
Contents

Introduction

1 First Steps to a Voyage

2 Non-stop to Panama

3 Link to the Pacific

4 West Sets the Sun

5 A Savage on Hiva Oa

6 Bora Bora

7 These Friendly Isles

8 Tikopia Unspoilt

9 Adventure Country

10 On the Kokoda Trail

11 In the Shadow of Sumburipa

12 Highlander

13 A Mountain Too High

14 Surviving New Guinea

15 The Sheltering Atoll

16 Solitary Sailor

17 To the Peaks of Reunion

18 Trek Into Zululand

19 Cape of Storms

20 Emperors and Astronomers

21 Martinique Revisited

22 The Blue Highway

Table of Passages

20 Emperors and Astronomers

*No journey carries one far unless,
as it extends into the world around us,
it goes an equal distance into the world within.*

-Lillian Smith



On our way back to Cape Town from the Cape Point lighthouse the engine in Eric's car suddenly coughed and quit. By chance, we were close enough to coast into a repair garage along the roadway. Abandoning the car for the moment to the care of the mechanic, we walked on to the local train station.

Our passenger train rolled past a school field where a uniformed band stood in formation and we briefly caught a snatch of the anthem *Die Stem Van Suid-Afrika*, "The Call of South Africa," before it was drowned out by the rumble of steel wheels on rails. Under a "Whites Only" sign across the aisle from us, sat a Coloured man as comfortable in his expression as if he owned the train. There were several blacks also sharing this first-class car with no apparent hostilities among the mixed group. The Afrikaner conductor took the tickets without remark to anyone.

I recalled then my experiences on the other side of the same country, where conductors enforced the segregation laws with sticks and shouts. Eric told me that in recent years, many blacks in Cape Town challenged or ignored the dogma of apartheid. Cape Town is in many ways the most progressive city in South Africa. On the other side of the country, interracial friendship was scandalous. Here I saw mixed couples walking the streets without drawing a second look from passersby. White and Coloured families even shared one of the town's residential sections. Bit by bit, sanity and tolerance were seeping into the culture.

Another part of town is reserved for Muslim Malays, whose mosque stands incongruously close to the spires of the conservative Dutch Reformed Church. Unfortunately, "reformed" did not mean they held trendy notions of equality of the races or evolution but they had at least dropped the flat earth cosmology held by previous generations. Even so, it would be hard to find two more mutually exclusive organizations standing side by side than the Dutch Reformed and the Muslim Malay.

In this era the signs of apartheid were gradually coming down around Cape Town. It was as if the entire country had changed during my nine days at sea. Actually, it was more like I had sailed from 1960's Alabama to 1960's San Francisco. Besides trains, the beaches were now integrated with a secluded spot reserved for nude sunbathers. The changes did not come with unanimous support. On a radio talk show I heard a woman caller announce her disgust at seeing a black woman breast-feeding her baby on the public beach. She expected the government to protect her from the terrifying black usurpers threatening her modesty.

And what of the others, the so-called Coloureds, the people without a voice or homeland? No one I spoke to in South Africa expected the Coloured population to play a significant role in the future of the country. Accepted by neither black nor white, they are caught in the middle with nowhere to turn. In the looming conflict of white against black they were being ignored – just when the millions-strong multi-racial peoples of South Africa were most needed as a bridge between cultures. At least the progressive attitudes in Cape Town offered the hope of some chance at future peace in this

troubled land.

Later that week Eric retrieved his car from the mechanic and generously drove me around town to gather the provisions I needed for crossing the South Atlantic. For another two days, I sat like a coiled spring ready to jump but found myself pinned down by a northwest gale. When Friday morning dawned clear and cool, I prepared to depart.

"You can't leave today," said the club secretary as I paid my dockage bill.

"Why not? I'm paid up and the weather forecast is fair."

"Because it's Friday," she explained. "Nobody leaves on a Friday!"

The customs agent, two sailors roaming the docks, and even the club security guard reminded me it was daft to depart on a Friday. To some ancient mariners, a Friday departure may have been inauspicious. My superstitious advisers knew nothing of the origins of their belief, yet they believed in it whole-heartedly and turned away with grim faces when I explained that Friday represents one of seven possible weather windows every week, and I was not inclined to throw away a good opportunity to appease the Bad Friday cult. So, despite the ill omen, I departed Cape Town Friday afternoon into a light west wind.

With all sail set I slipped into the open sea at a two knot pace – that of a leisurely stroll. On day two, Cape Town dropped from view, leaving the top of Table Mountain displaying its shrinking crown over the sea. A larger ketch on a similar course gradually outpaced me a few miles to starboard. As the wind settled in the south, I held course for St. Helena Island, 1,700 miles away and one of only two islands in the mid South Atlantic basin.

