea. The higher I walked, the more varied the trees became, now mixed with outcrops of rocks, ferns, some spiky plants that seemed familiar.

The weather began to change - in that I noticed it at all. A little warmer out from the trees, a little cooler under them. When I reached an open part of the path, where the trees fell away, a breeze caught me and pulled me on, up to a rockier patch of ground. There, I stopped for a while to look back and on. Behind me, some way back, the sea and the place I had met the figure. In front, the path opened up, curved and widened almost into a track.

The way grew rockier, with less grass and none of the moss I had seen by the sea. The trees thinned ahead, grew taller and made no shade on the ground around them. I stood to walk again and my steps sounded on the path where previously they had not. My working-shoes began to feel heavy.

I started to wonder where I might end that night. It was already late in the afternoon and I had still seen no-one, either on the path or in any part of the island around me. Yet the path clearly carried more than just travelers on foot, since two ruts had appeared drawn on either side. Perhaps I had come from a place people rarely visited.

The track began to turn between rocks, so that each new alteration of direction was hidden until I was only just upon it. These continued for an hour or so, while the sun drifted down. I became hungry, a little tired even though I must have more ground to cover before I found any shelter.

The track rose up again, less rocky than before, towards the edge of a hill.

The trees were now sparse and some time in walking would pass between them. As I finally came to the hill it flattened out and widened to show what I supposed was a village, of ten or so places close together.

The track became a street between the larger houses, if they were houses rather than store-rooms, or outbuildings attached to some other larger place. Closer up, I could see they were of more substantial construction than the little hut by the sea. They had windows instead of shutters, the walls of dressed stone - the bigger places had an upper storey, behind which the sun was about to set.

I heard voices, the first for many hours, behind the double-doors of one of the larger buildings. Perhaps I could be given food - though I had nothing to exchange for it. And I had nothing that might buy me a bed for a night, if a bed was to be had.

I was about to knock on the door, when I realised that it was already slightly open. Inside, a warm light and the noise of people. One approached and opened the door wide, signaling and smiling at me. There was a low table, with benches on either side. Six or seven sat at it, with a couple more standing by a fire. On the long table, flat, round loaves that some had torn chunks from. A large stone tureen held a heavy broth, or stew. At the end of the bench a place was made for me.

I sat down heavily, glancing about for the one who had brought me in, but entirely forgot which one it was. My neighbour offered bread and a bowl was passed up.

"You should eat, friend. You should eat."

"I have nothing ... with me. I can't give you anything."

Two or three of them gave a low chuckle at this. The woman put an arm round me and leaned in, telling me in a quiet voice -

"Don't worry about that. There's enough for us and you as well. You can share with us."

She smiled again and filled the bowl. It was a sort of soup, with large mushrooms and some other formed stuff in it. I ate a little too quickly at first, then felt more relaxed. Those nearby showed smiles, nodded and encouraged me. A little while later, I thought to ask my question.

"Is there a larger town nearby? I am lost. I need to find ... a way ... I was on a boat. Is there a harbour?"

Most of them looked blankly back, still smiling. One woman who sat closer

to the fire looked up and laughed. Beside her sat a man with two bags by his legs, as though he were just about to take them up and leave. He turned away.

"Is there not a harbour? For the boats?"

The man by the fire turned to face me. This seemed to mean nothing to them. Surely the island couldn't stand on it's own, without some regular traffic? What about fishing? But, then I remembered - I had seen no other boats since I last saw mine. I had seen no-one fishing, neither had I seen any being eaten. Here, only a day's walk from the sea, they ate mushrooms - and some other stuff, which although I didn't know I was sure could not be fish. A town, then? There must be a bigger place on the island, where more people lived?

"Do you want to go to the market? We will take you in the morning. Everything will be well there for you."

After some slow questioning, I realised that these were also travellers and stopped here on their way to buy and sell at some local town. Quite what they bought and sold I could not tell. None of them seemed to be carrying anything substantial, nothing that I could see to sell. But the place was clearly some commonly used place, where people stopped to share a meal and sleep until going on. At least I could eat - and sleep knowing that nothing would be asked of me for it. It was a great relief to know that I had fallen amongst people who would care for me.

Slowly, each one left the table and passed into darker places around the room. Each one fell onto a rolled pallet, which they had carried with them. The last lamp on the table was turned down until I could barely see across to the bench opposite. The place room was very quiet, warm, filled with the earth and the sky above.

I cast about for somewhere to lay down. I had no pallet of my own, but one of the women offered me a place by them and I quickly fell asleep. I expect it was being so tired that made me not to dream, or to forget whatever dreams I had. Whatever it was, the night passed very peacefully, even though I was in a place where I must have seemed entirely a stranger to all of them. The sleep was not like that of the boat, but something more natural.

They all had their places around the room. They asked nothing of me, nor questioned me. There seemed no curiosity in them at all, or what I might have called curiosity, just a contentment to have me there for a while and to put me back on my way.

In the morning, I tried to speak to show my gratitude to them - but even the ones who had spoken to me first the night before seemed not to understand. They pulled on backpacks and shared around more chunks of bread, apples and

a jug. In the jug, which each took a gulp from, was a foaming small-beer.

Each went out to a back courtyard and joined into a loose group, as though they had to travel together but had no wish to push themselves on any other. I couldn't quite understand why they were milling about, until a cart drew up. One by one, they all got in - and a hand was put down to pull me up. I sat at the back.

They spoke only a little as we slowly trundled along. Sometimes I wondered if it might be quicker to walk, but I thought it would look churlish to refuse their invitation, especially after being with them for a night. Although I felt some obligation to them, none of them seemed to be concerned in getting anything in return from me.

