

Exiles at the Oasis  
TALES OF THE SAILING LIFE

by  
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## Prologue

### COCOS ISLAND

It was cyclone season, and the rats had mange. The incessant rain had percolated into every corner of the craggy coral, and dampened their spirits as well as their fur. Morale in the burrows had reached rock bottom.

The hermit crabs were gaining the upper hand. The prehistoric beasts reveled in the wet conditions, and were grabbing more than their fair share of the food. The few fish carcasses that happened to wash ashore were being stripped to the bone by the army of crabs, while the rats huddled in misery in their burrows, nursing infestations of the dreadful parasites.

Tufts of fur were falling out, and the rats had turned an anxious eye to the horizon, hoping to spot the sails that would herald the onset of the cruising season, when the southeast tradewinds would steady and freshen, the humidity would drop, and the island would finally dry out.

Yachts crossing the Indian Ocean visited Cocos Island during the dry season, but the animals had the place largely to themselves, the rest of the time. The hermit crabs no doubt preferred it that way - in common with indigenous residents of touristed, tropical islands all over the world - but the rats were recent immigrants, themselves, and found

the imported foodstuffs a treat, and a welcome change from the coconuts.

They would find a crust of bread, or a baked potato skin lying on the sand next to the brick barbecue. Perhaps a few grains of rice, which had fallen through the planks of the picnic table. Delicacies of all sorts would miraculously appear in the garbage pit.

The annual arrival of the yachts was a time of renewal for the rats, and astonishing bounty - comparable to the spawning of the salmon, or the nesting of the sea turtles - and worthy of celebration and reverence.

Doc would later claim to have discovered a shrine on the reef, which the rats had erected around a weather-beaten, toy plastic boat. It was evidence of a cargo cult, he felt.

## CHAPTER 1

### COCOS ISLAND

#### *Yacht, Exile*

*Exile.* First yacht of the season.

When the sun set over the atoll that night, Doc was huddled inside his sailboat, about five miles offshore, wondering what might have been on the menu for dinner. The dinner he'd just missed.

*Fresh fish, of course.*

*Fishing would be brilliant inside the lagoon. And coconuts. The whole island was planted with them. A coral trout would have been lovely, simmered in fresh coconut milk.*

Doc had been mulling over the possible menu choices all day, ever since his morning sextant sights had placed him less than twenty miles from the atoll. He had left himself an easy downwind run for his final approach, and thought that he'd get the hook down in time for lunch, let alone dinner.

Unfortunately, the southeast tradewind then died away completely, interrupted by a series of squalls. Progress slowed to a crawl. By the

time he sighted the tops of the palms, the sun was already too low in the sky to illuminate any dangerous coral in the passage, leaving him no choice but to spend yet another night at sea, and enter the lagoon in the morning.

Only an hour or so of daylight remained.

Even though Doc had a small boat, he was sailing singlehanded, and could easily stow enough food to last several months. More, if the fishing was decent. Fresh provisions wouldn't last nearly that long, however, especially in the tropics. So the day inevitably arrived, during any long passage, when he was down to his final onion. Or, the last apple.

Two flaccid potatoes, in this case.

They weren't in such bad shape, either. Only slightly wrinkled, and a bit soft, with just the faintest odor of mildew. He'd seen far worse. The motion of his little boat could get abusive, at times.

But he wasn't in the mood to cook.

There was no point in getting closer to the reef, so Doc had dropped the mainsail, and turned around. *Exile* was well-behaved with just the small staysail set, and sailed slowly back to windward with the

helm lashed. He would merely have to tack occasionally, in order to hold his position during the night.

He had ducked below, out of the rain.

The swell was slight, but the squalls had raised a lumpy sea. He tossed uncomfortably in his bunk. The bedding was salty, and sodden. Several wet towels were hung around the cabin, spread out as well as the limited room would allow; but they'd never dry, unless he could circulate some air. They'd stopped dripping, at least.

Mildew had thoroughly soured his pillow. A white, powdery film of the fungus had even begun to spread over the surface of the deck beams. It had already turned green in the corners, he noticed. Doc had little else to do, so he stripped off the rank pillowcase, and moistened a corner with some saliva, then began using it to wipe the wood. The mildew wouldn't stain the teak, or anything, but the spores were harder to clean off once they turned black.

Rain water was streaming off the surface of the sail, and dribbling onto the deck, directly above the bunk. The sound resonated inside the boat - a hollow, wet sound - like someone pissing on the skin of a drum. It slowed to a staccato drip, then stopped.

Doc rolled off the bunk and slid open the hatch.

The sun had slipped below the horizon, moments before. The visibility was incredibly sharp and clear, and he reached inside for his binoculars, to have a last look at the island before nightfall.

The bleached coral surface had taken on a pinkish cast, and seemed to glow. The base of the island was uniformly flat, and in profile, the palms looked like bristles on a hairbrush. He focused on the islet which enclosed the anchorage, and searched among the trees, hoping to spot some sailboat masts. The coconut palms were closely planted, with lush undergrowth, and he could find nothing else. No buildings, or water tanks. Nothing at all.

*Should be some boats, soon. Everybody stops here. Cocos Island is an oasis, for sailors - this speck of sand, in a vast salt water desert.*

*Definitely deserted around here, too. Been towing lures for a thousand miles, and not a single fish. Tried them all, and all they get is...wet.*

He'd been out six months, this time - six months, simply being alone at sea, and exploring the solitude of largely uninhabited Indian Ocean islands. Now, though, Doc was longing desperately for some company.

Not the company of strangers, particularly. He'd had his fill of that, constantly traveling, kept on the move by immigration officials, who invariably grew suspicious if he stayed in one place too long. They'd feel obliged to ask probing questions, about how he intended to support himself. Eventually they'd ask to see the money. Doc seldom had much to show them. So he'd have to haul up the anchor, and sail somewhere else.

He had eluded the officials on his latest trip. He'd spent several months in the remote, outer islands of the Seychelles, and encountered only the occasional resident caretaker, or a few families gathering firewood and copra. Then shared coffee with fishermen in the Maldives, and taken meals ashore in the villages. They were friendly, hospitable people, but not very scintillating company in the end.

No. Doc was longing for the companionship of his own kind.

*He pictured a solitary albatross, flying gracefully across the sea, a mere slit of daylight above the waves. Then soaring, and banking up the face of the swell on rigid, sabre-like wings. Gliding, for days on end. Tapping the force of the wind with its feathers, like a musician playing in tune with the waves.*

*Then one day...when?...it would fly with purpose, no longer simply wandering, but returning to the land to seek out some of its own.*

*It would return home.*

A flash of lightning briefly illuminated the staysail, alerting Doc to the presence of yet another squall. Twilight had faded rapidly, but he could make out a wall of rain off to windward, headed his way.

The light beacon on the island flashed for the first time. Although listed as only a twelve-mile light, it looked bright enough to carry twenty. Doc was relieved, since he would have to rely on it to keep track of his position during the night. There was only the one light. He noted its heading and closed the hatch, just as the raindrops began pelting the deck.

The wind howled as the squall hit, and one of the halyards began tapping annoyingly against the mast. Tying it off meant getting wet again, so he tried to ignore it. The tone of the rope on the hollow wood mast wasn't that unpleasant, although it flapped wildly during the gusts. He could feel the mast shudder.

Thirty knots, he reckoned.

Doc had hoped to get a few hours sleep, while still certain of his position - a safe distance offshore - but the sound of the wind whistling through the rigging really put him on edge, as it often did. In addition, being within sight of land invariably made him a little anxious, after

weeks at sea. He realized that he ought to eat something, since he was likely to be awake most of the night.

*Soon there'll be bonfires, and barbecues on the beach, when the rest of the yachts arrive. Fresh fish from the lagoon, and fruit from the island store. Moonlit parties under the canopy of swaying palms.*

*Who's coming, I wonder?*

*Most will have already crossed an ocean, and feel confident about handling another. Exiles and emigrants, pirates and pilgrims...those voyaging to Cocos are more likely to be travellers than tourists.*

Once the squall had passed, Doc reopened the hatch to air out the cabin. A few stars had come out. He noticed the faint red glow of the compass light, reflecting off the sides of the cockpit well, and leaned out to check the heading. The fickle southeast tradewind had returned following the squall, and *Exile* had resumed her course.

Ocean currents are often erratic in the vicinity of an atoll, so he needed to guard against being set onto the reef in the middle of the night. In addition to monitoring the bearing of the light, he had to get a feel for its brightness, to help him gauge his distance offshore. The chart indicated that the light flashed every fifteen seconds.

Doc started counting as he watched for it.

The beacon flashed at a count of eight, but Doc didn't see it, because he never reached eight. He stopped counting, and covered his eyes in agony when a flash of lightning blinded him at six. It was followed by an incredibly loud crack, which resonated in the rigging.

“Aww...shit!”

Doc's dilated pupils had admitted an excruciating dose of light. His field of vision remained filled with a searing white, even though his eyelids were closed. He groped for the handhold on the hatch, suddenly anxious to seal himself safely inside. He fumbled his way blindly down the ladder, and lowered himself into a sitting position on the cabin floor.

The jagged imprint of the lightning flash faded quickly, yet it took several minutes before his sight was fully restored. Another flash of lightning reflected off the brass spigot of the portlight. The squall would soon be lashing the island, he thought.

He was left with a lingering headache, which he attributed to hunger more than anything else. He dug deeper into the food locker, hoping to uncover something with a little life left in it. He settled on some canned pears. They were South African, and not half bad. Embalmed in pear juice, instead of that cloying syrup. He could barely make out the lathe marks, where they had machined off the skin.

Another squall passed through, but it didn't amount to much, despite the impressive lightning display. He sought out the light beacon several times, but took precautions, and shielded his eyes as he searched the horizon. *Exile* had been on the port tack for almost two hours, and when the rain stopped, Doc decided that he'd better tack the staysail.

The light on the island flashed as he stepped into the cockpit well. Many more stars were out. He had finally regained his night vision, and could see some extensive vertical development in the clouds, off to windward. An isolated squall, looked like.

Unfortunately, it was squall with intense *electrical* activity, and Doc should have known better than to stare at it.

“Aww...shit! Shit!”

## CHAPTER 2

### AUCKLAND

#### *Yacht, Rainblow*

The annual convention of the Environmental Alliance was a festive affair. Nigel had taken his seat on stage, and could see that the conference had attracted a nice crowd. The aisles near the platform were packed with people, and the house lights dimmed, encouraging everyone to take their seats.

"Yo, Nigel? Love your shoes!" someone called out.

Cripes.

It had been raining heavily when Nigel left his sailboat to walk across town, so he naturally wore his raingear - a rubber-coated poncho, and gumboots. He had taken off the poncho, and draped it over the back of his chair, but his floppy, rubber boots and hand-embroidered Tibetan vest clearly set him apart. The rest of the Executive Committee had dressed for the occasion, rather than the weather, and were suitably attired to face the media. In suits.

He noticed the General Secretary glaring at him, now and then, and the Media Director was avoiding eye contact, altogether. Acting indignant. Not over an issue as petty as a pair of gumboots, though. It was their little disagreement over the explosives. Nigel had given them a

chance to do the right thing. They could have contributed. Dynamite wasn't that expensive. But, no. They would rather spend the money hiring a bloody *podium*. It was crap.

Nigel remembered the times they'd gathered at the farm outside Whangarei, when they held the meeting under the shade of the oak tree; or, if the rains came, they'd seek the shelter of the old house, and crowd into the living room. Even when the movement grew, the house seemed to expand to welcome everyone, as they spilled out onto the verandah, and listened through the open windows; or stood up in the loft, and hung onto the rafters.

Several contingents would invariably drive up from Auckland a few days early in their caravans, and spend a morning rediscovering the fern forest, or an afternoon climbing one of the sheep tracks to the top of a ridge, where there was a dramatic view of the ocean. A few rural families would arrive on horseback, with all their dogs, and set up their tents in the paddock. They would stretch out a tarpaulin between the trees to shelter the kitchen, and build a big campfire. Play music.

They were united, then. Both in spirit, and in purpose.

It just wasn't the same, now. The *mood* was all wrong. The conference hall was anonymous, and stark. The sort of multi-functional

venue where you could exhibit office furniture, or serve a cafeteria lunch. There were no windows at all, and one of the fluorescent tubes was flickering coldly overhead, and humming. Like the inside of a refrigerator.

Nigel glanced down at the injection-moulded chair he was sitting in, and ran his fingers over the wood grain moulded into the seat. He felt clammy just touching it, and the back of his shirt was already wet with sweat.

He suspected that the rumour would have spread to every corner of the hall, by now. That the Great Barrier Island chapter was withdrawing its recognition of the national organisation, and reclaiming its independence. His prominent position on the platform was reserved for the delegate from Great Barrier, and Nigel knew that everyone would be waiting to hear what he had to say.

The Great Barrier Island chapter had a moral authority in the movement that far exceeded their small number. Historically, the movement's most memorable protests always featured the arrival of four or five Great Barrier sailboats in Auckland Harbour, and the colourful rally at the quayside, where all the boats rafted together with their flags flying, and drums beating. Friends would gather in welcome, and unfurl their banners.

Nigel would blow the conch.

The unsullied grandeur of their home island had secured their reputation. The rocky inlets on Great Barrier teemed with mussels and scallops, and stands of virgin Kauri forest had preserved the natural, rugged aspect of the coast. The scenic vistas continued to attract property developers, but the obstacles they faced had discouraged most of them.

Barges attempting to deliver construction equipment to the island would find the quay blockaded by local boats, or have their propellers fouled with nets, or simply drift out to sea when their anchor was unshackled from the chain. Survey stakes disappeared overnight. Earthmoving equipment was dynamited.

Their tactics had evolved over the years, as they gained expertise, and won the support of a few committed professionals who had emigrated to Great Barrier from the mainland. The office contained an enormous map of the island, which had been painstakingly covered with several thousand coloured pins. The location of a sacred Maori site would be logged into the computer, and identified with a red pin. Nesting spots frequented by seabirds were marked with yellow ones, and endangered species of flora with green. Rare fauna with light blue. The map showed at a glance which areas were most at risk.

They catalogued historic sites, kelp and scallop beds, soils susceptible to erosion, or unsuitable for septic drainage...anything potentially useful.

Whenever an application was made for the permits necessary to begin developing a piece of property, they would access the data base, and find documentation to support the filing of a writ, seeking an injunction against it.

Their most recent success - the granting of a court order barring the deployment of a new generation of purportedly 'environmentally-friendly' defoliant against their cannabis farms - had received a great deal of publicity, and reminded everyone in the movement of their history.

After some brief and business-like opening remarks by the General Secretary, the Finance Director took the floor to deliver his annual report. After plodding through the figures, he unveiled a set of pie charts, which he claimed would demonstrate the need for an aggressive new strategy to maintain share points in a competitive donor market.

"Aw, bloody hell..." Nigel muttered, drawing a few muffled laughs from the audience near the stage.

Nigel wondered why Great Barrier hadn't annulled the relationship, years ago. It was embarrassing, having to acknowledge that they'd been in bed with these bureaucrats. Been so bloody loyal. No wonder the Committee thought the mood was irrelevant. They had lost their *passion*.

What started out as a movement to preserve the natural wildness of the environment had become an organisation dedicated to preserving itself. They were estranged from naturalness, now. As far divorced from it as their trendy ersatz-wood chairs.

Nigel reached into the pocket of his vest, and pulled out the notes for his speech, thinking he'd sharpen it up a bit. Add a few barbs. Some cutting remarks. Why not? Slash a few points off their precious market share, and take them back home to Great Barrier. Divorce was like that, he thought. Politics, too.

The Executive Committee had rejected every proposal for direct action submitted by Great Barrier for the past two years, and had done virtually nothing except hold meetings, send delegates to other meetings, and take photographs of a ship carrying nuclear waste.

Nigel had submitted their initial proposal to disrupt the logging in the Solomon Islands more than six months ago. Their plan to protest the open-cast mining on Misima Island went back even further. Almost a

year. Nothing had been decided, despite seemingly endless objections and amendments.

It was crap.

The gold mine at Misima Island, in Papua New Guinea, was really over the top. They were dumping the cyanide-laced tailings right into the *sea*, Nigel stressed, but every plea from Great Barrier had been ignored.

Misima lies near the centre of the Louisiade Archipelago, and is the highest island in the chain. The peaks stand high enough to capture moisture from the passing tradewind clouds, and the ravines that twist up the mountainsides are filled with wild, lush forest. One of the southern slopes had been stripped of vegetation, and was gradually being ground into a reddish-brown sludge. After leaching out the gold - a few, meagre grams per ton - they pumped the waste slurry down the slope, and it flowed into the sea.

The Executive felt that any action undertaken in New Guinea would receive only scant media attention in Australia, and no other country would cover it at all. The protest wouldn't be cost effective, they said.

The damage had already been done, Nigel knew, but exploration was accelerating on other islands. Since their extraction technology had improved, the mining company could profitably exploit even lower grade

ore. They'd move on down the archipelago, eventually. But he had to let it go. The log export terminal couldn't wait.

Nigel had delivered an ultimatum to the Executive Committee meeting yesterday. If help was refused, he was authorised to withdraw the chapter's support.

Their official declaration of intent was submitted in accordance with the provisions outlined in the Emergency Rules. Article 12 [Ecosystem], Section 4.2 [Imminent Threat]. He needed just one lousy envelop, in order to seal the letter before handing it over to the General Secretary, but he had to buy a whole packet of twenty-five. Nigel only used aerograms. It was crap.