My return to tropic latitudes brought relief from the clammy cold nights and the threats of gales popping up from all directions. Regrettably, the albatrosses and seals preferred the colder waters to the south. In their place I gained the companionship of a school of fourteen tuna that paced *Atom* for two days, darting in unison from the shadow of the keel to snatch up small fish we encountered along the way. *Atom* was now part of a wolf pack. The hunted flying fish took to the air as we passed through, the lucky ones making good their winged escape.

For the duration of this passage, the wind caressed the sea as gently and steadily as only a South Atlantic trade wind can. Day after day, the sails hung wing-on-wing. I dressed *Atom* down for this light air passage by hoisting her oldest threadbare suit of sails in order to preserve her least damaged sails for later use. As the tranquil days unrolled my work was little more than to once daily oil the wind vane bearings and ease the sail's sheets in or out a few inches to prevent chafe on blocks and cleats. Aside from these minute adjustments, I did little to earn my passage, which became a dreamy, sleepwalking event, almost as if I went to sleep outside Cape Town and awoke in St. Helena.

I had been given a bagful of books, mostly novels, by friends in Cape Town. Now I fell into languorous hours of reading as I reclined in the cockpit. The books were so biodegradably forgettable that I took a perverse pleasure in tearing out each page read and dropping it over the side until I held an empty cover and it, too, went overboard. Depending on our boat speed at the time, each mile was marked by two or three pages floating in our wake.

Among the new books that came aboard was the Koran, which a Muslim devotee in Durban had thrust at me "for spiritual guidance." I read it through in a day and a night before it also went over the side somewhere in mid-ocean alongside the other fiction. If only all medieval zealots could so easily be cast out of the world. "There is no conqueror, but Allah," it said. Perhaps, but could not Allah's disciples put more emphasis on conquering ignorance, intolerance, hate and cruelty, than stoning women and putting infidels to the sword?

At sea I was spoiled to nature's regular performances, the unique perspectives of rainbows and sunsets that no one else

would ever see. On this passage I had an entirely new night visitor. For the past month, Halley's comet was faintly visible from southern Africa. Populist astronomers had overstated its expected brightness and stirred up a frenzy of interest in the returning comet. For city dwellers, Halley's less than stellar brightness was a disappointment. Out here, a thousand miles from the desert lands of Namibia, as far from the star-eclipsing lights of civilization as a man could get, the comet's tail brightened and flowered.

The comet reappeared each night as a frosty-white streak over several degrees of arc across the southeastern sky. I lay in my bunk gazing at the comet for hours through the open hatchway. If *Atom* deviated from her northwest alignment, I knew as well as any telltale compass could show that I was off course by the comet's tail disappearing from my picture-framed view. My comet served as a guiding apparition as real as the star that led the three wise men to Bethlehem.

On a Sunday morning I put down the remaining pages of my tenth book since leaving Cape Town and lifted my eyes to the hazy outline of land below a cluster of low clouds. My eyes remained locked on the horizon for another hour until I was certain it was land and not a mirage born of the overwhelming emptiness all around it. The island lay anchored in mid-ocean isolation, rising above a range of dormant volcanoes resting just below the surface of the South Atlantic. From a distance, St. Helena, which is a mere six miles across, appears almost as tall as it is wide. In my imagination I follow its slopes down to the sea floor and picture its violent birth millions of years ago.

Hours later, we glided past a towering stone buttress marked on my chart as The Barn and its 2,000 foot-high peak named The Haystack. Here on the island's uninhabited north coast, the mountains display all their altitude in a single vertical wall. Five miles along this desolate, sunburnt coast, the small harbor of James Bay hove into view. A traditional three-masted sailing ship rested at anchor close under the scarred mountain. I lowered two anchors in forty-five feet of water in company with several other visiting yachts and moored local fishing boats.

James Bay is more of an open roadstead than proper bay. This slight indent in the rocky coast at the base of a valley is also the only permitted anchorage among the handful of bays on this coast of barren basaltic outcroppings. At least the island's wind shadow afforded some protection from the prevailing southeast trade winds, if not from the perpetual sea swell hooking around the circular island. Besides causing the anchored boats to roll their guts out, the swell makes landing a dinghy wet and hazardous.



St. Helena was long a favored stopover for ships returning to Europe along the East Indies spice trade route. Its sometimes tragic history of human occupation began in the early sixteenth century when a Portuguese ship exiled a horribly mutilated prisoner on the uninhabited island. In India, the unfortunate wretch had had his nose, ears, an arm and the thumb of the opposite hand removed for the crime of insurrection in the Portuguese colony of Goa, before being marooned on this empty island. He existed for ten lonely years on the island, surviving off the pity of sailors on passing ships who

provided him goats and essential supplies, before he returned to Portugal and eventually had an audience with the Pope in Rome. There he was granted a wish – thus he returned to St. Helena, by choice this time, to live out the rest of his life in solitude.