The track became a street of packed earth and stones. They spoke a little more to one another as the noise of the road beneath us grew. Beside the street came the occasional house, or shop, or storage-place - it was most often difficult to tell which was which. Sometimes one or two people would come out to watch us pass. I had the thought that we might be country-folk and not a common sight.

After an hour or so, another cart passed ours. Some of my companions called out and waved to those in the other cart, who recognised them and waved back cheerily. If we were going towards the market, they must be returning. But what was being bought and sold? None of those in the other cart seemed to be carrying anything different from those in ours. The oddities of the place, which I had accepted and even found calming when I had first come from the sea now began to seem curious - problems to be solved rather than only differences to be experienced.

These people were different from the figure I first met. The figure was tall, these people were my height - though everywhere there was a group there were hardly two alike. Young and old, some so short I thought they must be children, but they seemed not to be - the women and men, or those I called women and men, mixed together in such a way I had not seen before. Some I could not tell at all, if they were tall girls or willowy men - though they also seemed not to see any difference between themselves and made no surprise to see another very different from their own appearance.

Perhaps this is how I came to be so readily accepted by them, with none remarking on my clothes or speech. But how would such an island at once have so large an array of people on it and yet seemingly have no traffic with any other place? Where had they come from and how had they got here? They spoke so rarely - and preferred to smile and nod, to greet and farewell - that I found I had little opportunity to ask any explanation of them.

I could see that the market was approaching, or the larger town at least. We slowed as we came into the town square, or what I took to be the square. On three sides were buildings of two stories, on one last side seemingly nothing at all, save fields and the forest in the distance behind. This was the way we had come from.

I felt suddenly lonely, which then surprised me. I had felt quite content since being taken from the sea - why should I feel lonely now, just when I was with dozen of people, all of whom seemed friendly enough? Friendly certainly, if a little uncommunicative. Well, I should easily make my way on, to whatever city there must be on the island.

The cart stopped and we began to drop one by one from the back. Each traveller gave a wave, a sign of farewell to their comrades - and quickly disappeared into the edges of the crowd. It can have been no more than a few dozen, really, but by that stage I was quite unaccustomed to seeing more than one or two together at once.

I tried to see what might be for sale, but had no luck. Here the great mix of people began to confuse me. I heard at least two languages I didn't understand. One woman, tall and thin, stooped to speak in low tones to a short man in a phrase which she repeated again and over again. For a while, I was almost certain it was Basque, but then grew quite unsure when she turned to me and spoke it.

Still none of them had any word for me that was disturbing. Only confusing, but that could hardly be blamed on them. I was the stranger in their midst and it was surely up to me to make my way. And hadn't their fellows helped me already, more than I'd expected any help to come? I looked about and smiled hopefully. If they were so helpful, I had nothing to worry myself with.

The short man spat and whispered. He carried two black leather pouches, in which there were great bunches of pink flowers. He leant towards me as he passed and whispered again. Did he mean me to hear? Now I looked again and saw that none of those I'd travelled with on the cart could be seen. I felt for a moment almost afraid.

I tried to catch a word here and there, but it was the great mixture of languages that confused me - and that they seemed to be satisfied with only a word or two between each of them. Then one would laugh, or smile in agreement and that would be an end of it. Try as I might, I saw no money change hands.

Then I felt absolutely foolish. What had I to fear? All I had to do was find some proper place to explain myself - to explain what had happened to me - and surely everything would be put to rights. I began to come away from the

crowd and wondered if there might be some official place I could see around the square.

But, since I had arrived, I had seen no tower, no central building - was there a town hall here? There must be that, or something like it. How did they run the place? Who was in charge? And then, with a feeling of great relief, I saw in the far corner what looked just the place I was looking for. I almost began to run towards it, but found myself faced with others coming towards me. Friendly, most of them, they nodded me by. But some turned away - and one deliberately stepped in front of me.

I stopped and stared. The man's blank face showed nothing. Was he angry at me? If he was, it didn't show. Should I speak with him? Apologise for my rushing? Ask for help?

"Is this the way to the town hall?"

I could see he understood the words, but not all of what I meant. He stood alone. Others made their way past without looking up at him. I asked again. After a little time he took a half-step out of my way, then pointed towards the corner of the square that I had guessed at. He smiled.

As I walked on, I thought of it, then realised it was no smile - rather a sort of grimace. I thought to turn and see if he was there, but something made me not. At last I had reached what I supposed was the town hall, or some public office at least.

The ground floor of the place was taken up by a hall, to which there was only one way in and out. The door was half-open and I thought myself to be alone in there until I heard a movement in the dim end of the room, away from the door.

A large trestle-table was set up, at which a man sat, somewhat slumped across the boards. Before him was a pile of manuscript paper and three or four pens - some open, some closed. During our short interview he did not use any of them, nor seem to wish to pick them up. One of the manuscripts had been marked with ink. His hands were marked as well.

He seemed a little dis-interested in his work, if this was his work. Perhaps this was some civic duty to perform and he did it only unwillingly. However it was, he showed no interest in my coming into the room, only sat looking at his pile of papers. Even if he could not help, I assumed he might know which direction I should take next.

There being no bench or chair on my side of the table, I stood in front and waited for him a while. I seemed to interest him even less than his papers. I drew close up to the edge of the table until he could no longer ignore me. He



wore a dark coat, or jacket. A pair of gloves lay on the table in front of him. There was little else in the room.

He sat in silence as I tried to explain how I had come to arrive there. He seemed entirely unmoved by my situation, but at last gave a small sigh and moved about in his chair. He passed his eye over the closest set of papers.

"Well. You see, if you don't have your papers, we can't really help."

I stood, still. I wondered if I was to give any answer to this. It didn't seem like a challenge, or an accusation - just a plain statement of fact. He moved in his chair again, as though irritated by something. He moved to speak, thought better of it, then sat back. After a little while of reflection, he spoke quietly.

