



Robinson

Jack Robinson

B editions

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Stranded somewhere in the interior,
The suburban roofs are the horizon that he scans. What for?
– Durs Grünbein, 'Robinson in the City'

The story so far

A man was shipwrecked and washed ashore on an island and he fell down a hole and broke his leg and he starved to death.

Sitting outside a café in the Uxbridge Road – me with a flat white, Robinson with a Coke, the table a little wobbly – we watch a funeral procession of three black cars pass by at a speed calculated precisely to infuriate the drivers of the cars behind.

‘And that’s it?’ asks Robinson. ‘That’s the story?’

Well, there was a pirates’ treasure chest at the bottom of the hole full of those gold coins – *doubloons*, yes – but in the circumstances that doesn’t make any difference.

Robinson scratches the lobe of his right ear.

A man was shipwrecked and washed ashore on an island. Luckily, the ship wasn’t completely broken up and the man was able to salvage many useful things, including tools and rum and even guns. He wasn’t stupid. In fact he was surprisingly capable, and made fences and tables and even an umbrella and he grew crops and kept goats and managed to live a productive life on his island for twenty-eight years before a ship called by and rescued him.

Robinson: ‘Are you sure you’re not missing anything out?’

He means the footprint, I suppose. And the cannibals. And the man who was rescued by our man from the cannibals and became a loyal and faithful servant. But the interesting part is what happened next: how our man got taken up not just by readers but by educationalists and economists and politicians even, and his book became a national set text, one of those books that you've read even if you haven't, and then, to cut a long story short, there was a referendum and Britain voted to quit the EU.

Robinson is scratching his earlobe again – *kneading*, rather. It could be a prearranged signal. I look at the pedestrians on the opposite side of the road to see who he might be signalling to, and then up at the windows above the shops and there's a woman undressing. I have a horrible feeling that I've told Robinson this story before and he, out of politeness – everything is possible – is just pretending that I haven't.

A woman was shipwrecked and washed ashore on an island –

'I've heard that one,' Robinson says, and for no apparent reason he fidgets his chair a couple of inches to the left.

Then he asks to borrow my notebook – it's not as if I use it for writing in, he points out, I just *carry it around* – and he tears out some pages from the back and folds them and folds them again and places this little wedge under one of the table legs, so that the table now doesn't wobble.

'There,' he says, testing it.

Maybe we should move inside.

A man was shipwrecked and washed ashore on an island. It's unlikely that he was the first person to wash up on this island, or the last, but it turned out his timing was good because the ruler of the island at that time had a daughter and our man of course fell in love with her. Her name was Miranda.

A man was shipwrecked and washed ashore on an island and the name of the island was Bikini Atoll.

A man was shipwrecked.

A man was shipwrecked and washed ashore on an island. He was fleeing from a country where there was war and famine, nothing to eat and no work to be had, and lying on the sand he was amazed and happy just to be still alive. And it came to pass, as stories have it, that the people of the island welcomed the man.

Robinson shakes his head. I can't just *make things up*, he tells me.



1 Tree house

You have to blow it up a little – as David Hemmings does the photo he's taken of lovers in a London park in Antonioni's *Blow-Up*, zooming in, zooming in, until what can't be not seen is a gun poking out from the bushes, and then a body too – but there he is, Robinson, in the top left corner, shouting down from the upper tree house. He's cupping his left hand to his mouth to direct the shout – why not both hands? – unless that's a leaf, but it can't be a leaf because it's winter, not how it was in 1966 in *Blow-Up*, everything back then in bloom, summertime and the living easy (for fashion photographers) and the foliage good cover for whoever is firing the gun. But there *are* some leaves, just a few, clinging on.

Established in 1848, Le Vrai Arbre de Robinson was one of a number of *ginguettes* – tea gardens, suburban hosteleries: see Renoir and Manet – established in a south-western suburb of Paris. There were donkey rides, scenic railways, slides, live music, dancing. Le Vrai Arbre was a place to take your girl; and later, on Sunday afternoons, your whole family, but in Robinson's case that's not going to happen.

Robinson is shouting for more brandy, or another bottle of champagne.