

I WAS IN FIFTH GRADE. I didn't know how to make my own ponytail, and I couldn't find England on a map. I certainly didn't know what a schooner was, let alone a cove, let alone apoplexy. A more adept child might have picked up Stevenson's *Treasure Island* and leaped nimbly over the gaps, but I wasn't that child, and my teacher was a small, mean woman with a voice that could curl ribbon. She grimly assigned chapters one and two, and we sat around a kidney-shaped table and unknotted each paragraph as if it were a punishment. Accustomed to the prose of Judy Blume and the wit of television sitcoms, I found the story confusing and the language a garble. At home I laughed generously when *Welcome Back, Kotter's* Vinnie Barbarino said, "Up your nose with a rubber hose," but when Stevenson's Dr. Livesey told Billy Bones to put away his knife or "You shall hang at the next assizes!" (page 12), I barely registered the threat.

I didn't pick up *Treasure Island* again until I was a small professor at a large university. It was better to meet this story as an adult, and not only because I'd expanded my vocabulary. Western narrative had turned inward, and though nobody said so out loud, the "serious" novels were those in which protagonists didn't do that much, except gradually reveal their inner worlds. Austen's *Emma*, Woolf's *Dalloway*, Joyce's *Bloom*, Beckett's *Malloy*, none of these people sprung into action. It seemed that the best a character could do was, like Strether in *The Ambassadors*, sit in a garden and be thunderstruck by the realization of what he *might* have done.

Don't get me wrong. I love the quiet, internal literary story; it's precisely *because* I like to sit quietly in a room that I was thrilled to stumble upon Stevenson's novel. My God, I thought,

this boy is going to leave his mother and go out into the world and have an adventure that doesn't entail breaking a glass or fouling the rum taps. I read *Treasure Island* as though leaving my literary mothers behind. Fare thee well, V. Woolf! Catch you later, Grace Paley! I'm running off to a place where social relations are no more significant than leaves tossing in the breeze. No more dithering about one's inner world, protecting oneself from fearsome speculations. I could see the fires burning on distant shores, the lights of those ancient adventurers: Hercules, Beowulf, Odysseus, Gilgamesh, Gawain.

But *Treasure Island*, I soon discovered, doesn't plunge its protagonist into a perilous new world as fast as most adventure stories. Nobody sets sail until chapter ten. This was a problem for Stevenson when he first published the novel in *Young Folks* magazine. "The boy readers did not like the story," Stevenson biographer John A. Steuart reports. "As a serial it was a failure. Boys like a story to plunge at once into the active excitement; but here they were kept dragging on week after week with preliminary matter connected with the inn. They wanted to get to sea; they wanted the treasure hunt."

Dragging on? But I love the rude arrival of the sea captain, who throws his gold pieces on the threshold: "You can tell me when I've worked through that," says he, looking as fierce as a commander" (page 8). I particularly love his passive-aggressive tactics: "Mostly he would not speak when spoken to, only look up sudden and fierce and blow through his nose like a fog-horn; and we and the people who came about our house soon learned to let him be" (page 8). Never mind the dirk and the dagger; when the glare of an eye and the rattle of mucus don't work, the sea captain buys "all the trembling company" drinks and forces them to "bear a chorus" of "'Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum'" (page 9). If that's not active excitement—terrorizing a crowd with a sing-along!—then I don't know what is.

And maybe that's just it—that I don't know what excitement is—because I love *everything* that happens before Jim goes to sea. I thrill to Jim quietly laying the breakfast table while old guys scrape in the door, each one more manipulative, not to mention mutilated, than the last. Billy Bones (scar

on cheek) asks Jim to play lookout but never pays him the silver fourpenny on time. Black Dog (missing two fingers) forces him to play ambush: "You and me'll just go back into the parlour, sonny, and get behind the door" (page 14). Old Pew (blind as a bat) fakes fragility before threatening to break Jim's arm. The campy terror is delicious, and none of the murders on the island holds a tallow candle to the pub-side death of Blind Pew, rolling in a ditch, deserted by his friends, crying out in terror, "you won't leave old Pew, mates—not old Pew!" (page 31)—before he flings himself unwittingly into the path of the horseman. "Down went Pew with a cry that rang high into the night; and the four hoofs trampled and spurned him and passed by" (page 32). No, it's not the cold-blooded act of one man murdering another that gives me chills; it's Pew's accidental death—a bungle of greed, loneliness, disloyalty, error, and regret ("The rider tried to save him" [page 32])—that makes his end a horror.