Eventually, the British wrested control of the island from the contesting powers of Portugal, the Netherlands and France. St. Helena is best known as the home of a more famous exile, when the British brought the defeated French emperor,

Napoleon Bonaparte, here to live in enforced isolation until his death in 1821.

Today, St. Helena is one of Britain's few remaining colonies. The population of six thousand people are mostly a coffee-colored mixture of European, African, Malay and Chinese. Someone aptly described the population as “twenty percent black, twenty percent white, and sixty percent not quite sure and don't much care.” The Saints, as the islanders are known, are so interracially mixed that bigotry is an unknown concept. Saintry mothers were known in times past to encourage their daughters to fraternize with visiting sailors to expand the bloodline. The friendly atmosphere here was a refreshing change from the racial tensions of South Africa and it reminded me of Mauritius and Reunion Islands, an ocean away.

St. Helena is doubly blessed with having no airstrip and lacking good port facilities, thereby retaining its remote colonial charm. The harbor of James Bay lacks a pier or even a beach to land a small boat. The shore is fronted with a fortified stone wall, looking as much to repel visitors as the stones and pebbles tossed against it with each surge of the sea. The whole waterfront resonates with the clattering and deep-toned hissing of ocean meeting rock.

Before some improvements were made to the facilities in the years after I left, dinghies and lighters from the supply boat landed alongside steps leading down from the concrete quay into the sea. Local boats would approach the steps stern-to, with an expert oarsman timing his approach to match the rise of the swells. As the boat lifts to the sea, he would call out for passengers and cargo to come aboard quickly before the boat fell away on the retreating wave. Visiting royalty and common sailors alike swung themselves ashore from the deck of their small landing boats by grasping for a rope hanging from an overhead rail. The last person to step ashore would quickly pass the dinghy's line to others who helped pull the boat clear of the smashing waves. Lacking television, viewing the landing struggles was an amusing pastime for local villagers and fishermen who whiled away the hours watching visitors try vainly to make a dry landing. Often they missed their step and went for an unexpected swim.

As I approached the quay for the first time, the high surf deposited me at the top of the steps in one lifting surge. The waters receded under me as I stood up perfectly dry and pulled my dinghy up to avoid the next rush of water. To the audience watching from the pier, I hoped my lucky landing looked like I planned it that way.

At the quayside I checked in with customs and paid my \$25 harbor dues, then entered Jamestown through the gates of the “Castle” which houses the government offices and bank. At the post office I purchased a finely detailed cartographic map of the island. Laying the map across a table at the town pub, local Saints gave me advice on the best routes to walk across the island, “if one were queer enough to want to do it.” I picked out a circular route around the island that I guessed would take three days on foot. The high point on my planned trek was a pilgrimage to Halley's Mount, a peak named after astronomer Edmund Halley. It seemed fitting to pay my respects here to the history of the comet that helped guide me to this speck of land in a wide sea.

Before starting my hike I made sure *Atom* lay well secured with an added third anchor buried in the mud of James Bay, and friends on neighboring boats promised to look after her if the weather threatened while I was gone. I managed to land myself and my backpack on the quay, wet this time, but without injury.

I set out through Jamestown, whose whitewashed buildings spill down the narrow rift of Chapel Valley following a stream bed whose course is marked by a splash of green in the otherwise barren gorge. Thousands of hand-laid stones formed a continuous retaining wall for the road as it clung to the landslide-prone cliffs. The road forked and doubled back on its winding way up Munden's Hill, where it began to fall apart. Long in disuse, falling boulders had carried sections of the

road crashing down to the sea below. I looked down through one of these gaping holes in the retaining wall to see the square-rigged training ship moored directly below.

On the hilltop, amid scrub brush and cactus stunted and shriveled by the dry heat, laid the ruins of an old gun battery.

Cannon from iron foundries of 17th century England still overlook the harbor. Standing atop the ruins, I imagined the thunder of the cannons from siege and counter-siege by opposing colonial forces. Lying far below on the wave-swept rocks were remains of larger, WWII era cannons that in a display of war-weariness, had been pushed off the cliffs after the war ended. Weighing over three tons each, from this height they appeared as so many discarded toys.

Rejoining the main road on the upper slopes of Jamestown, I passed the sprawling colonial building of the cable and wireless station. Quiet and abandoned today, it was the busiest place on the island back in pre-satellite days when teams of men relayed messages in Morse code along the undersea cables linking the island from South America to Africa.

Continuing uphill, the road made a sharp turn at Button Up Corner and switched back again at Captain Wright's Turning. Jamestown may be the only town on St. Helena, but my map showed settlements as small as a single home scattered all over the island. This was not merely a map; it was an entertaining story documenting the lives and history of the inhabitants. Reading this map I got the impression that the British would name every bush and rock and label them on a map if given enough paper. Should he ever feel the need, even the poorest inland shepherd could fix himself in two dimensions relative to the rest of his known world. Here I overindulged my old weakness for a well-drawn map. I studied its features so often, at times losing myself in its intricate detailed contours, that I neglected to fully observe the land I was crossing.