The letter read: *'Great Barrier intends to halt the completion of the log export terminal currently under construction in the Marovo Lagoon, Solomon Islands, by all the means at its disposal. The chapter requests the support of the Executive for this emergency action, and immediate financial and logistic support.'* It bore the signatures of all the Great Barrier delegates.

He had shown them photographic evidence of the damage already done to the island, and letters from the traditional leaders of three villages in the lagoon, pleading for help. Once the crane was operational,

and the ships began hauling the logs off to Japan, the cutting would increase dramatically. The most desirable trees stood on very steep ground, and vast quantities of mud would be carried out into the lagoon. The coral reefs would be at risk. The spawning grounds in the mangrove swamps, as well.

"This sounds rather confrontational, Nigel," the Secretary told him.

"You think they'll pack up and go home, if we ask them nicely? We won't confront anything except the bloody crane. It'll be surgical."

"We can't authorise the use of violence. You know our policy on that. We're not terrorists."

"That's a pretty crude way to put it, don't ya reckon?" Nigel replied, somewhat offended. "Think of it as performance art. Something inspirational."

"Don't confuse the issue, Nigel. We'll have to network with our media consultants on this."

"You're the one confusing issues, mate. We've reported a rape, and you're worrying about the paperwork."

"You know the rules. The London Executive will need details."

"Sorry. The emergency rules prohibit any discussion of our intentions outside the confines of this room." Nigel wouldn't have bought the envelopes, otherwise.

"Really? Well...I can't sanction this."

"We're not asking permission."

"What do you want, then?"

"I was hoping for half a dozen limpet mines, actually. Some cash would help."

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Sophie generally avoided conferences like this, thinking them roughly equivalent to sitting through a prolonged dental appointment. Since she hadn't endured one for years, she was expecting to hear some rather bad news.

The decay would have continued to spread, she thought; and the rot grown progressively deeper, ever closer to the roots. She gritted her teeth, and leafed through the program to find out what lay in store. Judging from the titles of the upcoming speeches, she was in for a painful session.

Be brave, she told herself. It's for your own good.

She wasn't exactly sure why, though. After suffering the torture of the dentist's chair, the problem was usually solved. That wouldn't happen, here.

Sophie was a traveller. She had spent the summer backpacking the length of New Zealand, from the fjords on South Island all the way to the northern cape, but the last few weeks of steady rain had driven her to seek the shelter of the city.

She had hitchhiked into Auckland the day before, nursing a few blisters. Her sleeping bag had soaked through. Although she routinely travelled light, her backpack was enormously bulky just then, with the addition of a thick woollen sweater and a hand-loomed rug, which she'd bought to send home.

Sophie depended on the kindness of strangers, in the same way that tourists depend on their money. She had learned how to recognize kindred spirits.

A full backpack looks strikingly out of place in the city, she knew, and its bearer rather vulnerable. So when she came upon two friendly-looking women tacking up posters for the environmental conference, she approached them confidently, and asked if they knew any cheap hostels nearby. Sophie had an appealing, round face, and huge brown eyes. With wet ringlets of hair clinging to her cheeks, she looked irresistibly innocent. Her backpack must have appeared a pitifully heavy burden, especially in the rain, and they offered to put her up for the night. Several women in their commune planned to attend the

conference, and a party afterwards on some sailboats in the harbor. They had graciously invited her along.

The woman who had taken over the podium announced that she had some slides to show, which would vividly illustrate the legacy of toxic waste. The lights dimmed, as a photograph of a seriously sick carp appeared on the screen.

More bad news. Tumors, most likely.

A hush fell over the audience, as further horrific photographs followed. Sophie even recognized one of them - some deformed frogs that she'd seen in National Geographic, several years ago. For as long as she could remember, the environmental movement had been trying to convince the masses to care, by constantly telling them *bad* news.

It wasn't going to work.

When Sophie thought of the 'masses', she pictured them watching television. Given the multitude of entertainment channels available now, why would anyone watch bad news? People might tune in a war, occasionally. Or a natural disaster. But television had yet to find a way to make images of cancerous carp entertaining.

Unfortunately, even worse news was yet to come. Anyone who had travelled widely through the Third World would know that, she thought. Anyone who had seen all the *children*.

The only hope for preserving the Earth was some *good news*. Something powerful enough to make the masses *care*. It had to be a new religion.

The old religions, the classic philosophies - all of those had been thought up by men. Men who believed the earth was *flat*. Sophie couldn't see how they could make a meaningful contribution, anymore. Yet the flat earth people still ruled the world.

And the wasteland grows.

The new religion couldn't be a mere collection of facts, or interpretations. There had to be revelations. Something *holy*.

The first time she'd seen photographs of the Earth, taken from space - images taken from a large enough step back, where you could view the *whole* of it - Sophie knew. The Earth was holy. Not the subdued, subdivided bits of it, over which the flat earth people held dominion, but the whole round Earth, itself.

Mother Earth. Peace and blessings be upon her.

When the overhead lights came back on, Sophie amused herself by looking around the conference room, trying to pick out the round Earth people. She identified a few - a higher percentage than she'd find waiting in line in the supermarket, or walking down the street - but not as many

as she had hoped. She suspected many of them of having ‘round’ sympathies, but for one reason or another, they couldn’t ‘out’ themselves.

Maybe they needed the work.

There was only one unmistakably round person among the leadership on the platform. Sophie was eager to hear what he had to say. He was visibly upset, fidgeting and muttering to himself. Twice, she had observed him taking a pouch of tobacco from the pocket of his vest, and begin to roll a cigarette; only to look around self-consciously, and return the makings to his vest.

The crowded conference room was making him feel uncomfortable, she thought. Round Earth people need their space. It’s harder for them to live in cities, where everything is so...*compressed*.

Sophie was well acquainted with the symptoms. The prolonged period of maladjustment, and nervousness. The constant stress. She suffered through them every time she ran out of money, and had to return to work at her parent’s delicatessen in New York City.

To begin with, she had to contend with her fathers’ unfortunate habit of pointing out her shortcomings. For the most part, that meant her failure to provide him with grandchildren. She had promised him some, and he was getting tired of waiting.

Sophie desperately wanted to have some kids, but she worried for the children in a world devoid of good news. Before she could start a family, she needed to find out how many round Earth people there were. She knew that they must be out there, going around it, so she travelled herself, hoping to meet them.

Soon after her return to the City, she would make the rounds in the neighborhood to visit her old friends, and exchange stories. Even though Sophie travelled to places of exquisite beauty, the grandeur of it was often difficult to translate into words. A magnificent glacier became a big field of ice, more or less. Snow-capped mountains at sunset were reduced to pink piles of cold rock. Her stories seemed to lack something. They'd come out a bit...flat.

"You'd just have to be there, I guess," she'd say sadly.

She would know nothing of the latest films, or fashions, and they would endeavor to fill her in. Some of her closest friends were busy raising families, and one couple might even have a new baby to introduce to her. After which she would leave their flat feeling rather...depressed.

The City was a hazardous place for round people, and Sophie had learned how to adapt. She *deflated* herself, and then, just like the

well-flattened beer cans littering the streets, she became nearly invulnerable to the press of the traffic.

Even the buildings seemed to respond to the increasing pressure. They rose higher and higher every year, it seemed, taking up as little of the valuable standing room as possible.

The masses in the City were all flattened in the same way. Like a playing card, with both eyes on the same side - the ideal arrangement for watching television. They also stacked more easily that way, which allowed for the more efficient use of elevators, escalators, turnstiles...any place where the shuffling of large numbers of people was required.

Sophie had discovered that she could also flatten herself the other way, like a fish. This had advantages.

Waiting tables, for instance. She could dart between the crowded tables in the deli without causing offense, and with her improved peripheral vision, she was able to give the customers better service, and the tips were a lot bigger. A few customers were always impossible to please, and insisted that she bend over backwards. The effort of realigning herself to accommodate them invariably put her in a bad mood.

Other people in the city were flattened this way. Predators, mainly. Sharks, as she thought of them. Sophie was alert to their presence when

she went out at night, but she didn't worry too much, since her versatility allowed her to present them with a very narrow target.

She seldom went out, though. The jazz clubs were tempting, and the film festivals, but Sophie focused on work. The deli was open seven days a week, and her parents usually took some time off while she was there, so she worked long hours. She was usually asleep by ten, and not much happened in the City before then, anyway.

Petty slights, or insults that would bounce off her when she was round, and full of life, could almost go right through her when she was flat. The customers didn't really know her well enough to know where to aim; although some of the regulars could come close. As long as she kept moving, they usually missed the target. Her parents, however, could connect with a broadside.

They were continually trying to find her a husband. Time to put down some roots, they said. This usually made her think of weeds, which out of sheer desperation had managed to find the soil beneath the cracks in the concrete. Or she might think of the park, and the landscaped gardens, then remember that the sharks liked to cruise the parks. The urinating drunks, too.

During her last stint at the deli, her father was wildly enthusiastic about a guy named Morris. The man had travelled all over the world,

and worked in the tropics, he told her. Something to do with architecture, he said. She had even considered going out with Morris, until she learned that he was a despicable real estate developer, who built timeshare units in Florida, and that her father even *knew* that.

Sophie wished that she were round, then.

She was convinced that most people inflated on occasion, but managed to conceal it, thinking it too embarrassing to display in public, like an erection. Sophie could never tell when it might happen to her. It could begin with something as trivial as noticing the patterns in the ice, freezing around the perimeter of the storeroom window. Or, a brief glimpse at a flock of migrating geese.

Usually, it was in the spring. She'd see the first green buds on the twigs of some newly planted city trees, in their little fenced pens spaced along the sidewalk. Then, the first crocus in the park. The pint of strawberries.

There would be a few incidents. She might be walking down the street, and pause to admire a big maple tree dropping its winged seeds, causing three or four people to bump into her, and mutter to themselves; or actually curse, depending on how severely she had impeded the flow. Or pushing her way into the subway, just like she always did, and suddenly finding it...oppressive.

She would begin eating her lunch in the park. She'd watch the people laughing, their faces full of joy on a sunny spring day. She could almost hear them sigh, as they crumpled their empty lunch bags, and started walking back to the office, looking a bit sad. Deflated, really.

She might take an afternoon off, or an extra hour for lunch, and just wander around the City. The stained glass windows in a church might catch her eye, and she'd walk inside the empty building, and marvel at how the profusion of colored panes appeared to make the air shine, and cast little haloes. An optical illusion, no doubt. She would drop a few coins in the collection box on her way out, and notice the padlocks, and the heavy chain. There's nothing sacred, anymore, she'd think. Not even here.

She might also visit the library, to leaf through the atlas. The solemnity of the building would remind her of the church, but there were no illusions inside, just the facts. They would be stacked from floor to ceiling. Everywhere. It's a good thing they have computers now, she would observe. To make the facts smaller. They've run out of room to put them.

Or she might go to a matinee, to see a film that the customers in the deli had raved about, and feel disappointed afterwards. Even cheated. The movie might have some novel special effects, or other

briefly entertaining illusions, but she'd decide it was just another cartoon.

Sophie would realize that she was becoming round. That she *wanted* to be so. And that continuing to resist would only make her cynical, or possibly vengeful, like so many of the flat people. So she would sort through all of the coins that she had collected off the tables in the deli, and begin wrapping them, counting to see if she had enough. It might not be enough for an airplane, but it was usually plenty for a bus, and she would escape.

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The lights were dimming in the hall, once again. Sophie sat up attentively, having lost track of events, and tried to figure out what was going on. It was another slide show. The speaker was a media person.

The key to the success of the movement lay in providing society with images of heroes, he claimed. He clicked through a series of examples. Many of them showed courageous people clinging to inflatable boats, chasing after whales, or challenging enormous ships.

The color photography was marvellous, she thought.

The movement had to scrupulously avoid any media exposure which portrayed them as extremists, or evoked comparisons with

terrorism, he cautioned. The media loved using images such as that, but they offended potential contributors. He switched to a stark scene of some hysterical and dishevelled women, who had chained themselves to a tree, and were struggling with the police. When the next slide appeared on the screen, the hall erupted.

Some people began heckling and whistling, and many were laughing.

"Good on ya, Nigel!" someone called out.

It was an old black and white photograph of a man standing atop a sabotaged effluent pipe, wild-eyed and unshaven, wearing a muddy singlet and gumboots. He was holding a crudely lettered-sign, 'LOOK! NO MORE SHIT!'. His cohorts posed alongside the pipe, with their fists held aloft. Triumphant.

Sophie suddenly recognized the man on the pipe, and sought him out on stage. Nigel. He had risen to his feet, and was looking back at the screen. When he turned to face the audience, he was grinning widely, and took a deep bow. The abashed speaker had left the podium, checking on the image he'd displayed, and began apologizing profusely.

Taken before his time, apparently.

For the second time in as many days, Nigel found himself labelled a terrorist. It was beginning to bother him. He knew the importance of

the images. The white harp seal pup with its huge, innocent eyes. The humpback whales breaching, and the sea otter lying lazily on its back, cracking shellfish against a stone. The photographs had done more to preserve these species than any protests ever could.

Yet, the survival of those particular animals had been secured largely because they were so photogenic. They had become imaginary *pets*. But what about those endangered species which unfortunately lacked charisma? Or didn't appeal to humans, as pets? Giant clams, for instance. They were in deep shit.

What was endangered in the Solomon Islands, however, was a whole way of life. No marketable image could be printed on a T-shirt, nor could any catchy phrase like 'Save the Whales' express what was worth saving in the islander's traditional culture.

It was all inextricably entwined together.

Nigel had taken *Rainblow* to the Solomons during the previous cruising season, and spent several months anchored in the Marovo Lagoon - planning the demolition, and visiting with his mate, Mpane, who lived on an islet inside the lagoon. Mpane was half Kiwi, and half Solomon Islander; and an expatriate, of sorts, from the Great Barrier family.

Nigel had received a letter from him last week, reporting that the barge had just arrived from Singapore, carrying all the bits and pieces of

the large crane. Mpane estimated that the Consortium would be ready to start loading logs in about three months, so it was possible that Nigel might find a ship moored underneath the crane when he arrived. The letter was mailed over a month ago.

Bloody hell.

It complicated everything, Nigel knew. They might have to sink the ship, as well.

## CHAPTER 3

### COCOS ISLAND

*Exile.* Five miles offshore.

When dawn broke over the atoll that morning, Doc was sitting on the deck of his boat, wondering what might be on the menu for lunch.

*A fresh coconut, straight away.*

*They'll be lying all over the place. Hardly anyone bothers harvesting copra, these days. Certainly, not on Cocos Island. The Australians owned it, now, and the few Malays still living on the island would do a lot better on the dole.*

*Might be some coconut crabs. Crab with grated coconut would do nicely.*

*The crabs preferred deep sand to dig their burrows, though. Even some dirt.*

Doc reached inside the hatch for his binoculars, and searched along the line of coral boulders marking the seaward edge of the reef. There didn't appear to be much dirt.

*All right. Fish, then. I'd prefer fish, anyway. Get cleared in. Find some bait. Then, row out in the lagoon, and catch a fish for lunch.*

The squalls had tapered off during the night. A few fair-weather cumulus clouds floated lazily overhead. The southeast tradewinds were light, and it would be an easy landfall.

Even so, Doc wanted to wait until the sun had climbed a bit higher in the sky before negotiating the passage through the atoll reef. The coral heads were much easier to see when the sun was more nearly overhead, when more of the light penetrated the water, and illuminated the sand and coral underneath, rather than reflecting off the surface as glare.

It gave him some time to clean up the boat, and make it look respectable for his guests. In just a few hours they'd be coming aboard for an intimate conversation.

*Too bad it has to be Customs and Immigration officials. Wouldn't be my first choice. Their little talks remind me of job interviews, or police interrogations. Not exactly my favorite topics.*

Doc's last conversation with Australian Immigration officials had taken place over five years ago, and it hadn't gone very well. It was his own fault, really. He'd made a poor first impression.

His passage across the Coral Sea from the Solomon Islands had been rough, with strong winds most of the way. The landfall was tricky, as the outer Great Barrier Reefs extend nearly thirty miles offshore, making it possible to run aground on them before the lights on the coast were visible. An accurate fix was essential on approach.

He navigated continuously as he closed the coast, and had taken a dozen sextant sights before he was convinced of his position at twilight. Several times, he was doused with a sheet of spray as soon as he stuck his head out the hatch. The sextant would invariably get wet, and he'd have to rinse it with fresh water, dry the mirrors and the telescope, and try again.

He'd been too anxious to sleep, and had stayed up all night, listening for breakers crashing on the reef. As a result, he'd arrived at the quarantine dock unshaven, and bleary-eyed from lack of sleep. His hair was matted down from all the salt. The boat was a sodden mess. Four officials wearing impeccable white uniforms were waiting for him on the dock.

They didn't offer to help with the mooring lines, and didn't seem all that friendly, either. But Doc was so pleased to have made port that he

didn't take proper notice, and started talking to them ebulliently, as if their sole purpose in coming down to the harbor had been to welcome him to Australia.

Big mistake.

Once he had filled out the forms they kept shoving in front of him, they confiscated his passport, forbade him moving his boat off the dock, and ordered him to report to the immigration office, first thing in the morning. Doc was too tired to fully appreciate the potential consequences, and simply went to sleep.

In the early hours of the morning, however, he began to consider his options, if he were refused entry into Australia. New Zealand was a possibility. He'd find work there, but would have to fight his way south against the prevailing winds, without the option of stopping on the long Australian coastline. Then turn left, and cross the stormy Tasman Sea in mid-winter. New Guinea and Indonesia were out. Both countries levied exorbitant visa fees, and he was nearly broke.

