

The Quality of Life

A Short Story

The Quality of Life

“John Pilgrim, Sir,” I said, when asked my name by the Captain.

“And why have you applied for this job?” he asked.

“Er, I don’t really know, Sir,” I replied.

“Have you ever sailed before?”

“Er, no, Sir.”

“What qualifications do you have?”

“Er, none, really, Sir.”

“And why do you want this particular job?”

“Er, I don’t really know, Sir.”

“Are you good at anything?”

“Er, not really, Sir.”

“What experience have you had?”

“None, Sir.”

“If I gave you this job, what do you expect to achieve?”

“Nothing, really, Sir.”

“Where do you see yourself in five years time?”

“I’ve no idea, Sir.”

“Two years time?”

“I don’t know, Sir.”

“Next month?”

“Don’t know, Sir.”

“Have you anything you want to ask me about the job?”

“Not really, Sir.”

“Excellent. You’re hired. We sail at nine-o-clock tomorrow morning.”

Thus started my adventure.

“The Quality of Life,” a medium sized sailing vessel, stood in the harbour. It had arrived a few days earlier, and Captain Purpose, for that was his name, was in town looking for new recruits for his voyage. Never having been employed before, and the advertised wages sounding quite generous, I applied, and, to my surprise, got the job.

The next day, I awoke early, borrowed my brother’s old work clothes (I had never worked before, so I didn’t have any), and headed for the harbour. It was deathly quiet. I found that strange. I at least expected other crew members to be arriving, getting themselves ready to sail, but nobody. I expected the ship to be busy being loaded with all the equipment and supplies needed for a long voyage, but nothing. No cargo busily being taken aboard. Nothing. The ship just sat there in the corner of the harbour quite silently. I knew I had the right ship. *“The Quality of Life”* was freshly painted on the side. It was unusual for a foreign ship to dock in our little port. Normally only the local fishing vessels used it. But this ship was different.

I climbed the gangplank, which was resting on the pier. And indeed, there, welcoming me on board, was Captain Purpose himself.

“Welcome aboard!” he said, “So glad you could come.”
“Thank you, Sir,” I said. “Where are rest of the crew?”

“Of course, let me introduce you. This is my wife, Henrietta. She’s the navigator. We won’t get lost with her around.”

“Oh, good. Hello, please to meet you,” I said politely.

“Hello, young man,” she replied.

“John” I said, “Call me John. That’s my name.”

“Yes, John. Pleased to meet you too. Let me shew you where you are sleeping.”

Having been led downstairs into the bowels of the ship, I was shown a small but quite pleasant little cabin. It had no windows, but the bed was very comfortable and the cabin homely. I had the impression that I would be well looked after by Henrietta, although I still wasn’t too sure about her husband. And I was still to meet the rest of the crew.

“I’ll leave you alone and let you settle in,” she said.

“Thank you, Madam, you have been very kind,” I replied.

As the town clock struck nine o’clock, I heard the gangplank being hauled up and we were away. Leaving my room, I climbed up on deck, fully expecting a busy crew to be hoisting the sail, or whatever people did on boats. But nobody was there apart from the Captain at the wheel. The sail had already been hoisted, and he was contentedly singing away as he took charge of the ship on the open water.

“Hello, Son,” he said, “Come on up here.”

“You can call me John, Sir,” I said, trying to ease the conversation a little. I went to the wheel, which he was steering, and I got the impression that he was very happy that someone else was with him, taking an interest in his nautical skills and leadership qualities.

“Er, where are we going?” I sheepishly asked.

“This is the adventure of a lifetime,” he replied. “We’re doing business,” he continued.

“What kind of business?” I asked.

“We’re trading. Doing something nobody has ever done before. We’re going over the horizon, to trade in places the world has never known.”

“Where’s the horizon?” I asked.

“It’s that line over there between the sea and the sky,” he replied.

“We don’t seem to be getting any nearer,” I observed.

“Don’t worry about that. Henrietta known where we’re going.”

“What’s over the horizon?” I asked.

“Nobody knows,” the Captain replied, “That’s the adventure. One thing is for sure. There will be markets.”

“Markets?”

“Yes, markets. People to trade with. We will make millions, and you are just the right companion to share this adventure with me.”

At this point I realised I had still not actually seen any crew yet.

“Where’s the crew?” I asked.

“Nobody else would come,” the Captain said mournfully.

“What, you mean it’s just the three of us on the open sea?”

“Yes, but that’s all right. That means when we get rich, there’ll be more for each of us. And no pesky wages to pay either.”

“Why wouldn’t they come?” I asked.

“Oh, they gave many reasons. Too attached to their little lives on the mainland. One wanted to be near his family. One was too comfortable in his current occupation working for the council. A bin man, I think. One asked too many questions, realising he was more secure in his tiny, nondescript job in an office somewhere.”

“Oh, you mean it won’t be secure out here then?”

“Of course it will be. I know how to drive this thing and Henrietta can navigate. We won’t get lost. And we will become very, very rich. Far richer than anyone on the mainland could ever dream of. None of them there believed that of course, when I told them. But just you wait and see.”

My conversation with Captain Purpose ended. But it kept me awake long into the night.

I have to admit it was quite comfortable in my little cabin. It was warm, the bed was so soft, and when I did get to sleep, I slept very soundly. The sea was smooth and calm. Henrietta came and woke me up with

delicious home made food each day. She looked after me very well. In fact, I wondered what my job was actually going to be. Every time I went on deck to speak to the Captain, he would say, “Don’t you worry, everything’s fine. I’m in charge. And my wife knows where we’re going.”

I asked if I could do anything, like mop the deck, or whatever deckhands did, but he would just say, “No, it’s fine, don’t you worry. I’m in charge. Don’t you worry, Son. We’ll soon be over the horizon.” Except that the horizon looked just as far away as ever. And I didn’t like to tell him this, but if he had looked behind him, which he never did, he would have realised that the mainland we had left had disappeared a long time ago. So this horizon was now all around us. And always the same distance away. That confused me.

So I had a word with Henrietta. She was much more approachable. She informed me that when we sailed out of port, we headed West. So if we continue to head West, we will eventually get over the horizon.

“What’s West?” I asked.

“Look,” she said. “This is a compass. That big W is West. As long as we point the ship in that direction, we’ll eventually end up over the horizon.”

“Oh, that’s interesting,” I said. “And if we go that way,” I said pointing to the E, which was opposite the W, “we get back to the port.”

“Yes, you are very clever,” she replied.

Days passed. All was very pleasant. Calm seas, no work to do, delicious food every day and a very comfortable bed. Then one day, it all changed. Just as I was getting used to this new lifestyle, a wind blew up. The waves got higher and higher, and the little ship was tossed around. The thought of Henrietta’s delicious cooking suddenly became not quite so appealing.

“I think I’ll skip tea tonight,” I said, not feeling too well, “I think I’ll have an early night.”

The Captain said, “Oh it’s just a little storm. It’ll soon be over, don’t worry about it.”

He clung to the wheel, trying to steer the ship, but the storm grew stronger and stronger, and for the first time he appeared to be rattled.

“Which way?” he shouted to his wife.

“West,” she replied.

“Which way’s West?” he angrily retorted.

“There, there, on the compass, can’t you see?”