On the high slopes past a house named Alarm Cottage the vegetation grew more varied and extensive. St. Helena has a remarkable flora that is unperceived from the harbor. The terrain near sea level is a desert of sand, rocks and cactus, washed by infrequent rains and baked by a daily sun. Higher up, the central slopes contain grasslands and forests. The changeover can be abrupt and startling. Suddenly, I was walking at an altitude where rain-moistened fertile volcanic soil supported flowery gardens and forests. Most of the flora I saw here was not indigenous but had been imported after early settlers and their goats had stripped the original forests and grasses.

A sign pointing down a footpath to Napoleon's Tomb lured me off the main road. I moved quietly alone through pine forest until I came upon a young man leaning against a wooden gate. He was caretaker of the tomb and guide for the rare visitor. As we walked together, he recounted exploits of Napoleon that he had clearly memorized from an encyclopedia. When we arrived at the tomb I discovered it was simply an empty concrete slab surrounded by an iron fence, a one-man graveyard seemingly abandoned to the creeping forest. Napoleon had been here once, in his triple lead-lined coffin, until the French rescued his remains and returned them to the motherland in 1840. Even the tomb's inhabitant had fled.

Continuing my hike, pushing through the brush to the ridge atop The Devil's Punch Bowl, I dropped into Deadwood Plain, where once was sited a Boer War prison camp.

Nearby, at Longwood Plantation, a French flag fluttered. Here, at the plantation house, behind a long, low stone wall, Napoleon lived in exile after his defeat at Waterloo. Inside the house, the groundskeeper of the restored building took me through the rooms, describing every piece of memorabilia..

Each room of Longwood House brought the past to life. The copper bathtub where the emperor took three baths each day still functioned. Two large world globes stood in the billiard room on which the brooding Napoleon traced his former

conquests. Accompanied by a squabbling entourage of his generals, Napoleon lived in constant fear of poisoning and kept a food taster in residence. An autopsy performed in the billiard room found that he died of stomach cancer or, possibly, a slow poisoning. The groundskeeper confided to me that he sometimes hears Napoleon's ghost when here alone at night. On windy and misty evenings it's easy to imagine the horse-drawn carriage that used to race back and forth at a reckless speed, giving the emperor a temporary escape from a monotonous existence. Napoleon wrote here, "Death is nothing, but to live defeated and inglorious is to die daily."

At the end of the tour, the groundskeeper proceeded to question me at length about my travels around the world. He had worked here thirty-five years, immersed daily in a long past era, while occasionally dreaming of present day lands far away.

Leaving Longwood I turned down a dusty track next to the island's power station. From there I could see the backside of the Barn, which is the opposite side of the same mountain I viewed from the deck of *Atom* as I approached the island a week earlier. In view to the east was Prosperous Bay, a landing place in the late 1600s for an English invasion force tasked to march across the island and retake Jamestown from the Dutch defenders who themselves recently had taken it from the British. Above the high cliffs at Prosperous Bay (I thought better named Preposterous Bay since it held no possibility of shelter) the map indicated a spot called Holdfast Tom, where a young soldier named Tom climbed the rock face, fixing ropes for other soldiers to hoist their equipment of war up to the plateau.

I descended next into the dust bowl named Dry Gut, where the earth lay open in multicolored scars of mineral-laden sand dunes and washed-out, sun-hardened gulleys. The mineral-rich basaltic lava ran from brick-red to yellow to iridescent blue. Bristling cactus added the only touch of life to this desiccated landscape. With each rise and dip of the trail the vistas turn harsh or lovely. The beauty of eroded mountains and highland meadows and dizzying cliffs set against the dark sea was nearly heartbreaking. Walking over a wind-piled sand dune, each step had me sinking ankle deep into the fine powder as if struggling through a giant hourglass. And like an upturned hourglass, the wind-driven sand would erase my own passage upon the land. When I gained more altitude, I suddenly stepped into a green pasture. From a woody ridge, two farmhouses overlooked the veld.

Inside the dark, stone building of Hutt's Gate General Store I eyed wooden shelves sparsely stocked with a dozen or so cans of meat, soup and hard English biscuits. An old woman stooped over polishing an ancient brass scale, the same scales used in the same store by her mother's grandmother, she told me proudly when I admired them, as if unaltered consistency were as important in life as in the scales themselves. I filled my water jugs from the rainwater barrel on the porch and found room in my backpack for a loaf of the good woman's bread. On the wall over the counter, a calendar took the place of a clock. It felt like I could have talked to her for five hours, instead of five minutes, and she would not have been put out in the least.