He could always return to the Solomons. But there was no work, up there. None, at all. The best option seemed to be Guam. Close to three thousand miles.

Doc rallied, though. He arrived at the Immigration Office looking the image of the sporting yachtsman.

Was he intending to work illegally in Australia? Certainly not. His boatbuilding was really more of a hobby than an occupation. [He'd naively written 'boatbuilder' on one of their forms.]

Did he have sufficient funds to support himself? No problem, there. As a research chemist, he earned a steady income from patent royalties, in addition to a modest pension from the university, following his early retirement. [All of which was false.]

Mercifully they didn't ask to see the money.

The Immigration officer actually became quite friendly, near the end of their little chat. There was even hint of an apology, when the man confessed to being overly suspicious of yachts, because they were so hard to control.

Doc was understandably leery of being 'controlled'. He much preferred being left alone. So they were adversaries. Henceforth, Doc always treated them as such. Yet with the respect one accords a worthy opponent, knowing that he might be facing highly trained professionals, who studied psychological profiles, learned how to analyze body language, and were adept at spotting nervous, or rehearsed speech.

Needless to say, there would be no lunch, without their permission.

*It's like walking up to a restaurant, when you can't remember the last time you had a good meal. You pause to look at the promising menu in the window, and start toward the door in blissful anticipation of the sustenance to come...only to find these surly, uniformed guards barring the door.*

*They'll usually let you in, as long as you don't look too hungry. Seems ironic, in a way.*

Doc began cleaning the cabin. He folded up the bedding, and wiped the most visible surfaces spotlessly clean. Even arranged the pillows. Then, conducted a thorough search for any errant marijuana seeds that might have rolled under the cushions, or fallen through the floor hatches.

He found only three.

This was followed by a sponge bath and a shampoo taken in the cockpit, and a shave over the galley sink. Then, a final cup of coffee, before cleaning the accumulation of grounds from the sink. He carried his mug on deck. He'd drifted a mile or so closer to the atoll.

He realized that he hadn't seen a seabird all morning. Doc always noticed the birds. It would be hard not to, he thought. Anything alive

really stands out at sea, as dramatically as a flower blooming in the desert. Seabirds often visited isolated islands like Cocos in great numbers.

*So where are all the birds?*

*Maybe there's something wrong with the place.*

*A tourist resort? Seabirds would cross the island off their list, if there were jetskis whizzing across the lagoon, or parasailing tourists in the air. I'd do the same, myself.*

Seabirds preferred places where there was no human habitation, at all. Doc had stopped at several remote nesting islands between Madagascar and the Seychelles, where the entire coral surface was covered with raucous colonies of birds. All of those islands had more natural vegetation than that on Cocos.

Coconut palms were a sure sign of human presence. Whenever Doc sought out a village - especially in places which hadn't been overrun by copra plantations, like Fiji or Vanuatu - he always looked for the telltale clump of planted palms.

*He wondered.*

*What if a wandering albatross should alight at what it thought was its home...and find only pigeons? Find that, during its absence, its home had been paved with cement?*

*The pigeons would glance furtively, warily at it, as if an albatross were some kind of criminal. Could it still love them? Or teach them to fly properly? To soar?*

*Inevitably it would take flight, again, and resume its wandering. It is the nature of an albatross, after all. Genetic, as they say.*

*With country after country closing the doors to immigration, wandering might soon be classified as aberrant behavior, much like depression, anxiety, or even unhappiness. As if it were something to be eradicated.*

*A disease.*

*They might even choose the albatross, with its rich repository of nomadic genes, as the ideal species to use for developing a vaccine. A genetically-engineered retrovirus, or something. Prenatal clinics could be established to perform the procedure, and they'd produce happy well-adjusted children, who stayed where they were put.*

*And were so much easier to control.*

The sun suddenly felt hot, on the back of Doc's neck, and he wondered what he was doing, sitting out in the midday sun, while all those unwanted coconuts were lying in the shade of the swaying palms, awaiting lunch.

He hoisted the sails and headed on in.

Surf was breaking continuously along the entire eastern coast of the atoll. He sailed outside the line of breakers, until he came to the entrance - a smooth, turquoise ribbon of water, which led directly into the lagoon. The scattered coral heads were easy to see.

As he passed the westernmost point of the islet, the crescent of white sand that enclosed the anchorage opened up, and Doc saw that he was still alone. There were no other boats, just a solitary yellow buoy. In a few short tacks, he had it close aboard, and dropped anchor.

He lowered the flapping sails, and immediately noticed the silence, as his boat floated quietly, suddenly asleep. A few bits of untended rigging tapped softly against the spars.

*New sounds, now. The light rustling of the palms, and the low rush of the surf on the windward side of the island. Then, the crunch of some small reef fish, nibbling at the barnacles on the hull.*

*Nothing wrong with this place.*

*Home, then.*



## CHAPTER 4

### AUCKLAND

When Nigel arose from his seat to address the conference, he brought his poncho with him, and draped it over the edge of the podium. He straightened his vest, and stood formally behind the microphone, adjusting an imaginary tie.

He cleared his throat.

"First, I'd like to thank everyone for their loyal support of our fund-raising efforts, out on Great Barrier. Many of you have commented on the inflated prices recently. I want to assure you that we have been working tirelessly to increase production, to meet the surge in demand. Getting our hands dirty, I might add. I think you'll agree, when I say that I have some really good news to report."

Sophie sat up alertly.

"Now, bear in mind that we can't be entirely certain, since the latest shipment has only just hit the streets. But current market trends indicate that our extra-fine, defoliant-free sinsemilla has already fallen in price, and is expected to stabilise well below the four hundred dollar mark."

Uproarious laughter and cheering filled the hall. Many in the audience stood to applaud, either grateful for the news, or pleased to have some relief from the grim nature of the proceedings.

"That's all the statistics I have for you, which should be welcome news, as well, given all the crap we've had to listen to tonight. Great Barrier has submitted proposal after proposal to the Executive Committee of this organisation, pleading with them to help our neighbour islands in the tropics. But they're just not interested.

"We've showed them proof of reef fisheries being buried under mining sludge. We've handed them photographs of rainforests being bulldozed into rivers of mud. We've documented the complete lack of environmental safeguards, and the systematic destruction of traditional island cultures...but they're just not bloody interested.

"They've rejected every single proposal. These small countries are out of the spotlight. The media coverage is slight. So the Executive Committee doesn't want to get involved. They prefer the bright lights on centre stage for their photo opportunities.

"They want contributors to like them. To think of them as heroes. Well, fair enough, I suppose. Everybody wants to be liked. But Great Barrier didn't join this coalition because we wanted people to like us. We thought it would increase our effectiveness. Instead, we find ourselves trapped inside an umbrella organisation where the main priority seems

to be avoiding getting wet. They even purchased ten sets of designer foul-weather gear for cruising around in their rubber ducks. I wouldn't be surprised if they start taking along make-up artists on these publicity stunts."

Nigel took hold of his poncho, and slipped it over his head. "We Kiwis on Great Barrier don't care too much about fancy yachting outfits. We don't mind getting wet, either. I reckon it's time we left."

Nigel led the Great Barrier contingent out of the hall in protest then, and many others followed. Most of the rural Northland people. Virtually all the Maoris. There were wild cheers of support. "Good on ya, Nigel!" Even more cat-calls and whistles directed at those who remained seated on either side of the empty podium. "Bloody wankers!"

Sophie's friends from the commune joined in support, and she allowed herself to borne up the aisle along with them, grateful to escape.

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The Great Barrier sailboats were tied up alongside a rusty barge in the commercial harbour. The party had overflowed the crowded deck of *Rainblow*, and spilled over onto the wide, flat deck of the barge. A

charcoal barbecue had been set up there, in a pair of split metal drums, and a crowd of people were gathered around the fire, drinking beer.

The party had started well before the end of the conference, it appeared. Sophie concluded that some of them must not be ecology people, and it raised her hopes for the party.

Two young Maori men were tending the coals. Their faces and arms were covered with elaborate, fierce-looking tattoos, which Sophie thought they'd just painted on for the party. On closer approach, she realized they were genuine.

They were grilling shellfish. The little stones sizzled in the heat of the glowing coals, and began to split open.

"Are those clams?" she asked.

He seemed amused. "Pipis. You talk funny, eh? Where you from?"

"New York City," she said absently, fascinated by the sight of the opening shells, and suddenly feeling hungry. She looked up, and smiled pleasantly.

"Just passing through."

"Hah. That's what they all say," he said.

He began to laugh, which spoiled the fearsome effect of the tattooing, somewhat. He snatched some clams from the fire with a pair of tongs. Then scraped the meat from one with his fingernail to

demonstrate, and popped it into his mouth. He piled the rest on a piece of newspaper, and handed it to her with a wry smile. "When you decide to move in, remember who gave you a feed, eh?"

He then handed her an enormous bottle of beer, after snapping off the cap against the metal edge of the barbecue with the palm of his hand. When she took hold of the bottle, he clinked his own against it.

"Cheers," he said.

Sophie wandered around the barge until she found a place where she could sit down, on top of a bollard. She needed both hands for the clams, and set down the beer. Two litres, the embossed glass said. She needed two hands for that, as well. There were several buckets full of pipis, she saw, as well as some scallops, and at least a dozen large fish.

One of her friends from the commune called from the deck of *Rainblow*, urging her over. Her name was Janine.

"Come and meet Nigel," she said.

Sophie dropped her empty clam shells into the water, and crossed the wooden plank onto the sailboat. When she reached the bottom of the companionway ladder, she gasped, and almost dropped the beer. Right in the center of the cabin, prominently displayed on a shelf next to the chart table, stood a small metal globe. The image of Mother Earth. Peace be upon her.

How could I have been so stupid, she thought.

The *sailors*. They were the first ones. The very first people who knew for certain that the Earth was round. The round Earth people were out there, all right, travelling around it, but many of them must be on the *sea*.

She traced her finger around the globe, never needing to lift it off the blue paint of the ocean. There is only one Ocean, she realized. Various names were printed on the globe - Atlantic, Pacific, Indian - but there were no boundaries on the sea. The flat earth people couldn't divide it up to own it. Or build fences across it.

The globe was a fake. A fabrication the flat people used to indoctrinate their children. Sophie longed to erase all the lines, and paint over the garish pink and purple countries. Add the exquisite, subtle shading of the forests, grasslands, and mountains. Then, a wash of cloud.

"G'day. You must be Sophie. I'm Nigel."

Sophie looked up into Nigel's blue eyes, and saw a reflection of the sea in them, and confirmation of her revelation. Nigel knew. He was one of them. He seemed relaxed, obviously relieved to be back at home, on the water.

"Hi. Loved your speech," she said happily.

Nigel thought he'd never seen such a beatific smile. She was as radiant as an angel. Or else she was really stoned. It looked ecstatic, whatever it was. "Oh, I'm not too good at that sort of thing. It was such a lousy place to hold the meeting. You want a glass?"

"A glass...?"

"For the beer."

"Oh, sure. Thanks."

Nigel searched in the cupboard under the sink, and found an empty glass jar. He unscrewed the metal lid, and set it aside. Dill gherkins, it said. He was still wearing the same vest that he wore to the conference, but he had put on a clean blue shirt. He pulled out a tail of it, and perfunctorily wiped the inside of the jar. She handed him the heavy beer bottle, and he poured it for her, filling up his own glass, as well. The perfect host.

"Janine says you've travelled all over the world with just a small rucksack," he said.

Sophie blushed. She used a full-sized backpack, but without the bulky frame, so she could pass it off as a piece of soft luggage when she went to places where backpackers were regarded as vagrants, more or less.

"I just love travelling, I guess. So do you, to judge by all your books."

"It's more comfortable on the boat, though. I can visit new places, and always be at home. I don't think I could live out of a pack, anymore. Seems too much like work."

"Have you sailed all the, uh...all the way around?"

"Once. In my last boat. I've only been up to the tropics a few times, in this one."

"That's where I want to go next. Some tropical islands. I want to go to sea," Sophie said, surprising herself.

"Really? You've been sailing before?"

"Only in Alaska. It was really beautiful, but so cold." She shivered, remembering the summer she went to see the icebergs.

She had seen some photographs of glaciers in British Columbia that flowed all the way from snow-capped mountain valleys, right into the ocean, and she wanted to see one of them calve an iceberg into the sea. So she made her way to Seattle, where she planned to catch the ferry. The fares were cheap, if you weren't burdened with a car.

On her first day on the ferry, Sophie met a couple who were returning to their sailboat in Alaska. They both had heavy backpacks, so she had taken a seat next to them, feeling some kinship. They had come down to Seattle to get some parts for their boat, see a few friends, and do

some shopping in preparation for sailing down the coast. She asked them about the glaciers.

The only way to witness the calving was by boat, as there was no land access to the rugged coast, except for those prepared to hike for a week, and climb an ice-covered mountain range. Sophie wanted a front row seat. It had to be on a boat.

They had been through the inside passage many times, both on the ferry and their own sailboat. Most of the glaciers in British Columbia were at the head of very steep fjords, they explained, where the mountains continued descending below the water. So there was often no place to anchor. You couldn't expect the calving to occur on cue, as it were. You would have to anchor, and wait for it to happen.

The very best place, they thought, was Glacier Bay in Alaska. They offered to take her along on that leg of their voyage south. She could catch the return ferry at their next stop on the coast.

"You don't mind the cold, do you?"

Cold.

Sophie had never been so cold. Floating in the middle of all that ice. Some of the icebergs born that morning were as big as houses, but they were just scraps compared to the one that the glacier delivered at noon. It was as large as a whole neighborhood, and she worried that the boat would crack in two from the shock of its parting. The taut wire

rigging wailed like the strings of a dropped guitar, and continued to vibrate until all the echoes coming of the mountains slowly faded into the snow.

Nigel's boat reminded her of Alaska. It was panelled with knotty pine boards, like a cabin in the woods. Several kerosene lamps were glowing warmly, while a blackened pot-bellied stove stood ready to provide heat in the winter. It was really comfortable, and full of friendly people.

One of Maoris came below, carrying a platter piled high with steaming shellfish and grilled snapper. Janine followed with a second plate, along with some crusty loaves of garlic bread, and the aromas filled the boat.

Nigel reached out, and took Sophie's hand. "Come and meet everybody. Let's eat."

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Later that night, after all the guests had left, Nigel sat down at the cluttered cabin table, and realized that he had a bit of a problem. How was he going to tell Sophie about the dynamite? It was stowed right

under her bunk, and since she was going to be sleeping on top of it all the way to the Solomons, it seemed the right thing to do.

He had stowed the blasting caps and coils of fuse at the other end of the boat, behind the sail locker, so it wasn't as if he were asking her to do anything truly dangerous by sleeping on top of the dynamite.

Still, he knew he had to tell her.

Even though he could clean out the paint locker at the foot of the bunk, so she would have plenty of room for her pack, she was bound to look underneath the mattress sooner or later, and find the two shrink-wrapped boxes. They were clearly labelled. EXPLOSIVE.

He couldn't forbid her to go in there, not without seeming rude, or making it seem as if he had something to hide. It was her space. You'll have the whole quarterberth to yourself, he'd told her. She wouldn't have agreed to come, otherwise. But, then, she'd want to know why. What's it for? He would have to tell her everything.

Nigel had never met a woman he felt so at ease with, maybe because she seemed so at ease with herself. If she asked him to throw the explosives overboard, he might do it.

No, he couldn't. It was important. And he'd promised Mpane.

Crap.

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When Sophie arrived at the dock in the morning, shouldering her pack, she still hadn't decided how to broach the subject. Janine had briefed her about what she'd learned from her Great Barrier friends at the party. How Nigel and Mpane were planning to demolish the crane.

Sophie didn't know the details, but thought it silly of them to have told so many people about their plans, when they were obviously intending to do something illegal. Nigel looked haggard after his tiring night of wrestling with the moral dilemma, and she could tell that he was worried.

Nigel spoke first. "There's something I have to tell you," he said gravely.

Sophie wanted to hug him, right then, but decided to wait until later. "I already know," she replied.

"What do you mean?"

"I know about the crane, Nigel."

"You couldn't..."

"Janine told me. She heard about it at the party. I think a lot of people know about it."

"Damn."

"It shouldn't be a problem, should it? Unless there's a spy? The authorities in the islands won't have a clue."

"I don't know what to think." Nigel felt betrayed. He thought they'd made a mistake by involving the Executive Committee, but none of them had attended the party. It must have been one of his own people. Drunk, probably. "I'd better destroy all of the hard evidence. Have a look at this, before I burn it."

He handed her the photographs, the letters from Mpane, and everything he'd taken to the meeting with the General Secretary. Then, he began to talk about the islands.

Sophie felt compelled to interrupt at one point, to ask why Nigel was taking along a new chainsaw for Mpane, when their goal was preserving the rainforest. But his explanation made sense. It was the massive scale of the logging, and the exploitative attitude of the logging company that posed a threat to the forest. The islanders periodically cleared new sites for their gardens, and could use the trees selectively. It wasn't the same as wholesale clear-cutting with bulldozers.

"I couldn't bear going to jail, Nigel. I know I couldn't." She had to say it.

"I don't want to minimise the risk. But the only authorities in the lagoon are the village chiefs, and most of them are on our side. There aren't any police, or patrol boats. No electricity, either. It will be completely dark. We'll use canoes."

"Won't they suspect us though?"