If anything, things get a little *less* interesting to me once the crew gets to the island, for it's then that the plot runs along sort of like a baseball game—this many guys down and this many left; and what's all that business about the stockade and the map but so much horse trading, no more compelling for being thrown to us afterward, like the clue in a bad mystery: They gave the pirates the stockade because it stinks of malaria! They gave the pirates the map because they knew Ben Gunn had moved the treasure! And don't even get me started on the weirdness of Dr. Livesey pinch-hitting for Jim Hawkins at the top of the sixteenth inning ("Narrative Continued by the Doctor: How the Ship Was Abandoned," "Narrative Continued by the Doctor: The Jolly-boat's Last Trip," "Narrative Continued by the Doctor: End of the First Day's Fighting," "Narrative Resumed by Jim Hawkins: The Garrison in the Stockade"). By the time Jim takes up his pen "in the year of grace 17—" (page 7), he's had countless nights to drink port with Livesey and Trelawney and ask, "But how did you get powder and provisions to the stockhouse? And where were you when Ben Gunn was showing me where he killed his first goat?" No, the switch to Dr. Livesey at the story's helm is just plain wrong, as if

Stevenson's knocked his retrospective narrator's hands off the tiller and the ship yaws sharply, dashing foam in the reader's face.

And if that's a quibble, well, then, I'm allowed to quibble; this is me wanting to have a word with Stevenson, one writer muttering to another, "Time out. I thought you said you knewed the rules." As much as *Treasure Island* is an adventure story, it's also a story about people *playing* adventure. Which is why Squire Trelawney doles out roles as if he were handing out costumes from a toy chest: "You'll make a famous cabin-boy, Hawkins. You, Livesey, are ship's doctor; I am admiral" (page 38). It's why he sounds less like an aristocrat who handles large sums of money and more like a kid planning to amass candy on Halloween: "We'll have . . . money to eat, to roll in, to play duck and drake with ever after" (page 38). It's why Billy Bones interrupts a tirade to take his medicine "like a child" (page 20) and why Dr. Livesey, "as if to hear the better," removes his wig and looks "very strange indeed" (page 35). The masks slip and the props drop. Even that terrifying summons, the black spot, looks as convincing up close as a set of wax fangs. Why *would* a small, round paper, colored black on one side, and on the other, inscribed with the message—in a "very good, clear hand . . . 'You have till ten tonight'" (page 26)—put anyone in mind of lawless buccaneers? I used to get notes like that in elementary school, also in a good, clear hand: "Patty said Beth is mad at you! Are you mad at them? Answer me by three." I don't have to read *The Sea Rover's Practice* to know pirates didn't pass notes when they wanted to rid themselves of a captain. By the powers, they marooned him or threw him overboard or shot him in his sleep!

But here's my favorite place to see *Treasure Island* smiling at its own game: Jim has stolen off and recovered the *Hispaniola*; now he's slipped back into the stockade, only to discover the pirates own it. Like any wily fifth-grade girl, Long John Silver claims that Jim Hawkins' friends are mad at Jim—"ungrateful scamp" was what [the doctor] said"—and orders Jim to join the pirates. His back to the wall, Jim professes not to

care that his friends deserted him and delivers a brave, gloating speech:

"But there's a thing or two I have to tell you," I said, and by this time I was quite excited; "and the first is this: here you are, in a bad way—ship lost, treasure lost, men lost, your whole business gone to wreck; and if you want to know who did it—it was I! I was in the apple barrel the night we sighted land, and I heard you, John, and you, Dick Johnson, and Hands, who is now at the bottom of the sea, and told every word you said before the hour was out. And as for the schooner, it was I who cut her cable, and it was I that killed the men you had aboard of her, and it was I who brought her where you'll never see her more, not one of you. The laugh's on my side; I've had the top of this business from the first; I no more fear you than I fear a fly." (pages 163–64)

This is Jim's finest moment, not only because he refuses Silver, but because the attentive reader knows he's full of crap. It's sheer luck that Jim wakes up in the apple barrel to hear the pirates plotting; his capture of the *Hispaniola* depends on luck, fog, tides, and drunken pirates. When Jim boards, O'Brien is already dead, and Israel Hands' murder bears a tad more explanation, seeing how Jim forgets to prime his pistols, laps up the older man's conversation like a starving dog, and only shoots Hands, we're strenuously told, by accident: "In the horrid pain and surprise of the moment—I scarce can say it was by my own volition, and I am sure it was without a conscious aim—both my pistols went off, and both escaped out of my hands" (page 153). And excuse *me* if I mention that Jim nearly drowns paddling the coracle and, when faced with death, curls up for a nap!

But kudos to Jim, boy hero Jim, for knowing how to spin the story. He's our hero, all right, but a hero with the seams showing. As Jim blows his own horn, he betrays the provisional nature of all heroic exploits. After all, how could anyone, in the real

world, keep the story line this clean? Let Jim skip the parts where he feels anxiety, fear, shame, hesitation; let Jim cry out that he doesn't fear a fly, though pages earlier, we see him dread a sea lion. *Treasure Island* is awfully wise about the games people play. Jim invents himself as a hero to save his own skin, but that doesn't mean the fantasy of being fearless—the fantasy of being free of emotions, free of the turbulence of internal life—isn't important. Some days more than others, that fearless guy is who *everyone* wants to be. So don't believe the hype; Jim Hawkins isn't "more a man than any pair of rats of you in this here house" (page 165), as Silver says. He's just an ordinary human trying to believe a hero might be living inside him, cozy as a weevil in a biscuit.

—Sara Levine