

The Island

I once met a woman who was born on an island. Her birth coincided with her mother's death, and from that day her father was her mainstay. One hundred-and-ten people lived on the island and since it was small, its terrain gentle, its vegetation benign and penetrable, the islanders walked. When they did not walk they paddled in dug-out canoes away from the white sands near their homes to the reef-protected, mangrove-edged lagoon on the island's southeast. If they were hungry they would set out from the little wooden dock on the island's northern side in shallow motor-powered boats made from another world's timber. They would trail their hand-knotted fishing nets in the clear waters and greet by name each of the dugongs, stingrays, green turtles and sharks they passed.

According to the woman, her father was the only islander who had never left his home. He distrusted sea travel on account of a dream that had stuck to him since childhood. When put to speech the dream made all who heard it shiver, a strange sensation in that place of unrelenting heat. The dream revealed him lying in one of the island's shallow, motor-powered boats as it drifted slowly with the in-coming tide until it nosed the island's lone dock. Again and again with the dream's retelling the islanders who were gathered on the white sand saw the dreamer prone in his boat, his chest unmoving, his arms limp by his sides, his eyes closed. The dream's only sound came from the sobbing of the little girl with short plaits who stood a short distance behind the other islanders, her hands a mask across her face.

That was not the father's only dream, but it was the one that allowed the islanders to nod and say: "He will never leave the island." For the other islanders who had accepted the benefits and risks of sea travel, the father's dream was nonetheless

evidence of wisdom. Indeed, when he wasn't seeing himself lying in a boat he dreamt about others. His dreams, or, as he preferred, his insights, were known throughout that scatter of islands. The dreamer's insights were even noted on the stretch of mainland to the south, in the small town built at the end-point of the unsealed road that ran across the red earth toward the southern horizon. They had been told that the road defied swamps and deserts. It skirted mountains and forded rivers in order to link their world to the other side of the nation, their nation. But that place, the islanders told themselves, was yet to be disproved as rumour.

For as long as the woman could remember, her father walked, dreamed, and imparted details to his neighbours and even to the pale, perspiring strangers who occasionally visited the island on anxious quests for solace. Her father's gifts were remarkable. His insights were not limited to the hours of darkness but came to him as he sipped his breakfast cup of milky four-sugared tea. They arrived after lunch as he made his first hatchet cut into the piece of driftwood whose raw contours implied a cormorant, egret, sea eagle or tern. A dream revealed itself at six in the evening when, his daughter beside him, he applied the finishing daubs of paint to wing tips and eyes, just when the light was fading, the perennial humidity loosened by a shift in the air across the tropical waters. Insights gripped him then, with the islanders sauntering along the beach to join him, to chat about their catches, to relay news drawn from the movements of shapely clouds. All stopped to view and comment on his latest creations and, in turn, to show him what the day's waves had deposited on the island's shores, to sing and smoke and down a few tepid but welcome beers. Sometimes insights came like the low tumbling surf in which the children were diving. And so, sitting with his daughter on the beach beyond his shack, he might double-up with the pained

incomprehension of the childless couple due to disembark from the once-monthly ferry the Saturday afternoon coming. But then pain might give way to a grinning coyness because the rheumatic man in the shadow of the couple's sadness had not been robbed by his son-in-law, but had forgotten that his life savings were rolled up in a jar on the second-bottom shelf of his larder.

The father's insights continued when war broke out. He stayed, the only able-bodied male over eighteen left on an island of women and children and a one-legged, grey-haired elder. He stayed on the island that was also home to clutches of crabs whose scarlet carapaces were broader than a hand-span. He stayed and took his daughter to monitor the nesting sites of ocean-wandering turtles. His daughter and he ambled together under a sky temporarily darkened by thousands of flashy songbirds and they listened to them noisily at roost in the straggly palms, gaining strength for the next leg of their migration away from a north-Asian winter. They witnessed what the woman's father hoped would also turn out to be a transient presence, a three-man length of saltwater crocodile sunning itself on one of the lagoon's sheltered banks, unconcerned by the swarming sandflies and midges.

At times the dreamer would hold his daughter's hand a little more firmly than usual, and his sadness would curb her questions. They would approach one palm-fronded dwelling or another and stand in front of an opening, for there were no doors on that welcoming island. They would stand long enough for a mother or wife or aunt or sister to learn that now she was in mourning, that the wailing and the stories intended to keep the dead close to them for the requisite period must now be inaugurated. Many weeks and sometimes months later, an envelope containing what was called a telegram would be found among the sacks of flour, sugar and tea, the kegs of beer and bolts of

cloth, the bundled planks of another world's timber, the long-awaited tools, ropes and twine, the cans of tar and diesel brought by the ferry. The brawny sweating mainland men hardly spoke to the islanders, even when they were wrapping the dreamer's carvings or placing the islanders' fish and crabs in crates of ice. But they would bow their heads when passing an envelope to the dreamer for delivery to the home of those already knowing and past grieving. There it would be impaled on a rusty hook, unopened, abandoned to the weather.