"There should be quite a few yachts in the lagoon. It's the cruising season. You'll have a perfect alibi, if you're with some other yachties when we detonate."

Sophie had begun to think of herself as one of the team, and she'd even imagined herself with a blackened face, lighting the fuse. She felt a little disappointed. "What about your alibi?"

"They won't hassle the yachts. I'll be okay."

She had never seen dynamite before, and she pestered Nigel until he agreed to open one of the cases. The sticks looked like the highway flares sold in auto supply shops. "Where did you get it?"

"A neighbour of the old farm in Whangarei. He wanted to split a couple of big rocks in his paddock, where he wanted to build a barn. When the lazy sod learned that he'd have to bore holes in them first, he lost interest. I got it pretty cheap."

"Can we still cruise the islands, after we've blown up the crane?"

"Of course. I have to do this. Then, I'm free. Please come."

"Okay." She agreed without the slightest hesitation.

"You don't mind staying in here? With the dynamite?"

"No. Not really. But I'd rather sleep with you."

"Bloody hell. Why didn't I think of that?"

The innocent look of surprise on his face was irresistibly cute, she thought. He'd be eaten alive in New York. Like a cuddly, chewable bear. "Didn't you? Be honest." She drew him close, and touched the tip of her nose to his.

"Well, I did have some hope for the future." He kissed her nose, and put his arms around her.

"Now, tell me if I'm wrong, but isn't it standard procedure to try out any new arrangements on a boat, before you head out to sea?"

"You're not wrong."

## CHAPTER 5

### COCOS ISLAND

*Exile*. Quarantine buoy.

Doc hoped that his VHF radiotelephone still worked, since he hadn't used it since he left South Africa, over a year ago. He picked up the microphone, but his thumb froze, unable to squeeze the lever.

Telephones made him rather nervous. After trying to talk to a computer a few times, he felt so foolish, so out of touch, that he avoided using them whenever possible. Except for the odd profanity, or greeting to a dolphin - perhaps an occasional word of encouragement to his boat - Doc hadn't uttered an audible word for months. That made it even worse.

He took a deep breath, then exhaled slowly, and pressed the lever.

"Cocos radio? Cocos Island radio? This is yacht *Exile*. Over."

There was no response.

Doc waited about thirty seconds, then repeated the call. A voice came right back.

"Yacht calling Cocos Island, this is Cocos Harbourmaster. What can I do for ya?"

A friendly voice, Doc thought. But he had already decided on a formal approach. He called back. "Good morning, sir. This is yacht *Exile* - Echo, X-ray, India, Lima, Echo. *Exile*. An American flag sailing vessel, arriving from Tanzania. I have dropped anchor behind the quarantine buoy, and request pratique. Over."

Not bad, Doc thought. Calm, and professional.

"Uh...sure. What was that you wanted, again?"

"I require *pratique*. Over."

The Harbormaster was rather slow to respond. "*Teak?* Sorry, mate. Reckon not. Could you make do with some spotted gum?"

Doc stared suspiciously at the radio, not quite believing what he'd just heard come out of it. He repeated his request, taking care to enunciate clearly, and adding the explanation that he needed quarantine clearance from both Customs and Immigration.

"Awright. No worries, then. I'm doing a spot fishing at the moment, a few miles off West Pass. Gimme about twenty minutes, eh?"

"Okay. Thanks."

Doc clipped the mike back into its holder, feeling totally ridiculous.

Doc realized that he'd forgotten to fly his American flag. He fetched it from its place in the far back corner of the chart table, and clipped it onto the backstay.

He was surprised how his attitude towards the flag had softened, over time. Now, he even thought it a handsome banner, sometimes. For the most part, though, he'd have liked it better if it bore the insignia of the Chicago Bears. He had little use for countries, anymore, except for the fact that they supplied the sides for international test rugby, or added a bit of interest, and some color, when he looked at a map. Their borders caused him too many hassles.

Doc's boat usually helped him get past the borders. *Exile* wouldn't fit the profiles of a boat suitable for smuggling. Besides being far too small, it didn't have an inboard engine, just a little outboard motor that hung off the stern on a bracket. Doc always stowed the motor below when he went to sea. It fit nicely in the stern locker. The boat was waterproof, and looked it. It had to be, with all his boatbuilding tools inside.

All the woodwork on the plywood boat was in solid teak, and the fittings cast bronze, most of which Doc had made himself. He was proud of his boat's ability to find him work. *Exile* was like a very loyal, albeit stupid dog, who fetched him something useful now and then, without even asking.

Doc spotted the Harbormaster's boat, skipping across the choppy lagoon on a smooth plane, sending up a thin roostertail. A twin outboard runabout, looked like. It slowed on approach, and a solitary figure left the helm to position some fenders along the rail. He was wearing a wide brimmed canvas hat, but exchanged it for his Harbormaster's cap, which he kept in a battered leather briefcase. He motored slowly alongside, and cut the engines, and they rafted together.

"Welcome to Australia, mate" he said, extending his hand. "You alone on board?"

"Just me."

"You sail this little boat all the way from America?"

"Yeah. Goes pretty well. It was all I could afford." He wasn't your typical bureaucrat, Doc observed. He was barefoot to begin with, and his shorts were dotted with fish scales. He looked very fit. His blue baseball cap bore the insignia of the Australian Customs Service, with a gold embroidered 'Harbourmaster' patch sewn underneath. He introduced himself as Shaun.

"What was your last port, again?" he asked.

"Zanzibar." Doc saw confusion on his youthful face, and elaborated. "Tanzania...East Africa? You probably don't see many boats coming that way. I stopped at some outlying islands in the Seychelles, and Chagos, but I've still got my clearance from Zanzibar."

"Africa, eh? That's beaut. Can I look inside?" Shaun asked, surveying the boat, and eyeing the closed hatch.

"Sure. Climb on down," Doc offered, sliding back the hatch, and pulling out the washboard.

The cabin was like an oven, he imagined, now that the sun was directly overhead.

Doc had discovered that Customs officials felt somewhat claustrophobic, climbing inside his cramped boat. He'd also noticed that the effect was exacerbated, as soon as they started to sweat. So he'd closed the boat up tightly after making the radio call, and even blocked off the cowl ventilator to shut off the supply of fresh air to the cabin. Then neglected to put up the awning.

Now, though, he felt downright inhospitable. Shaun started to climb below, then paused when he felt the heat, and contented himself with merely sticking in his head.

"Brilliant boat, mate. Looks real comfortable, I reckon." He sat down in the cockpit, and opened his briefcase. "Better do the paperwork, eh?"

Doc handed him his passport.

Shaun pulled out a sheaf of dog-eared forms, and rummaged through a tangle of fishing lures and potato crisp packets, trying to find

his stamp pad. "Bloody hell. I wasn't expecting any visitors. Reckon I can leave you the forms, and pick them up tomorrow?"

"Great. I'll put the kettle on," Doc promised.

"One thing. I've written up this fact sheet...you know, to hand out to the yachts, and I'm not sure I got it quite right. Reckon you could look it over for me? Be good to hear a sailor's opinion, eh? You're my first boat."

Amazing, Doc thought. They sent a *rookie* out here.

"Be a pleasure, Shaun. This your first season?"

"Nah. I was Assistant Harbourmaster last year. Got a promotion," he said proudly. "They gave me the job when the old man went on medical disability. He couldn't handle the stress, eh?"

"Stress...?"

"Yeah. Couldn't catch a fish to save his life. He just lost it..."

"That's rough," Doc said sympathetically, in response to the sadness on Shaun's face.

"Another thing, Doc. We had a lot of cyclone activity, this season. Could still be another one, I reckon. I've put down new chain on the mooring, and shackled it around three big coral heads. Dive on it, and have a look. Unless it's a bad one, she'll be right. The sand in the anchorage is good holding, everywhere, but I'd pick up the mooring, if there's any sign of westerly winds. You keep your radio turned on?"

Doc grinned. "Not usually. No."

"Well, we sound the hooter, if we get a warning. If you hear it, give me a shout. Well, wish I could stay to chat longer..." Shaun gathered up his briefcase, and made ready to leave. He was sweating profusely.

"Oh, by the way," Doc asked. "How many yachts stopped here, last season?"

"Seventy-two."

Shaun started his engines, then remembered something, and bent down momentarily. He tossed over a can. An ice-cold Foster's.

"Cheers, mate."

Shaun opened the throttle before Doc could say anything, and quickly brought the boat up to speed, taking the HMS Customs patrol boat back on duty, guarding the border.

The beer was so cold that it commanded Doc's attention. He couldn't allow it to get warm, like everything else, and let its coldness simply go to waste. A chip of ice was clinging to the top of the can. He licked for it, but the ice escaped, and wedged itself defensively under the pull tab. Doc cracked the seal, and tried to trap it with his finger, but it slid down into the beer, choosing suicide.

It appeared that lunch would deliver itself, once he found some bait. Fish were swimming all around the boat, in numbers.

*Fish aren't very satisfying company, are they? So cold and spiny, and covered with scales, and all. And not a feathered friend in sight. The place seems so suitable, too.*

*For mating.*

*Would there be one? An independent woman? Searching, possibly longing for a mate? Probably not. Seldom are. Unlike the solitary seabirds, human nomads tend to migrate in pairs. Still. Could be the odd stray. Or stowaway.*

## CHAPTER 6

### HONOLULU

#### *Yacht, Footloose*

The leak was getting rapidly worse. Claire was sure, now. She had counted. Fifty-six strokes of the handle, until the bilge pump sucked air. Yesterday, it had only taken forty-four. Thirty the day before. At first, she had blamed the holes in the deck for the additional water accumulating in the bilge, but it hadn't rained.

Damn.

The foredeck of the old motorboat was badly infected with dry rot. There were a few places where she could push a screwdriver clean through the plywood, and one of the deck beams had rotted away completely, where leaking rainwater had gathered inside. Claire knew where the soft spots were, and avoided them, but ever since the Coast Guard inspector put his foot through the deck, she didn't go up there, at all.

He had concluded his report with the assessment that the vessel was unseaworthy, and posed a potential hazard to navigation in the lagoon. It was in imminent danger of sinking, he said, which seemed overly dramatic at the time, but now she wasn't so sure.

The boat had been declared a derelict, and the harbormaster had notified her a few days later, that unless repairs were made within two months, her snug little home would be towed away, and destroyed. Claire had phoned the owner of the boat, and asked if he could make it seaworthy.

"You must be joking," was his response. As the registered owner of the vessel, he had received a copy of the surveyor's report in the mail.

"But I'm willing to help fix it," she pleaded.

"Claire, you don't understand. What they mean by 'seaworthy' is that the boat must actually be able to *move*. Go out of the harbor."

"So?"

"She hasn't left that mooring for ten years. If you scraped off all the barnacles holding her together, she'd probably fall apart. The engine is seized up. Somebody even stole the propeller. She's finished."

"But I don't have anywhere else to live. How am I going to find another place? In Honolulu?" She had started to panic.

He advised her that she had better start looking, and that, if she were lucky, the harbor authorities wouldn't get around to moving it for months. Until then, she could stay on rent-free. It was generous, Claire knew, and the best that he could do.

She had lashed a tarpaulin over the bow, which covered the big hole in the deck, and had been counting on at least two month's grace

before being evicted. But, now, with the hull leaking...she had to make a move. Soon.

She rowed the dinghy over to *Footloose*, and asked John's help, finding the source of the leak. John, and his wife, Mary, had been Claire's neighbors for nearly six months. Claire was the same age as their youngest daughter, and they had taken her, and her troubles, under their grandparental wing.

John and Mary decided to go sailing shortly after this daughter had married, and bequeathed their house to the newlyweds. They had completed two leisurely circumnavigations since, and were busy provisioning their boat for yet another ocean crossing. John poked around the bilge of the old wooden launch, until he thought he'd found the problem.

"Worm in the garboards," he said. "Can't tell if that's all, though. Everything's too wet. But this plank here's got worm, for sure." He pointed it out to her, and stuck the tip of his knife into the wood. A bead of water welled up on top of the painted surface. "It's hollow, you see."

Keehi Lagoon was the only safe anchorage on Oahu where visiting overseas yachts could stay for an extended period without having to pay marina fees. The marinas only kept a few token berths available for

visitors, in any case, so the lagoon was usually crowded. Although the surrounding area was largely zoned for industrial use, some condominiums had recently been completed on the foreshore.

They were really getting desperate for land, she thought, since the usual incoming flight path into Honolulu International airport was directly overhead, and there were a few periods - early morning, late afternoon - when you couldn't think, for the noise. The new tenants were moving in, though, and the authorities were clearly coming under pressure to clean up the lagoon. The liveaboard derelicts, such as Claire's, were considered an eyesore - squatters, more or less - and they had to go.

She had never lived on a boat before, and although it had taken her awhile to get used to the peculiarities of life afloat, she had come to love it.

Claire didn't have too many possessions, but she appreciated quality, and it distressed her to find some of her favorite clothes - things she'd been attached to even before she started law school - dotted with rust stains around the buttons, or unusable after the zippers had frozen solid with corrosion. The chrome plating on the metal toes of her favorite boots had blistered, and flaked away from the rust underneath.

She gradually learned how to row the dinghy ashore without catching the tip of an oar, and covering herself with salt spray; and when she went shopping for a waterproof rucksack, or spent an afternoon rummaging through the used clothing on sale at the flea market, the first thing she checked was the zippers. She started carrying her shoes in the rucksack, or simply left them at work, and went barefoot in the dinghy.

The tourists that routinely swarmed over all of Hawaii's beaches never came to this industrial area, and the sandspit which separated the lagoon from the Pacific Ocean was usually deserted. There was the odd tire, or discarded auto battery, but still...shorebirds often gathered there.

She spent many pleasant hours watching their antics, and had even bought a field guide to Hawaiian birds to learn more about them. She had resisted buying the book on several occasions when she visited the bookshop, partly due to its price, but also because identifying them seemed too much like collecting. Pleasantly, though, she discovered that knowing their names made them seem more like friends.

She would sit under the pilothouse canopy, watching the birds, and the waves breaking on the sandspit, until the sun sank silently into the sea. Then linger on, and wait for the brilliance of the sunset to fade before lighting the kerosene lamp for an hour or so, until she found sleep.

The yachties occasionally organized an barbecue on the spit, and usually invited her. She drove into the city nearly every day, and more often than not, would give a lift to one of them. Although she usually brought nothing more than a pack of hot dogs and some wine, she was always invited to share in the homemade casseroles, salads, and cakes which they had prepared on their boats. Claire thought them charmingly domestic.

She seldom cooked anything elaborate for herself, anymore. It hardly seemed worth the trouble. She had to ferry out all the water she needed to wash the dishes, and since only one burner on the old kerosene stove burned cleanly, she was restricted to a single pot. The oven was too encrusted with corrosion and congealed mold to even consider rescuing.

With a little planning, she could still prepare something interesting, by cooking things in the proper order; for example, doing the rice first, and keeping it warm under a towel while she made a stir-fry to put on top of it. Usually, however, 'interesting' meant buying a whole basket of food, in order to have all the ingredients she needed. She would invariably end up with too much in the pot, and had no fridge for the leftovers.

Her diet gradually changed to suit her simple kitchen. She ate a lot more fruit, and raw carrots. Potatoes and onions kept well, and eggs

were reliable for more than a week. She planted a small garden on deck in a couple of shallow wooden crates that she found abandoned outside the fruit market, and grew scallions, so she no longer had to buy a whole bunch when she only needed one or two for an omelette; and thyme and basil, which added a bit of flavor to boiled potatoes, or fried rice.

She loved to cook, though, and when she was honest with herself, she had to admit that the reason she didn't bother anymore was because it was just too demoralizing, taking the care required to cook something really special, when she knew there was no one special to share it with.

For the first few years, she had excused herself, since she was in mourning. Ceaselessly, mourning the loss of her husband. The rotten shit. How many years, now? Seven? No, eight.

She had supported him for nearly that length of time, while he finished university, and then graduate school, by working as a secretary in the Law School. Typing. Every day, she would type, and then do all the cooking, and even the cleaning up afterwards. Then, just when she was considering going back to the university to finish her own degree, he told her that he'd fallen in love with someone else. That he'd been sleeping with her on and off for years, in fact. While Claire was *typing*.

It wasn't his fault, he said. He just didn't find her exciting, any longer. She had become domestic, and routine. *Boring*, he told her. Her

first thought, after the initial shock wore off, was that he must be right. How could it be otherwise? After all that mind-numbing typing, she was bound to boring.

She simply lacked the resolve to improve herself, he explained. Though he'd constantly tried to help her, her flaws were too deeply ingrained, her laziness too intractable. Just look at yourself, he said. Chipped nail polish, and smudged mascara. Dull, unkempt hair. And there, on her thigh, that was a trace of cellulite, wasn't it?

Although his comment about the mascara seemed unfair - she'd been crying, after all - she trusted his assessment implicitly. She always had. It explained why he had lost interest in sleeping with her. She'd let herself go.

Initially, she couldn't bear the thought of continuing to live in the same city with him, and considered travelling - Guatemala, or Cuba came to mind - but she didn't have enough money, and never even took a day off from work. Just kept on typing.

Even when all the subtle cruelties in his betrayal slowly became clear to her, the mourning didn't cease. She simply deleted him as its object. Then, her mourning even seemed to grow, and become sanctified.

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When Claire finally finished her degree, and discovered that her political science diploma qualified her for doing little more than, well...typing, she decided to continue on, and go to law school. She almost felt qualified to work as a lawyer by then, anyway, given her experience working as a legal secretary, routinely writing reports and letters that went out with her boss's signature. She wouldn't get the commensurate salary, though, without the degree.