"You could go and get them yourself, I suppose."

I told him that I had none to get, which seemed only to make him mildly irritated again. He settled on the idea that I should carry on through the town, onto the road to the city. There was a city, then - and it was at the far shore of the island. He couldn't tell me much about the place, since he had never been, but he knew it was big - and money was sent to him from there. Money - and these papers. He spread out his hands as though to offer evidence.

"There's nothing else to be done."

Here he looked up and smiled, like the others. But where they had seemed quite open and unashamed of it, he smiled as though he felt a fool doing it, or that he had given something away that he should not have. The smile quickly left him. It was replaced not by a stern look of authority, but an evident weariness.

Perhaps the money sent had not made up for the work with the papers. Perhaps the town tolerated him and his papers, but little more than that. I was, after all, his only visitor. I decided to take advantage of the quiet and asked him a little more about the island - and about the rest of my journey.

He said the island was small, that I had already come almost half-way across it since I had arrived. This part of the island was his home. The people in the city were different, but also richer. He wished to be rich. But these people in the market town seemed not to satisfy him. None of them were rich. Even if they had been, how would they have shown it - how would I have told a rich man from a poor one, there?

He spoke of the city in a tone of admiration: the buildings, the streets, the people - the best of the island, by far. Not like here, not like the market, where only country-people came. I was lucky to have an opportunity to go. He would have wanted to come with me, but the papers, you see?

Again he made the motion with his out-stretched hands. Before he could sink back into them, I asked where I should go next. He said the way was easy - easier by far than the way I had come. Proper road-way ahead, no cart-tracks or mossy paths. He envied me.

I made my thanks and left the place: at the doorway I turned to see him, entirely absorbed by his papers. Whatever kept him here kept him very strongly here. And for someone so eager to take the way I was to take, he seemed quite content to let me go ahead and stay himself. I had come in to him alone and left alone. No others waited outside and none of those who passed by looked in on him. He sat quietly at his table, his eyes cast down. He seemed to be resting.

Outside, some half of the people had gone off. Back to their farms, or fields, or whatever place they had come from. The sun was dropping and I knew I had to find another place to keep me overnight. In all the square there seemed nothing like the place I had slept before. Where might I look?

Before the sun set, I knew I had to get one of them to help me, or at least tell me where I might be helped. Two women passed slowly before me, carrying between them a large glass bottle in a wicker container, which offered to handles to carry it with. Behind them, a man in a three-quarters coat, with what looked like an old-fashioned doctor's bag, very scuffed and marked.

As I came closer to him, I wondered if I could even make myself understood. I asked if there was some place to stay until the morning, which he took some time in thinking about. At last he did not speak his reply, but pointed to what looked like a large alley-way that opened into the square, opposite the open field.

Before I could ask any more, he nodded quickly and left. It was not an alley, but the doorway to what seemed to be a very small factory, or a storage-place of some sort. The doorway was quite wide, wide enough for at least a cart to come into for loading.

Around the walls were stacked several of the glass bottles in wicker baskets. There was a low lamp by the doors. I saw three or four people already unpacking their bags in the darkest part of the place. Why did they want to go there? Why not stay by the light?

I had expected the usual round of greetings, but this night was not for that, it seemed. Not one of them offered any more than a glance to me. A couple shared a loaf of bread, but it wasn't passed round. I thought I had better find my place to sleep and make the best of a breakfast I could in the morning.

I put myself down in the corner nearer the lamp and pulled a large sheet of

sacking over me. I was cold and hungry, not not enough to keep me from sleep. Within only a few minutes, I had left the quite world of the town and fallen into the world of dreams again, dreams I had very often forgotten before, if I had dreamed at all. But now, once more, I dreamed of home - or, what came after home: the beginning of my journey.

I was shaken awake, by someone I couldn't quite see. By the time I was up, I was the last in the place. There was a smell, one I'd not noticed before. Something acidic. Outside, the square was empty. I looked back towards the way I'd come, wondering for a moment if I should go back.

The way up and away from the square led to an open road, well-laid and lined with planted trees. There was a place for carts, but none for me to walk. My working-boots sounded on the road and I began to feel out of my place.

I began to feel hot, though the sun was not much higher than it had been when I left the square. The road led straight up a rising hill. Soon a small rise showed I was to cross a bridge, but as I walked closer, I saw that the road stopped before where the bridge should have been.

I looked down to see not a river, but only a stream. It looked quite unnatural, running in a straight line which seemed to pass into the distance. No part of the stream was higher than another. The water ran neither in one direction or the other, but seemed to boil. The acidic smell came again.

The strangest thing about the stream was it's colour - where I had thought the sun had made it golden, I stepped down to find it a glistening, flat and sickly yellow. As far as I could see, it spread like a line drawn directly through the middle of the island. I had to cross the water - if it was even water - if I was ever to leave the place.

The smell rose beneath me. I tried to step over it all at once, but my slower foot dragged and slipped back into the stinking yellow, which hissed and bit at my boot. I fell forward and grabbed at the far bank, which was stained and soggy. I sat up, suddenly exhausted.

I looked back toward the far side of the stream, which seemed at once very close and far away. A thin film hung in the air. I knew I couldn't stay there and must go on, if only to get beyond the smell of the yellow ditch. Slowly I pulled myself away and up the bank, back to where the road started again.

The smell faded only a little, but anything was better than staying by the bank. Tired, I rejoined the road and stumbled slowly on. I realised why I was the only person on the road: there was no-where to go. Only one way was left for me, onwards to the city, to get my papers and to leave the island.

The road on this side was even better than before. Surely this was not a road for carts, but for motors. The surface looked, again, newly-laid. The road passed straight ahead, starting to cut an embankment into the thickly-wooded hillside. The ground rose and fell, but the road simply sliced through.

