

Pirate Island

There is an island where, for one day each year, the dead rise.

It is an old pirate island near Jamaica. Inns grow from dry stone around the main harbour. Smugglers caves dot its cliffs and a small central mountain.

When the dead return, they walk in peace. Given life again, just for a day. I want to see my father.



I take a ship. A frigate. Single small porthole on the world. There are many of us, each holding wishes, time to think, each in a small cabin of tin, on narrow bunks, the paint is thin, like the paint skin on metal strongboxes to keep receipts or money. The protected box on voting day, in a hall in a small town, where papers are marked with a cross and are folded, then dropped like souls overboard. I squint out the port slot, into the sun. On this ship, a mixed box of hopes.

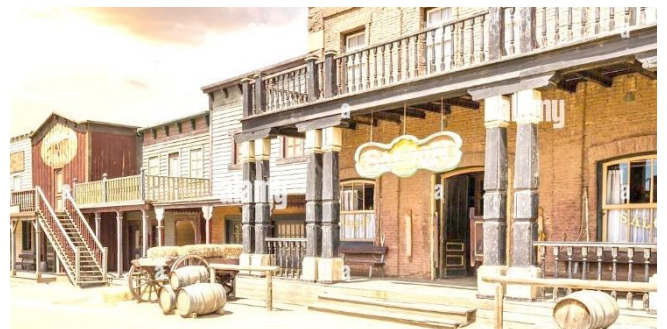
Sparkle of rocking waves, not much to see. The pirates are gone now.

Ten years since I saw my father. He had an idea. I don't know if I'm coming to the island to say goodbye or hello.

We arrive at the harbour, filled with heroic galleons, rising with rigging and crows' nests, and modern yachts of slick white and mirrored windows. A few old naval ships like ours, moored like coaches. There's not much space to weigh anchor and set ashore. It's around noon, and remarkably quiet. Harbour buildings, old wooden inns, and the town stretching back through a wide main street.

Down our clanging ramp and onto the pontoons, like wood-strip boardwalks at Mers-les-Bains, only wider, with the strength for supporting cargo of sacks and barrels. This clang of our ramp, as we walk down, is the only sound. Not even seagulls. I look at the boat names all around, painted like tattoos. Figures carved. Mermaids and roses. Names we give in imagination.

Along the street, empty inns with swing doors that don't quite creak. Sand dust swirls on steps and front boards. No-one here. Up in the hills there's a light in one of the caves. A flame. Or maybe it's just reflection of the sun or the sea. The path to the hills looks well-trodden. Recent scuff marks and modern shoe prints in dry sandy earth.



My father said “Life is a wonderful thing. One of the most wonderful things there is.” He had an idea of what is beyond “life”, I think. We are made with destruction in mind. At any moment our cells can self-destruct, without any external force. For our bodies to live, we have gathered the materials to be so. All solid matter, arranged, and lit with an unknown spark. We have gradually, since birth and sooner, assimilated what we become, drawing from surroundings. Seeking what we need, or want – so that we can be, and also to change back. To stop. Every part of all of us has assembled the elements and tools with which to grow, or to chip away at its own edges. To return to the prime, or maybe go somewhere else. Maybe both.



Do the dead know that it is the same with our thoughts and memories. Each thought has that essential ability to cease to be a thought any more. Any memory can cease to be remembered, overgrown by other memories, or by memories of others. Or by dust.

I think my father understood this. And he knew why. He had a notion of the ‘somewhere else’.

If he is here on this island today, then he knows. He was right.

I keep walking up the track, towards the cave. Here the air sometimes feels heavy, sometimes light. There are still many of us from the ship, but we no longer walk in groups. Tramping onwards, upwards. To see if X marks the spot, none of us walk together.



Those steps we count, seeking departed treasure; “Twelves paces North, Thirty paces East... how long is a pace?” until we’ve walked far enough guessing at angles, unsure whether to dig up nothing but sand. I notice how everyone else too, spread on this mountain, is pacing up this hill as if counting steps, whether or not they feel it.

It is mid-afternoon when I reach the cave entrance. There’s not much to see. A tunnel. A mouth descending into the mountain. No signposts outside, or dropped litter, or bags left at the door. It is as if the alive or dead have passed with little trace. Just tracks on the sand. From here the town is tiny now. Distant harbour, boats bobbing, ocean sparks. All around, the sea.



Like many children, I was raised with island mirages. Books and drawings, where two or three pirates land on an island together, to poke grubby fingers on a crumpled yellow map, and keep lookout while one pirate counts the paces until, with a shovel, a cross is drawn in the sand. Then they take turns to dig. Their sought treasure, a chest of gold and jewels. Now, on this island’s new treasure hunt, we mortals arrive in our hundreds, then walk alone. The old gold can be shared,



for it has the same value to everyone. Gold doubloons are the same everywhere.

But we new bounty seekers cannot share the words of our cherished dead. Cannot share their words or their smiles. Then I realise, we can if we want to. We can share their wisdom with anyone. We can offer our stories of them, and we can accept the same from others. Lives and deaths may be worth more than golden crowns... or less. Either is a reason not to speak of them, when compared to the gold standard.



I step into the cave.

A tunnel heads down, occasionally lit with burning torches, with curves and turns here and there. I feel that the Island of the Dead is not this one. It is a different island, which you cannot land on, connected to this by a tunnel. I wonder how many people walk this way each year. For how long has this been here?



It keeps going.



I turn around.

Get out of this hole.

Faster, back up the tunnel's slope, passing more and more people coming in, I hide my face, not looking in their eyes. Those others... In passing we say a quick "hi", "how are you?", no more.

That's all we ever say.



Back up, past the torches, and out again. Tasting salt, breathing the clear air above the island.

As the sun goes down, orange over a wide sea, skipping, leaping down the track. Back into the town, again empty, through the main street, no-one here, not even a dog. I run to the harbour, laughing. Steal a boat. A big ship, a yacht. Heading out to sea.



The dead don't come to us.
We go to them.

Waves lap the sides. I crack into the minibar, pour water. Rub my eyes. Seagulls. Lick my lips.

For one day each year we can join them.

I look back. The island is out of sight now.