She had only completed the first year, when her career plans changed abruptly. It had been a Friday lecture, she recalled, and a few groups had gathered around the hall, afterwards, discussing their plans for the holiday weekend. Claire had been looking forward to the extra day. She could finish typing all the documents for Legal Aid, and still have an entire afternoon for herself. Maybe take in a matinee. The professor motioned to her as she was heading for the exit. He walked over, smiling.

"I enjoyed your brief, Claire. Showed some real passion. The court would find your arguments hard to dismiss."

She fumbled for words. "The case interests me," she said. Passion? Her brief had been very thorough, she felt, and yet concise, but what she had been trying to achieve was something more like...dispassionate. It bothered her.

"If you have a few minutes, there's something I'd like to discuss with you."

She agreed reluctantly, and walked with him down the deserted hall, discussing the case. From a few of his comments, she realized he hadn't understood some of her main arguments, nor read the pertinent article in the latest law review. Maybe he was overworked, too. He opened the door for her, and followed her inside, closing it behind him.

"Seems like everybody's grateful for the long weekend," he said, cheerfully changing the subject.

"I know I am," Claire agreed.

His cluttered desk stood to one side of the door, and he pulled out his swivel chair and offered it to her, while clearing a corner of his desk for himself, using his briefcase like a broom to sweep all the papers aside. She remained standing, next to the chair, hoping to give the impression that she didn't plan to stay very long.

"Do you have any plans?" he asked.

The chair was an antique - English oak, she thought - and quite valuable. She swivelled it back and forth, admiring it. "Oh, just the usual, I guess. I have a lot of work to get done. Might manage a film, though."

"Why don't you join me?" he said, leaning close to her, and stroking her arm. "We'll have fun."

She recoiled at his touch, but tried to stay calm. She hadn't foreseen this. "I can't make any plans. Really, I just can't." She wanted to move toward the door, but he stuck out his leg, blocking the way. He was smirking.

"Come on. I insist."

She suddenly despised him, for the way he was leering at her. "I'm sorry. I have to go."

He stood up, barring the door. "Your career could really go places, Claire, if you'd stop being so boring."

"You rotten shit!" she snarled. She faced up to him, fuming. "Boring?"

He lunged forward, then, and ripped open the front of her blouse. His eyes were on her breasts as he grabbed for her, and Claire saw her chance. She clawed at his eyes, and the ferocity of her attack caught him by surprise. He raised his arms, frantically trying to fend her off, and she brought her knee up sharply into his groin. He gasped in pain, hunching down. She violently pushed his face away, and he staggered back into the edge of the desk, straightening up. She took a full stride forward, and kicked up at him as hard as she could. He screamed horribly, and crumpled to the floor.

She rushed past, and escaped into the hall, crashing into the wall on the other side and sliding down along it to the floor. The sharp metal

toe of her boot glistened with a few drops of blood. She started to cry. Claire had never hurt anyone before. Never in her life.

The screaming in the office resounded throughout the building, and people soon came running down the hall to investigate. There were calls for an ambulance, and Claire was tended to by some fellow law students.

The women's student caucus urged her to press charges of attempted rape against the professor, and several of their number came forward and told of past incidents of sexual harassment by him, as well. The probability of a conviction seemed high. She felt remorse for having kicked him so hard, though, especially when the doctors were unable to save his ruptured testicles. A radical vasectomy had been performed on him before he got here, they said.

When the administration of the law school offered her an out-of-court settlement of fifty thousand dollars, she accepted. She tried to continue studying, but after a few disinterested weeks, and several incidents when male students passing her in the hall would cover their privates in mock terror, she decided to quit. Claire had never been all that interested in becoming a lawyer, anyway. She just didn't want to have to type, anymore.

Claire put the cash in the bank, and, initially she thought she could manage to live on the interest, if she were really frugal, and took some part-time work, now and then. It was unrealistic, of course. The interest rates were meagre, and she couldn't resist spending some of her capital. A nice tent and a down sleeping bag, to start with. Then, lenses for her new camera. And a station wagon to carry it all.

She spent a year camping in the desert, in Arizona and New Mexico, photographing the patterns in the sand, and the myriad rock formations, but didn't sell enough of them to even cover the cost of the film. She didn't put much effort into marketing them, though.

A friend from the law school convinced her to take a job with Arizona Legal Aid, as a paralegal, helping to interview clients and prepare cases; but too much of their work involved trying to find loopholes in the immigration laws, or helping the underclass avoid having their televisions repossessed, and she soon became disillusioned. It was like guerrilla war. Or, guerrilla theatre, maybe.

She moved up to the Pacific Northwest, for a change of scenery, and took a part-time job at the Native American Law Center, doing research and helping to write briefs. The work was fairly interesting - litigation concerning treaty fishing rights and land claims - but there were some political hassles over the fact that Claire's ancestors were

colonists; and when she made the mistake of typing a personal letter in the office, there was some resentment, as well. They couldn't accept her refusal to help with the typing. It's so easy for you, they said.

She took her camera into the mountainous wilderness areas whenever she could, and photographed the snow. Or drove out to the majestic coastline, and studied the tidepools. The perpetual rain drove her away in the end, and she moved to Hawaii.

She had only planned to stay a few months, and live in her tent while she photographed the lava flows. But she'd been there almost two years, she realized. Claire knew that she couldn't continue to live in Hawaii on the money she was earning. Not with her boat sinking. She couldn't afford the outrageous rents. Her job providing legal counselling at the Women's Crisis Center had only come about because she had offered them her services. They were now paying her a small salary, after persistent appeals to the Hawaiian Bar Association for a grant, but it wasn't much.

She was beginning to show the initial symptoms of burnout, anyway. Her feelings of empathy had largely evaporated, and her reservoir of sympathy was running dry. Some of the women who came in to see her were incredibly hard cases. It didn't seem to matter if they'd been brutally beaten up, or been cheated out of everything they owned,

including their self-esteem. Even if they had seen their children abused, all they really wanted was to get the bastard to love them, again. To get that incredible feeling back, just one more time.

They always had a name for the source of their suffering. Or the focus of their grief. It was Jimmy. Or Peter. Whoever. It seemed totally irrelevant to Claire. It mattered as little as the brand of scotch would to an alcoholic. The symptoms were always the same. It was an addiction.

She wanted to hug them, and tell them how it wasn't their fault - that it was a disease - but that wasn't her job. Instead, she told them how to file for a divorce, or get custody of the children, or obtain a restraining order. Maybe it helped. She hoped so.

Claire thought that her feelings about love must be close to what an abstaining junkie feels toward heroin. It felt so good while you were into it, and it had such amazing power...but, shit, could it mess up your life. The constant longing for it. It was always there.

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Claire decided that she might benefit from some wise counselling, herself, and rowed over to *Footloose* to visit Mary. The dinghy was missing, but she'd caught a glimpse of Mary on deck. She'd probably sent John shopping, again.

Mary answered her call from belowdecks, and invited her aboard. Nearly every surface in the galley was covered with cooling Mason jars. They exchanged smiles.

"You know how Johnny likes at least one good meal a day," Mary said. "Believe me, this is easier than cooking at sea. How's the leak?"

"A little worse, maybe. Doesn't matter." Claire sniffed inquiringly.

"Chicken curry. Beef with oyster mushrooms. Hope you're free for dinner. I ran out of jars in the middle of the beef."

Mary was beaming. The canning of the meat was a ritual, regularly performed before a season's sailing, and she was eager to leave Honolulu in her wake.

"There's another smell, though," Claire wondered aloud.

"Must be the apple crumble in the oven. Vanilla. Thought I'd use up the old beans before we get to the South Pacific. We'll get some fresh, there. You will stay for dinner, won't you? I know Johnny wants to talk to you."

"Well, since there's apple crumble..." Claire laughed. A good meal, according to John, always included dessert. "Okay if I put the kettle on?"

Claire set about making coffee, finally feeling comfortable about intruding into Mary's galley. She felt intimidated, at first, but she often

shared meals with them, and felt obliged to share the work. Besides, she hated having Mary wait on her, all the time.

She had learned that each cup of coffee required four strokes of the foot pump. ['No point boiling water that you don't need. Wastes gas.'] That everything had to be stowed back in its proper place. ['Never know when you might need to find something in the dark.'] That every time you opened a latch on a door, you never forgot to close it, again. ['A gale at sea will always find you out, if you start forgetting things.']

Claire had to admire the tidy efficiency of the small kitchen ['It's a galley, Claire.'], but couldn't imagine what it might be like during a storm. She had never been sailing in her life.

Mary reported on their progress in getting *Footloose* ready to go to sea, while Claire related a few of the latest disaster stories from the Crisis Center. These accounts usually horrified Mary, yet riveted her attention, like some video footage from a refugee camp, or the frontline of a war zone.

Claire went on deck when John arrived, worried that her dinghy might be in the way, but he was already climbing aboard. His weathered face was shaded by the wide-brimmed straw hat he always wore, to keep the sun off his bald spot. He handed her an insulated bag.

"Butter pecan," he announced, grinning.

"Why didn't you borrow the car?" It was a long walk to the store.

"Trying to get fit," he said, flexing his shoulders. "I've gotten a bit slack, just lounging around. Long trip ahead."

Claire held out the ice cream in front of her, and made a point of appraising it. Then, looked over at John and shook her head, as well as the bag, in mock reproach.

"Just provisioning for the trip, Claire. A little body fat to keep me warm. All of us marine mammals need it."

They shared a quiet dinner, with little conversation. Mary was a splendid cook, and the food dominated the occasion. When Claire had cleared the table, Mary poured some coffee.

"There's something we'd like to talk to you about," John began. "Mary and I are getting on in years, you know. You've probably noticed that Mary's showing some signs of arthritis?"

"No...Mary?" Claire hadn't noticed a thing.

"It's a trifle, really. My wrists do ache a bit, after a few sail changes. Sometimes, I wish we still had that little sloop we started out on. She was so easy to sail. I think Johnny's forgetfulness is more of a worry."

"Comes and goes, you know. It has gotten a lot harder for me to stand watches, at sea. Sometimes, I just can't concentrate." It would put anybody to sleep, he felt.

They have rehearsed this, Claire thought. They are trying to get me to worry about them. I *am* worried about them, she realized. She looked closely at Mary. Studied her face.

"And there's always the worry that one of us might get hurt. Break a bone, or something. They get brittle when you get older, you know. I don't know if I could handle *Footloose* by myself." Mary glanced over at John.

"We've been thinking that maybe it's time we considered taking a younger person along. You know...a crewmember." John said.

"The problem is finding someone we can get on with," Mary added. "It's not easy. On a boat."

"We've agreed that if you were to come along with us, it would solve all our problems."

"It would be a big help," Mary said, looking intently at her, and smiling encouragingly.

"But I'm not a sailor!" Claire protested.

John's eyes were on her, too. "We're really serious, Claire. We'd love to have you come along. In part, because it would be good for us. It

would make this trip more of an adventure. Somehow, more...fresh. The sailing bit's easy."

"And also because it would be good for you," Mary continued. "When you tell me about all the people you see at the Crisis Center, do you know what it reminds me of? A zoo. All those poor, caged animals...pacing in circles, mutilating themselves, trampling their own young. You need a change, Claire."

"The way I see it," John said, "You're a bit...adrift. Now something drifting doesn't choose where it goes. It gets borne about. Of course, it can be pleasant living like that. I often do it myself. But there's something wonderfully mischievous about deciding to stick up a little sail one day, just because you're curious about what might happen. Or maybe the direction you're heading isn't all that great to begin with, and you find that you can go wherever you like. You can really use your imagination, then." John smiled, and sipped his coffee. "You seem an imaginative sort of person to me, Claire."

Mary reached over and took her hand, and gave it an affectionate squeeze. "I know we've left it a bit late. You're forced to make a change in any case, since you're losing your boat. We just thought we'd offer you another option."

Claire tried to imagine herself out on the ocean, sailing. She did wonder about it, sometimes, looking at the sunset, watching the birds. What it would be like to be out there, with them.

"I'll have to think about this," she announced, looking at each of them, in turn, warmly acknowledging her appreciation of their offer. "Could we have the apple crumble, meanwhile?"

They all laughed, which gave Claire some room - a little space in which to gather her thoughts. Adrift. John was right about that. She had been drifting for years. Why not drift a little further? All the way to some South Pacific islands?

When she considered her options, after it became clear that she would have to make a move, the island of Oahu began to feel like a prison. The only route of escape was the airport. She pictured the helpful airline ticket agent, standing behind the counter in one of their snappy, tropical motif uniforms, apologizing.

"I'm sorry, but I can't issue you a ticket unless you have a destination."

Claire knew they wouldn't let her leave unless she had one. Some destination. She could always lie. Just pick one at random off the departure board. It occurred to her that she should ask some questions, like where John and Mary were going, to start with.

After dessert, John pulled out a few charts, and the three of them gathered around the saloon table, while he traced out the possible routes they could take. Their destination, if you could call it that, was Madagascar. They'd sailed around the Cape of Good Hope once, and spent a few months in Cape Town, but the politics in the area being what they were, they had missed all of East Africa south of Dar Es Salaam. Mary was keen to see all the lemurs that lived in the rainforests on the northwestern coast of Madagascar.

Claire was surprised when John told her that they planned to spend almost a year and a half to get there. They reassured her that there were airports everywhere, and that if she hated it, she could always fly back to...wherever.

There were only a few constraints. The passage through the Torres Strait had to be taken in early May, just after cyclone season. Mary had her heart set on visiting Fiji, again, and they both insisted on Cocos, an isolated atoll in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

"We can't miss Cocos," John explained. "It's one of the few places left that a cruising sailor can call a home."

As for the rest, they could make a joint decision later on, and just head out toward some of the isolated atolls near the equator that provided the closest stop along the way. They had received a good report

from a friend who had visited Canton Island. "We'll aim for that one, and see what happens," Mary said.

It was the sort of destination that Claire could commit herself to. She asked a few more questions, until she realized that she was only gathering further information to confirm a decision she'd already taken. "Just one more question," she said, finally. "When do we leave?"

"Whenever we're ready."

How charming, Claire thought. If only the airlines could post departure times like that. Whenever. She was beginning to like this. What it was doing to nourish her imagination. John was right about that, too.

Claire went to inform the Harbormaster about the worsening leak, after she had moved the last of her possessions off the old launch, since she pumped so long that final morning that she lost count, and she didn't want to leave behind a sunken ship inside the lagoon. She didn't like leaving a big mess when she moved on. It seemed rude.

He thanked her, and said he would put an engine-driven pump aboard, to keep it afloat until the tow could be arranged. It would be buried at sea, he said, although he thought the Navy might be keen to shoot a few holes into it, first. A couple on a German yacht agreed to

purchase her old car when she left, which was ideal, since she could continue to use it until *Footloose* was ready to sail.

She was convinced they were buying too much food. The cash register tape from the supermarket stretched out to six feet, or more. And that was in addition to all the canned fruit and pasta, which they bought by the case. There was food everywhere. Mary spent hours peeling the labels off the cans, and writing the contents, and the date, on the end of each naked, anonymous tin with a felt marker. The paper labels absorbed water in the damp, she explained, and encouraged rust.

Mary found space to stow them all, though, and *Footloose* soon looked her usual tidy self inside, except for some mesh nets bulging with oranges and grapefruit, which were suspended like hammocks in the spaces between the cabinets. Claire had pruned back her thyme plant, and transplanted it into a plain clay pot, and lashed it into a net of its own, next to a portlight window. Mary liked it, and it made Claire feel more at home.

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The channel leading out of the lagoon was quite short, and *Footloose* passed quickly through it, and emerged into the open ocean.

The moderate tradewinds predicted for the next few days were barely rippling the water off the leeward coast, and the ocean was almost as smooth as the lagoon. It was like going through a gate, Claire thought. She was obviously outside the land, and the perspective changed completely.

Claire watched intently as the skyline of Honolulu slowly spread out, while the individual buildings started receding. She turned her gaze forward, briefly, toward the opening horizon. The ripples had grown to little waves as they cleared the land, and they shimmered in the early morning sunlight.

She identified places she'd often visited in her travels around the city, and marvelled at how differently they appeared from her new vantage point out on the ocean. Mary joined her along the aft rail to share the lovely view. The impressive wall of high-rise hotels and tourist apartments along Waikiki Beach dominated the scene. Some of the newer buildings were terraced, and adorned with pastel panels, and gardens of potted, flowering trees. Cascades of vines draped from the balconies, adding a splash of greenery to the monotonous boxes of glass, and masonry.

Gradually, she was able to see more features of the island, itself. The grandeur of the buildings faded quickly, and they soon looked artificial, as the city became just a feature on the coast. The rugged

aspect of the island soon became dominant - the pinnacles of volcanic rock, the ravines carved into the mountains by the tropical rains, and the pass where the funnelled tradewinds blew so hard you had to strain to maintain your balance. The further offshore they sailed, the more she was able to envision how the island might have appeared, before the hotels arrived. It was only possible with separation. With a new perspective.

For some reason, she thought of psoriasis. She recalled the wording of an advertisement for some brand of skin cream. The 'heartbreak of psoriasis'. Was it incurable? She couldn't recall. The suburbs and the city looked like scabs. Scabs of cement on the lush, green skin of the island.

She found the horizon ahead drawing her attention more and more often. When she turned her gaze ahead, once, John was looking back at her, and smiling, from where he stood at the helm. He reached down, and switched off the engine. Mary turned around, too. He leaned toward the pair of them, in the most suave manner he could effect, and said casually, "Let's boogie."