One morning just before dawn, the thuds of naval guns woke the islanders. The war had neared as the woman's father said it would, although not even he could quite explain what war entailed over and beyond the routine mourning for kin who would not return. The islanders gathered on the white sand near the northern dock to watch the explosions, vibrations tickling their unshod feet. No one ran because the dreamer assured them there was no need: the ship would sink today but the island would remain untouched. All squinted at the doomed vessel, as big as the frigate that had surprised the islanders the year before. This ship belongs to your own country, so the moustached pink-skinned man in a khaki uniform and slouch hat told them. We are fellow citizens, he barked, before taking away the island's men. All, that is, but the old man who'd lost his left leg to a shark, and the woman's father, concealed beneath a canopy of foliage and fishing nets arranged by the other islanders out of consideration for his life of walking.

That was how the islanders were able to put a name to the country once located in the realm of rumour. Yet, doubt remained. None of the island's men had returned to confirm that place as fact. The doubt was felt even by the dreamer, the occasional user of a battered, mildewy dictionary and a grammar published in Edinburgh in 1903 by a

charity dedicated to the welfare of the Empire's children, the only goods left by the sweaty priest two decades before. Some weeks after settling in to erect the island's church he succumbed to fever, leaving his unfinished building to shelter fishing gear in the rainy season. The doubt was maintained by the youngsters who picked up snatches of song from the island's temperamental short-wave radio. The doubt was shared even by the few others who could get by with the fragments of a language washed into their mouths over the years, but never quite as tangibly as the driftwood they collected each day for fires and for the dreamer's hewing. The remaining islanders doubted because the strangers who came and departed were unconnected to them as kin, like the pale man in khaki who had stepped stiffly ashore to round up the island's men. More than a rumour was required for strangers to be accepted into the islanders' world, for the islanders to relate to unseen geographies.

Here, they felt, was good enough. They navigated this shimmering zone without hesitation. And in the insular space formed by this and the more easterly islands, they conversed with other islanders, without stammering, without misconstruing the intimate stories of the sea they shared.

The islanders stood near the dock, their doubts lingering, yet consoled by the insight of an island future unscathed by the morning's events. The woman's father had dreamed it so, that in some distant future place massive clouds would rise over smoking rubble (an image of such impossible destruction that his listeners lowered their eyes in disbelief) and those alive among the island's men would return to fish, as before, in the island's clear waters. And as the sky lightened, they watched the grey silhouette on the horizon, the ship that the woman's father claimed had brought the sounds of war as close as they would come to the island. Above the ship were aeroplanes, objects the

islanders had seen before high in their island's sky but never as close as this. Like frenzied, tenacious mosquitoes the planes dived and buzzed and soon the ship's grey shape was an orange glow.

Gathered on the white sand, the women and children and the old one-legged man watched as the woman's father left their ranks to step upon the little wooden dock. They saw him abandon the earth for the first time in his life and climb into one of the island's shallow motor-powered boats. The engine spluttered, he steered the boat across the flat water toward the wreckage, and wisps of pale-blue smoke accompanied his gentle lapping wake. The islanders waited until sunset for the dreamer's boat to drift slowly toward them with the in-coming tide. Behind it were other boats, six canvas-sided life-boats bearing a cargo of broken bleeding men rowing in exhausted coordination, in silence, so many wide-eyed, oil-spattered, sea-soaked men, the first boat's machine gun pointed at them, at the group of islanders stuck together in their own uncertain silence, their trust in dreams now fading. The islanders stood near the dock as the men strode through the water, as a man in a dented helmet shouted at them in an unfamiliar tongue. This was proof of another world about which they'd had no forewarning. Here were the signs of the dreamer's insightful error. And as her father's boat gently nosed against the little wooden dock to reveal his unmoving, bullet-shattered chest, his arms limp by his sides, his eyes closed, the little girl with plaits began to sob a short distance behind the other islanders.

Her hands became a mask upon her face, she said to me many years later, on account of her loss, on account of the insights that struck her then. For standing alone on the white sand while her island was occupied, she finally comprehended her father's gift. She saw projected on the surfaces of her palms the slow falls of screaming women

that registered like machete cuts across her gut. Her blistering cheeks told of the flames stretching out from the welcoming entries of her island's dwellings. Then she ran and hid beneath a canopy of foliage and fishing nets. Her hands screening an unwanted dream, her toes curling into the warm sand, she crouched alone and recognised her home-to-be, remade on the most southerly tip of the mainland. She began to shiver, a strange sensation for one so accustomed to heat. Inhaling the cool air of her future home, first in her dream and again many years later, the island woman told me about her insight's sole consolation. She knew she would survive to dwell in a place too distant for her island dreams to follow.