There was no place on either side of the road to walk - and I continued in the rising heat to travel straight down the middle of the road, expecting anything that came along to see me before it was too late. The trees began to close in, so that the road was half in dark shadow and half in the blank of the sun.

I tried for a while to keep in the shadow, but found it impossible. The trees looked even more alien than those I had seen before. Some had a large fruit growing on them, which hung down like an aubergine, but the colour a sort of light green. I dare not try them, for fear they might be poison - or at least, un-ripe.

The hills around became more irregular. The road carried on. Ahead I thought I heard voices, or perhaps it might have been an animal. There was a disturbance in the top of the trees and several large birds took off into the sky, heading above my head and back towards the yellow ditch.

I cannot tell how long I had been walking, except to say that it must have by now been some time in the afternoon. The trees closed in still further, almost covering the road and giving some relief from the late sun.

I came suddenly to a crossroads. Looking up the slight rise, I saw that the road ahead was crossed by a thin metal barrier, behind which stood three men in uniform. One appeared to carry a gun, but I could hardly see that clearly until I came closer.

I called out a hello. They saw me, but gave no answer. Closer still - and I could see that the two unarmed stood back, leaving the barrier to the one with a weapon. I must have looked a terrible sight, tired and dirty, but they looked more fearful than disgusted at me.

I said my hello again, but got no response, until I reached a few steps from the barrier. He raised his gun and spoke to his fellows to move up by him, as though I was some sort of threat. I could hardly have offered much resistance to anything they chose to do. I certainly made no threat to them.

But still they looked warily at me, not speaking except to each other and then only in a mutter I could not make out. I stopped and tried to explain: my journey from the sea right up to coming to the city. I was looking for my papers, so I could leave the island, so I could go home.

The one with the gun asked: "Where are your papers?" - and I explained

again, that I had none. They spoke to each other a little longer, then I was waved forward. "You must have your papers."

At last the thin metal barrier was raised - and I was let through. Here there was a small armoured car, with no turret but room enough in the back for at least six more of the guards. Was I in some occupied zone? Perhaps I shouldn't be here at all. Perhaps I had come the wrong way.

But after some long questioning, I realised that there was only one way towards the city - and I was on it. They looked at me with some suspicion, until one suggested that I be given a pass. I was taken over to the armoured car and stood by the back, while one of them crouched over a stack of cards with a pen. Even as I watched, the gun was trained on me.

The pass was an oblong of rough card, with paper laid on it. A printed form with spaces to fill was attached. The print was very faint and marked all over with tears, smudges and two large red stamps. I looked at it doubtfully but they assured me that it was the only way I might pass on further.

I asked why they were there, but got no answer I could understand. I asked if they were part of an army, but they looked puzzled at the idea. I asked why one of them had a gun - and he laughed. The trees hung low over the barrier. I could only see a little way into the forest, or perhaps it was by then a jungle.

I wondered where I might get some food; they sent me on my way, saying that I might find something nearer the city. None of them could tell me how much further I had to walk, only that they had been driven there from a nearby barracks. I was sent off as an irritant - they made it clear that I should only go on and not come back that way.

The rest of that day was a hard, long walk. As I carried on up the road I began to hear noises far off in the distance, a low boom, coming irregularly. After a while, I imagined it to be the sounding of a gun, but approaching nearer it was clearly some machine.

The trees began to come away from the roadside and I saw, still some what ahead of me, a large clearing with people working around it. The trees were being pulled down, with a thing that looked like a crane, only close to the ground. It seemed to require a great deal of people to operate it - they looked tiny beside it, tending to some larger animal.

The machine itself had no-one inside it, but several people moved about it, pulling at ropes of wire, or chains. The long neck of the thing would be pulled back, the rest for a while under some sort of preparation. At last the neck would flail forwards heavily and land with a horrid crash on the trees in front of it. Then the men would climb onto it and start handling the neck back into position.

Each one of these operations would take ten or so minutes, so I saw three in succession before I came close enough to see the results. Each great force exerted on the trees crushed several at once, but from the top branches down, so that some would remain half-demolished by the blows and others would be entirely destroyed.

As far as I could see, not much attempt was being made to make any orderly path through, or even to retrieve the carcasses they had created. As soon as a tree fell completely, it would simply be pushed aside by groups of men with long metal staves.

After my encounter at the barrier, I felt more wary of the people on this side of the island. From here I would assume no welcome - and that they might even begin to threaten me. How could I pass by to the city without bringing too much attention to myself?

I decided that I should try to look familiar - and that I would take what I could from the clearing to make myself look un-remarkable. I went off the road, into the thick-gathered trees away from the great machine. Here there were ill-stacked piles of trunks, what looked like smaller machines, large canisters of fuel-oil and many coils of wire rope.

There was also a few large tool-boxes, with caps and jackets laid on them. From behind a tree, I saw a duffel-bag, open at the top. Looking out to check I would not been seen, I came out quickly, took it up in passing and stepped back toward the road.

For a while, I expected to hear voices behind me, but they were too far away to notice me. I broke into a run for a little time, until I could hear nothing but the boom of the machine. I would have to find some place to go through the bag I had picked up.

Beside the road, I put myself by the largest tree-trunk I could find, well-hidden from anyone approaching. I pulled open the heavy bag and let the contents out. A cap, dirty with oil on one side. A jacket, with a fluorescent band across the back. Three cylinders of some thin metal, joined together with a string.

I turned them over. The top of one came loose, to show a sort of cold stew inside. I had no spoon - and drank it from the metal container. One other cylinder was empty, save for some grains of rice. The last one had three or four strips of green-brown fibre in it, which taste sweet. At the bottom of the bag was a large canister, with a little water in it, which I drank.