Claire had learned a lot about boats during the time she spent in the lagoon, but the sailing was new. So, she observed, while John and Mary began to rig *Footloose* for downwind sailing; and listened, while

they explained what they were doing, and why. They asked her to help with something occasionally, but for the most part, she watched. Cause no harm, she told herself.

Soon they were up and sailing along under twin jibs. Just two large triangular sails, set on either side of the mast, and held out to present their full area to the wind with long telescoping poles. It was not a flexible arrangement, they told her. If the wind were to come around, and fill a sail on the wrong side, it was possible to break a pole, if it happened suddenly, in strong winds. The wind was light, though, and John said it would get more exciting in a day or two, when the wind picked up.

It was pretty exciting, now, Claire thought. The boat felt so much different with the engine switched off. So quiet. She marvelled at the soft sound of the water moving along the hull, and there seemed to be almost no sound, other than that. Then, she heard a slight gurgle from one of the cockpit drains. A flutter from the edge of the flag. The engine was located right underneath the floor of the cockpit, and the harsh vibration from it had overwhelmed the light motion which she felt in her feet, now, as the boat moved in rhythm with the waves.

John asserted his authority as captain, and decreed a schedule of watches. Claire was to serve hers on deck, steering by hand, while the

seasoned hands, as he put it, could switch on the electric autopilot and stay below drinking coffee, or reading a book, and just take a look around, now and then. Claire had to learn how to steer properly. Pay her dues.

The bright lights of Honolulu were just a glow on the horizon after sunset, and paled in significance compared to the steady brightness of a few nearby ships. During Claire's first night watch, Mary came up and sat with her for awhile, explaining how to interpret the orientation of their colored navigation lights, and trying to guess where the ships were going. Or where they might have come from. John peered out of the hatch, once, to ask if she wanted a cup of coffee; and Mary later brought a second cup, along with a few chocolate chip cookies. She had plenty of time alone, though, to concentrate on her steering. Get the feel of it.

She could actually feel the pressure of the waves on the rudder, transmitted through the tiller to her hand, and learned how the rhythm would change if she started to go off course. The swinging compass card could hypnotize her eyes after awhile, with its soft red glow, and she wouldn't notice it slowly straying, but the touch of her hand on the tiller would warn her if it happened. Or she might feel a change in the wind direction flowing past her ear. Or hear the slight flap of a sail.

The trick to doing it smoothly, she thought, was to stay alert enough to respond to the warnings while they were still soft, just a

whisper above silence; well before an angrily flapping sail, or the rude slap of a wave against the hull would require a hard pull on the tiller in order to restore the harmony. She felt a bungler, then.

It required more effort and concentration than she had first imagined, and at the end of her watch, she crawled into her bunk, and fell instantly asleep.

She awoke to the sound of Mary scrambling eggs in the galley, then noticed the whoosh of the water sliding along the side of the hull, just inches away from her shoulder. Outside. She took in the sounds around her, until the brass handle of the portlight flashed a reflection of the sunrise across her eyes, and she realized where she was. At sea. The rolling, sliding motion of her bunk suddenly seemed a very odd thing, and she bounded out of it.

Although it was officially John's watch, he was still asleep. Mary had stayed up all night, too excited for sleep her first night back at sea, and was cooking herself breakfast. She had brewed a full thermos of Kona coffee, but Claire strode right past it and rushed out on deck, anxious to see.

Hawaii had disappeared. The ships she watched during the night had gone on their way. She scanned the horizon to make sure, but there

was only ocean, and it was just the way she thought it would be. It was *big*.

The lower limb of the sun was just pulling itself free of the horizon, and the whole of it was tinged with orange. Claire could still look directly at it, but not for very long. A sooty shearwater skimmed along the trough of a wave, passing over the wake of the boat, then banked up and over the crest, into the following trough, and crossed back once again.

"Breakfast, Claire?" Mary asked, standing on the middle rung of the ladder, and holding out a mug of coffee.

Claire accepted it eagerly, and gave her hand a little squeeze. "Oh, Mary, it's a lovely sight. Haven't you slept, at all?"

"I stayed up to watch the sunrise. All those months in Honolulu...I missed them. How did you sleep?"

"I can't remember!" Claire laughed.

They shared breakfast in the cockpit, and Mary explained that she was letting John sleep, since he usually felt slightly seasick the first day or so at sea, especially after such a long time in port. "He'll find his sea-legs, soon," she said. She showed Claire how to work the controls on the autopilot, and told her she could steer by hand, if she felt like it, but not to worry. Then she went below to get some sleep.

Claire had the boat to herself all morning. In the middle of her third coffee, she realized that she really missed her morning paper. An addiction, she thought. She wandered below, looking for something to read. Although she'd brought along a big stack of fiction paperbacks, she was in the mood for journalism, and settled on the South Pacific Handbook from the library on *Footloose*, instead.

She steered for awhile, and discovered that it was much easier in daylight. She rarely had to check the compass, and relied on the relative position of the sun, or the angle of the waves, instead. A few storm petrels appeared, bouncing along the waves, and picking at the sea with their long, grasping claws.

She spent most of the morning just watching the birds, and the sea. The waves were as even as furrows, plowed all the way to the horizon. It reminded her of Kansas.

The sudden disruption of their shoreside routines affected all of them. When John appeared, Claire went to her bunk intending to read, but fell asleep after a few pages. No one had the energy to organize a meal, and they all fended for themselves.

Claire's rotation for the night watch began at midnight. The wind had freshened a little, and *Footloose* was much livelier, and the steering not so subtle.

She noticed some light, astern. A ship, she thought. Claire fetched the binoculars from their holder just inside the main hatch, and looked closely, but she couldn't see any navigation lights. Just a diffuse orange glow above the horizon. It must have a very bright light on deck, though, to carry so far.

She continued watching. It almost looked like a fire, with the light reflecting off the clouds, or a pall of smoke. She had neglected the steering, and a wave caught the stern quarter. She stumbled slightly, as the boat heeled over, but managed to push the tiller soon enough to avoid back-filling the sail.

When she had steadied the boat back on course, she looked again for the light. It was unmistakably brighter, and more yellow, with a smoky, orange loom.

It had to be a fire, she decided, and a big one. An oil tanker. Something with a lot of fuel. She was growing alarmed, but unsure about what she should do. It was the law of the sea, wasn't it? To offer assistance to a ship in distress? She considered turning around, but that wouldn't work, since the sails were rigged for running downwind.

The crew! There would be lifeboats in the water!

She leaned into the cabin and called John. He appeared in seconds, responding to the alarm in her voice.

"John, there's trouble. A ship!" she told him, as he scrambled up the ladder to join her. She pointed it out, and handed him the glasses. "Back there. I think a ship has caught fire!"

"I see it," he said, trying to force himself awake.

"It's gotten a lot bigger. Especially in the last few minutes."

"Did you see any red flares?"

"No..." Distress flares, she realized. "Shouldn't we turn around?"

John started to raise the binoculars, then stopped. He glanced over at the compass, and then back towards the brightening glow in the east, and smiled.

"Okay, listen," he said, taking command. "I'll switch on the autopilot, so you won't have to mind the helm. You just keep both eyes on the...ship..." He began to laugh, but put his hand over his mouth and stifled it. "Look!"

Claire remained puzzled for a moment, then she saw it. The bright, sharp tip of a crescent moon clearly emerging from the sea. The horizon was barely visible in its soft glow.

She continued watching as it rose, feeling pretty embarrassed, but also with a deep sense of wonder, because she had never seen a moonrise before; and she realized that it had never even occurred to her that such a thing happened...and how could that be possible?

It was so soft, so subdued, when compared to the exuberance of the sunrise. She never really thought about the moon - it just appeared, already there, in the sky. It might be nestled interestingly in a slot between some city buildings, or hanging above the silhouette of a palm, and accidentally catch her eye.

The moonrise was such a simple thing. There weren't so many distractions at sea, she thought. But distractions from *what?* What other simple things had she missed?

## CHAPTER 7

### COCOS ISLAND

*Beach.* Under the harbormaster's palm.

Doc knew that he'd arrived early for the party, but where were all the boats?

*Seventy-two, Shaun said. What's keeping everybody?*

Fortunately, Doc was more patient than most. Sailing a small boat with no engine had gradually taught him that over the years. He'd had plenty of practice just...floating.

He could remember days when he'd been becalmed, and cursed the calm air. Or voiced his outrage at the wind howling through the rigging, while a gale continued well into its third day, and there was nothing to be done for it, except sit it out. But that sort of behavior embarrassed him, now. He wasn't saddled with a schedule, like a tourist with an itinerary to follow.

Instead, he had come to admire fate. Its mischievous choices were always entertaining - the continuous creation of unforeseen novelty - and much like life, itself.

Doc was grateful for Shaun's company, at least. He was about the most amiable harbormaster he'd come across.

"Want any more of this, Shaun?" he asked, taking a drag on the joint, and offering it over.

Shaun had carried one of the cushions from the patrol boat ashore, and propped it against a palm, as a backrest. His hat was tilted well forward, covering his eyes, and he looked as if he were asleep.

"Don't mind if I do," he said. "Want a bikkie?"

Shaun handed across the packet of shortbread biscuits, moving only his arm. Doc took a few. They were superb cookies. Made with butter.

"Thanks, mate."

"Amazing how you just found this mull, washed up on the beach. It's bloody nice."

"I'm a lucky man, Shaun, I really am," Doc said, feeling truthful, as he thought that Cocos was about as perfect a place as you could hope to find. Concerning the marijuana, though, Doc thought it prudent to tell the small lie. He didn't want Shaun to feel like he was being derelict in his duties, by allowing illegal substances through Customs.

Shaun wanted to be a good harbormaster, and Doc thought it was to his credit that he didn't consider police work as one of his priorities.

Doc wasn't sure what Shaun's priorities were, exactly, other than catching the elusive fish that would put him atop the leaderboard in the Customs Service's annual fishing tournament. But he was willing to offer whatever advice he could. Shaun was a rookie, after all.

The fact sheet that Shaun had written to pass out to the visiting yachts was a short treatise, really. It stretched over five pages, and he must have spent many hours laboring over it. Doc had corrected all the spelling mistakes, and suggested a few small changes. They'd get around to it after lunch.

Shaun had in fact fallen asleep; and Doc contented himself with looking over the treatise. It began with a brief historical account of the atoll.

The island had been awarded to a Scottish fellow named Clunies-Ross by Queen Victoria, as a little gift. Kings and Queens could do that sort of thing, back then. Just give away islands if they felt like it, or even whole countries. They usually kept the best bits for their empires, though.

A copra plantation had been established on the atoll, and indentured workers were brought in from Southeast Asia to do the work. It flourished for a time, when copra still had some value.

Most historians are fascinated by the events surrounding wars, and Shaun was no exception. He went into great detail about the attack on the cable relay station on the atoll by a German warship in the First World War, and the subsequent battle at sea, during which the German vessel had been sunk.

Doc had climbed over the rubble of bricks, which was all that remained of the relay station, where they had been piled along the seaward reef when the ruins were cleared to replant the island with a new generation of coconut palms. They were obviously very old bricks, rounded off around the edges, and weathered smooth in the surf. High quality bricks. Made to last.

Doc might have appreciated them even more if he hadn't read their history. A coral atoll is a rather unusual place to find red clay bricks, after all.

*Mysteries are more fun than facts. Kind of alive, somehow. There are possibilities. Facts, well...they're more like bricks. Or accumulated rubble. Pretty lifeless, really.*

*Only living things have a history. Everything else just has its history imposed on it, like some form of colonialism. Or slavery.*

The Australian government had decided that the atoll was of strategic importance to the Commonwealth, and purchased it. Got it pretty cheap, really, considering that unspoiled tropical islands are in short supply these days. Doc knew that the Aussies were somewhat paranoid about being invaded by the resource-poor, overpopulated countries to the north of them, but, really...*strategic?*

The salt water crocodiles and vast tracts of arid outback would surely deter any thoughtful Asian horde from descending on the Northern Territory, or Western Australia. Doc thought a more plausible explanation might be that their Navy simply longed for a destination to sail to from time to time, instead of motoring in circles around Australia. He didn't think Shaun would be interested in including speculation about this in his treatise, though.

The only existing structure on the island was a modest-sized shed, open on all sides, with a corrugated sheet metal roof. Its main purpose was to collect rainwater, which was piped directly into two cement cisterns, resting on a platform of heavy timbers at the low end of the shed. Doc had checked the tanks, and found that they were both full after the heavy rains during cyclone season.

*You simply turn the brass handle, and water comes out, just like it would in a hotel. How civilized.*

Doc had filled his water tank, and added just a splash of bleach, as a precaution against fouling the tank. Not so much that it would affect the taste of his coffee, though.

He even took some for washing a bit of laundry. Just a couple shirts and pairs of shorts, in addition to the sheets from his bunk, which were so impregnated with salt that they glistened in the sunlight when he carried them ashore. Clothes always feel stiff, and the sheets clammy, when you wash them in seawater, and they never seem to get very clean. It seemed extravagantly wasteful, however, and he felt guilty about it, afterwards.

Doc usually collected his own drinking water with an awning made for the purpose, which even incorporated a funnel and a length of hose, so he could feed the gathered rainwater directly into his tank. Rainfall is often accompanied by wind squalls, however, which made it difficult to rig; and it was seldom possible under sail, either because the sails or the awning would be in the way, and any salt spray would foul the water. It was a hassle, sometimes.

The first time Doc used his bucket toilet in the anchorage he observed that he might have a slight problem. The turds continued to lie there on the sand underneath the stern of the boat, where he would be swimming every day. Usually he sailed away from the stuff.

Then, he noticed the turds bounce slightly on the sand bottom, and begin to slide slowly away. Thankfully, there was a slight current passing through the anchorage, and he could forget about it.

They'll probably build a tourist resort here, one day, Doc imagined, and put in some civilized flush toilets.

*Who wants to worry about where the turds go? Or be reminded of the care necessary to preserve a watershed, and all the resources required to deliver pristine drinking water directly into the porcelain bowl, so it's ready and waiting for the next shit? Some things are best forgotten, aren't they?*

Doc generally considered the telephone as the benchmark of his alienation from modern civilization, but he thought his growing aversion to toilets might set a new standard. He knew it couldn't get much worse than being unable to take a shit when he left his boat, without feeling like a complete fool.

Shaun had excavated a deep rectangular pit in the coral rock to serve as a garbage dump. He'd brought over a pair of steel drums, and a jerrican of diesel fuel to incinerate the rubbish before it went into the pit. This reduced the volume considerably, which would extend the useful life of the pit. Shaun wasn't keen on digging another one anytime soon. It was hard work.

It reminded Doc of the taro pits he'd watched the islanders digging on a remote atoll in the South Pacific. The island was totally without natural soil, and the only way they could grow any vegetables was to make their own dirt. They chiselled pits into the coral with pickaxes, and then began the tedious process of making soil by throwing in palm fronds, leaves, and any organic refuse they could come up with. They added some rain-washed sand, now and then, and after a few years of composting, they could plant their first crop. Doc suspected that the pits would also serve as latrines for awhile, but the islanders didn't mention it.

The only other amenities on Cocos were a pair of picnic tables under the roof, and a large barbecue behind the tanks, which had been built with some of the bricks. The cooktop was a thick steel plate, which was crusted with rust from sitting out in the rain, and months of disuse.

Doc found a suitably flat piece of coral rock, and occupied himself wet-sanding the steel with it, using handfuls of beach sand as an

abrasive. When it was tolerably clean, he rowed out to his boat to fetch some cooking oil to season it with. When he returned to the beach, Shaun was sitting at one of the picnic tables, doing some paperwork.

Doc gathered some coconut husks and fallen palm branches, and got a fire started underneath the plate.

"Have any special requests for the supply ship, Doc?" Shaun asked.

"Do you mean, uh...government-issue?"

"Whatever."

Doc was intrigued. "Do you have a catalog?"

"Come on, Doc."

"How about a volleyball?" He had identified a perfect location for the court between two palms at the edge of the beach, where the intervening sand was perfectly level.

"Beaut. I'll ask for a net, too." Shaun began filling in the requisition forms. "I'll probably fax the order by the end of the week. If you think of anything else, just let me know."

"Sure. I'll give it some thought."

Doc's imagination was swimming. He felt like a predator, confronted with a vast school of reef fish in synchronous motion, swaying tantalizingly right in front of him...but he just couldn't focus.

*A volleyball, of all things. I can do better than that. Surely.*

Shaun was keen to discuss his handout booklet, and set the requisitions aside. Doc appreciated that Shaun had stressed the importance of conserving the limited water supply, and keeping the beach free of rubbish, and suggested that he might include the admonition that cleaning fish in the anchorage might attract sharks. It was pointless trying to lay down any rules, Doc knew. Yachties are a rather anarchistic lot.

Doc pointed out a few paragraphs where the grammar needed a little work, then raised a minor complaint. "This section about the rats seems a bit harsh," he said.

"But the island is plagued with them, Doc. They eat all the birds' eggs." Shaun sometimes used the rats as bait, when he fished for sharks. They loved them, apparently.

"Well, of course they eat the eggs. They taste good. But the rats have been here a long time. Where do you think they should go?"

Doc felt some kinship with the rats. They are hardy, resilient animals, he thought. Survivors. He imagined them fleeing persecution, arriving as stowaways on some filthy sailing ship, and escaping ashore to find their freedom. There were plenty of burrows available in the craggy coral rock, and they stayed on. The plagues weren't their fault, after all.