Back at the intersection, I chose a road leading towards Halley's Mount. At the old brick church of St. Mathews, I left the road and moved through the church graveyard where, on the other side, I found the trail the shopkeeper had directed me to, "out thar beyond the graveyard." Through knee-high grass I scanned each scarred and flaking headstone. Nearly half the occupants here had died in the year 1936, I imagined by some epidemic brought by an unlucky ship. Two gravestones standing side-by-side caught my eye. One was barely readable, recording a man's death in the epidemic of '36. The other was his wife, who faithfully joined him forty years later. In the graveyards an island's history is laid out like an open book, but with every second page missing, leaving much to the reader's imagination.

Behind these last two headstones, I found my trail and followed it up the flank of Halley's Mount. Pressing in on all sides and growing above my head was an overgrown grove of broad-leafed New Zealand flax. Imported a century earlier as an export crop to produce ropes and linen, it is no longer harvested and proliferates across the island's highlands. Crouched over with my head nearly to my knees, I pushed through the dense growth until I emerged at a clearing on the peak of a long ridge.

Discarded stone blocks marked this spot as the observatory hastily built by astronomer Edmund Halley in 1676. Equipped with state-of-the-art clocks and telescopes, this observatory is where Halley studied and cataloged the stars of the Southern hemisphere. He paid for this first expedition out of his own pocket, but returned on the King's dime in 1699 as commander of *HMS Paramour*. Halley is, of course, best known for discovering the orbit of the comet that now bears his name by linking the one he observed in 1682 with similar great comets reported throughout prior centuries.



I camped here among the ruins and awaited nightfall. With darkness came a persistent, misty light rain that softened the sound of the wind. Each hour I awoke to poke my head out the tent's entry flap, looking for a trace of starry sky in the overcast. A few hours before dawn the sky cleared to reveal a white, powdery trail low in the southeastern sky. The harmony of the Newtonian universe is wonderfully highlighted by the 76 year cycle of this particular comet's approach to earth which approximates the human lifetime

cycle. Few among us will see it twice.

As I peered skyward that early morning of March 13, watching the display from Halley's Mount, the European spacecraft *Giotto* approached the comet's head. Scientists found it was composed of nothing more than dirty ice older than life on earth. It was wonderful to think that at the same moment as I gazed through a window in time upon the long-haired star from my remote post, *Giotto* was rocketing through the comet's tail and sending its photos back for earth's astronomers to marvel at. As *Giotto* had steered for weeks towards the comet, I too had steered my ship by this celestial body, night after night, to bring me to this spot in time and a certain intimacy with the man who had cracked its mystery. It is said that Napoleon put St. Helena on the world map. But Napoleon was merely an emperor, while Edmund Halley holds the greater glory as a man of science.

With dawn's eclipse of the comet, I continued pushing along the ridge through walls of flax bushes. I found my way blindly by staying atop the sharp ridge as it tended slightly downward and then rose again until I emerged in the clearing atop Diana's Peak. From here the land fell away in a series of folded ridges. Neighboring Mt. Actaeon produced a lone pine tree standing as sentinel on its craggy top. According to Greek myth, Actaeon the hunter accidentally observed Artemis as she was bathing and in her anger she turned him into a stag who was then killed by Actaeon's own dogs. A wooden box posted on Diana's Peak contained a visitor logbook and a letter from the island's governor proclaiming this 823-meter peak as the highest point on the island. After adding my name to the list, I looked across to Mt. Actaeon, which appeared equally high, but trusted the venerable governor's judgment that it was, in fact, three meters lower.

Down the southern flank of Diana's Peak I emerged from the bush onto a rough jeep track signposted as Cabbage Tree Road. Around a bend in the road I saw the way ahead resembled a tilted bowl pouring its contents into Sandy Bay on the island's southeast coast. Halfway down this giant bowl the vegetation thinned and the brown earth radiated the

morning sun's heat.

Here stood a one-room Baptist chapel of hand-hewn stone blocks that looked as if it grew out of, and was as old as, the earth it rested on. In contrast to the barren hills, a leafy green slash of vegetation marked the course of a river so close to dry that I didn't bother to try filling my water bottle in it. A total of five inhabited homes dotted the valley, each standing as if painted into a portrait of a miniature Nile Valley.



Chapel on St. Helena

At one house I stopped to ask for water and met Trevor Thomas, a lean, bronze-colored man who counted seventy-some years in this valley. His skin was as parched and brown-furrowed as the hills pressed around his brick home. From his well, Trevor filled my water bottle and then asked, "Are you that rock studying fella I heard about on the radio?"

He was referring to a geologist visiting from England who was currently roaming these hills in search of specimens. I assured Trevor it was too hot to carry rocks around and that I was searching for much lighter souvenirs, no

heavier than a few photos and memories. I briefly recounted my journey and told Trevor I wished to cross the next mountain range to the southwest corner of the island. My finger stabbed the map showing a grassy plateau above Man and Horse Cliffs. Trevor ignored the map as he sized me up from my wide-brimmed hat to my leather boots. Eventually, he said that no one had gone over that rough country in many years but that it was possible to do. He said there was a footpath to take me part way and then I'd be on my own among the crumbling mountains.