At which point the compass broke free of its housing, and crashed to the floor. The storm became stronger and stronger. Not being able to sleep, being tossed about in my cabin and feeling terrible, I tried to clamber up on deck to at least see if they needed any help. I just arrived to see Henrietta slip over the edge of the ship.

“Mother, mother!” I cried, for she had been a mother to me.

She just managed to catch herself on a rope and was clinging onto it for dear life.

“I’ll help you, just hang on to me,” I screamed.

And she did. She grabbed on to me and I slowly tried to pull her up. Slowly it was working, but she cried out, “I can’t hold on any more, I’m so weak.”

“Hold on, hold on,” I cried, “I’ll get you.”

But it was too much for her. She let go her grip, and as much as I tried to help her, she slipped away over the edge, never to be seen again.

The storm didn’t last much longer. After a couple more hours, the sea slowly grew calm again. The Captain was visibly devastated.

“I’m sorry, I tried my best to save her,” I said, expecting the worst from him.

But he calmly replied, “I know, I saw. You did your best. It’s just you and me now, Son.”

“John,” I replied.

“Yes,” he said.

Several days of calm seas followed. But the Captain seemed to have lost his sense of direction. The ship seemed to be wandering aimlessly around. Sometimes in one direction, sometimes in another.

“We should be heading West,” I said, knowledgeably.

“What’s West?” he replied.

“Henrietta told me, we should be heading West.”

“How do I do that?” he replied, with some sadness in his voice.

“Have you got the compass?” I said.

“It was broken in the storm,” he replied.

“So, we don’t know which way to go,” I said.

“And we don’t know the way back either,” he reluctantly concluded.

Coming to the realisation that we were hopelessly lost, we decided we had to make the best of things. And it’s at this point we suddenly saw land.

“That way!” we said simultaneously.

As we got closer to the land, it was clear that it wasn’t the mainland that we had left. It looked somehow different. And it dawned upon us slowly that we had indeed made it over the horizon into the unexplored lands that the Captain had been so excited about. Of course, now his excitement had been abated somewhat, because even if we could find a commodity that would sell for a good price at home, we couldn’t actually get home, so we couldn’t sell it.

It was a flat land, and the first thing we noticed were the very peculiar trees that grew there. Very tall trees, with large leaves fanning out, but only from the top of the trunk. We’d never seen anything quite like them before. And there were lots of them. As we got closer we saw

several villages and people going about their daily business. We tried to find a suitable place to berth. As it was so flat, and mainly beach, we eventually decided to drop anchor and launch a smaller boat to get to the land.

The people seemed friendly. They welcomed us onto their island, for an island it was. The chief of the village introduced himself and gave us a meal of their staple fruit. In fact it was so staple, that's all they ever ate. Coconuts. The funny looking trees were full of them. And nothing else seemed to grow there. We tried them, and we found them delicious.

“What beautiful food you have here,” the Captain remarked.

The chief said, “No, no, no, we're sick of these wretched coconuts. This is all we have. Coconuts for breakfast, coconuts for lunch, coconuts for tea. We're sick of them. We saw a foreign vessel, and thought you could provide us with something else. Something more pleasant than these dreadful coconuts all the time.”

The Captain's ears pricked up. He espied a business opportunity. We could take such delicious fruit away from them very cheaply, maybe even for nothing, sell them at home at a premium price, because to us they were delicious, then sell them something else in return. In fact they seemed so desperate that anything else would probably do. And we could sell here for a premium price too.

Except for one problem. We didn't know how to get home.

Thinking on his feet, the Captain replied, "I may have something for you on the ship."

He quickly went to the ship, and found a packet of dry biscuits, so dry they had lost what little flavour they had in the first place because they had been on the ship for so long. He came back to the chief.

"Try these," the Captain said.

The chief bit into one of the dry biscuits. The delight on his face was immediate.

"Wonderful!" he cried. "Hey, everybody, try these!"

Others came and had a taste of the biscuits. They were delighted.

"Have you got any more?" the chief asked, "We'll give you a good price for them."

The Captain knew a business opportunity when he saw one.

"We haven't got many of these biscuits left on board, but we can go back home and get you plenty more," he lied. "We'll take your coconuts in return."

So a business deal was done. The few biscuits they had left on board they gave to the chief. And they filled the hold of the ship with coconuts in return, which the islanders were only too delighted to get rid of. The Captain was very pleased. He knew he could get a good price for the coconuts, if only.... If only he could get back to the mainland.

So, with a hold full of coconuts, happy customers on Coconut Island, for that was its name, and a promise of returning with a cargo full of cheap, dry, tasteless biscuits from the mainland, we set sail again.

The Captain was very satisfied. "Markets. Business. That's what life's all about," he told me.

"But we can't get back to the mainland to take advantage of this," I pointed out.

"A minor issue," he said, as he set sail again for.... we didn't know where.

"Which way's the mainland?" he asked.

"E." I said. "At least that's what it said on the compass before it broke."

"Which way's that?" He asked.

"I don't know Sir, the compass has broken."

At which point, the conversation ended.

Many days later, after already getting a little bit tired of our new diet of coconuts, we spotted land again.

"Ah! Land again!" cried the Captain. "Maybe we can meet new people there, buy up all their supplies of dry biscuits and return to Coconut Island, now we know there is a market for them. We'll be millionaires in no time!"

"Which way is Coconut Island?" I enquired.

"Don't ask stupid questions," he responded. "Let's go!"

This new island, for another island it was, was different. It didn't seem to have any trees at all, but we could see the houses glinting in the sunlight from quite a distance away. As we got closer, everything seemed to shimmer with gold. We anchored again, this time nearer shore, and approached the village.

“Greetings,” said the Captain to nobody in particular.

A couple of scrawny old men came out.

“What do you want?” they grunted.

“We're from a foreign land and we'd like to do business with you,” explained the Captain boldly.

“What kind of business?” they grunted.

We took a closer look at their houses. They seemed to be made of pure gold.

The Captain said, “Is this gold that you've made your houses from?”

“Yes,” they replied. “It's terrible stuff. So heavy to move, so hot inside in summer, can't even begin to try to put windows in it. We hate the stuff. You can't eat it, you can't build anything constructive out of it. It's useless. But it's all we've got.”

The Captain's eyes glinted. “We can relieve you of it, if you like,” he helpfully suggested.

“Could you?” they quickly replied, “That would be wonderful. Take it, take it. Here, take as much as you like. Free. As much as you can carry. We don't want it.”

The Captain and I started loading the ship, not believing our eyes and ears.

One of the old men then said, “What’s your boat made of?”

“Wood,” I replied.

“What’s wood?” they said.

“It comes from trees.”

“What’s trees?” they replied.

“You don’t know what a tree is?” I answered. “It’s a large plant that grows out of the ground.”

“What’s a plant?” they enquired.

“Something that grows by itself from a seed out of the ground,” I replied.

“It would have to be a big plant to make a boat,” they replied. “We don’t have anything like that here. That sounds like fairly useful stuff.”

“What do you eat?” I asked.

“Nothing much,” they replied. “Dirt, grubs. That’s why we’re hungry all the time.”

I spoke to the Captain, who was heartily loading the ship with gold.

“They’re hungry,” I said, “At least let’s give them some of our coconuts.”

“What?” the Captain replied. “What’s in it for us if we give them some coconuts?”