It was the fleas, and the lice. They were the ones who caused all the trouble.

"They just don't belong here," Shaun protested.

The rats reminded Doc of the Afrikaners in South Africa. They were universally condemned, too. The circumstances of their arrival in Africa was probably similar to that of the Cocos rats. He imagined them coming ashore in that magnificent land, and not being particularly keen to put out to sea again. They don't call it the Cape of Storms for nothing. The land was largely available, so they stayed on.

Numerous plagues were visited upon the indigenous Africans, afterwards. So it's not surprising that even though the Afrikaners have been in Africa for well over three hundred years, they still don't seem to belong there, either.

But it didn't seem fair, somehow. They didn't have anywhere else to go.

"I don't know," Doc said. "What does belong here? Surely, not the coconuts."

"Well, the fish were probably here first. I reckon they have a claim."

"How about us?"

"Well, I work here. I'm not sure about you, though." Shaun grinned.

"Thanks a lot, mate," he sighed. "You know, I think I've figured out what bothers me. This sentence, here. 'The island is infested with rats.' Makes the island seem flawed, somehow. Don't you think?"

"I suppose. Yeah."

"How about this? 'The island boasts a fine population of the brown, Indian Ocean rat.'?"

"I don't know, Doc."

"No implications of prejudice, in that. Enhances the image of the island, doesn't it? Think positively, mate."

"Okay. I guess."

"We can do without this 'potential for pestilence' bit, then. Right?"

"Yeah. Cross that out."

"In the same vein, I don't think it's such a good idea to remind everyone that there might be mosquito larvae in the water tanks."

"There probably are mozzies in there, Doc."

"Well, sure. But there's most likely spider eggs, amoebas, and flagellate worms, too. When you buy a sack of flour, the label doesn't warn you about rat feces, or cockroach eggs, does it? You know, there's government regulations about how much rat shit is allowable? So many

milligrams per kilo, or something. It's never 'none'. People would rather forget about that sort of thing."

"Rat faeces? Filthy, bloody rodents."

"There you go, again."

"People have a right to know the truth, Doc."

"Of course. But most people prefer illusions, Shaun. They find them a lot easier to live with. Besides, you have no proof about the mosquito larvae, have you? Any independent laboratory tests?"

"It's just rainwater. There's no reason to test it."

"Exactly my point."

## CHAPTER 8

### DURBAN

#### *Yacht, Trekker*

"Please try to remember, Mom," Kate warned. "Those spike heels will ruin the deck."

Anneliene knew that she was about to receive another lecture, just from the look on her daughter's face. There had been so many in the last few months that she immediately recognized the tight set to her mouth.

Kate was standing on deck, looking down on her while she waited on the dock; and it served to remind Anneliene of her daughter's superior mastery in all matters relating to the sailboat.

"You know what happens, when you drink champagne," Kate continued. "You'll come giggling down the dock, and forget to take them off."

She was still sulking about the party, Anneliene suspected. The Yacht Club Centenary was the biggest gala of the year, and Kate wasn't invited. But it was her own fault.

Kate was justified in being protective of her teak deck, however. It had taken her several months to scrape out the cracked seam

compound, renew the caulking, and sand the old planks smooth. It looked a picture.

She had worked on the boat every weekend, when school was in session; then virtually full-time, once she'd completed her matric. For weeks, they had all obeyed masking tape arrows, directing traffic safely away from the uncured, sticky black rubber. Even the cat suffered during that period, Anneliene recalled, either being chased off the boat, or pinned reluctantly in the cockpit, while Kate struggled to clean the pads of its feet with lacquer thinners. Some black polyurethane paw prints were still visible on the pontoon. Anneliene had to stifle a laugh.

"It's not funny! Shoes like that don't belong on a sailboat. We're already running out of stowage space, you know. We have to make choices, Mom."

Choices. They hadn't been easy ones.

The decision to emigrate from South Africa. To sell off everything that wouldn't fit aboard *Trekker*, and just sail away. Leave friends and family behind. Anneliene recalled the night of Hennie's speech - the night following the second murder - when he spoke about the need to consider those hard choices. How they couldn't simply carry on, after all that had happened, and hope for the best.

Anneliene thought that she had already lost a great deal, and willingly given up even more, in exchange for a vastly uncertain future.

"It's a formal banquet, Kate. I can't just wear takkies," she said, in defence. "Besides, I love these shoes. They're nice Italian leather."

"Oh, that's good. Imported from *Italy*. Made by Europeans, you mean. As if everything imported has to be better than *anything* you'd ever find in Africa. We're Africans, Mom."

"That's not fair! You helped me pick them out!" Anneliene's neck suddenly felt stiff from continually looking up. She lowered her head, and then found herself staring at the fine, blond hair that covered her daughter's legs. Not tonight, she told herself.

"Hennie! I need some support here!" she cried, while knocking on the side of the hull, as if it were the front door of a house. Hennie was already on his way up the companionway ladder. He stepped onto the deck, and came over to stand next to Kate. His tuxedo fit him perfectly. He had a good tailor.

"Our daughter thinks I look like a racist bimbo," Anneliene explained.

"Hmm. Let's see," he said, smiling broadly while Anneliene spun around to show off her dress. "Oh...I'd say...absolutely stunning, Annie."

Anneliene smiled. "I love you."

"Oh, you two really deserve each other," Kate scowled, clearly outnumbered.

"That's enough!" Hennie said sharply, perhaps more so than he intended. "The Zulu king is the guest of honour at the Club tonight. It's not the time to mount another protest, Kate. I know you think it's hypocritical, and that a lot of the people invited regard him as just another dirty kaffir, but we can't do anything to change that. As you so often point out to me, we're Africans, remember? Respect for tradition, Kate. That's the point." His expansive gesture took in Anneliene's long gown, the string of pearls, his tuxedo...all of it.

It was a plea.

Kate felt some tears welling up, but her pride held them back. This was her parent's finest traditional garb, their equivalent of King Goodwill's ocelot fur cape. Kate didn't have a tradition, anymore. She'd lost it. That didn't really matter, though. Not now.

"I'm sorry, Mom," She stepped over the lifelines, and bounded down onto the dock, and gave her Mother a brief hug. "You look lovely. Have a good time, okay? But, still...don't take any shit." Then she turned quickly, and sprinted off down the long jetty.

"Kate de Beer! Don't you dare curse like that!"

"I wouldn't worry, Annie," Hennie said. "She's just bitterly disappointed that she won't get to meet King Goodwill."

"Surely, Kate wasn't expecting an invitation to the party? Not after she tore up her membership card right in front of the Commodore, and threw the pieces at his feet?"

Hennie laughed. "You know, she won't even set foot in the building anymore, unless a new foreign yacht arrives in the harbour. I've seen her escorting yachties up to the office, to make sure they get their complimentary one week membership. I'm sure she always points out that the Club granted two weeks free, last year."

"I just wish she would stop being so...militant."

"You mean shave her legs?"

"I guess."

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Almost two years had elapsed since the Yacht Club published an article in their newsletter, which implied that visiting international sailors were responsible for a rash of unsolved thefts from local boats. Even though there was no evidence to support the allegations, the accusatory finger was pointed anew, from time to time. The suspicions

lingered on, that the foreign sailors were somewhat disreputable, like a band of gypsies.

Ever since this incident, Kate had introduced herself to every visiting overseas yacht, and apologized on behalf of those who opposed the 'xenophobic clique' at the Yacht Club. Usually, she included the whole of the Zulu nation in her faction. Although she realized it was presumptuous on her part, she decided to include them to add some potential muscle. Besides, it was probably true, anyway.

A few of the yachtie's boats were rather rusty, Kate had to admit. And they often lived on very little money. Yet Kate respected them. They crossed vast oceans, braved storms, and explored the world, while most of the Yacht Club cronies merely talked about it, drank beer, and organized races around the harbour, now and then.

Kate worried that her father might not be prepared for the journey ahead, since all of his sea time was spent sailing with his pals from the Club. Kate needed to learn how to sail, and decided that the yachties were the ones who could teach her. So she set out to earn their trust.

She discovered that the yachties loved visiting parts of the city that resembled bits of Africa, rather than the areas that were remnants of apartheid. Her fluency in Zulu, and intimate knowledge of the city allowed her to lead forays to places never frequented by tourists.

She would usually explain how blacks had been required to carry a valid pass under the apartheid system, in order to enter designated 'white' areas. And how some places were always off limits. The entirety of the beachfront, for instance.

Now though, everyone was free to go where they pleased, and as far as Kate was concerned, that included her. Before any major excursion, she laid down some basic rules. No watches or fancy clothes could be worn, no wallets or purses carried, and everyone needed shoes that they could run in, if necessary. Body language was important as well, since predators would always try to single out the weak. She probably exaggerated the danger a little, but it enhanced the experience, she thought.

Kate had uncovered many untapped resources in the city which the yachties regularly utilised, and appreciated. A Zulu machinist who could make almost anything from bits and pieces he gleaned from the scrap metal yards. A copy shop run by a Hindu couple who would photocopy nautical charts on heavy weight paper that wouldn't tear with the slightest use.

Kate found the paint completely by accident.

She enjoyed watching the boats being hauled out of the water in the yacht basin, prior to repainting. You couldn't fully appreciate the

lovely shape of a sailboat, she thought, until you saw the whole of it - sitting on dry land - where you could walk all the way around, sight down along the turn of the bilge, and visualize the flow of water along the hull. Watching a boat she admired slowly emerge from the water was a delicious unveiling of its secrets. She gained intimacy.

One day, she rode her bike over to the drydock, to see what the whole of big container ship looked like. For the most part, she was disappointed. The lines of the ship were awfully flat. The bulbous bow was interesting, but it looked a bit out of place. It was a ponderous appendage, with little grace to it, and relied purely on brute force to penetrate the seas. It made her feel uneasy.

A large crew was at work, painting the bottom of the ship. It seemed an impossibly massive task. Kate noticed a solitary figure working on the catwalk above the drydock floodgates. He had a long-handled net, and was scooping rubbish from the water, filling empty paint pails with the muck. She rode over to investigate.

A whole pallet of empties sat next to the tip. Kate had learned a lot about anti-fouling paint from the yachties, and was curious to see what kind of paint the dockyard was using. They were twenty-five litre tins.

She tipped one pail slightly, in order to read the label more easily, and noticed that the supposedly empty container seemed too heavy. She

prised off the lid, and sure enough, there was more than a litre of paint inside. What a waste, she thought. It was really expensive paint. She wiggled a few more, and found another one that resisted. At least two, maybe even three litres in that one. Glancing over at the catwalk, she saw that she was being observed by the man with the scoop. She smiled and waved hello. He did the same.

Kate wheeled her bike around, and pedalled slowly back. She saw two pallets of paint on the floor of the drydock, then a third, and whooped with joy. It was a goldmine. She rode furiously out of the drydock, past the shipyard, to a small Indian tuck shop that catered for the workers in the container terminal. She bought a takeaway of mutton curry, a couple sausages, chicken wings...more.

The man was still working on the catwalk when she returned. The fresh northeaster had eased slightly, and it felt much warmer. Kate knew that the drydock crews worked around the clock - banks of floodlights were positioned to illuminate its entire length - but she thought she'd only have to wait for the change of shift until her future business partner clocked off for the day.

He'd noticed her return, of course. They were alone at the harbour end of the drydock - all the work was being done on the floor, and on the superstructure of the ship - so it must have been obvious that she

wanted to see him. He laid down the scoop, and walked the length of the catwalk.

"You wanting something, missus?" He looked puzzled, perhaps even a little worried. His short hair bore tufts of grey on the sides. He was very thin.

"Hello," she said. "There's a lot of rubbish, isn't there?"

"Yes, missus. Is bad today. Days the wind come north, everything is coming here. Every day seems more is coming. Always more."

"I'd like to ask your advice about something, if you have the time. After you've finished work, of course. My name is Kate. Kate de Beer. And yourself?"

"Vincent, missus."

"Vincent...?"

"Vincent Nkosi, missus."

"Would you have some time, Mr. Nkosi? To talk? I'd understand if you have to hurry to catch the train home." She noticed he was pleased to be addressed properly. Bless you Hennie, she thought.

"Me, I'm living here all the time. I do the garden, look after the pumps. Little bit everything." Kate had noticed the small flower bed next to the security gate. "What you like knowing, missus?"

"Would it be all right if we sat down?"

She took one of the paint pails for herself, and spun another one towards Vincent, indicating that she'd like him to join her. She opened her orange juice and sipped some. "Well Mr. Nkosi, I noticed that some of these tins still have a little paint in them, and...oh, I'm so rude. Would you care for something to drink? There's juice. And some sorghum beer?"

She handed him the bag with the drinks, not wanting to appear in a hurry, and initiated some small talk about the ship. How big it was. How many litres it took to paint it.

"Oh, this is nice. Is hot today," he said, happily sipping his beer. Vincent Nkosi wasn't worried, now. Or puzzled, either. He knew exactly what Kate wanted.

"There's a few little things to eat, as well. I was going on a picnic, you see. But my friend couldn't get off from work. The curry's still warm, I think."

She pulled the feast from her rucksack, and spread it out atop a third pail. She took a chicken wing for herself, and cut the apple into wedges so they could share it. They ate together, each complimenting the food, and when the time seemed right, Kate continued. "What happens to all these tins? Do they all go into the tip?"

"Yes, missus. Everything is going. Bottles, styrofoam, plastic bags, condoms...even dead rats, sometimes. Is bad for the pump, you understand? Is sad, the harbour, now."

"I hate it, too. Is it all right if I call you Vincent?"

"Certainly, missus."

"Please. Just Kate."

"Thank you. Kate." He smiled pleasantly. "Please, Kate, how I'm helping you?"

"Well, Vincent, I want to ask your advice. If someone were to collect all the paint left in these pails, you know, to use it, rather than just letting it all go to waste...it wouldn't really be stealing, would it? I mean, since it all gets thrown out, anyway?"

"Oh, no, Kate. No way is stealing."

"Oh, that's good. I was hoping you'd think so."

And so a deal was struck. Vincent Nkosi proved to be very conscientious in collecting the surplus paint. He was more than pleased with the money Kate was able to bring him for his trouble, and the yachties even more astonished at how cheap it was. Kate insisted on discretion from all concerned, since she knew the yacht chandlery's paint sales must be suffering heavily, and she didn't want her friend Vincent to get into trouble.

She needn't have worried about Vincent Nkosi, however. He had things well under control, and even provided a bakkie to deliver the paint. He soon inquired if Kate was interested in any expired nautical charts, or Admiralty pilot books. Since their insurance policies required them to carry only the latest editions, there was always a stack of outdated or cancelled charts waiting to be disposed of on the ships.

Kate knew that many of her friends were sailing with far fewer charts than they really needed, solely because they were prohibitively expensive. The thought of one of them possibly running aground on a reef because they were missing a chart distressed her, especially when she learned that vast quantities of them were simply thrown away. She quickly agreed.

Vincent Nkosi was in charge of the crew who set the chocks underneath the keels of the ships, so that they were properly supported when they dried out. Since improper placement of these chocks could cause severe structural damage to a ship, as well as major trauma to a ship engineer's reputation, the ship's officers deemed it prudent to encourage the drydock crew to perform their very best work. So Vincent Nkosi's requests were routinely granted. Kate soon had hundreds of charts stacked aboard *Trekker*.

She wasn't concerned with making money from any of these enterprises. Hennie had enough of that. In fact, she routinely charged

him slightly higher rates for everything she kept for *Trekker*, because he didn't qualify for any of her subsidies. There was only one thing Kate wanted. To learn enough to take *Trekker* across an ocean. Just that first big step. The rest would come.

It seemed hopeless, in the beginning. She didn't know which corner of the sail was supposed to be up or down, and couldn't tie a proper knot. Kate soon learned that the yachties loved to tell stories, and she spent many evenings listening to them. As she slowly accumulated a store of information, and learned the terminology, it became easier for her to ask some intelligent questions.

They often had shelves full of books - about boat construction and design, heavy weather sailing and navigation, cruising guides for all the islands - and would usually let her borrow anything she wanted. In the same way that parents are eager to show off their babies, or inventors their latest creation, the yachties were pleased to show her their boats. She had inspected nearly all of the overseas yachts, and had even asked a few to hoist her aloft in a bosun's chair, so she could examine their rigging.

Kate discovered that there were many differences of opinion among them on how to do certain things, but some areas of general consensus

emerged. In the process, she uncovered some glaring inadequacies in her own boat.

The anchoring gear was the most obvious flaw. Nearly all the yachties ridiculed the flimsy anchoring arrangements on the local boats. The anchor on *Trekker* was too small, they said. The chain was too short, and a heavy storm anchor was deemed a necessity.

The problem Kate faced was how to convince Hennie, since he certainly wouldn't listen to her. On the rare occasions when he had taken her sailing outside the harbour, he would let her steer for awhile, or help raise the sails; but he routinely pushed her aside, or pulled the rope out of her hands when he got frustrated.

She decided to recruit Doc, an American singlehander, and one of her best friends on the jetty. He was an obvious choice for several reasons, foremost among them being that he agreed to do it. But also, because he was a professional boatbuilder. Hennie had noticed his boat on the jetty - you couldn't miss it, since it was right in front - and had commented on how seaworthy it looked, and the high quality of the joinery in the teak hatches.

Kate had met him on his first day in port, after a crossing from Madagascar. He had tied up his little boat at the head of the jetty, next to the seawall, where the ramp joined the floating pontoon. The water

was very shallow there, and none of the other boats would float in the space, so it was ready and waiting for him, like a reserved front row seat.

