

NOW I KNOW WHERE I AM. I've found the place I have been looking for. After these months of wandering I feel at peace again, and my enthusiasm is renewed. In the days following my discovery of English Cove I prepared for my search. At Jeremie Biram in Douglas Street I bought the things I couldn't do without: a pickax and spade, rope, a storm lamp, sailcloth, soap, and food. I completed my explorer's kit with one of the big hats made from vacoa fibers that the Manafs, the blacks from the mountains, wear here. For the rest, I have decided that the few articles of clothing I have and my old horse blanket must suffice. I deposited the little bit of money I have left at Barclay's Bank, where the manager, an obliging Englishman with a wrinkled face, noted that I had come to Rodrigues on business and offered, as he was a representative of the Elisa Mallac postal company, to keep my mail for me.

When I had completed all my preparations I went, as I did each day at noon, to the Chinaman's to eat fish and rice. He knew I was leaving and he came to sit at my table after I'd finished eating. He didn't ask me any questions about my departure. Like most of the people I've met on Rodrigues he believes I am going to pan for gold in the mountain streams. I have taken care not to contradict these rumors. Some days ago as I was finishing my dinner in this very room, two Rodriguan men asked to speak to me. Straight off they opened a little skin pouch and poured onto the table a bit of black earth with shining particles in it. "Is this gold, sir?" From the lessons my father had given me, I immediately recognized the particles as copper pyrites, which have deceived so many prospectors and for that reason are called "fool's gold." The two men were looking at me so anxiously in the light of the oil lamp that I didn't want to disappoint them too cruelly: "No, it's not gold, but it does mean perhaps you are going to find some." I also advised them to get a bottle of aqua regia so that they wouldn't make any more mistakes. Half satisfied they left with their leather pouch. I think it's because of that incident that I acquired the reputation as a prospector.

After lunch I got onto the horse-drawn cart I had hired for the journey. The coachman, an jovial old black, loaded my trunk and the equipment I had bought. I sat down beside him and we departed through the empty Port Mathurin streets for English Cove. We went along Hitchens Street, passed by the Begue house, then up Barclay's Street to the governor's house. Now we're going west, passing the temple and the Depot and traveling across the Raffaut estate. Some black children run for a while after the cart, then give up and go back to swimming in the harbor. We cross the wooden bridge over the Lascars stream. Because of the sun I've pulled my big Manaf hat down over my head, and I can't help thinking how Laure would burst out laughing if she could see me in it, bumping along in this cart with the old black coachman shouting at the mule to make it move forward.

When we get to the top of Point Venus and are in front of the telegraph buildings, the coachman unloads my trunk and tools and the jute sacks containing my provisions. Then after having pocketed what I owed him, he goes off wishing me good luck as he drives away (the prospector legend persists), and I am alone with all my belongings at the edge of the cliff, in the silence of the howling wind, with the strange feeling of having landed on a desert island.

The sun is sinking toward the hills in the east and already its shadow stretches over the bottom of the Roseaux River valley, enlarging the trees and sharpening the points of the vacoa leaves.

Once again I feel troubled and confused. I fear going down into the valley as if it were forbidden territory. I stand still on the edge of the cliff, looking out over the countryside I discovered the first time I was here.

The fierce wind makes up my mind for me. Halfway down the landslide there is a platform of stones on which I could take shelter from the night cold and the rain. I decide to make my first camp there and go down with the heavy trunk on my shoulder. Despite the late hour, the sun is still shining on the slope and I arrive on the platform bathed in sweat. I have to rest for quite a while before going back for the spade and pickax, the sacks of food, and the canvas that will be my tent.

The platform is like a balcony; it rests on big blocks of lava that have collected there and juts out over the void. It is certainly very old, for there are large vacoa trees growing on the platform whose roots push through the lava walls. In the distance, above the valley, I can see other identical platforms on the hillside. Who built these balconies? I think of sailors from long ago, American whale hunters coming here to cure their fish. And I think, too, of the Corsair's stay here, which I have come to discover. Perhaps it is he who built these posts, the better to observe the "masonry" in which he had decided to hide his treasure!

Again I feel dizzy and feverish. As I go up and down the slope getting my things, suddenly, on the valley floor, among the withered trees and the vacoa silhouettes, it seems to me that I see, coming from the sea, shadows walking in a line, carrying heavy sacks and pickaxes and going toward the dark hills in the east!

My heart races and sweat streams down my face. I have to lie down on the ground on top of the cliff and look at the yellow twilight sky in order to calm myself.

Night is falling quickly. I quickly finish setting up my bivouac before it is completely dark. On the dry riverbed I find some tree branches left behind from when the river flooded and some smaller pieces of wood for making a fire. I use the big branches to make a rough frame, over which I put the sailcloth, which I then keep in place with a few heavy stones. When it is all done I am too tired to think of making a fire, and sit down on the platform to eat some ship's biscuits. Night has fallen suddenly, drowning the valley below me and obliterating the sea and the mountains. It is a cold night with a mineral smell and only the sounds of the wind blowing through the brush, the crackling of stones losing their heat, and, in the distance, the rumbling of the waves on the reefs.

Despite my fatigue and the cold, I am happy to be here, in the place I have dreamed about for so long without knowing whether it really existed. I tremble deep inside as I sit with wide-open eyes looking out into the night. Slowly the stars glide to the east and descend toward the invisible horizon. The violent winds shake the canvas behind me as if I were still on the ship. Tomorrow I will go to the valley floor and I will see the place where the shadows passed. Something or someone awaits me. This is why I have come here, have left Mam and Laure. I must be ready for what is going to appear in this valley at the end of the world. I fall asleep sitting in the entrance to my tent, with my back against a stone and my eyes open to the black sky.

*Excerpted from The Prospector by J. M. G. Le Clézio (David R. Godine)*