When I again held out my map for Trevor to point out the path he gently pushed it aside without a glance and said, "I'll join you, at least for the first mile or so." Trevor stuffed two handfuls of his homegrown finger-sized bananas into my pack and we each took long camel-like draughts of well water and set off down the road. As we passed ruins of old homesteads he spoke of his lost neighbors, "Most of us older folk have passed and the young ones mostly left this dry valley for the cooler, greener highlands. Some we hear went to England. They never come back." Drifting sand was now reclaiming the old homesteads.

I followed Trevor's surprisingly youthful stride down the valley to the black sand and rocks on the shore of Sandy Bay where a government-sponsored research garden bloomed alongside the river. With the efforts of the few remaining gardeners in the valley, the sparse and ungenerous gravel had been coaxed to yield a few annual basketfuls of bananas, corn and tomatoes. A row of flowering red hibiscus trees formed a natural windbreak to protect this last stand of life from the creeping desertification and provide the eye with a respite from the starkness of an otherwise lifeless land.

Here, at the end of the road, I listened intently as Trevor gave me directions. My eyes followed the course his bent finger traced against the background of basaltic domes. The thin line of a barely discernible trail snaked its way among the rocks up to a pass called the Gates of Chaos. How could a traveler not march directly toward anything with such an intriguing name?

The next range of mountains I needed to cross were not visible from here so I memorized every word of Trevor's convoluted instructions as if my life depended on it. Trevor had walked through those gates in his youth but did not know anyone who had crossed all the way to the opposite shore. I thanked my new friend and he wished me luck. Our goodbye was English style: brief and formal. I walked a while and looked back over my shoulder to see Trevor still rooted in his place, looking at me under cocked hat, or perhaps past me, as if to see the place where his youth had fled.

High up the desert path I stopped to lunch on a bag of bananas, bread and carrots. From my seat on a flat rock I looked over a coastline of rocky necks of land protruding into an ultramarine sea. The erosive forces of the southeast trade winds shape the raw and cracked character of this giant amphitheater. Blowing sand and rain have stripped the softer rock, leaving cores of harder basalt towers. Everywhere here the earth is laid open for inspection – truly a geologist's playground. The fluted pinnacles and ridges are all the result of free sculpture by wind and rain. The exposed strata hold streaks of porous scoria, dark basalt, rust-colored minerals, all bound together with cracked clay and gravel.

Beyond the tiny patch of green at Sandy Bay lay the scorched slopes of the Devil's Garden. Our mapmaker was a cartographic poet at heart who created a paper masterpiece. Looking at my position on the map, I noticed he had not named this particular hummock I sat on and so I named it Perseverance Peak.

When the indistinct trail I was following disappeared altogether I continued moving upwards until cresting a ridge where I saw the pass I sought. Though it was not far in distance, it looked difficult to reach. The mountaintops here form only edges without plateaus. As I moved along the sharp ridge on hands and knees the soft sandstone crumbled away at every touch, falling away in little landslides towards the valley floor. Wind gusts tugged at my pack, pulling me off balance. I began wishing I were somewhere, anywhere else. My next move, a leap across a downward arching gap in the ridge, meant I



into the badlands of St. Helena

committed myself to going forward with no way back. There was exhilaration in willing myself on to new heights. In a few more precarious moves I stood within the Gates of Chaos, where I took in a vista of distinctly colored cliffs dropping at crazy angles into the seaward horizon.

The citadel of tormented stone at the Gates of Chaos deserved their name. The further I entered this land of hot wind and sun-baked rocks, the more I wanted out. Moving down a gully and lacking any familiar frame of reference or discernible patterns I lost all proportion of the dimensions of the land. The basalt monolith called Lot's Wife rose biblically above the surrounding ridges. How large it was or how far away I couldn't say. Corrugated layers of earth rose and fell leaving me light-headed and utterly alone in the strangely frightening and beautiful landscape.

At the bottom of a gorge I moved over the layered rocks of earlier ages, spanning perhaps a thousand generations in a single geologic stride. I drank from one of my two water bottles until it dripped empty. In these depressions there was no cooling wind to moderate the blazing sun as it baked the moisture from my body. My mapmaker was never here or he would have named it Land of Thirst. There was not a single tree to provide a spot of shade anywhere in sight. The land was so empty of life even my shadow had deserted me, or perhaps it was just the noon hour.



Beyond the Gates of Chaos

I kept moving until I reached the relative sanctuary of the next ridge where I halted to get my bearings. While orienting the map against the ground, I tried to recall Trevor's exact instructions: "Follow a long ravine towards the high rock of Lot's Wife. Stay on the north side of it and look to the west for a farmhouse on the far hillside."