“Nothing,” I replied, “But they’re hungry.”

“You mean, just give them something for nothing?” said the Captain.

“Well, yes,” I replied, “It will give us a good reputation as compassionate tradesmen,” I hastily suggested.

“Oh, I see,” said the Captain reluctantly, “All right then. But don’t give them too many. We don’t want to be inundated with scroungers.”

So I offered the old men some coconuts.

“What’s this?” they asked.

“Coconuts,” I replied. “Try eating the flesh inside. It’s delicious.”

So they tentatively put a small piece in their mouths.

“Ugh!” They both replied at once, “It’s disgusting. Are you trying to poison us? Take it away!”

At this point, we spied some of the tribe swimming out to our ship. They started pulling at the ship’s side, to see if they could dislodge any wood.

“Captain,” I shouted. “Quick, to the ship. They’re trying to dismantle it!”

Both of us hurried to the ship, as best we could with as much gold as we could possibly carry. We managed to get on board, haul up the anchor and sail away before any major damage was done to the ship.

“That was close,” I said.

“What a wonderful place,” said the Captain. “Unlimited amounts of gold, whenever we want. We’re millionaires already!”

“Yes,” I replied, “But where can we spend it?”

We sailed on, now quite heavily laden down with gold and coconuts. The next storm could seriously sink us.

The Captain tried to put a good spin on things.

“We’re sure to find someone, somewhere who will be glad of gold and coconuts. We’re bound to get a really good price for both.”

“They didn’t appreciate either on Gold Island,” I said. For that was its name.

Days turned into weeks. We really had no idea where we were going, or if indeed we’d hit land ever again. And these coconuts started to become seriously nauseous to eat. The food Henrietta had originally brought on board had long been finished, and we had sold all our dry biscuits, and so the variety had now gone.

“Oh for a dry biscuit!” I lamented, sounding more and more like a Coconut Islander every day that passed.

When all hope seemed gone that we would ever find land again, and with no direction in life, I mused, “Maybe we’re going round in circles. That’s why we never see land.”

The Captain replied, “If only Henrietta was here, she was the only one we had to give us direction.”

For the first time, I saw that the Captain was beginning to question his original decision to do business “over the horizon.” Especially now that we couldn’t get back, and that we’d come across people who just didn’t want our merchandise.

The heavily laden ship creaked on. Finally, as the coconut supply started to get alarmingly low, we realised

that we couldn't eat the gold, and starvation was something that was slowly coming into our minds.

Then, just as suddenly, "Land!"

Such a relief came in the Captain's voice.

We headed straight for it. Just to see another creature would be wonderful, it didn't matter how odd they were, or whether they were sick of coconuts or not. Or even gold for that matter.

As we got closer to the land, we saw lush greenery. And the people, as soon as they saw us, all came out, waving to us from the shore. They seemed so excited to see us. As we got closer, it dawned on us that there didn't seem to be any men. They were all youngish women, and in the tropical heat, they weren't wearing that much at all. They seemed so happy as we came to shore. We found a commodious harbour, and no sooner had we stepped on shore, they were all around us. They couldn't keep their hands off us.

"How many of you are there?" one of them asked.

"Only the two of us," we replied.

A look of disappointment came across their eyes.

"Well, two is better than nothing," they replied.

"Who's in charge here?" I asked.

"The Queen. She's in her palace on the hill there, and she'd be delighted to see you."

So, we slowly made our way up the hill, the women hardly keeping their eyes (and hands) off us. We

thought this was odd, as was the fact that we hadn't seen any men.

We arrived at the palace and were greeted by one of the maidservants.

"The Queen will see you straight away," she said. "Come this way, she's heard of your arrival already."

Marvelling at the hasty arrangement of this meeting, we entered the Great Hall, and there was the Queen. She quickly came down off her throne to meet us, shaking hands and greeting us warmly.

"Come in, come in," she said. "It's a delight to meet you. You must stay for dinner."

Very quickly a great table was arranged with all sorts of food and delicacies, everything you could possibly imagine. After a diet of coconuts for a few months, we couldn't believe our eyes.

"Come in, sit down. Help yourselves. We always have plenty here. Eat as much as you like. You are our guests," she said.

"It's a delight to meet you," I said.

"It's a delight to meet you too," she drooled, "Where are you from?"

"A long way away, over the horizon," I said. "Our compass broke and we have got terribly lost. We thank you for looking after us so well."

"Oh, please stay, please stay," she said. "As long as you want. We have plenty of everything, and as many wives as you want, or can cope with."

"Yes," I said. "I was going to ask about that. Where are all your men?"

“Oh, it’s such a sad story,” she told us. “We had enough men for all of us once, and we were very happy. But the men all one day decided they didn’t like women any more.”

“Didn’t like women?” blurted out the Captain suddenly.

“No. They started dressing as women themselves and preferring each other. They left their wives and were much happier in each other’s company. Then they all got a terrible wasting disease and every one of them died out. Very sad.”

“So, you no longer have any men here?” I asked.

“No. We’ve been looking out to sea for maybe a ship to come along full of men we can marry. We almost lost hope, and then you came along this morning. We were a little disappointed there was only two of you, but two is better than none, I suppose. I’m sure we can share you around. You can have as many wives as you want here. Please stay.”

I thought about these things. They were pleasant thoughts. As much as we want to eat all the time and an endless supply of wives. What else could any man wish for? But something was niggling at the back of my mind that there ought to be something else, somewhere, but I didn’t quite know what it was. My thoughts confused me. Then I had a great idea.

“Captain! What a marvellous business opportunity! We can go away, find some men. Tell them about this place, an island full of women. Charge a premium price for

bringing them here, then sell them to the women, also for a premium price. Brilliant! Don't you see? Two amounts of cash for the same commodity. A win, win situation. We can be millionaires in no time!"

"What?" the Captain dreamily responded.

"Don't you see? This is just the golden business opportunity you have been waiting for!"

"What?" he mumbled again.

"This is bound to work! Don't you see it?"

"See what?"

The Captain's whole demeanour had changed. He didn't seem at all excited by the things that had excited him in the past. Markets. A golden business opportunity. No response. Then suddenly he replied, "Oh, what's the point. Who cares about business? It's too much like hard work. Why do that, when we can stay here, have as much as we want, when we want, with as many wives as we want. Hang business! I'm staying here."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. This went against everything I had ever known about the Captain.

"But what will you do here?" I asked.

"Do?" he replied.

"Yes, you must have a purpose surely?"

"Purpose?"

"Yes, a purpose in life."

"Hang purpose! I'm staying."

And with that, off he went, a wife on each arm, kindly given him by the Queen. And I never saw him again.

Captain Purpose had lost his purpose.

What the Captain did wasn't illogical. I could see the pleasure it would give him. I understood why he had done what he had done. But pleasure without purpose? Could I deal with that? I know business was the Captain's purpose in life before, and I know that that particular purpose was very limited in its scope – the Captain was proof of that, abandoning it so quickly. But I thought, just thought at the back of my mind, that there ought to be a lot more out there to be discovered. A far greater purpose. So I sailed on.