I bound up all I could take in the bag and left the rest by the bottom of the

trunk. I sat for a while, listening to the sound of the forest - or rather, the sound of the great machine I had recently passed. I smiled at the thought that I had got past them easily: not just got past them, but taken my food and clothing from them. What fools they must be - and what a wily creature I was!

I pulled my newly-got jacket close to me - and my oil-stained cap low over my eyes - and stepped out into the roadway again to carry on walking. As I walked, I began to plan the way ahead. If they had machines out here, with those drums of fuel-oil, surely there must be some transport to carry them about. I should be able to get myself a faster way up to the city if all of those workers were as slow as the first lot I'd chanced across.

I walked on, thinking of how best I could cheat my way to my destination. I smiled at myself, thinking ... thinking ... and then I stopped. What was I thinking? That it was good for me to be a thief? That I should carry on my way, by stealing? Hadn't the people of the island welcomed me in the market? Hadn't one of them even rescued me from the sea?

Quickly I felt entirely ashamed - and thought of how I had been on the boat and what my strange journey had been since then. I could hardly blame the islanders, which seemed to have a simple life, or one that seemed simple to me. How could I feel such delight at stealing from them? Hadn't they given me so much already?

Of course, those after I had crossed the yellow ditch weren't quite so welcoming, but they were soldiers and had their jobs to do. The workers in the forest taking down the trees had left their clothes and food and I had stolen them. I had stolen them - perhaps the first time I had ever stolen without thinking it was plainly wrong to do so.

Would I have starved, if I had not taken that food? Should I not simply have asked for something to eat, or for some clothes? Thinking of it horrified me. Something in me had changed. I could not blame the islanders, so it must have been in me all along. I felt suddenly quite ashamed.

I stood for a while, still in the middle of the road. I thought back to how I was on the boat, how I was before I left. I never would have taken something like that - stolen something. I should go back, give back what I had taken. But, they would ... what would they do? There were the soldiers, back there. And, after all, I had to keep myself warm and alive. What else could I have done?

As soon as I had started to walk again, I heard an engine on the road ahead. I came to the side of the road to let it past and waited. It was a large four-wheeled carrier, with a high cabin at the front and a low, angle-roofed container at the back. It drew up and the driver leaned out.

"You're late. You should have been with the others. What are you doing out here?"

He must think I was one of the workers, dressed as I was. I was about to say I wasn't one of them, when I realised that he might well turn me in. I decided to go on.

"Which way?"

"Back up the hill, of course."

Then I would be taken further towards the city. At last! An end, finally, to tramping along on my own, or swinging along on some slow cart. Now I would be travelling fast enough to reach the city before night - and I would find my papers and the island would soon be just a strange memory.

The engine of the thing idled as I clambered in through a thick canvas, opened at the back. The floor of the carrier was angled as the roof was, so the whole thing formed a sort of hexagonal tube. I hadn't the chance to even get my bearings before the thing gave a sudden lurch. The engine roared and we turned slowly to face up the hill.

The driver spent some time wrenching through the gears before the engine took a grinding note and we set off - at first quite slowly, then picking up speed. I put myself down where I could on the metal flooring and took a look about. The carrier was clearly used for workers and their machinery. There were oil-stains and marks of chemicals all over, with the metal dented heavily in several places.

Right at the back was the un-mistakable smell of the yellow ditch, with a small amount of that bright-yellow liquid running in the grooves of the metal flooring. I decided to sit as close to the heavy canvas hanging at the back of the carrier as I could, so as to be as far from the smell as I might get. It was the odour of a strong acid, or bleach, quite unlike any natural thing.

From my perch at the back, I saw the forest thinning rapidly away, with clearings multiplying and joining together. At first, there was one or two groups of workers tending their machines. Then, as the afternoon wore on, I passed what looked like small settlements: groups of workers, possibly put out here to clear the land for other uses.

If they were foresters, where were the trunks of the trees? The machine I had seen earlier just smashed at whatever was in its way. I'd not seen any piles of logs, anywhere. Perhaps it was used there and then, for fuel?

The carrier trundled on, changing gear now and then as the road rose and



fell. Once or twice we slowed as another similar carrier passed us going the other way. One had workers in, the other a few soldiers, their guns pointed up through the canvas.

The road flattened and widened. We passed signs, which I thought must be the edge of the city, or at least of the more built-up part of the island. I could only see the back of them as we passed. I sat back, revelling in the thought that my long journey would soon be over. I would present myself for my papers and be gone, as soon as possible.

I was beginning to relax a little, when the carrier came to a sudden stop. The engine ran for a minute, then stopped too. I heard the driver's door open and slam shut. I waited for a minute or so, quite unsure what to do.

Eventually I pulled the canvas aside and looked out. We were in a lorry-park, beside several more carriers. It had begun to rain. The place was covered in broken tarmac. I looked round but could see neither the driver, nor anyone else. I gathered together what I could and slowly let myself down.

There was no-one to be seen around at all. Around two sides of the lorry-park were apartment-blocks, which looked all but derelict. Looking closer, I saw that they had in fact never been occupied - almost completed, then seemingly abandoned. Roofs and walls were missing, not through decay but through incompleteness. The rain fell through several floors. There were windows only on the ground floor - and even there they were painted over.

I thought I must have been on the outskirts of the city and more travelling lay ahead of me. I pulled my stolen jacket in and my stolen cap down over my brow. I tucked my hair in at the back as well as I could. For a moment I stood waiting as though for direction, but then started on my way towards the road. I thought I saw someone watching from one of the doorways - but the whole block was clearly empty.

With the lorry-park behind me, I was back on the road. Here it had broken into a dual-carriageway, with carriers passing now and then. There were also a few people on bicycles - all dressed in a similar style, not a uniform, but a rather obvious fashion.

