



COMPANY Peter Hobbs

In Mexico four years ago I pulled a drowned body from the Pacific. It was at Zippolite, a travellers' beach I'd ended up at, where fierce surf draws back muddied as it rips up sand from the seabed.

It was the end of a long trip, but it was new for me, seeing this: a crowd gathered on the beach; out in the waves a swimmer in trouble, treading water and gesturing with one hand for help. The jungle behind us serene and unreal We would lose sight of him in the rise and fall. A local lad on a surfboard tried to get out past the waves to him and barely made it back himself, two friends of his grabbing him when he came in on the wave.

I didn't feel much of anything. Stood beneath the sun with the others, our hands shading our eyes, watching until a wave rose in our view and beat itself down and he was no longer there. I don't know how long we stood then, anxiety itching at our shoulders. Seconds,

perhaps, or several minutes. Time stretched and nothing changed in the ocean.

Then suddenly he was there, face down in the water, close to shore and inside the strong line of the waves, close enough that another bloke and I could race in and grab him. The beach drops away quickly there, and even though we weren't up to our waists the pull of the water was incredible. If we'd have lost our footing we'd have disappeared. But we were lucky, grabbed a shoulder each and lifted his face from the water, dragged him through the surf to the ankle-deep shallows where there were more hands taking his legs and carrying him up onto the soft sand.

He was heavy with water, pulling towards the earth. I remember his black hair plastered across his head and chest and the yellow and purple look of his skin like a rash broken out across it. I remember thinking that it was just a body I was holding and not a person. I remember that he was balding, that he wore some kind of a pendant around his neck on a leather cord. We turned him onto his front and his eyes rolled stupidly.

They tried to revive him for ever. I stayed until I could stand it no longer. There seemed no point to the effort. When you looked away it was as if it hadn't happened at all, the spray salt air still was cleansing, the water an unremitting blue. I lay on my hammock and stared at the cane roof of my hut. No one knew who he'd been. No one had screamed his name from the beach. Someone cried, but not because they knew him. I guess like me he'd been travelling alone. I heard that he was French, and it seemed possible because there had been something in his face, even as it was, that looked French. There was a rumour he'd been drinking, but I don't know anything about that.

It wasn't much to me, this event, simply the last thing that happened to me while I was away, and it's only the telling of it from time to time that has made it seem at all important.

It turned out to be the last travel I did. The money I'd inherited when my parents died had been used up. My sister put hers into buying a house and getting married, but I just took off when I came out of school. I got nearly three years out of it. Africa, first of all, and then South America. I worked my way up from Buenos Aires, and eventually got a flight from Caracas into Managua, then on to Mexico. I did the ruins across the Yucatán – Uxmal, Chichen Itzá, stayed a long while at Tulum.

A few weeks later in the north I found a small desert town outside of Sierra Mojada and stayed there for a couple months. Not doing anything, just breathing the air and resting, watching the desert light. When you stop moving after so long you get into this frame of mind where weeks pass by without you being aware of it. All your thinking slows down, moves forceful and unhurried like a glacier. Then finally I got sick of the heat and the dust and trailed down the coast. Things had began to feel like they were over long before I got to Zippolite.

A few months after I came home to Cornwall, when I was working a job at a printers in St Austell to get money to travel again, I was in a car with a guy called Mosso, out for the night, when we had a pretty bad crash. The job was fine, I had done it before during summer breaks to get money. The work was hard, and messed up your hands, but the hours were flexible. Sometimes I worked all night, packing and sorting crates full of material ready for printing. Days when we stopped for lunch we formed teams for hard-fought football

in the car park, and in this way I came to get to know people there, and spend time with them after work, in the pubs.

The crash was Mosso's fault. We'd both been drinking after work and were heading off to meet some of his friends. I'd been in the car before when he was drunk and thought nothing of it. It seemed like he could handle it. But I guess his reflexes were slow that night and we slid on past some red lights he'd seen change too late and a car hit us pretty fast from the left.

It was an old car, not too sturdy. Mosso was fine over on the drivers side, but my door caved in on me and crumpled down around the leg well. I was in hospital in Truro for nearly a year while they sorted it out. They cut me from the car, though I was unconscious the whole time. My left leg was badly mashed, it's held together with pins now. I've been walking again the last year or so, but not easily. It's getting stronger. Four times a week someone gives me a lift up to the hospital and I get physiotherapy there. There are exercises I do at home, over and over. I sit and watch television and stretch. There's a walk I make on my own every evening, taking a footpath out over the fields. My knee bend is getting better. I won't get full use out of my leg again, but it will improve.