I left Pleasure Island, for that was its name, not without some regret, but at least I could stock up well on many things other than coconuts, which, I was glad to say, had finally run out. I sailed for many days, and the sea was calm enough, but it was somehow very different without a Captain, especially a Captain with a purpose. But I knew it was right to leave him where he was and sail away. In fact I got used to my own company. I quite liked it. I could finally think deeply about things which I never had the chance to do before, either on board ship or back on the mainland, or anywhere else for that matter.

After what may have been a couple of weeks, I again espied land, and made a beeline for it. Looking from a distance, it seemed a quite well organised land. Plenty

of trees. Plenty of farms and fields, with villages dotted about a quite pleasant countryside. Each village consisted of several houses surrounding a larger building in the centre which seems like a communal hall, or something. The odd thing was the construction. Each communal building had a kind of tower with what looked like a small cross on top. What were these strange buildings? I thought.

There was a small harbour, and I managed to sail the ship alongside the jetty. The people on shore were very kind and welcoming, and helped me to secure the ship.

“Welcome to the Isle of the Son of Man,” I was greeted.

“Thank you, that’s very kind of you,” I said.

“How many of you are there on board?” I was asked.

“Only me,” I said.

“Just one of you?”

“Well, there were three of us originally. One died in a storm and the other decided to stay on Pleasure Island.”

“Oh dear! We’ve heard about Pleasure Island,” they said. “It sounds delightful on the surface, but it leads to death in the end. You should be so grateful you escaped.”

“Well, I didn’t escape exactly. I just saw a lack of purpose in all they did.”

“Of course! That’s exactly right. You did the right thing. It was good you saw the need for a purpose. And God has guided you over the sea to just the right place.”

“God?” I asked, “Who’s he?”

“The Lord. He made everything, the world, the universe, you and me. Everything. And he upholds it all and guides it all in his inscrutable providence.”

“Made everything?”

“Yes. You don’t think all this made itself, do you?”

“Well, I’ve never really thought about it before. But nobody guided me anywhere, I just came here myself.”

“Did you aim to come here?”

“Well, no. The wind and the sea brought me here. You see, our compass was broken.”

“Exactly. It was the Lord.”

“What lord? Nobody else was involved. Just the wind and the sea.”

“God only used those to guide you here. God is not like us. He is invisible.”

“So, this invisible person deliberately blew me here? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Well, yes, sort of.”

“HmMMM. Can I meet this invisible person? I’d like to see him.”

“You can’t. He’s invisible. But every evening we go to the church in the village to worship him. We’d love you to come with us tonight. Please say you’ll stay.”

“Church?”

“Yes. Every village has a church. You probably saw some of them as you were arriving.”

I took this to mean the rather strange looking community halls I had seen.

The kindness and gentleness of these people were attractive to me. They didn’t hassle me or overwhelm

me, and seemed genuinely concerned about my welfare. Nobody had quite been like that to me before, not even back on the mainland. Their strange ideas about an invisible God were the only thing that really put me off.

I was taken in by a Mr and Mrs Pious. They were a very easy-to-get-along-with middle aged couple with a very beautiful daughter called Grace. They had a very comfortable home with a bedroom to spare, and were very happy to put me up for as long as I wanted.

“Is Grace your only daughter?” I asked over tea.

“Yes,” they replied. “She did have an elder brother, but he sailed away and we’ve no idea where he is any more. You’re staying in his room.”

“Oh. Why did he sail away?” was the obvious next question.

“He didn’t believe in God,” was the stark reply. “He had had enough of church, didn’t see the point of going there every evening as we all tend to do around here, so he left, thinking he could have a better life elsewhere.”

“Did you try to stop him?” I asked.

“Well, he knew the truth. He grew up in it. He knows that there is a God who rules over everything, is worthy to be worshipped, and that we are His creatures. But he decided, for some reason to go. And once he was no longer a child, what could we do?” Mrs Pious said wistfully.

“Do you miss him?” I asked.

“Of course we do. We pray every night for his safe return. And I’m sure God knows where he is even now and has His hand upon him.”

“Pray?” I asked. “What’s that?”

“We speak to God. We tell Him all our needs. We ask for our son to come back every day.”

“But he never does?”

“Not yet. But God’s timing is not our timing.”

“Maybe there isn’t a God at all. Maybe this invisible creature doesn’t actually exist. Have you actually heard his voice?”

“Well, no.”

There was an awkward silence for a few seconds.

Then Mr Pious said, “But He brought you here, didn’t He? So He must exist.”

“Have some more tea,” said Mrs Pious, changing the subject tactfully.

“Yes, please, that would be wonderful, thank you,” I replied, with absolute sincerity for their kindness to me, even though I didn’t really fit in very comfortably with their strange philosophy of life.

That evening, the family got ready to go to the church. Each one took a black book with them. Mrs Pious offered me one.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“It’s a Bible. You can have it. Keep it, with pleasure,” she said, “But promise me you’ll read it every night.”

“Who wrote this book?” I asked.

“It’s the Word of God,” replied Mr Pious.

“So God wrote it?” I enquired.

“Well, men actually wrote the words down over a period of several thousand years, but they were inspired by God.”

“So men wrote it?”

“Yes, under the inspiration of God.”

“So men wrote this book, inspired by a god they’d never seen,” I concluded.

“But they knew He was there, inspiring them,” said Mr Pious emphatically.

“It’s time to go,” said Mrs Pious, “Get a move on, or we’ll be late.”

And so we went to “church.”

The whole village seemed to have turned out. They were all incredibly and genuinely friendly. Nearly everybody seemed to take a real interest in me, as a newcomer to the group. I liked that. I felt comfortable in their company, except for this invisible god thing...

The meeting started off by them all singing a few songs together, none of which I knew. The word “grace” popped up more than a few times, and I thought they were singing about the Pious’s beautiful daughter, until I sort of realised they weren’t. Then the leader started speaking into the air to God. I suppose this is what they called “praying.” After that, someone read a passage from the black book, but I couldn’t find whereabouts exactly. Then another gentleman made a fairly long

speech based on the passage that was read. And that was the end.

It was a pleasant enough time, I suppose, even though I couldn't follow much of it. It was the friendliness of the people that stood out. It really impressed me and gave me such a desire to stay on the island for at least a while.

I expressed my genuine thoughts about the whole day to Mr and Mrs Pious at home afterwards. I felt, for the first time in my life I think, comfortable enough to do so. I praised the friendliness and genuineness of the people. And I felt I could speak quite frankly and openly about all my concerns, especially to do with the problem I had about the idea of speaking to an invisible being. It was so good to know that they really cared about me, and that they were happy to put me up for a while.

Days turned into weeks. The Pious's never told me to leave, or get a job, or anything. But after a few days, and after seeing the villagers all working so hard each day, I asked, indeed I insisted, that I help them in some way. So it was I got a job on Mr Pious's farm.

I enjoyed it. I'd never had a real job in my life before, apart from working for Captain Purpose. It was then that it suddenly dawned on me that that wasn't a real job at all, because, well, actually, he never paid me

anything. Just told me, in what now seem to be very vague terms, that we would be rich one day. But we never were.

I liked the family. I liked the companionship. I loved the people I met every day as I worked in the fields, and went to church every evening. Things were, for the first time in my life, beautiful. Except for this invisible god thing, which I put to the back of my mind.

One evening, after all the activities had ended for the day, as I lay on my bed in my room, my eye caught the black book Mrs Pious had given me. I had taken it to church every evening, just like everybody else, but I had never actually read any of it, just heard bits of it explained here and there in church.

