

# PIG ISLAND

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**BANTAM BOOKS**

LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND • JOHANNESBURG

Part One

CRAIGNISH  
AUGUST

# Oakesy

## 1

The alarms first went off in my head when the landlord and the lobsterman showed me what had been washed up on the beach. I took one look at the waves breaking and knew right then that cracking the Pig Island hoax wasn't going to be the straightforward bit of puff I'd expected. I didn't say anything much for a few minutes, just stood there, probably scratching the back of my neck and staring, because something like that . . . well, it's going to get you thinking, right? However much of a big guy you think you are, however much you reckon you've seen in your life and however lairy you are about the mad stories that go round, looking down at something like that splashing around your shoes,

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it's going to make you scratch a bit. Why didn't I listen to those alarm bells, turn right round and walk away from the whole thing there and then? Don't. Just don't. I stopped asking myself that question a long time ago.

That summer what they called the 'devil of Pig Island' video had already been around for a couple of years. Disturbing thing, it was. Genius hoax. And trust me, I know hoaxes. It had been shot on a sunny morning by a tourist out on a boozy sight-seeing tour of the Slate Islands, and when it hit the public the whole country went off on one, whispering about devil worship and general bad shit happening on the remote island off the coast of west Scotland. The story might have run and run, but the secretive religious group that lived on the island, the Psychogenic Healing Ministries, wouldn't give interviews to the press or respond to the accusations, and with nothing to fuel it the story died. Until late August last year when, after two years of nothing, the sect decided to break the silence. They cherry-picked one journalist to stay with them on the island for a week to see how the community lived and to 'discuss the widespread accusations of Satanic ritual'. And that canny old git of a journalist? Meet me. Joe Oakes. Oakesy to my mates. Sole architect of the biggest self-fuck on record.

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‘Seen the old video, have you?’ said the lobsterman. It was the first time we’d met and I knew he didn’t like me. There were only four of us in the pub that night: me, the landlord, his dog and this moody old shite. He sat in the corner huddled up against the wood panelling, puffing away at his rollies, shaking his head when I started asking about Pig Island. ‘Is that why you’re here? Fancy yourself a devil-wrangler?’

‘Fancy myself a journalist.’

‘A journalist no less!’

He laughed, and looked up at the landlord. ‘Did ye hear that? Fancies himself a journalist!’

The place had that leery feel you sometimes get in these struggling local holes – like any minute a fight’s going to kick off behind one of the fruit machines even though the place is half empty. There were two alehouses in the community – the tourist one, with its picture window overlooking the marina, and this one for the locals, up a cliff path in the soggy trees. Stained plaster walls, stinking carpets and dingy, sea-dulled windows that stared out to where Pig Island lay, silent and dark almost two miles offshore.

‘They’ll not let you on the island,’ said the landlord, as he wiped down the bar. ‘You know that,

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don't you? There's not been a journalist on that island in years. They're as mad as kettles out on Pig Island – won't let a soul on the island, much less a journalist.'

'And if they *did* let you on,' said the lobsterman, 'God, but there's not a soul in Craignish will take you out there. No, you won't catch any of us gaun out to auld Pig Island.' He squinted through the smoke out of the window to where the island lay, just a dark shape against the gathering gloom. His white beard was nicotine-stained, like he must've been drooling in it for years. 'No. Not me. I'd sooner go through the old hag's whirlpool, pure fatal or not, than go round Pig Island and come face to face with auld Nick.'

One thing I've learned after eighteen years in this trade is there's always someone who gains from supernatural phenomena. If it isn't money or revenge it's just good old-fashioned attention. I'd already been to Bolton to interview the tourist who'd shot the video. He had nothing to do with the hoax: poor beer-bloated sod couldn't see past the next Saturday-afternoon league tables, let alone set up something like that. So who was gaining from the Pig Island film?

'They own the island, don't they?' I said, twisting my pint of Newkie Brown round and round in the circular beer stain, looking at it thoughtfully.