I met plenty of people while travelling and was never lonely, but in some way you come to live within yourself. You just look on to the next place and the people you might meet there and think nothing of what you leave behind. You get used to the solitude. It was the same during my enforced stay in hospital, something inside prevented me from going beyond myself. I didn't want to be there, but I was patient enough to wait. I thought it would pass, this time. Early on my boss from the printers called by, but I was listless and didn't want to see

him and he never came back. He'd seen enough to realize anyway that I wouldn't be working for a while.

I never saw Mosso, though I didn't expect to. And after the year I went home, back to a rented flat that my sister arranged for me. For a while I had a carer, a woman who would do my shopping for me, but I do it myself now, even if it means an extra walk. I prefer the evenings, when it's cooler. I walk warmth through my legs into my feet until they glow and itch.

My sister walked this path with me one evening when she was down from London. She was scared the whole walk, scared of the dark. 'I'd be afraid of muggers,' she said, she's from the city, she doesn't know the place. The thought of muggers hanging round Cornish fields on a night is pretty strange. I never see anyone. Hardly ever.

Last night when I left my flat the clouds were like wide grey scales, stretched and split. Black divides of sky between, a star or two dully visible. It was cool enough that I wore my jacket. I stretched out to lose the stiffness I get. A little way along I took the alley, dark and narrow, covered over by some old vine-ridden trees and smelling of cats' piss, then beyond that the buildings fall away and it's open fields, the path following a line of trees and curving round north. Sometimes there are horses in the field, benevolent shadows with heavy heads and hot breath, and I'll stop to feed them.

I heard the reverberation of loud music as I crossed the first field and thought that somewhere there was a party. There's a cricket ground and pavilion along that way, but I could see the dark, lifeless outline of the building already. So it was something else, perhaps the sounds of life from someone's garden, over in town behind the trees. I

was sickened by it.

At the pavilion the path ends and joins a long drive leading to the road, there are bollards across the join preventing you from driving into the field. Beyond them a car was parked, backed up to end of the path, pumping rap music into the night. A cigarette sparked beside it and lifted as though to someone's mouth, then was gone.

I stopped in the shadows. I'd never seen anything parked up there before. It was clear I would have to walk right along past it, or turn a long way back. I walked on. Didn't see anyone around the car as I approached, just slid along between it and the hedge. There was someone sitting in the driver's seat, but it seemed they hadn't seen me approach and couldn't have heard me above the noise. They looked up, startled, as I passed the window. Just some kid, I thought. I scared him, creeping up like that. I relaxed again and carried on down the drive.

'Hey mate,' he called after me.

There was a choice then. Carry on or turn back and answer. I had no reason to do either. I was a few yards beyond the car, fairly sure that there was only one person in it, that the cigarette I'd seen was one he must have flicked from the car. I held my distance and turned. The guy from the car was leaning his head out the window. He was wearing a baseball cap, looked like the people I had known at school, once.

'Yeah?' I said.

'Have you got the time?'

'No. But I guess it's about midnight.'

'Hang on mate,' he said, 'let me turn this down.' His head ducked back in the window and bent forward, he fiddled with something and

the music cut. The head popped out again, and I repeated what I'd said.

'Thanks.' I nodded and turned to go, took two steps, trying not to limp. I thought: cars have clocks.

'Hey.' Again the choice to make. But having made it once there was the urge to make it again the same way.

'Yeah?'

'Hang on a second. Uh. Can I ask you something?' I raised my head, indicating I was listening. 'Wait,' he said, 'come here a second.' He got out of the car. He was taller than me, a little gangly with it. The darkness was still around us, and I hadn't lost my watchfulness. I took a few steps towards him.

'Can you tell me how it sounds?' he said. 'Is it loud from the path?' Friendly, nothing more.

'Yes. I heard it way back up the path.'

'Oh yeah? Thanks, man. Listen, respect to you for turning round when I said. A lot of people would have just walked on, you know what I mean?'

'No worries.'

'Yeah but respect. I mean, nothing funny. Not that there's anything wrong, nothing like that. Just it's dark and I'm sitting here with my lights off and people would be right to think it might be funny, if they're by themselves, like you are. Not that my head's funny at all, it's not like that. Listen, are you local?' I nodded. A hand was casually extended, and I met it, tensed. There was something like dust on his palms.

'Nicky.'

'Jon.'

‘Do you smoke?’

‘No.’

‘I was going to offer you a roll-up.’

‘Thanks, but no.’ He takes a closer look at me.

‘Are you an actor?’

‘What? No.’