So I opened it at random, and gave it a go:

“And the LORD called unto Moses, and spake unto him out of the tabernacle of the congregation, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, If any man of you bring an offering unto the LORD, ye shall bring your offering of the cattle, even of the herd, and of the flock. If his offering be a burnt sacrifice of the herd, let him offer a male without blemish: he shall offer it of his own voluntary will at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation before the LORD. And he shall put his hand upon the head of the burnt offering; and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him. And he shall kill the bullock before the LORD: and the priests, Aaron’s sons,

shall bring the blood, and sprinkle the blood round about upon the altar that is by the door of the tabernacle of the congregation. And he shall slay the burnt offering, and cut it into his pieces. And the sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire upon the altar, and lay the wood in order upon the fire: And the priests, Aaron's sons, shall lay the parts, the head, and the fat, in order upon the wood that is on the fire which is upon the altar: But his inwards and his legs shall he wash in water: and the priest shall burn all on the altar, to be a burnt sacrifice, an offering made by fire, of a sweet savour unto the LORD. And if his offering be of the flocks, namely, of the sheep, or of the goats, for a burnt sacrifice; he shall bring it a male without blemish. And he shall kill it on the side of the altar northward before the LORD: and the priests, Aaron's sons, shall sprinkle his blood round about upon the altar. And he shall cut it into his pieces, with his head and his fat: and the priest shall lay them in order on the wood that is on the fire which is upon the altar: But he shall wash the inwards and the legs with water: and the priest shall bring it all, and burn it upon the altar: it is a burnt sacrifice, an offering made by fire, of a sweet savour unto the LORD. And if the burnt sacrifice for his offering to the LORD be of fowls, then he shall bring his offering of turtledoves, or of young pigeons. And the priest shall bring it unto the altar, and wring off his head, and burn it on the altar; and the blood thereof shall be wrung out at the side of the altar: And he shall pluck away his crop with his feathers, and cast it beside the altar on the east part, by the place of the ashes: And he shall cleave it with the wings thereof, but shall not divide it asunder: and the priest shall burn it upon the altar, upon the wood that is upon the fire: it is a burnt sacrifice, an offering made by fire, of a sweet savour unto the LORD."

“What’s that all about?” I wondered. I couldn’t understand it. So, I began to read the next chapter:

“And when any will offer a meat offering unto the LORD, his offering shall be of fine flour; and he shall pour oil upon it, and put frankincense thereon: And he shall bring it to Aaron’s sons the priests: and he shall take thereout his handful of the flour thereof, and of the oil thereof, with all the frankincense thereof; and the priest shall burn the memorial of it upon the altar, to be an offering made by fire, of a sweet savour unto the LORD: And the remnant of the meat offering shall be Aaron’s and his sons:’ it is a thing most holy of the offerings of the LORD made by fire. And if thou bring an oblation of a meat offering baken in the oven, it shall be unleavened cakes of fine flour mingled with oil, or unleavened wafers anointed with oil. And if thy oblation be a meat offering baken in a pan, it shall be of fine flour unleavened, mingled with oil. Thou shalt part it in pieces, and pour oil thereon: it is a meat offering. And if thy oblation be a meat offering baken in the fryingpan, it shall be made of fine flour with oil...”

I gave up. “What a load of rubbish,” I said to myself. But just as I did, something began to make me feel uneasy for saying it.

“OK,” I thought, “I’ll try somewhere else in the book, somewhere in the middle”:

“I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure: and, behold, this also is vanity. I said of

laughter, It is mad: and of mirth, What doeth it? I sought in mine heart to give myself unto wine, yet acquainting mine heart with wisdom; and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life. I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards: I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kind of fruits: I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees: I got me servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me: I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces: I gat me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts. So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me. And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labour: and this was my portion of all my labour. Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun....”

“How depressing,” I thought, “Everything in this world is pointless? Is this really the ‘word of God’ as Mr Pious called it?” I tried again. This time, I thought I’d be smart. So I went to the last page of the book to see how the whole story ends:

“And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. And there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him: And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads. And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever. And he said unto me, These sayings are faithful and true: and the Lord God of the holy prophets sent his angel to shew unto his servants the things which must shortly be done.”

I realised that this was speaking of somewhere else, somewhere in another world. “So they believe in an invisible god, who can never be seen, a world we are now in which is depressingly unprofitable, and an invisible world in the next life where all the good things are,” I concluded. I mused on these things. I love these people immensely, they have been so genuinely good to me, but their belief in such things.... I can't deal with it. I eventually drifted off to sleep.

Weeks went past. Months went passed. Mr and Mrs Pious never asked me to move out, and were quite happy to put me up, although I guessed they were also very happy for an extra pair of hands to work on the

farm, which indeed I was more than happy to give them.

I mused on Captain Purpose. He'd lost his purpose and embraced pleasure. Here, I had pleasure, real pleasure, it was a pleasure to be amongst this community, it really was, a far greater pleasure than the selfish pleasures of Pleasure Island. The only problem I had was the concept of purpose here. Their ultimate purpose was completely in invisible things, in another world, which may or may not be real. I couldn't deal with that. It just made me that little bit uneasy here. I was more than accepted into their community, but I wasn't really "one of them," because I didn't know whether I could truly embrace these invisible things or not. I explained everything to the Pious's, and they were so very helpful and understanding to me. But I really didn't know what to do. Shall I stay, or shall I go?

More weeks went by. The ship was still sitting in the harbour, I had kept an eye on it many times over the weeks. In fact I had been secretly visiting it, storing various portions of food there, just in case I decided one day, well, possibly, maybe, to leave. One night came, and I thought I'd just give this old book one more try. But before opening it, I decided to "pray." For the very first time, I spoke awkwardly into the air to this invisible god, "God, if you exist, let me know." I opened the book and read:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God. Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you. Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men. Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.”

“This is it!” I exclaimed to myself, “This is the life they are leading, and it is truly beautiful. This is the life I want more than anything else in this world.” And do you know, my heart was strangely warmed, and I had my first good night’s sleep for a very long time.

Months turned into years. The ship was still there in the harbour. I hadn’t forgotten it. But the community, the

new life I had discovered, gave me a new impetus to mix with the people. I joined their Bible study groups. I contributed not a little to them. I began to “pray,” yes, “pray” in public to this invisible God they had invented... no... that was truly there somehow, guiding us throughout this life. Hallelujah! I was truly happy here. This was my real home.

And everything went well for quite some time. Until one day, Grace, Mr and Mrs Pious’s beautiful daughter, whom I had grown to love dearly, living in the same household these years, yes, Grace, beautiful Grace, came home, and announced her engagement to be married to a man from the next village.

The parents were very happy, of course. And I congratulated her, of course. I really, genuinely wanted her to be happy. But I was devastated. I lay in bed that night, not knowing what to think. I loved her dearly. I did. I really did. This little upstart from the next village had gone and taken her away from me. I couldn’t bear it. Except that, he’s not an upstart, I didn’t even know him. And, well, she wasn’t “mine” at all. I couldn’t live here any longer. I couldn’t deal with it. So, that night, I packed my bag, left the house quietly, climbed on board the ship and sailed off.