Lot's Wife I could see, so I moved up the ravine Trevor had spoken of, or maybe near it. The weathered earth under my boots crumbled in a way that made me not trust my footing. Climbing this ravine was like walking on a

tilted surface running with ball bearings. My boot prints in the sand lay like cat's paws on the sea awaiting erasure by the next wind.

Finally, I stood on the ridge next to Lot's Wife. I watched as dark clouds gathered over the peaks to the east and imagined a desperate situation if heavy rains came. Rocks and sand would slide down the saturated clay slopes carrying all things before them into the gorge. Previously dry riverbeds would swell into torrents, forcefully sweeping mud and boulders into the sea. There was little chance to survive here in a prolonged rainstorm.

To push these fears from my mind I returned to my reassuring habit of comparing the minutiae of my map against the landmarks around me. On the map were wild names for a wild country: the Devil's Cap, The Asses Ears, Castle Rock, even the single farmhouse I sought was marked as Distant Cottage. Then my target appeared across the valley where a fence delineated the desert from the pastured oasis of Distant Cottage.

The walking grew easier as I stayed on the ridge rolling away to the west. With one last ravine to cross, I dropped into the chasm at its narrowest point and began a slow crawling ascent up the final slope by climbing over the multi-hued clay dunes bulging from the inclined surface. Once again I felt the burden of a backpack that pulls at the shoulders, strains the back and teaches the legs the awful power of gravity.

At the fence line of Distant Cottage, the clay, sand and cactus magically turned to rolling pastures and lanes of shade-giving trees. This plateau of land mysteriously held the desert in check. I took it all in with a satisfying wide-eyed stare, as a blind man suddenly given eyes. This little house standing in its pastoral quietude, and lying apparently abandoned, held a magnified importance because of its position on the desert's edge. I called out, only to be answered by the rustle of wind and muffled sounds of a few cattle as they cropped the fragrant grass along the fence. I had already imagined a conversation with the cottage dweller: "Say, how did you find us way out here at Distant Cottage?" Proudly I'd reply, "I walked through the Gates of Hell to get here." Now, after my deliverance from the badlands, I stepped lightly, hardly noticing my previously heavy pack.

Along this plateau on the island's southwest corner, a trail led me past more neatly fenced pastures, roamed by a few cattle and sheep. A new lamb bounced limber-legged on the rolling hillside. A farmer led his loaded pack mule over a hill and another man mending a fence waved his hat at me as I passed. The sun hung low over the sea by the time I reached Man and Horse Cliffs. At my feet was a long straight drop to the bay of Shepherd's Hole. The name now seemed fitting, since that is where shepherds and sheep might find themselves after a careless step.

A man approached on a trail motorbike with a shotgun slung over one shoulder and a lifeless rabbit headed for the cooking pot hanging from his belt. This motorized cowboy was complete with blue jeans, Texas hat and high leather boots. I waved him over and asked permission to sleep on this spot for the night. He pointed to a lean-to where I could find shelter and then, without any questions as to my purpose here, rode off in a clatter of two-cycle motor noise and smoke. I was unsure if his indifference was due to the reserved English attitude, or because strangers crawling out of the desert asking to sleep in his field was commonplace.

I looked over the tin-roofed shelter the man offered and decided not to use it. I was content to sleep in the open pasture near the edge of the cliffs. For dinner I finished my bread with a can of cold English green peas, washed down with powdered milk as I listened to the shrieks of laughing gulls nesting in the cliff under me.

The sun vanished into the sea in a swirl of colors. I sat up well past twilight – silent and still as the night sky. It was not long ago you could count me among those men who live their lives in endless rehearsals for tomorrow. It was in remote

places like these where my awakening to the present replaced the fears and desires of rethinking the past or planning the future, leaving only this infinite now.

Under a gray dawn the winds funneled up the face of the cliffs in rain-laden gusts. I packed my gear hastily, eager for the warmth in the exercise of walking. Swirling clouds hid much of the view this morning as I hiked the high plain northward. Faces belonging to cattle, framed by fences, momentarily studied me before vanishing into the mist. As the road straightened and continued along the high veld I might have been passing through the more temperate clime of an English countryside.

The clouds lifted as I turned down the paved lane leading to the governor's residence at Plantation House. I was lured down this path to see where Captain Joshua Slocum stayed for a few days as guest of a previous governor in 1898. Captain Slocum wrote of listening for Napoleon's ghost from under the blankets at night. The spacious white plantation house overlooked horse stables and a cricket field. The only people I saw here were two workers trimming and planting in the flower gardens.

Lacking an invitation from the governor, I continued along the road to a country store that served a cluster of houses given the collective name of Bishopsholme. I entered the store to beg some water and was soon surrounded by wide-eyed children. I bought and passed around a box of biscuits to the kids while I spoke to the elderly sisters who owned the shop. As soon as I opened my mouth they recognized me from an interview I had taped at the local radio station the day before my walk began.