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‘The Psychogenic Healing Ministries. I read that somewhere – they bought it in the eighties.’

‘Bought it or stole it, depending on your position.’

‘Was an awful fool, the owner.’ The landlord leaned on the bar with both elbows. ‘An awful fool. The pig farm goes belly up and what does he do? Lets all the farmers in Argyll dump their dodgy chemicals out there. Ended up a death pit, the place – pigs all over the island, old mine shafts, chemicals. In the end he has to give it all away. Ten thousand pounds! They could have stole it from him, it’d be more honest.’

‘You won’t like that,’ I said, in a level, casual voice. ‘People coming from the south and buying up all the property round here.’

The lobsterman sniffed. ‘Doesn’t bother us. What we *don’t* tolerate is when they buy a place, then lock themselves away and get up to all their queer rituals. That’s when it bothers us – them hunkering down out there, consorting with the de’il, doing nothing but eating babies and giving each other a rare auld peltin’ whenever they’ve a mind to.’

‘Aye,’ said the landlord. ‘And then there’s the smell.’

I looked at the landlord. I wanted to smile. ‘The smell? From the island?’

‘Ah!’ he said, throwing the tea towel over his shoulder. ‘The smell.’ He fished under the bar for a

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giant bag of crisps and opened it, shovelling a fistful into his mouth. ‘Do you know what they say? What they say is the signature smell of the devil? The smell of the devil is the smell of shite – that’s what it is. Now, you go to anyone out there –’ He jabbed a crisp-covered finger at the window. Crumbs confettied on to his T-shirt. ‘– out on Jura or in Arduaine, and they’ll all tell you the same thing. The smell of shite comes off Pig Island. There’s no better proof of their rituals than that.’

I studied him thoughtfully. Then I turned and looked across the dark sea. The moon was out and a wind had come up and was whipping branches against the windowpane. Beyond our reflections, beyond the image of the landlord standing under the lighted optics, I could see an absence – a dark space against the night sky. Pig Island.

‘They piss you off,’ I said, trying to picture the thirty-odd people who lived out there. ‘They do their fair bit to piss you all off.’

‘You’re right about that,’ said the landlord. He came to the table and sat down, setting the crisps in front of him. ‘Do their fair bit to piss us all off. They’re not well liked – not since they fenced off that nice bit o’ beach on the south-east of the island and stopped the young folk from Arduaine going out with their boats. They’d only be wanting a wee game of footy or shinty in the sand, the

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weans, Godsake, no need to be so stern about it, is my opinion.'

'Not your perfect neighbours.'

'No,' he said. 'They're not.'

'Where I come from, you behave like that you're asking for a hiding.'

'So you're starting to see my point.'

'If it was me I'd be trying to think of how to make their lives difficult.'

'We've been tempted!' The landlord laughed. He licked his fingers carefully, then put them to his eyes, like tears of mirth had gathered there. 'I don't mind telling you. Been tempted. Put some paraffin in their bottles of bevvy, maybe.'

'You know, if it was me, I'd – I'd – I don't know.' I shook my head and looked at the ceiling, like I was searching for inspiration. 'I'd probably try and set up some kind of . . . dodgy rumour. Yeah.' I nodded. 'I'd set up a hoax – spread a couple of rumours around.'

The landlord stopped laughing and rubbed his nose. 'Are you saying we're making it all up?'

'Aye. Takin' the piss, are ye?' The lobsterman sat forward, suddenly flushed. 'You takin' the piss? Is that what your message to us is?'

'I'm just saying,' I met his eyes seriously, looking from him to the landlord and back, 'it's got a smell about it, hasn't it? I mean, *devil-worshippers*? Satan walking the beaches of Pig Island?'

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The colour in the lobsterman's face paled very slightly. He crushed the rollie in the ashtray and stood, drawing himself up to his full height. He took a few deep, fighting breaths, and looked unsteadily down at me. 'Laddie, tell me. Are you a man who is easily shocked? You're a big man, but I reckon you're one who'd shock easy. What do ye think?' he said to the landlord. 'Is he? Is he a man who'd go in a funk if he saw something peculiar? Because that's how it looks from where I stand.'