What had I done? The best life I had ever led, ruined by an upstart.... no. Not him. Or her. The fact is that if I

had stayed, I really wouldn't have been able to deal with it, I really wouldn't, seeing them every day. It just would never have been the same. And it was this truth that eventually made me realise that, yes, maybe it was time to move on after all.

My main source of food now was whatever I had stored away in my times of doubt on the island, much of which was already going rotten. What an idiot I'd been! Leaving so quickly.

"It's OK," I thought, "I could turn around and go back...." But the thought of that made me even more ill than the food could.

"Help me, help me," I shouted, yes, I shouted to God. But the invisible god, the God of the Pious's, and the God of the Isle of the Son of Man, was nowhere to be found. Weeks went past. I was really struggling to survive now. The food was incredibly short, what was left was in a very bad state, but that's all I had. Until, "Land!" Another cry of relief rang from my lips.

I perked up. "What kind of people would I find there?" I wondered. "Maybe I could join their community and tell them about the invisible God who did invisible things, who created them and looked after them. Now where was my Bible?"

The island I headed towards was very dark. The weather didn't help, the sky was dark behind it, and it seemed a storm would soon be brewing. I quickly looked for a place to anchor. A suitable bay soon came in to view, and I went ashore.

Nobody was about. The trees were huge, far larger than I'd ever seen before. Then suddenly, as if out of nowhere, CRASH! A huge object landed right beside me. I looked. It was the biggest coconut I'd ever seen. Far larger than one could ever imagine. I found I could roll it, with difficulty, so I started to load it onto the ship. It took all my time, but once aboard, it would keep me going, albeit in coconuts, for quite a long time.

One by one, I rolled the coconuts onto the ship. I had maybe got four or five on there, and was going for a sixth, when suddenly, a voice boomed, "Hey, you..."

I turned around, and a giant of a man at least ten times my height stood between me and the boat.

"Where do you think you're going with those?" he cried.

"Er.. I'm sorry, sir," I replied, "You see, I... er... I've been lost at sea and I need food desperately. I didn't see anyone to ask. But now you are here, maybe you could please spare me one or two of your coconuts, and I'll be on my way?"

"Why should we feed you, when we've got so little food ourselves?" he bellowed. "Now you're here, you look quite tasty."

Before I could say anything he grabbed me. I could feel my feet leaving the ground as I was picked up into his hand and taken away into the interior of the island.

“Oh dear,” I thought, “I can’t possibly tell him about the invisible God now. He’ll kill me.”

And so it was, I was incarcerated in a cage they had specially constructed for keeping morsels like me.

He sat with two other giants, and they began to think of dinner time.

“Shall we eat him then?” one said.

“He’s so small, he’s not worth it.” another replied, “Just a couple of mouthfuls.”

“He’s a change from coconuts,” said the third.

“He’d just be a treat for one of us,” said the first, “let’s cast lots for him.”

“No, you greedy, you always cheat at lots.”

“No I don’t.”

“Yes, you do. You always cheat.”

An argument ensued. Not knowing how on earth to extricate myself from this situation, I cried to God. Nothing happened. I cried again, “Please help me. Please save me. I’m about to die.” As soon as I said that, I remembered that the last page in the Bible had told me of a far better place in the next world. So I inexplicably found myself ready to die if necessary.

Suddenly my cage was rattled angrily by one of the giants.

“Come here, I’ll eat you myself,” he snarled. But as he did so, I noticed that as he rattled my cage, the lock had broken so I ran and ran and ran as fast as I could to get away from the place and into the jungle beyond.

I didn’t know where I was, but at least the jungle was too thick for the giants to pursue me, so I could sigh a thankful sigh of relief. I needed to get back to the boat, but I didn’t know the way. I cried again to this invisible God, and again got no answer. I was perplexed. I then noticed that the sky was brighter on one side of the island than the other, so I assumed that the brighter side was the side I had sailed into, because it was only dark behind the island when I arrived. I was right. No sooner had I eventually come to the edge of the jungle, that I spied the ship in the harbour below. Not seeing any sign of the giants, I hastily broke cover and ran and ran and ran until I reached the ship. Quickly hauling up the anchor, I sailed away, giving another thankful sigh.

Well, it’s back to coconuts again. I mused that Giant Island, for that was its name, was the first island I had come to where I had had a particularly hostile reception. It didn’t help, of course, that I was trying to steal their coconuts. Relieved and thankful that I had escaped unharmed, although nearly eaten, I sailed on.

Days passed, and the coconut supply started getting low again. As it happened, it was then that another island

came into view. I sailed towards it. It seemed to have much vegetation, so my hopes were high that I could find food there. I anchored and went ashore.

Nobody was around. In fact, I had seen no signs of life at all, no villages or buildings of any kind. Maybe this island was uninhabited, I thought. I reached the trees, and found that many of them were dead. They had been destroyed, and I soon found out the culprits. Thousands and thousands, even millions of caterpillars munching away at the leaves. And they were going through the trees at a tremendous rate.

“I need to be quick,” I thought. So I got ahead of the front line of caterpillars and grabbed as much of the fruit as I could and took it back to the ship. I went back for more, but already the front line had got further ahead. I grabbed another armful of fruit and took it back to the ship. The next time I had to go still further still to get my fruit. And by the fourth time, I was exhausted. The caterpillars had got so far ahead, I couldn’t catch up with them. Four armfuls of fruit was all I could get.

“That will hardly sustain me for a couple of days,” I thought.

I prayed to God, but, again, no answer. The trees all around me were bare now. There was complete devastation. Nothing left at all on them. I reluctantly decided to head back to the ship and move on. It was an odd feeling actually. I knew a few armfuls of fruit wouldn’t go very far, but I didn’t seem as worried about

the situation as I thought I ought to be. There was an unusual feeling of calm inside me, which I couldn't explain. I sailed away.

I was careful with the fruit, only eating a little a day. Amazingly, three weeks later, I found myself to be still eating it. And this set me musing again. I saw no answer to prayer last time I was short of food after leaving the Isle of the Son of Man, I saw no answer to prayer on Giant Island, when I prayed for help to get out of the giant's grip. I found no answer to prayer when I was subsequently lost in the jungle. I found no answer to prayer when I could get so little food on Caterpillar Island (for that was its name). But in all this, I realised that, actually, I'm still here.

As the days went by, I began to notice that the stars at night always followed the same patterns in the sky. I noticed especially that one star in particular was always in the same place, with the others circling around it every night. I realised then that I could use this as a crude navigation aid. I wouldn't know where "E" was, so I couldn't get back to the mainland. Neither did I know in which direction the Isle of the Son of Man lay, so I couldn't get back there again either. But at least this navigational aid would stop me going round and round in circles, which I am sure we had been doing in the past.

A few days later, I spied land again. This time it seemed a much larger land mass, far greater than merely an island.

“Had I eventually managed to return to the mainland?” I thought.

As I got closer, I soon realised that it wasn’t the mainland at all. On the shore stood a huge city. Buildings of all shapes and sizes as far as the eye could see. I’d heard about such places back on the mainland, but had never been to one.

I got closer, found a harbour, with an available space on the jetty, and sailed in. As I was tying the ship, suddenly a voice shouted out, “Oy, you! You can’t park there! This is private.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t know,” I apologised.

“If you want to park, go to the public boat park over there,” he said, pointing to a small corner of the bay which was crammed full of ships.