A good way to get to know the Saints, I found, was to listen to their two-hour daily radio broadcast. It takes the place of an island newspaper by reporting anything and everything that happens locally. My interview was repeatedly broadcast between the two big news events of the week: one being that a car knocked over a road sign in town, the other from the local doctor describing as "nonsense" the rumor that people were catching venereal disease by swimming in the town's pool. "The only way to catch VD in the pool," the doctor explained over and over, "is if you are doing something other than swimming in it." It was evidently a persistent rumor because they rebroadcast the doctor's message every day during my stay on the island. I can imagine the unfaithful husband explaining to his wife that he must have caught some germs in the public pool. Most of the islanders, myself included, decided to stay clear of the pool just in case.

One of the boys from the store led me up to an old fort overlooking Jamestown. The path to High Knoll Fort was obvious even to me but I couldn't turn away an eager guide. Facing me while running backwards, the boy gave me a nonstop commentary on everything from his grandmother's house in the valley below, to stories of ghosts who lived in the fort. As with all the children of the Saints, each of the boy's sentences ended with "Sir," as if raised in a military school.

We entered the hundred-year-old stone fortress through a wooden drawbridge. The central courtyard, recently used as a quarantine yard for imported sheep and cattle, now stood empty. From the fort's walls heavy cannon pointed over the town and harbor. On the roof of what were once the soldier's quarters, there now stood satellite-tracking antennae.

Suddenly a heavy door on rusty iron hinges swung open and the startled boy ran backwards right into the stone wall. Our "ghost" was an American NASA technician who invited us into a room he had converted into a tracking station. On one side of the room stood an iron bed and oil lamp on a wood table. Across from it blinked a futuristic array of electronics. Information gathered here from satellites was relayed to the United States for the NASA space program. Our talkative boy now stood speechless as computers chattered and punched out data from a passing satellite onto a spool of paper. He had finally discovered his ghost of High Knoll Fort.

With Jamestown in sight, I resumed my trek alone. On a dry plateau I walked through the ridge top settlements of Halfway House, Cowpath and the assorted tin-covered shacks of Half Tree Hollow. Eventually, I stood at the top of a mountain of steps leading down Chapel Valley into Jamestown.

The town struck me as amazingly congested after coming from the quiet countryside. In reality, this capital city was a mere village of a couple thousand people. Before me, the 699 concrete steps called Jacob's Ladder were the last leg of my island circumnavigation. As I took in the scene, two boys brushed past me and launched themselves down the stairway by laying their shoulders across the steel pipe handrail with feet stretched over the opposite rail. In this way, they slid down the entire banister on their backs without ever touching a step. I timed their descent, which took some three minutes nonstop. A man standing next to me explained that long ago the servants from the hilltop kitchen delivered pots of stew to the garrison of soldiers below by balancing the pots on their stomachs as they slid down the banister in similar fashion.



Boy slides down Jacob's Ladder into Jamestown

I took the stairs of Jacob's Ladder one at a time and with each step relived a scene from the discoveries of the past three days of walking. The ladder deposited me in the center of town, a short walk from the small boat landing. I pulled boots off sore feet and rowed the dinghy slowly back to *Atom*, still safely anchored and rolling lazily in the swell.

I stayed on the island a few more days, long enough to witness the local phenomenon of Saturday night's town dance. Every Saturday evening,

Jamestown swells to overflowing and there is even a traffic jam on the main

street as people rendezvous from all corners of the island. In a dance hall on China Lane, hundreds of folks of all generations gathered to visit, party and dance to a variety of taped music. An outdoor bar and grill served the overflow crowd. Visiting sailors found plenty of friendly single girls on the dance floor. I was kept occupied by a lovely girl whose dark skin and flowery dress kept reminding me of nights on Mauritius. Like a scene from Cinderella, it all ended abruptly at midnight, for that is the beginning of Sunday, and in this regard at least, the Saints are ardently religious.

A light rain fell as I walked my date back to her home a few blocks away. As I turned alone towards the harbor the skies opened up with a downpour. Soon I could hear stones from the hillside above banging as they struck the tin-roofed buildings. As rain fell harder and rocks hit more frequently, I ran down the street with hands protecting my head. The run-off water from the cliffs above town was pulling down loosely held stones that struck with a resounding crash on the roofs, bounced off and landed with a thud on the streets around me. I recklessly ran down streets filling with rubble as if we were under cannon attack. I made it unscathed to the dinghy and laughed at the rain of stones as I rowed back to *Atom*.

Next morning, I filled my water jugs from the shore side tap, made last minute preparations for sea, and hoisted my anchors aboard. Busy getting the boat underway, setting up sails and wind vane and stowing my anchors, I hardly noticed the island retreating until I looked up and it was no longer there. I continued looking aft, feeling oddly like my stay there had all been a pleasant dream from which I was slowly awakening.