Perhaps they didn't import much in the way of clothes. Or perhaps it was some sort of national dress. Or one of those styles where it's best to look like you're unconcerned about your appearance. In any case, it gave them all a similar look: people, workers and soldiers all seemed of one lot. I couldn't tell any of them apart. Suddenly I felt that I might well start to stand out here, that I might become different and noticeable, when I had very much wanted just to be invisible.

I walked on - and a sort of pavement emerged from the road-side. Where a gutter and kerb should have been, there was a shallow channel. This was the only mark between those walking and the bicycles and carriers passing by. How could they tell if they were in the road or not?

The traffic both on the road and the pavement increased. The only motors passing seemed to be working: the carriers, some empty but most with workers or soldiers in them; a couple of larger things that moved more slowly and had three soldiers clung to the side by a large turret; many more bicycles.

The bicycles themselves seemed to be of an almost uniform type. I couldn't see any cars on the road at all, only the lorries and military things. Squalls of rain passed quickly overhead, making the way difficult to follow. The surface of the pavement became slippery and now and then a bicycle would swerve towards me.

I must, I realised, find somewhere to put myself again before it became dark. I couldn't stay out here in the rain. The main road ahead finally separated around a large circus, with traffic swirling around it. In the middle was a grubby-looking stretch of grass, with a couple of kiosks in front of what looked like a sort of large plinth, on which a statue no longer stood.

On the side of one of the kiosks I could see a stylised map, rather like the sort of thing one might find for tourists - though I could see no-one about who would fit anything like that description. I waited for a gap in the traffic and made a dash for it.

I wasn't quite quick enough and caught a cuff on the back of the head from a passing cyclist. My cap fell off and my hair suddenly blew forward in the wind and rain. At least two more cyclists laughed at me as they passed. The driver of a carrier leaned out and gave a whistle, followed by a leering look as he slowly drove off.

I picked up my cap as quickly as I could and put it back on, feeling rather as though it had now taken the place of armour. The kiosks both looked particularly uninviting. One was clearly closed for the day, the other had three customers sat at a metal bench attended by a surly-looking vendor. None of them noticed me.

The map looked old and marked heavily by weather. It had clearly been there for some time, then forgotten for even longer. It was a map of the city, as far as I could see. I could make out the road I had come in from, since it headed down towards the middle of the island. At the top of the map lay my destination: a place where the city met the sea. I couldn't see a port or harbour marked, but this map was for tourists, not those wanting to leave the place.

A wreath of flowers was printed around the name of the city, but that had been scribbled over in thick marker pen. Roads and other things seemed quite clear despite the state of the diagram. Around the map were buildings drawn in the style of a fairy-tale: a museum, perhaps; an art gallery; a pair of long, open boulevards with cafes; a great roundabout where a grand restaurant stood in front of an admiring crowd.

I looked more closely at the map. If that was the road I had come on, then - surely this place I stood was where the restaurant was marked. I looked about. There was nothing except the two kiosks.

A couple of metal tables - really discs held up by props - stood a little way from the kiosks. Someone had left the remains of a meal and I immediately picked up a paper bag containing what looked like a toasted sandwich. It looked very dry and smelled of vinegar. Despite any hunger, I could not face to eat it.

Also left on the table was a newspaper. It was thin, on cheap paper, printed in black and red. On the front page were simple word puzzles, cartoons and what I thought might have been sports or lottery results. I left it there.

I went back to the map and tried to find how I might get to the harbour, or what took the place of the harbour. Whatever happened I knew I must reach or pass through the most built-up part of the city. There I could find a post-office, or town-hall, or registry or some place I could tell who I was - and at last be sent on my way.

There were always arrangements to be made, I knew that. Papers, passports, passes - all these things must be done. They are the necessary things we have to do to travel, especially in far-off places where we are unknown. And that was where I was: in a far-off place, quite unknown.

But the people on the other side of the island had been quite friendly to me. Here in the city it was not at all like that. The people rarely looked at me - in fact, they seemed almost not to look at each other. If I did look alien to them, either they were hiding their reactions ... or ... I could not think.

The map showed the city as it once was supposed to have been, or wished to be, or wanted to be seen. I could not imagine that the place would ever have really looked anything like the diagram suggested. I could not even explain it as many years passing and the city falling into ruins. It was almost as if it was a pretence: that people claimed that the city was some famous attraction for tourists, all the time knowing that it had never been that - nor would it ever be.

The roads, though, were in the right place, as far as I could make out. Nervously, I tucked my hair in under my cap. I traced my route in on the map and wondered if I should just carry on. If I did - crossing the circus with the

kiosks - the map showed a grand progress up to a great open square.

Around the square on the map were ranged tall houses, some looked like public buildings. The map marked some with small icons: the coiled horn I though must be a post office. Under the horn was printed 'PTT'. There, at last, it must be a post office. They would help me. That would be the place to go.

I walked away from the kiosks, rather glad to put my back to them. They had a grimy and unpleasant aspect. I must have been at the less developed end of the town. Certainly the map gave the impression that some greater buildings lay ahead.

I walked over the scrubby ground and crossed the road that ringed the circus. The traffic was even heavier than before. Now there were lorries, flat-bed trucks, small three-wheeled delivery tricycles - but still no sign of a private car. The constant whirr of bicycles of all sizes, on which perched all the mobile population of the city.

But again I noticed their clothes: if I had not dressed myself as a forest-worker I would have seemed quite noticeable amongst them. Everyone wore the same sort of uniform, as though none did anything but work.