'Why?' I said, putting the glass down slowly. 'Why? What are you going to show me?'

'If you're so clever you don't believe what we're saying, then come with me. We'll see what kind of a *hoax* is gaun on.'

Pig Island, or as it's called in Gaelic Cuagach Eilean, lies in the small cup of sea at the edge of the Firth of Lorn, caught like a precious stone in a setting between Luing, Jura and Craignish Peninsula – like it's been placed to block the entry to the Sound of Jura. It's a weird shape: like a peanut from above, covered in grassland and dense trees, a wide rocky gorge running down the middle. Once, before the pig farm and the chemical dumping, there'd been a slate mine operating in the south of the island, with a community of miners and a regular ferry. But by the time I got there Pig Island was almost totally

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cut off. Once a week the Psychogenic Healing Ministries sent a small boat to collect supplies. It was their only contact with the world.

I knew a bit about that part of Scotland – wrote bits and pieces about it from time to time. But my bread and butter was debunking work. One of the things that comes as birthright to a Scouser is knowing the stripe of bullshit when you see it and I'm a natural sceptic, a full-blown non-believer: a Scully, a James Randi, an out-and-out hoax-buster. I've flown round the world chasing zombies and chupacabras, Filipino faith-healers and beasts in Bodmin; I've used glass vials to collect dripping milk from the breasts of Mexican virgin statues – and in that time I've worked up a hard skin. But even I had to admit there was something odd-looking about the Psychogenic Healing Ministries' island. If you were going to believe in devil-worship you'd picture it happening somewhere remote and sea-wreathed like Pig Island. That night, as we jolted and bumped along a dark path that led to the end of the peninsula, I stared out of the window at its dark, desolate shape and for a moment or two there I had to tell myself not to be an old tart about it.

The landlord had crammed me into the back seat of the lobsterman's beat-up rust-bucket of a car. We left the dog in the pub: 'Because he's a mad rocket when he comes out here,' said the landlord, as the

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car pulled off the road on to a thin, muddy beach. ‘Makes him crazy and I’m not putting him in a paddy just because *you* won’t take my word for something.’

We got out of the car and I paused. I hadn’t been out on the lash or anything, but I’d sunk a fair old few in the pub and it felt good for a moment to fill my lungs with the night air. The beach was silent, and there was already a breath of autumn in the air. It was gone eleven but Craignish was so far north the sky was still edged with blue. You’d almost think that if you stood on tiptoe and squinted you’d see the land of the midnight sun peeping at you from over the horizon, maybe a reindeer or a polar bear on a giant mint.

‘See the pipe?’ The lobsterman walked away to the south, totally steady in spite of the whisky, his old shoes leaving dull prints in the mud, his moonshadow long beside him. ‘The wee stank over there?’ He was pointing to the long, low shape of a sewage pipe straddling the beach ahead. ‘You get the conditions right – a nice westerly, an ebb and a spring tide – then everything from out at Pig Island gets washed up, not in the loch or even on Luing, where you’d expect it, but here, on this side of the peninsula. Most of it gets caught on the other side of that pipe.’

The landlord hung back, giving me a dubious

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look. His face was a little pinched seeming in the moonlight. He turned up his collar like it was suddenly dead cold out there. ‘Sure you’re ready for this?’

‘Yeah. Why not?’

‘It’s not for the faint-hearted, what’s caught up under that pipe.’

‘I’m not faint-hearted,’ I said, looking down the beach at the lobsterman. ‘I’ve seen everything there is to see.’

We walked for a while in silence, only the sound of the waves breaking on the beach, and the tinkle of a halyard on a boat moored somewhere out in the sea. The smell hit me first. Even before I saw the lobsterman hesitate at the pipe, looking down on the other side, before I saw him shaking his head and leaning over to spit out something in the sand, I knew it was going to be one of those stomach-turners. One of those times I’d regret the last pint. I took a breath and swallowed, tapping my pockets as I got nearer, hoping I’d find a stray bit of chewy or something to take the taste away.