I sailed over, only to find it absolutely full. As I got closer, I noticed a big sign with the heading, “Parking Charges.” Not wanting, or really being able to afford to pay money just for a piece of water to park my ship, I sailed along the coast for a bit. I eventually found a small cove with a few other boats parked in it, obviously others trying to avoid the “parking charges.” So I anchored there, and used the small boat to get to land.

I climbed up onto the land, and started walking back toward the city centre. I passed mile after mile of housing, with no facilities, such as shops, where I could buy things.

“How do the people cope, living here?” I thought. After a very long walk, I eventually reached a more lively part of town, and spotted a market, which is just what I was looking for. I had taken the initiative and brought with me a small bag of coins that Captain Purpose had left on board the ship before deciding to leave. “This ought to be enough for me to buy a few items of food,” I thought.

I reached a vegetable stall, picked up a good looking cabbage, and said to the stall holder, “How much?” “Half a ducat,” he replied.

Not knowing what he was talking about, I offered a coin. He looked at the coin, pointed to the king’s head on the coin and said, “Who’s that Charlie?” And he threw the coin back at me.

“Oh. How can I pay for this?” I asked.

He pointed to a funny pattern on the side of his stall. “Alipay,” he said.

“What?” I replied.

“Alipay. We only take Alipay here, mate,” he said, looking through me and serving somebody else.

I went further on, and noticed that all the stalls had the same funny pattern on them. I also noticed that everybody was carrying around a small hand-held device. Occasionally they would get the device out of their pockets, point it at the funny pattern, and that seemed to placate the stall holders in lieu of payment.

“That must be an Alipay,” I thought. So I asked several people in the street, “How can I get an Alipay?” at

which everybody looked very strangely at me and quickly walked past.

“Is there an Alipay shop around here?” I asked again, more people walking past giving me funny looks but no answer.

I eventually came across a shop which seems to sell these hand-held devices, so I went in.

“I’d like one of these please,” I said to the man behind the counter.

“Which one?” he asked. He was obviously very excited about what he was selling, because I then got a very long speech about each machine in turn, using words I couldn’t understand, like “gigs” and “megabytes,” which frankly, left me no wiser than when I’d walked in.

“How much are they?” I eventually managed to get in edgeways.

“Well this one starts at 600 ducats, ranging all the way to 4000 ducats for the top end latest model.”

“All right,” I said, pointing to the cheapest model, “I’ll have this one.”

I got my bag of coins out, at which the assistant said, “Alipay. Alipay. We only take Alipay here.”

“But I haven’t got an Alipay, I’m trying to buy one,” I said in frustration, completely confusing him.

At this point, a young couple walked in to look at the latest model. The assistant looked straight through me and started talking to them instead, after all, they were interested in the most expensive model and seemed to

know all the right jargon to use so they could speak to him on the same level.

I walked out.

I prayed to God, “I haven’t got an Alipay, I’ve got no food left, please help me.” Only a few minutes later, joy, oh joy, I came across a church!

“Hallelujah!” I shouted out loud, causing several more very odd looks.

I went up to the church. Wonderful thoughts of church on the Isle of the Son of Man came flooding back to me. “At last,” I thought, “I can get help here.” I went up to the door of the church. In fact I went right around the church building, and it was firmly locked. A notice hung on the front of the building, stating simply, “Sunday Service 11am. We are an inclusive church.”

“What does that mean?” I thought, “All churches are inclusive and welcoming, aren’t they? And only one meeting a week? Is that all?” It seemed rather odd.

I didn’t know what day it was today, so I tried asking a few people in the street, only to get even more strange looks, nobody actually telling me what I needed to know. Eventually, I found out the fairly good news that today was a Saturday, only because I saw a sign saying, “Market day, Saturday,” and I knew I had just come from the market earlier on.

“Good,” I thought, “I can go back to the ship, have a good night’s sleep in the knowledge that I will be able to get help at the church tomorrow morning.” And with that in mind, I started the long walk back to the ship.

However, disaster struck. As I reached the shore where the ship was, somehow, people had got aboard. They were hauling up the anchor, and were just about to sail away in it.

“Hey, stop!” I shouted, “That’s my ship!”

They heard me, looked at me, laughed, and sailed off anyway.

What do I do now? I’ve got nowhere to sleep. And I haven’t got an Alipay to pay for accommodation. “Help, Lord!” Another prayer went up to heaven. And no answer.

I walked slowly back to the city. As it happened, I came across a police station. I thought that at least I could report a theft. So I went in.

“Hello, Sir. Can I help you?” a cheery police officer behind the desk said.

“I’ve come to report a theft.” I said.

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, my ship’s been stolen.”

At which point the police officer’s face dropped. “Not another one,” he said under his breath.

“I’ll get the file,” he said. A thick file of papers was retrieved from the shelf.

“You’ll have to fill out this form,” he said, helpfully,

“What’s the boat’s registration number?”

“Er, I don’t know. It’s called *The Quality of Life*.”

“My boat’s called ‘George,’ but that’s not going to get it back, is it?” he said, “What’s the registration number?”

“Er, it hasn’t got one.”

“You mean you haven’t registered it with the authorities?” he said sharply.

“Er, I’m not from here, I sailed in this morning.”

“Oh, I see. A foreigner. Can I see your passport, sir?”

“My what?”

“Your passport.”

“Er, my ship has been stolen.”

“Oh, I see, and your passport was in the boat.”

“Er...” He got another file from the shelf.

“You’ll have to fill out this form. This is the one for lost passports. You keep the white copy on top. The pink copy underneath is ours, and the blue one you must take to your embassy within 24 hours. They should issue you with another passport, which you then have to take to the Home Office in Bureaucracy Street to get stamped. Oh, it’s closed now, it’s the weekend you know. Take it on Monday, they open about 10 o’clock. Then you need to come back here with your original white copy and the new passport, with stamp, and we can then give you your deposit back.”

“Deposit?”

“Yes. We need a 30 ducat deposit otherwise we may have to charge you with wasting police time. We take Alipay.”

I left.

It was really getting dark now, and I needed to find somewhere to sleep. I found an archway under a bridge which seemed fairly suitable. Several other people were already there.

“Hello,” I said, “I’m looking for somewhere to stay, can I join you?”

One had what was clearly a bottle of very strong spirits. I had come across drunkards before back on the mainland, so was already familiar with such people.

“Yesh, of course. Make yourshelf at home,” he said, “Here, have a drink.”

When I politely refused his offer, he and his companion began to look warily at me, as though I wasn’t really one of them. I tried to settle down. There were some others sitting a short distance away smoking some strange sweet smelling substance, which was not tobacco, as again that would have been familiar to me. They didn’t seem to be very communicative. One was just lying there motionless. Another twitched a bit occasionally. I went over to see if they needed any help, but all they did was offer me one of their strange cigarettes, which again I refused and went back to the drunks. I was having a kind of conversation with them, hoping in fact to have an opportunity to bring in something about the invisible god who made everybody, but I soon discovered that it’s just not possible to communicate rationally with people whose minds are not functioning properly.

Then, out of the blue, things turned really sour. My drunk friend’s companion slowly but surely pulled out a knife with a huge blade on it. He was looking at it, spitting on it and polishing it. He seemed to have some sort of fascination for these sort of things.