I was pushed to the side of the pavement by the run of traffic. Walking seemed to be quite unpopular and a few of those passing by looked at me in surprise. I should find myself a bicycle of my own. But - what was I thinking? Of stealing, again, as I'd done in the forest? I felt instantly ashamed. Why would I do such a thing? And could I have got away with it, in this crowded place?

I tried to put it out of my mind and look for the square ahead. According to the map it should have been only a short walk up ahead, but I began to think I'd headed in the wrong direction. I found myself walking not towards an open square, but to a series of tall apartment-blocks, not as squat as the ones I had seen before.

I must have taken a wrong turning somewhere - but how could I? There was only one road to follow. I decided to carry on up to the blocks to get my bearings. The roads became even more full of traffic, sometimes the carriers came in lines of three or four together - moving so slowly and closely that they seemed like one, long mechanical progression.

The bicycles swarmed about me, pushing and edging each other out of the way. Once or twice the road became so crowded that the pavement was taken over entirely by cyclists - none of whom cared to slow down or wheel their near-identical machines, but sped on as best they could.

I came up to where I had expected to see a large square, but faced across the

busy street only a wall of buildings, some looking recently built. The ground floors of most looks strangely un-featured, as though the real entrances were a floor below the ground and I was looking at the blank expanses of the upper floors.

The roads certainly formed a square, but there was no open ground in the middle. Slowly I realised that I was in the right direction after all - only that what had been the square had been filled in, over the years, with construction. The city was erupting into itself.

I knew where the post-office building was supposed to be and tried to make my way towards it. Each tall construction looked much like the last, with little to tell if it was residential or commercial. In fact, the only places selling anything seemed to be the little kiosks I had passed and several similar small concerns.

There was a surprisingly thin kiosk selling a small selection of newspapers; a tricycle converted to carry bundles of what looked like work-clothes; two men standing at a metal cart selling some sort of food - though the line was so long I couldn't see what it was they were selling.

Where all the traffic was going I couldn't tell either, but I knew I must find some relief when I reached the post-office: I could come out of the great mass of people and finally resolve the situation. I wanted to be away from the place as much as the people in the city wanted me away. This was no place for tourists, or even a casual visitor or accidental traveller. Their city had business that excluded people like me - I was an irritation, a mistake, something to be borne only for a little while and then thrown out.

I would be glad to have them rid of me. I simply couldn't survive in such a place. I wanted nothing more than to be back on my bunk in the boat - however tedious it had seemed back then, it was almost inviting now. How I missed my regular tasks and meals. How I missed the quiet companionship of the rest of the crew.

I was so absorbed in myself I almost missed the place I was looking for: on the large windows of the block I was walking past was the post-horn logo, with 'PTT' in large orange letters beneath in. In fact, the entire thing was so large it reached from the ground up to the second storey - but faced flat onto the pavement. It seemed very odd to have a mark so prominent and yet seemingly so easy to miss, especially for a visitor.

I tried for a doorway, but found none. No panel swung back, neither was there any window I might push open. If this was a public building, how on earth was I to get in? As the crowds push around me, I put up my hand to shield my eyes and get some look at the inside. It took some time for me to get used to the dark interior: rows of people seemed to be waiting for their turn at a few booths,

rather as one might expect at a remote train-station.

This I supposed must be the main post-office, it being so very crowded and well-used. But where might I get in to it? I looked about on the street for some over-hanging sign, or anything that might signal an entrance. Nothing I could see would show any way in. I was not going to give up, since there must be some answer, though I did start to become irritated and - at length - exasperated at how simple a task seemed either to be made complicated, or perhaps I had grown somehow stupid.

I stood watching others pass - and decided that I should wait until someone else made their way in. If the post-office was so full, many people must be going in and out - somewhere. I did not have long to wait until two men came up, glanced at the window and then took a sudden turn to vanish.

It took me a moment to work out what had happened: there was a small alleyway between the blocks that I simply hadn't noticed at all. It was very dim, with fluorescent lamps in a thin line above it. I saw the two turn again into the post-office. I followed them, surprised that such a place had such a small and unwelcoming entrance.

There was no door to pass through: the alleyway ended suddenly and opened into the ground floor of the post-office. The floor was of large marble squares, rubbed and scarred from use. The high ceiling held four chandeliers, none of which were used. Strip lighting had been installed later, it seemed, under a layer of cladding.

Around the walls hung posters, most of which were torn and faded. The only ones to look new were a couple of large lists, possibly prices for services, since many of the figures were crossed out and pencilled over.

Dozens of people were milling about, some seemingly in queues, others not. It was difficult to see where I was supposed to go. I made my way towards a central desk, which I understood to be a sort of information point. I joined a queue, which moved slowly. After about a quarter hour I stood in front of a young man at the desk, who sat with a computer screen at his left-hand side, but without a keyboard.

"You're to take this, fill in your details, take one of these, go to the registration office and then you can start."

I looked on with a little surprise.

"You've come for your papers, yes? You don't have any?"

Quite how he knew I couldn't work out, but I supposed I was glad that I

didn't have to explain myself. I took the assortment of pages, together with a thick pen, turned and made my way back to a row of chairs by the wall. At last, I felt some little relief from my situation. I could fill in the forms, get my papers and go. These people didn't want me here. I wasn't one of them. I had no reason to be there. I didn't even want to be there.

Perhaps, years ago, I might have wanted to visit the city when it was as it appeared on the old tourist map - but no-one would come here for that reason now. And it was so crowded! It was almost as though the people living in the city didn't know the rest of the island existed. And the other side of the island may as well have been another country entirely - or even another time.

Did they even know about those people here in the city? Certainly they seemed very different, in almost every way. Even physically: the people I had met first were a great assortment of types - whereas here in the city I was finding it difficult to tell each one apart from another. In the villages I felt like one of them, but here in the city I began to feel rather conspicuous. But what was I worried about? I had started to feel as though I should be hiding, ever since I had been on the carrier. But who was I hiding from? Was I trying to escape? Who was coming after me?