‘Worse is it?’ said the landlord, approaching the lobsterman. ‘Got worse?’

‘Aye – there’s more. More than there was last week.’

I held my T-shirt up to my nose and peered down

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on the other side of the pipe. Dark shapes bobbed and buffeted in a yellowish foam. Meat. Decaying chunks of flesh – impossible to tell in the slime where one piece ended and the next began. The breaking waves forced them into the crevice under the pipe, tangled them in ribbons of tasselweed. Decomposition gas fizzed from under the raised flaps of skin, sending bubbles to the surface.

‘What the fuck’s this?’

‘Pig meat,’ said the lobsterman. ‘Dead pigs. Killt in one of them rituals on Pig Island and been washed off the island.’

‘Police have seen it,’ the landlord said, ‘and they’ve not cared to do anything about it – can’t prove where it’s coming from and, anyway, a few dead pigs aren’t hurting anyone, is their manner of thinking.’

‘Dead pigs?’ I looked up at the mouth of the Firth. The moon picked out the silvery tips of waves as far as the eye could see – to where Pig Island peeped round the end of Luing, silent and hunched, like a dozing beast. ‘All of this is dead pigs?’

‘Aye. That’s what they say.’ The landlord puffed out a series of short, dry laughs – like the world never ceased to amaze him. ‘That’s what the police say – everything here is just pig meat. But you know what I think?’

‘What do you think?’

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‘I think that when it comes to the lovers of Satan you can never be too sure.’

### 3

Let’s think about my mistakes with the whole Pig Island thing. Well, the first one was letting my wife come to Scotland with me. What was I thinking? I’ve had to stop punching myself in the face about it, because you have to find ways of hanging on to a bit of sanity, so I say whoever was to blame, Lexie was there with me. Course, I didn’t know she was there for her own reasons, didn’t know she had something on her mind. I thought she was totally made up with her job – a receptionist at a London clinic – besotted by the media-whore neurosurgeon who ran the place (you guessed I don’t like him, right?). The last thing I expected was for her to want to leave London. But one minute I say, ‘I’m coming to Scotland,’ next thing she’s on the web looking for holiday cottages.

She found a crappy one-bed bungalow on Craignish Peninsula that my budget stretched to. It was hot and unventilated and Lexie slept restlessly. The night I got back from the beach she was already in bed, turning over in her sleep, whimpering and

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pushing at the pillow. I got in silently and lay next to her, staring up at the ceiling. Tomorrow I'd be on Pig Island. I needed to think about what I was chasing. I was going to have to play it dead carefully. Going to have to concentrate, be ready for anything.

The Psychogenic Healing Ministries wanted me at their Positive Living Centre on Pig Island because of Eigg, the little Hebridean island fifty miles to the north. They hadn't said it, but I knew it anyway. On Eigg the tenants had raised the money to buy the island from the owner. They got donations from everywhere, all over the country – even the National Lottery. Booted old Schellenberg and Maruma out. And how did they manage that? Good publicity. Simple as that. Someone was there to spread their story to the world. And that someone was me. I'd been there – helped break the story in the press. How I saw it now was the Psychogenic Healing Ministries probably had some legal hassle they wanted to raise money for. Thought I could help. If they'd known I had history with their founder, Pastor Malachi Dove, if they'd known that eighteen years ago I'd written an article on him under the name Joe Finn, that he'd been so arsed off about it he'd tried to sue me for libel, I'd never have got even a little bit close to Pig Island. But, like I said, canny bastard, me.

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I lay awake half the night ticking off kit in my head: MP3 player, camera, batteries, spare camera card, phone . . . Didn't get to kip until three in the morning and the next day I was on edge. After breakfast, when I'd packed and was ready to set off for Pig Island, I got the laptop out one last time.

