

## **My Island Home by Peter Rodgers**

On the day of his release I travelled to the dusty town where he and the others were ‘admitted back into society’. By late afternoon we were all on the same flight back to the capital, the 40 ex-prisoners who had been out of it for more than a decade, the dozen or so journalists who had been away since that morning. We were like business people taking the trip home. Except that when the plane landed, the journalists caught taxis back to familiar places. They went to fractured new beginnings.

About two months later I was walking near my home when I saw him coming towards me. ‘I think I know you from the ceremony,’ he greeted me softly. It struck me as a curious way of describing that day. So began our friendship which led to the publication of my stories. I say ‘my stories’ but of course they were his. I was picking over his life. He was the one on display, the one taking risks.

He looked disheveled the first time I called. I wondered if he had been asleep. ‘It’s good of you to drop by,’ he said quietly, putting a large mug of warm tea in front of me. We chatted. He asked how long I had been in the capital, whether I was alone; the usual inquiries of first acquaintance. I learned that his family had come to the house many years before. During the time he was away, he smiled as he said that, various friends had lived there.

After a while I asked, ‘What was it like on the island?’ He said nothing for what seemed an eternity. In the humid mid-afternoon stillness I heard a clock chime four. Finally he said, ‘I’ve been waiting for that question’. Before he could say anything more I said, quickly and self-consciously, ‘I’d like to record this if that’s alright. I don’t want to get you into trouble.’

He gave me a sad smile and shook his head. ‘My friend, my young friend, you must understand this. For 14 years I could not be with those who were the core of my life. My wife fell ill and when she died her friends, not her husband, buried her. The news of that terrible event reached me many weeks later. Soon after my children left. Perhaps without their mother’s shelter the stigma of their father’s fate became too much to bear. Perhaps they simply despaired of ever seeing me again.’ His voice wavered then he continued. ‘For 14 years my life belonged to someone else. What trouble can *you* cause me now?’

I felt my face redden with embarrassment.

Our first meeting lasted more than five hours. After four hours I ran out of tape and scribbled furiously. I saw him a couple of times over the next few weeks but only briefly and it was another

two months before we talked again at length. That day when I arrived at his house I noticed a policeman standing over the road. 'I have had other visitors since you were here last,' he said, ushering me into the living room. The way he said 'visitors' alarmed me. 'Should we stop?' I asked. To my guilty relief he replied, 'How would that help?'

I left at nightfall. There were two policemen now. Both lit cigarettes at the very moment I went out the front gate and I saw their faces clearly. They said nothing but I could feel their eyes on my back as I walked away.

One day he said, 'You remember the guard I told you about. The one who confiscated the photograph I carried with me?' 'Yes,' I replied.

'One day I saw him terribly upset. I heard there had been trouble in one of the outlying areas and one of his brothers, a policeman, had been killed. I thought about those two men for a long, long time. They served those I regarded as worse than unworthy. Had this tainted them and stained all others in their family? Should I have quietly rejoiced at the death of the policeman or comforted the guard?'

'What did you do?'

'Nothing,' he replied, shaking his head. 'I could not decide, so to my shame I did nothing.'

'Shame?'

'That guard was kind to me after my wife died.'

That day as I left he said, 'I have something for you'. It was a copy of the photograph he had spoken about.

My articles were published over several days. I took great pride in the eloquence with which I told his story but wondered if this was not an awful conceit. After all, my own words were little more than binding for his testimony.

*Five of us were taken before a judge. He was clean-shaven, with an oval face, and reminded me uncannily of one of my students. What if he were I wondered. Would that have made it better or worse for me, or him? I was amazed to find myself trying to remember what marks I had given that particular student.*

*In those first months we itched for detail. We longed to know what was happening to us, why we had been detained, why we were sent to the island. Knowing would not have changed anything*

*but it would have helped to define us as individuals. We quickly understood how easy it is to lose one's bearings in a factless environment.*

*After I had been on the island a few years a small number of prisoners were released, or at least transferred. We did not begrudge them freedom, if indeed that was their fate. But we had, it seemed, all fused into a single being and it was agony when they were torn from us. Not long after, one of the younger prisoners stole the small boat the guards used to patrol the island. A little way offshore the engine cut out. That was how we discovered that every evening the guards removed the fuel tank in the boat and replaced it with one filled with water. We knew then what it was like to be a small bird or perhaps a mouse caught by a cat: any hope of escape was a taunt. We never saw that young man again.*

*Eight of us lived in a rough, cramped hut. One night one of the men told a story, the next night another. Soon we were all taking turns. Then one of the men fell ill, so sick he was taken away. The sight of him lying there on a canvas stretcher looking worn and frightened made me very uneasy. Yet we had to admit that his departure was convenient because our stories could now rotate with the week. We began, a little awkwardly at first, to call each other only by the name of our day, 'Tuesday,' 'Friday,' and so on. The other prisoners naturally became curious. One of them suggested that everyone assume a new name and the idea was taken up enthusiastically. We had appropriated the days of the week so the others became a date. When the last of the prisoners was renamed '14 November' we could calculate, for the first time, exactly how many of us were on the island.*

*The most gifted of our story tellers was 'Thursday'. He was small and softly spoken but held our attention effortlessly. As 'Wednesday' I could feel the men's anticipation of the next evening as I tried to entertain them. Sometimes Thursday amused us and we would wake next morning strangely refreshed. But I best remember this story.*