I looked down at the sheaf of forms I had been given. At least I should start on these and make the best of it. I had got this far, after all. But, the more I looked through them, the more worried I got. Many of the pages I couldn't understand at all. Some seemed blank. Some referred to things that seemed quite unconnected to me. Others asked for information I couldn't possibly have - still more demanded strangely intimate details that I thought I wouldn't like to give. One seemed to be a sort of check-list one might fill in before surgery.

Had I been given the wrong forms? I must have been. I tried again to concentrate on the first few pages. Even these seemed quite insurmountable. I sat back and felt tears of frustration and exhaustion. I closed my eyes and tried to think. I had made it all across the island: at first with their help and now despite their resistance to me. I couldn't give up after so much effort.

And what would giving up mean? After all, I had survived by my wits since crossing the yellow ditch. Which one of these had helped me after that? I could survive on my own here. I would show them. I didn't need to fill in their forms and run away. I could make my own way on the world without depending on them.

With one last glance down at the papers, I realised that I could never have filled them all in, even if I have wanted to. I stood up, shaking pages from my lap onto the marble floor around me. I had to get out. I had to go on by my own, under my own efforts. I couldn't depend on any help from any of them. In fact, I should remember now that they could only harm me.

I fell towards the way I had come in and forced my way between the constant flow of people coming the other way. Coming out of the little alley-way was even more difficult than getting in. No-one but me seemed to want to do anything but come into the post-office. Those pushing against me got more and more obstructive, eventually aggressive. By the time I had come out onto the street again, I was exhausted.

It had begun to get dark. Not the dark of night, but lowering clouds. Oily street-lamps came on, shimmering in a sickly orange. A great rumble of thunder sounded: no-one looked up, or seemed to notice, or seemed to alter anything they were doing - even when the rain started. It came down in freezing sheets.

I looked up and down the street, trying to work out how I might cross the filled-in square and - if I could - make my way to the port, or harbour, or whatever was there. There was something, where the edge of the city met the sea. I fell forward into the crowd, blundering towards ... some way out, perhaps? Away, certainly, from the city.

Those I passed grew increasingly angry at me. I felt more conspicuous than ever, trying my best to pull my cap down and hide myself from them. A couple jeered at me. One spat and shouted out ... quite what, I couldn't say.

I felt I must cross the road, despite the traffic. It moved so slowly, I thought I might manage to squeeze between the carriers, lorries and bicycles. There were three, or perhaps four lanes on the road, but the traffic seemed to ignore the divisions entirely. There were no markings on the road, no traffic-lights, no signs. By the time I reached the other side of the road, I was bruised and slightly frightened.

Whatever happened, I must get away from the road. Here in the middle of what used to be the square, the buildings were even more haphazardly built. Some seemed old and weathered, some newly built, some abandoned. Through the rain, I dashed through the ground floor of a building-site. The water washed over the flats of exposed concrete, the rusted spikes of iron looking like stumps of trees cut down. I felt that one mis-step would mean injury.

The midst of what used to be the square looked like a flooded hulk. The backs of the buildings loomed over it, shadowing every pathway. There was an opening right in the middle, with what seemed to be a large round pond. As I reached it, I realised it was the remnants of what had once been a very substantial fountain. The rain fell straight down.

The fountain itself was filled, half-filled, with a near-fluorescent yellow liquid - presumably water, but horribly coloured. It stank, heavily, of a sort of acid. The falling rain seemed not to dilute it at all. Whatever the fountain had sprung from



was completely unrecognisable - a sort of half-broken column.

I broke into a stumbling run, splashing through puddles tainted with the yellow liquid. The alleys opened up slightly, only to fill with people. I saw a man turn to watch me as I passed: when I came near to him, he swung a cloak over something in front of him to hide it from me.

The alley-way I came down turned into a sort of tunnel, into a funnel which roared with sound, which ended in a little open doorway that spat me out into the roadway on the opposite side of the filled-in square.

But instead of the expected traffic there was - the sea. The road in front of me was cut straight down the middle into the edge of a cliff. The sea was eroding the land straight into the middle of the square: the other side full of people and traffic, this side slowly falling into the waves.

I could already see down, right down to the water below. It didn't look like a shore, but the straight descent of a cliff-edge to the open sea. The underneath of the clouds glowed darkening orange. The surface of the sea was a sort of brown. The rain fell heavily and the waves looked like boiling water.

I stood with one leg forward, one back - one towards what I thought was escape, one still in the place I wanted to escape from. I couldn't turn back. There was nothing to return to. Those people didn't want me, wouldn't help me.

I tried to stand, but the roadway had tilted up under my feet and I fell back towards the alley-way. Pulling myself up again, the whole world seemed misshapen. The sea screamed. I stepped out toward where the other part of the road should have been.

The surface of the road sloped away. I felt a sudden rise of nausea. I was on the edge of the island, completely alone. The road slipped and twisted away, at once rearing up and again falling sharply down towards the sea. I tried to keep my footing and moved as carefully as I could back towards the alley-way entrance.

The road fell away, soundlessly. There was no moon, no stars to show which was the sky and which the sea. Everything became in a moment still. Stars, sea, the air, the dark - stopped, with me suspended in it. Hung, my legs put up where they should have touched the road and arms outstretched to the sea below.

The island stood silently, pitched up, stuck in the sudden sea. Everything seemed immediate and close. I could see the sides of the buildings, up-ended ...

Slowly, the air moved about me. Slowly, I looked up to see the waves falling down on me. I felt, for the first time since I had left the city, as myself. I felt at

ease. I felt entirely relaxed - even happy. I was certain that this was an end, to something.