I never had found out what came first – the rumours that the Psychogenic Healing Ministries were practising Satanism, or the video. But when the public saw it they made up their mind it was an image of the devil, brought down on to Pig Island by the Satanic ritual of the PHMs. A great steaming pile of bollocks, naturally, but even I had to admit there was something dead creepy about the video.

First of all, it wasn't trick photography. It had been through every AV specialist unit in the country, passed every test, been torn apart frame by frame, but even with all that gadgetry thrown at it, it kept coming up clean over and over again. Whoever had cooked up this little bit of chicanery hadn't used trick photography: something had definitely been on the island beach that hot 18 July two years ago.

That morning I played it again on my laptop. I sat forward on the edge of my seat, concentrating hard. I'd seen it a thousand times and knew every frame. It started off kind of ordinary, with the camera lingering on the horizon out to sea, tilting gently as the single-engined boat bobbed on the waves in the

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Firth of Lorn. I dragged the RealPlayer toggle to the bit where a shout went up on the boat. This was the exact moment when one of the other tourists saw something moving on the island. A few indistinct shouts came from the TV – a lot of camera movement as the surprised tourist whipped the videocam sideways, taking in one or two shocked faces on the boat, then focused across the bay on an indeterminate line of green-brown – the seaward shoreline of Pig Island. Someone close to the camera spoke. The words were totally unintelligible because of the wind on the soundtrack, but the BBC unit had added sub-titled dialogue to my copy: ‘What in fuck’s name is *that*?’

This was the important bit. You could feel the guys on the boat inching forward in curiosity, staring at the beach where a creature no one could put a name to moved ponderously through the foliage at the water’s edge. It stood at about five foot eleven; the BBC technicians figured this out from comparative measurements using sun and trees. In most ways it appeared like a naked human being – the video showed its back from the waist down; the upper half was concealed in shadow. Except it *wasn’t* human. There was something dangling from the base of its spine. Estimated to be about two feet in length, the same battered brown flesh as the body, it looked just like a fleshy tail. It banged once on the back of the creature’s legs as it moved.

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Even in that stifling bungalow, with the sun coming through the picture windows, lying in great squares on the dingy patterned carpet, and Lexie a few yards away in the kitchen, I got this crawl of discomfort across my skin. I leaned nearer to the TV and stared at the wavery brown line of empty beach, the camera holding steady on the island in case the beast reappeared. A full three minutes elapsed until the tourist gave up waiting and turned the camera back to the other men on the boat. They stood at the gunwales, all four of them in their Bolton Wanderers shirts, holding the stanchion line and staring in silence at the spot on the beach where the creature had been.

The people at the BBC reckoned it was an actor, someone in a costume. Their AV unit had worked on the Bluff Creek Bigfoot film, and they thought this video had some of the same hallmarks: Sasquatch, as we all knew, was just some guy in a Hollywood gorilla suit – and the technicians decided that was probably what was happening in the Pig Island film. The problem was, because the video was taken from a boat about two hundred yards offshore, because the ‘creature’ emerged from the trees at frame 1,800 and had disappeared into the foliage by frame 1,865 (at a rate of thirty frames per second that meant a shade over two seconds), and because the movement of the boat had the

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picture jumping all over the place, the Beeb couldn't get a good enough image to analyse it any closer. They could only say what it *appeared* to be.

Half beast. Half human.

'I'll put your lighter in the rucksack,' said Lexie, suddenly, from the kitchen. 'I'm putting it in the front pocket.'

I paused the video and turned to look at her. She was standing at the table, her hair held back in the Alice band she'd got for her snobby job, and a pair of shorts I had a vague idea I was meant to notice. I didn't answer her straight off. Her voice was kind of casual, but both of us knew how serious she was. I'd 'given up' smoking months ago and I reckoned I'd hidden the occasional sneaky rollie pretty well. Except now there was the lighter.

I watched while she zipped up the rucksack.