“That’s a bit big for spreading butter,” I was going to say, but decided better of it. It really was time for me to move on, just in case he decided he wanted to try the knife out on a piece of meat, namely me.

I left. Nobody was in any fit state to stop me really. I walked on, into a back alley, and finally found somewhere quiet, away from people for a few hours, where I could settle down, the thought of being able to go to church in the morning keeping me going.

Well, I did manage to get some sleep. A few rats were about, but they didn’t bother me too much. A lot less trouble than most of the people I’d come across in this city so far.

The sun came up, and I set off for the church. I was on the lookout for a public clock, because I didn’t want to be late, but there didn’t seem to be any, the few I did find were obviously wrong.

“How do people tell the time around here?” I wondered, realising later that the time was displayed on everybody’s Alipay, so there was no need for public clocks any more.

I arrived at the church. It looked just as before. Everybody was hurrying straight past it, far too busy about their own activities and their Alipays to bother about anything or anybody else, let alone actually going to church. But, this time, I noticed that the door of the church was open. I went in.

Nobody was there. Suddenly a rather stocky man with a collar around his neck, purple hair and a ring in his nose appeared out of nowhere.

“Hello, good to see you,” he said welcomingly. Except that his voice appeared odd, in fact it was more like a woman’s. In fact, I think it was a woman actually.

“You’re early,” he/she said, “It’s only half past ten.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I don’t have a watch, so I wasn’t sure of the time.”

“Watch?”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter. I just got the time wrong, that’s all.”

“That’s all right. You can stay here in the warm while you wait. We’re an inclusive church, you know. Please sit down, anywhere you like,” he/she indicated some hard benches, and wandered off to do whatever he/she was doing before.

I sat down. Deciding to spend my time wisely, I asked, “Can I borrow a Bible, I’ve left mine at home?”

“A Bible?” he/she said surprisingly, “Oh no, we don’t have any of those any more. Terrible things. We got rid of them ages ago. We’ve got some new ones on order with more inclusive language, but they haven’t arrived yet.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” I said.

Time passed. A few others walked in and sat separately without speaking to me.

At what was presumably eleven o’clock, the man/woman said, “Welcome to the morning service. We are so happy to have you. As you know, we are an inclusive

church, we accept all races, genders, orientations and religions here. We want this to be a safe space for everybody.”

I thought to myself, “Of course a church is a safe space for everybody. Why do they have to say that?” At which we sang a strange song about pylons. Everything seemed very odd, but I was a foreigner here, so what was I to know. The man/woman then welcomed us again and spent quite some time telling us what he/she’d been getting up to in the previous week. We then sang another equally strange song, this time about elephants, before he/she then gave a very short talk on how we should be kind to one another and inclusive in everything we do. Then as suddenly as it started, he/she said, “Now let’s all have a cup of tea.” And that was it. The whole “service” lasted barely half an hour.

The entire congregation (all five of us) retired to sit around a table at the side. A man with pink hair and a matching pink suit and tie came up to me and introduced himself, “Hello, I’m Muriel. Have a cup of tea,” he said thrusting a paper cup full of hot brown liquid into my hand.

“Er. Thank you,” I said, politely.

Then a little voice piped up, “Are you new here?” It came from a little old lady in the corner I hadn’t noticed until then.

“Well, actually, I’ve got a problem,” I said, at which everybody’s eyes sank and scowled at the old lady who had encouraged me to speak in the first place. I continued, “My ship was stolen, I’ve not eaten since

yesterday, I've got nowhere to live and I'm in need of money and help."

Silence. That didn't seem to go down too well at all.

Finally the man/woman spoke up, "You say you came from a boat?"

"Yes," I said.

"So you're an asylum seeker, then?"

"A what?"

"Oh, of course. We help asylum seekers here. Yes, we're a very inclusive church you know."

"Er. Thanks. What can you do for me?"

"Have you got your coupons?"

"My what?"

"Your coupons. The coupons the government gave you when they rescued you off your boat. We can help you spend your coupons. Some shops take coupons you know. None around here though. You'll have to go to Welfare Street to be able to use them. That's quite a way from here."

"I haven't got any coupons."

From their faces I could tell they were becoming more and more agitated with me.

"Look," I said, "I need help. I've got nothing. I'll work. If you lend me some money, I can pay you back with interest if you like."

"Money?" They all said in unison.

"Yes, money," said the old lady in the corner. "We used to have that in the old days. Marvellous stuff. You knew what you had then, and knew what you were spending. And you never spent too much. Not seen any money

for ages now. My daughter looks after me. She's got this new-fangled Alipay thing. I don't understand it at all."

"Neither do I," I said, emphatically, and walked out.

I had a lot of sympathy for that poor old lady who must have been going to that church for years and seen it change so much. No longer any Bibles, and, as I just realised, no mention of God the whole time we were there, just the word "inclusion" again and again. But they've just excluded me.

I walked aimlessly through the streets. "What am I to do?" I asked myself. "I pray to this invisible God, and no answer. Where am I to go?" At this point, I just happened to look up and catch my reflection in a shop window. I had to take a second glance. How *old* I looked. The streets were still full of young people running around, busying themselves about nothing, all engrossed with their Alipay devices, and then there was me. I thought of that old lady in church. I thought of the happiest time of my life on the Isle of the Son of Man. I thought of Grace. No! I found myself slowly walking down to the sea shore. In this part of the city, the sea shore was not very pleasant. It smelled quite a bit. I reached what little beach there was, and slowly, dodging the effluent pipes, seaweed, litter and concrete blocks, I made my way across. My steps were getting slower and slower. I wondered what I was doing here. I tripped and fell. I hurt my leg on a piece of sharp, rusty

metal. “Help,” I cried, but although there were some youths messing around nearby who could have heard, nobody responded. I landed on a rock, and I couldn’t pull myself up again. “Help,” I cried again, but only a faint whisper came out. I lay myself down to sleep.

Suddenly, everything became lighter. I felt myself floating. Maybe the tide had come in. I had no strength to resist anything that came along any more. But the pain in my leg no longer seemed to be there. I was floating, higher and higher, off the rock altogether into a very warm, pleasant sea. Except that I didn’t feel wet. And I wasn’t struggling for breath. I floated for quite some time. It was comfortable. It was light. It was beautiful. Until, just as suddenly, I felt ground beneath me again. Not a hard bump, rather, it was soft and gentle. I woke up. I looked around. I was on a beach of very beautiful, white sand which stretched as far as the eye could see. I revived. I stood on my feet. “How did I get here?” I thought. And it was all so very different. The sky was an emerald colour, and there was no sun, yet it was comfortably warm. The only source of light seemed instead to emanate from a place far in the distance across the sand. Wanting to explore my new environment, I felt I couldn’t. I saw the sand, it was beautiful, but, rather, I was inexplicably drawn towards the light source. I couldn’t help but slowly, step by step over the sand, approach closer and closer to it. The light got brighter and brighter. Until it was so bright, I

couldn't see it properly. I fell to my knees. I looked and thought I could see that the source of the light was a great white throne. And, yes, I could just about make out someone sitting on it, but it was so very, very, blindingly bright, I couldn't see clearly. And then I heard a voice, far clearer than any voice I had ever heard before: "And what did you do with the life I gave you?"

THE END