‘You look like someone I know. I mean someone on TV in this thing I watch. Your voice sounded just like them.’ He’s smiling now, a little nervously. ‘Just with the voice you look just like him, and it’s worth asking, you know.’

‘Sure.’

‘What’s up with your leg?’ he asks. He’s sharp, to have seen that, or my limp is worse than I know.

I tell him, briefly, understating the damage, and he’s already nodding before I’ve explained, then telling how a mate of his got hurt the same way. All the while we’ve been talking he’s been drifting around to my left, never staying straight on but almost retreating behind my shoulder. He emphasises his words by pushing with his loose fist, his hand touching my shoulder. It could be a tic, or he could be testing the distance to hit me. His clothes are baggy. A pale shell suit. He could take something from his pocket and strike me. He takes something from his pocket, but it’s nothing, I don’t even see.

He’s talking about his car, now. There are more details than I listen to, a stream of words from his mouth. How much it cost to fit up. How cheaply he got everything. He stutters ever so slightly, I didn’t notice it until he talked like this. He’s no longer as cool as he tried to be, his thoughts have taken over and are running ahead. My leg aches with standing, a pain down my hamstring and across the

back of my knee. I don't want to show it.

'Do you know what kind it is?'

The car is red, a Citroen. 'No.'

'It's a Citroen.' Points to the logo.

'Yeah, I saw that.'

'Come round, have a look. No, better the other side. There. Let me turn it up.' He's beginning to direct me closer to the car, perhaps into it. The way a confidence trickster takes your worries away one step at a time. He thinks I'm no longer afraid, if I was ever afraid. The music starts again, and I find myself nodding my head to it, though it seems detestable. He pulls his head back out. 'You don't look like that actor now.'

'What do you do?' I'm sick of hearing about the car.

'I'm a civil engineer. Well, training. On a site. I went to university, and took it forward, what I wanted, you know.' The truth is being bent, a little, he's too young to lie well and I can read it.

'Jon, right?' he says, pointing at me. It turns into another handshake. Again the sensation of dust or slipperiness. I smell something in the air I don't recognise, but is familiar, and causes something to wrench in my chest.

'Nicky,' I say. He nods. He's pointing at something, the speakers in the back.

'Guess how much?'

'Listen, Nicky, I'm going to clear off.'

'Yeah, I didn't mean to keep you.' He's calm again. He straightens. Several inches taller than me, and certainly in better shape. He could just kick me in the leg and I'd be finished.

'No problem.' I take a few steps, but all I'm aware of is him

behind me, if he was moving or not. He stayed where he was, beside the open driver's door.

'Hey,' he said. But this time I did not turn. My hand raised to bid goodbye.

I walked on. The music turned up to full, and then I could no longer be certain he was not following, though there was no reason why he should. I just couldn't shake the idea. It grated in my nerves and I strode out, though it made my limp more evident. I rounded a corner and felt a shiver along my backbone. There was a flutter of noise behind me. I felt sure I was being watched, eyes burning on my back.

On the road I flinched every time a car went by. Kept as close to the row of shops as I could, walked quickly, painfully. Not wanting him to know where I lived. I've been in the same place too long and feel vulnerable for it. My anonymity has worn away, I can no longer be solely within myself. Others crowd in. But the streets were empty. And then right as I ducked into my gateway, my back tingling with the worry of what was behind me, a red car went past.

Normally I don't think of it but I checked the door was locked behind me. Though my leg was hurting from walking too fast I stood by the window with the lights not yet on and watched the street until I had seen nothing for a long time.

Everything is different this morning. Familiar and no longer threatening. When I woke I got down on to the floor and start stretching, trying to condition my tired leg. Things are clearer. The days will continue alike. But I'll walk a different route tonight, and still I'll be looking behind me. I don't know what this fear is that's grown in

me, nor where it came from.

The truth is I need to get out. Away from these people, among strangers, rid myself of the tired longings I've accumulated here. This silence in my life has lasted too long. Maybe I'll borrow some money from my sister and her husband and take off. She offers it to me, from time to time, so that I might regain the freedom to pick up and leave with nothing more than a rucksack and a limping walk. I could look for some of the things I've lost. A beach somewhere, or a city and language I can lose myself in. Where the pressures from within and without match, and I am balanced.

In some ways I feel like I'm already gone, no longer here, this town and home are fading away. It's just going to take a little while. My thoughts are already moving, and some nights now in my dreams I'm pulling someone's arm, trying to bring him with me, but the arm is heavy and lifeless and I'm not strong enough to carry him alone and I can't let go.

First published by Pulp Net (<http://www.pulp.net>)
<http://www.pulp.net/fiction/stories/30/company.html>

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