'It was in your jacket pocket,' she said, reading my mind.

'I got it for the stove. There's no pilot.'

'Yeah,' she said, laughing. 'You're so transparent.'

I laughed too. Just a bit. 'Transparent or not – I used it for the stove.'

'OK,' she said lightly. 'OK. I believe you. You're so believable.' She set her tongue at the back of her front teeth and smiled up at the ceiling. Her smiling made the sinews in her neck stand out. She'd got skinny recently. I waited a few more moments to see

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if we were going to pursue this. Not dropping the smile or taking her eyes off the ceiling, in that same high voice she goes: ‘And there was tobacco in the shorts you had on yesterday.’

‘You’re going through my pockets now?’

‘Yes. My husband lies to me about smoking so I go through his pockets.’ She dropped her chin then and met my eyes and I saw she’d flushed a deep purplish colour – like her cheeks were bruised. ‘My husband thinks I’m stupid. So I have to fight back.’

The most important thing about me and my marriage was I didn’t fancy my wife any more. I’d known it for months and done nothing about it – it’s one of those things you can stick in the back of your mind and ignore if you’re clever enough. But, and this is true, I cared about her. Weird fuck I was, I did still care for her. And I cared, in some rusty old-fashioned way, about fidelity. Back in London half my friends were already blasting their way through first, second divorces: I was the sanctimonious one, believed in thick and thin, wasn’t going to end up in a frigid, three-minute-egg of a marriage. *Touché, Joe Oakes, you pious arse. This’ll teach you.*

I stood slowly and went to stand in the kitchen doorway, looking at her. ‘I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘I am.’

She didn’t move for a moment. Then her

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shoulders slumped and she let out a sigh. ‘That’s OK,’ she said, shaking her head and holding out the rucksack to me. ‘It can’t be easy, giving up.’

‘No, but I’m working on it.’ I pulled on the rucksack. ‘Believe me.’

She forced a smile. ‘I’ve put some water-bottles in, at the bottom, and some factor ten.’ She smoothed down the rucksack straps across my chest and, finding an imaginary stain on my T-shirt, wet her finger and rubbed at it. A compulsive neatnik, Lex, this grooming, this shrimping, was her way of showing I was forgiven. ‘Now,’ she said. ‘I know it’s your turn to cook tonight, but you’ll be exhausted, so I’ll do a pasta salad. Avocado, bacon, olives. It’ll save if you’re late.’

‘Lexie,’ I said, ‘I told you. Didn’t I? I said I didn’t know if I’d be back tonight. I told you this. Remember? I said I could be out there a few days.’

She bit her lip. ‘A few days?’

‘We talked about it. Don’t you remember? I said I’d probably have to stay over and you said you’d be all right on your own.’

‘Did I? Did I say that?’

‘Yes.’

She shrugged. ‘Well, don’t worry about it. I mean I’d’ve loved some time with my husband on our holidays, and obviously I’d rather *not* be in *this* place on my own.’ She opened her hands to indicate

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the bungalow. She'd hated it at first sight. She'd booked it but turns out to be my fault it was so shitty. 'But, don't worry, it's all right, I'll be all right.'

'Lex. I said it was work, remember?' Remember how I said it was—'

'*Please!*' She cut me off, holding up her hand in the air. 'Please don't. Please just go. I'll be fine.'

'I'll call you. If there's a signal out on the island I'll call you. I'll tell you how it's going – when I'll be back.'

'No,' she said. 'Don't. Really – don't. Just . . . just go. Do your thing.' She drummed her fingers on the table, not looking up at me. 'Go on,' she repeated, when I didn't turn to go. 'Just go.'

I sighed and touched her shoulder, opened my mouth to say something, then thought better of it. I tightened the rucksack and left, not bending to kiss her goodbye, quietly closing the kitchen door behind me. That was how it went, these days. Outside I stopped. At the end of the bungalow's long, rhododendron-crowded driveway the land opened into a funnel. There, basking in the glittering sea, was Pig Island.