It was a hot, shrivelled day towards the end of summer. An old woman was walking back to her village. She sat down to rest in the shade of a large, rambling tree and to her surprise heard the sound of a car coming slowly along the pot-holed road. A large black vehicle, its polished chrome fittings dazzling in the sunlight, eased around the corner. She made herself as inconspicuous as possible but the car came to a halt, a tinted window half-opened and a voice called to her, 'Please, it is not a day for walking, come with us'. She was intrigued but uncertain. 'Come now,' the voice continued, more authoritatively. The driver got out. He

was dressed in a smart brown uniform and wore the finest pair of boots the old woman had ever seen. He walked around and opened the door for her. Still hesitating, she climbed in. As they neared her village the driver asked for directions. A small, curious crowd watched as they pulled up outside her cottage. The woman's son looked on. The driver stepped out and opened the door. She offered demure thanks and the car slid away. Later that evening they heard it passing through the village but it did not stop.

An odd thing now happened. Every week, on exactly the same day and at the same time, the car would pass through the village. Several of the older inhabitants observed that the car's outward travel was always at the same time but its return journeys were progressively quicker. They concluded that the car was visiting each of the villages along the mountain road. The car's passage became not just anticipated but welcomed. The village children and quite a few adults would stand by the side of the road waving and cheering. Some held up placards with VISIT US SOON or DON'T FORGET ABOUT US written carefully in eye-catching colours. A committee, led by the local schoolteacher, was formed to ensure that the visitors, whoever they were, received a fitting welcome. The streets were swept and the walls of the public buildings whitewashed. An air of expectation hung over the village and children tossed in their beds at night.

Then, one week, the car slowed and nosed straight to the home of the old woman. She filled with pride to see it standing right outside her small dwelling. The driver got out and once more she admired those boots. He opened both rear doors and stood to attention as two men alighted, one in a dark uniform. The children burst into their well-rehearsed song of welcome. But even before they finished the man in the dark uniform spoke the old woman.

'Where is your son, madam?'

The boy, in his late teens, stepped out of the crowd, a smirk on his face at being singled out. The man looked at him and with a jerk of his thumb barked, 'Into the car, you!'

A hush fell over the crowd. 'What?' the boy asked, surprise and wariness on his voice.

'You heard me, into the car, I said!'

The driver and the man in civilian clothes now stood each side of the boy grasping his arms. The old woman had turned very pale. 'What do you want with him?' she asked, her voice trembling.

'We want nothing with *him*,' the man in the uniform said shrugging his shoulders. 'But we knew where you lived. It saved time having to find someone else.'

'What has he done though?' she asked in a high voice, repeating the question several times.

‘Done? Done!’ The uniformed man seemed incredulous. ‘We’ll think of something.’ He looked at the other man and the driver. The three of them sniggered.

Soon after that day the old woman saw her son’s name on a list, published by the authorities, of those helping ‘To suppress elements seeking to undermine the state’. That was as close as she ever came to her son again.

*There was a heavy silence after Thursday finished. Slowly the men began to speak. ‘Stupid, naïve villagers,’ one said. ‘They were trusting, that’s all,’ another remarked. ‘Set up by their committee, that’s what,’ a third commented. ‘Maybe the committee was taken in too,’ said a fourth man. ‘Then what was the point of having an educated man as its leader?’ the third man retorted. I could feel all eyes on me.*

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One week after my articles appeared he vanished. I was sickened at the thought of what I had done. Difficult months passed. I was desperate to find him. There was no logical path of family or friends that might help me and for the first time I truly understood just how much he had been dispossessed. But he had mentioned the names of a few other prisoners. I was wary of approaching them directly, guilty perhaps of my likely role in his disappearance. I wrote to them and received two replies. One thanked me warmly for telling his story. But the tone of the other response was sharp and accusatory. I was a meddler in a situation I could never truly comprehend.

One day I received a phone call requesting me to meet with a senior government official, someone I knew and respected, though cautiously. I took this summons as a hopeful sign. Notions of justice attained and friendship renewed ran through my head. My efforts and his courage had revealed the truth of that terrible time. We had challenged those in power to confront what had been done in the name of the state and, in a few cases no doubt, to consider their own actions. We had forged a new beginning.

How breathlessly naïve were those thoughts, those dreams. The meeting lasted less than ten minutes. I was invited to sit but contrary to usual courtesies no refreshments were offered. The official spoke from a written script. It condemned me for re-opening up old wounds, for my unacceptable behavior. I was given one week to get my affairs in order and leave the country.

There was only one affair that truly mattered. He had told me of a beach on the island, the memory of which was one of the few joys he took from all those years of dislocation. I travelled to the island

and found the beach, a small strip of the finest golden sand washed by clear, turquoise water which had soothed scabbed and aching feet. As the sun edged towards the horizon I gathered debris from above the waterline and lit a small fire. When its flame was hot and pure I knelt and burnt the photograph he had given me. It dissolved into a pale blue trace that left the island far behind, forever. The photograph showed three young men, their arms over each other's shoulders, smiling broadly at the camera. They were happier times, when these men were brothers – not a guard and a policeman and a highly educated prisoner of the state.

I sat there for some time then rose slowly and walked into the ocean. The waves began to buffet then wash over me. I pushed on. He had escaped the island but I had destroyed his freedom. I would make amends in the only way I could. The island would have me forever. I kept walking.