She knew from past experience that many of the overseas visitors had strong first impressions when they arrived in South Africa. It was that kind of place.

Doc had been given a poor impression, she suspected.

The Yacht Club restaurant kept a long row of plastic dustbins adjacent to the boat ramp, reserved for their use, and a large crowd of indigent blacks were sifting through the garbage, searching for something to eat. There had been a private function at the Club the previous evening, so the pickings were probably better than usual. Word gets around, somehow.

The bins had strong hinged lids, which they could fold back and use like tables to sort through the rinds of fat and chicken bones to identify the edible bits, and then wipe off the cigarette ashes with some crumpled serviettes. Most of the locals paid scant attention to the scavengers, she knew. There were throngs of destitute blacks and street kids everywhere. They were almost part of the landscape.

Doc had noticed, of course, and was sitting half inside his boat, with his back propped against the coaming of his main hatch, actually watching them.

He had already visited the supermarket, she saw, and was eating a halved mango with a spoon. That made her feel a little better. The mango crop was really special this year. There had finally been some decent rain, and mangoes liked the wet.

"Hi. Welcome to South Africa."

"Pleased to be here," he said wryly.

"You have a lovely boat." She stepped back and admired the hull.

"Thanks."

"It's awfully small. Did you sail it all the way from Chicago?" The home port was painted on the bow.

"Whenever possible. It's easier than rowing it."

"Oh." She puzzled over that, and briefly lost her stride. "I'm Kate. From 'A' dock. Have you been up to the Yacht Club, yet? For a hot shower? I could show you where to go, if you like. The security guard is a bit of a Nazi, so he might hassle you, if you don't..."

"Thanks, Kate. But what I really need is some sleep. Maybe later, okay?" He smiled then, and ducked below. He wasn't unfriendly, exactly, more like preoccupied. She attributed it to a bad first impression, and didn't take it personally that he hadn't even told her his name.

When she rode past the jetty, the following day, she noticed that he had affixed a sign to his lifelines, so that it faced the parking area. BOATBUILDER NEEDS WORK. It was a rather foolish thing to do, since the immigration officials often visited the yacht basin, and even ate lunch at the Club, occasionally. You couldn't help noticing them, in their white shorts and knee socks.

There had been numerous news reports about the influx of illegal aliens, and how they were usurping the few available jobs. This mainly applied to blacks, though, coming in from Mozambique and Zimbabwe in increased numbers, perhaps feeling that they might receive more lenient treatment from the authorities now, in the changed political climate. Nelson Mandela had been released from prison, and the date set for the elections. Unemployment was the norm in their home countries, whose economies were near collapse in the deteriorating drought conditions. They were always near collapse, though, even in the best of times, so illegal immigrants from those countries posed the biggest threat. Still, Doc stood a good chance of being deported, if they caught him working.

Kate decided to find him a job.

She knew an acquaintance of Hennie's, a man named Botha, who was doing a refit on the interior of his boat. She had heard him complaining about the incompetence of the local craftsmen. The blacks couldn't do the work. They had been systematically excluded from

trades requiring any but the most basic tools, since it was thought they'd either steal or destroy them. There were some skilled coloured shipwrights in the country, but only in the Cape. That left Asians. The guy had already gone through several Indian carpenters, who were accustomed to building square pressed-wood cabinets, while he was expecting them to do elaborate joinery work with tropical hardwoods.

Very few whites worked as tradesmen. It had always been discouraged, and considered wiser to direct the other races to do the actual work. That's what they were for, it was said.

Kate found Botha at work inside the boat, ripping out part of the galley. A new part, it looked like. He was keen to hire Doc, as it happened, and escorted her right back to the yacht basin. Doc's hatch was open, and when she rapped on the deck, his head appeared.

"Morning, Kate," he said. It pleased her that he remembered her name.

"Hi! I'd like you to meet Mr. Botha. He's been looking for a good boatbuilder to do some joinery. I saw your sign."

She allowed him to introduce himself, and then took her leave. When she reached the top of the ramp, and glanced back, Doc was smiling at her. Botha wasn't watching, she noticed, so she took the opportunity to give Doc a hint. She swivelled her hips, and patted her rump - where you'd expect to find a wallet. Then she mimicked a fat

man, with both hands supporting an ample stomach. The guy was loaded. He good afford a decent hourly rate.

By the time they joined forces to convince Hennie to upgrade *Trekker's* anchor gear, they'd become friends. Most of the visiting yachts carried on around Cape Horn, and into the Atlantic - usually bound for Brazil, or the Caribbean - but Doc was planning to sail to Tanzania, which meant that he had to stay on, until the cyclone season ended in the tropics. He wanted to witness the elections, anyway. They talked about it often. Everyone did, at the time.

Their plan was simple. Doc would come over for a special dinner aboard *Trekker*, and then, over a brandy, he would tell a few anchoring stories, which he had previously related to her. How he'd lost two anchors in a single week during a series of gales in New Zealand; and, another time, when he might have lost his boat if it weren't for his stout storm anchor.

On the appointed evening, Doc arrived carrying a bouquet of roses for Anneliene, which made Kate rather jealous. The dinner went smoothly, and the two men spent almost an hour on deck, inspecting *Trekker's* anchor gear, and discussing possible improvements. Afterwards, Kate decided to give Hennie a discount on the Australian

charts he wanted, since the new anchor gear for *Trekker* was going to cost a lot of money.

Despite her persistent efforts, it proved nearly impossible to get the yachties to cast off from the jetty, and take her sailing. The thought of sailing around inside the harbour was about as exciting to them as driving a car around a parking lot. They just weren't interested. They only left when it was time to go somewhere else.

And they always left.

She cried, sometimes, when people she had grown really fond of would sail away one day, and she knew that she would probably never see them again. She would receive a few postcards, perhaps, or a letter that bore no return address, but, for the most part, the farewells were final. The transience was hard to accept.

When Anneliene's father was murdered during an attack on his farm on Natal's south coast, just a few months before the first democratic elections in South Africa, Kate sought the support of her friends on the jetty.

The attack was politically motivated, the newspapers announced. Even though her grandfather was only interested in growing bananas, and tending his prize orchids, his killing was deemed a political act,

solely because he was white, and the perpetrators presumably black. No arrests were ever made. In the tense period leading up to the elections, even the most obscene act of savagery was thought to be a consequence of the violently racist rhetoric of the various political groups.

The strong bonds of friendship that Kate formed during those difficult days were gradually broken, one at a time, as each successive boat sailed out of the harbour, and left her behind. She was left with only her memories, and it seemed scarcely different from what remained of her grandfather. Just memories.

Kate often heard people talking about emigrating, long before the date was announced for the elections. A steady trickle of whites had been leaving the country for as long as she could remember, but the increasing frequency of the discussions made her think that it might become a flood. When only a few were talking about 'getting out before the blacks took over', it was easy to dismiss their fears as paranoia. Yet, as the tension escalated with the approach of the elections, it came to be regarded as simple common sense to consider your options, and take precautions.

Yacht owners had more options than most, since their boats provided a means of getting assets out of the country. The valuable yacht, itself, to begin with. Strict foreign exchange controls prevented

most people from doing so. They couldn't take their houses with them overseas. The proceeds from selling them, either. Not legally, anyway.

Many yachts had, in fact, left the country during the summer months, often laden with extra single-sideband radios, autopilots, outboard motors, cases of whisky...almost anything that could conceivably be declared 'spare' yacht equipment. Others had stockpiled food on their boats, and made them ready to take to sea, in the event that the tense political situation deteriorated into uncontrollable anarchy.

When the puppet 'homeland' government of Bophuthatswana collapsed, shortly before the elections, nearly everyone watched it on television, as it happened. They saw hordes of blacks swarming through smashed shop windows, and supermarket trolleys being wheeled away in every direction, piled high with looted goods. Once the shelves were stripped bare, the fixtures themselves were ripped out, and carted off to the townships, as well. Then, the fires started.

To Hennie, Bophuthatswana appeared prophetic. It was the actualisation of the total black onslaught which the National Party government had been warning about for decades. And where were the security forces?

Only a few days after this drama, there was a temporary power failure in Durban, and all the lights went out for an hour or so, while Kate was visiting with Doc. They weren't even aware of the power outage, until she happened to look out the hatch, and noticed that the entire city had gone black. The only light came from the cargo ships, tied up to wharves in the harbour.

Doc's boat was unaffected, and its independence really stood out, like the brightly lit ships against the blackened shore. As the blackout continued, they began to worry. Doc expressed their concern succinctly.

"It's only a matter of time, Kate. If the power stays off too long, the city will burn."

The conflagration in Bophuthatswana had been precipitated by a peaceful walkout of the police force, striking to protest the loss of their pensions, if the 'homeland' was reincorporated into South Africa. The Durban city police wouldn't be capable of responding to trouble, either. Shop windows in the city centre could be broken and looted with impunity, under the cover of darkness.

While impoverished blacks might participate in looting, they were unlikely to have caused the power failure. So Kate began to worry that one of the extremist Afrikaner groups had acted on their threats of sabotage. They had vowed to disrupt the elections, by provoking a crisis

that would compel the security forces to intervene. A major riot would suffice.

Although the membership in these right-wing groups was small, they were extremely well-armed. Their leadership had close ties to the South African military, so they had access to explosives, and the expertise to use them. Their rhetoric was inflammatory, and uncompromising. They would never surrender sovereignty of their homeland, they said. Not to black terrorist thugs, and communists.

When the faulty transformer at the electrical substation was repaired, and the city relit, Kate could almost smell the tension lingering in the air, like smoke.

The tension affected everyone, Hennie and Anneliene more than most. The bullets that killed Anneliene's father had added several large holes to what they already thought was a sinking ship.

Their future in Africa, Hennie felt, was finished.

There would be no secure homeland for the Afrikaners. Their number was small, and they had tried to hold onto too much territory. Seduced, almost, by the beauty of the land they tamed when they were driven away from the Cape. Corrupted, perhaps, by allure of the gold they found. There would be moves to expropriate their farms, eventually. Marginalize their culture. Seize their assets.

The Israelis were a driven, desperate people when they seized their small homeland, while the Boers had grown soft. Destined, now, to become an increasingly persecuted minority in their own land. Or part of a despised diaspora.

Hennie didn't think he was a bad person, particularly. He had benefited from the privileges accorded him under apartheid, of course - his Mercedes-Benz dealership was among the most profitable in the country - and he could never claim that he was unaware of its cruelties. To the extent that it was possible in the industry, he ran an ethical business. Although Hennie was no philanthropist, he had always been extremely generous with the people who worked for him, and earned their loyalty, and affection. He couldn't help them all. There were just too many.

His daughter thought he was somewhat of a shit. Although she never said as much, he often saw it in her face. Especially the way she would wrinkle her nose, or turn down the corners of her mouth.

When Kate was growing up, she was always bringing home stray kittens, or nursing injured birds. The guest cottage often resembled a veterinary hospital. Then, she started staffing the office. There was Patience, who made the tea. Miriam, who waxed the parquet floor, and obsessively arranged the magazines in the showroom. Joseph, who

polished the brass door handles every day, and waited patiently to erase the slightest trace of a fingerprint from the glass, or ash from the ashtrays.

Hennie had to turn them away, in the end. She befriended too many.

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Kate joined in, when the whole city breathed a sigh of relief, following Nelson Mandela's gala inauguration. Shoppers browsing past store windows seemed to have a lighter step. The people on the street looked as if they had finally managed a good night's sleep.

Then Gideon had the back of his head blown off.

Ever since Kate was an infant, Gideon had tended their garden, and performed all the maintenance on the house that Hennie never had time for. He'd cleaned the swimming pool, and washed the cars. Pulled the jacaranda leaves out of the gutter.

It was one of the organized hijacking gangs, the police said. Gideon had taken the Land Rover in for servicing, and was just sitting in it, waiting for a robot to change, when they stuck the gun to his temple through the open window. Three well-dressed black men, a passing motorist told the police. They dragged him out, pushed him to the

pavement alongside a parked car, and put the pistol to his nostrils before pulling the trigger.

The sergeant explained that it fit the pattern of the gangs, who preferred to leave no witnesses, and often added some gratuitous violence to enhance their reputation. With the others.

"I went with him when he went to vote, Doc. Gideon was so happy. There were tears in his eyes." There were plenty of tears in her own, she knew.

"How's your Mom?" Doc asked sympathetically.

"Asleep, I guess. The doctor gave her some pills." Anneliene had intended to take care of the servicing, herself, but asked Gideon at the last moment, when a friend stopped by, and they got to talking. It might not have happened to her, Anneliene said. She always used the air conditioning, and kept the windows rolled up. "I'm more worried about Pa. He's been taking his gun, and just driving around the city."

"What? Thinking he'll find the car?"

"I don't think he knows, himself."

Kate seemed to be taking Gideon's death even harder than her Grandfather's, Doc thought. He prayed that Hennie wouldn't come across any kids spray-painting graffiti, or somebody kicking a dog.

"You remember when my Grandpa was killed? All the newspapers put it on the front page. But now, for Gideon...they didn't even mention his name."

"Yeah. I saw it." The article had been buried inside. Three Killed in City, it said.

"How come, Doc? Because he was black? Because it wasn't a political killing?"

"Who knows, Kate. But it's still political, if you ask me."

"Why?"

"In this country, crime is just the continuation of politics, by other means. It's the politics of the future."

Kate grew silent. When Doc noticed fresh tears on her cheek, he felt remorse for what he'd said, which had added despair on top of her grief.

"Shit. Some future," she said.

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By the date of the Yacht Club Centenary, most of the overseas yachts had already left, preferring to round the Cape during the height of the summer, when the storms abated for a few months. Kate knew that *Trekker* should already be at sea, since they were bound for Australia,

and the summer months were best for that passage, as well. She was anxious to leave.

Hennie was awaiting a final shipment of imported auto parts, which his German associates had agreed to invoice at a grossly inflated price. The overpayment represented the last of their assets, which he had been gradually funnelling out of the country.

Kate had already concluded her own business affairs, having handed her paint distributorship over to her friend Ginger, whose parents were staying on, hoping to earn enough money to repair the engine on their boat. Ginger was from California, and seventeen - a year younger than Kate.

She had a huge library of music videos that Kate never even knew existed. When Ginger informed her that she was at least fifteen years out of date, and that her music was gross, Kate was inclined to agree. Ginger was endeavouring to help her catch up.

With her parents attending the party at the Yacht Club, Kate would have the TV on *Trekker* all to herself. So she'd invited Ginger over to watch a few videos, which would most likely provoke her Mother to the point of censorship, purely out of habit. The music videos in Ginger's collection would have surely been banned, under the apartheid regime.

First, though, Kate wanted to see King Goodwill.

The South African police had moved a temporary charge station into the yacht basin parking lot. A shipping container, actually. They had painted it bright yellow, with blue trim, and had affixed a decal emblem next to the door, identical to those they put on the SAP patrol cars. Heavy wire mesh screens covered a pair of small windows, either side of the metal door. The two policeman standing watch had been issued full body armour, and they looked uncomfortably hot in their visored helmets.

Kate went up to the Indian sergeant. "Pardon me, officer. Sir? Pardon me."

"Yes, madam?"

"My friend Ginger has come all the way from America. On her sailboat. That's it, over there. The steel ketch, with the baggywrinkle on the shrouds," she said, pointing toward the jetty. Then, realizing that the policemen wouldn't understand what she'd just said, she added, "Uh...the red one? The one with the Stars and Stripes flying."

"Is that so? That's very fine," he said, nodding his head respectfully toward Ginger.

"She's not so tall, you see, and can't see very much down here," Kate continued, drawing an evil look from her friend. "Could we climb on top of the container to witness the unfolding of this gala occasion?" She

saw indecision on his face, and quickly held out her hands in front of her, palms upward, and added, "We're unarmed."

The sergeant laughed, and consented. "Certainly, madam. Our orders are to remain as inconspicuous as possible. With you fine ladies up there, no one will even notice us, I'm sure. There are some steps. On the harbour side. Be careful, please."

They walked around to the ladder, and started up. "Kate? He wasn't being serious, was he?" Ginger asked.

"About what?"

"Being inconspicuous. I mean...he was holding an assault rifle!"

"Don't worry, Ginger. You'll get used to it."

From the top of the container, they could see over the brick wall abutting the railway tracks, which isolated the yacht basin from the central part of the city. The only crossing led directly into the Yacht Club parking area, so that King Goodwill's motorcade would have to pass through the gates, right in front of the container. It was perfect. They had a while to wait.

"That's the drought relief ship over there," Kate said, pointing toward the grain terminal, near the harbour entrance. "Sixty thousand tons. American flag. That's six thousand railway carriages, at ten tons each."

There had been a few delays, but the trains had finally started rolling that afternoon, delivering the much-needed maize to drought-stricken Zimbabwe. South Africa was the only country on the continent capable of mobilising the resources necessary to undertake the task, and it made Kate feel proud. They stood together watching, as another train passed out of the harbour.

Kate suspected that many of the carriages had been diverted from their usual duty of hauling coal to the export terminal at Richard's Bay, on the north Natal coast. She hoped they'd been cleaned properly. Some of the tarpaulins covering the open cars looked rather dirty, and a few were patched. It was worrisome.

"They look like gravel cars," Ginger remarked. "If they keep leaking like that all the way to Zimbabwe, there won't be much corn left."

"They just spilled a bit filling them up. Outside. On the struts. See?"

The train was picking up speed, and soon passed. A short queue of automobiles had formed behind the gate, and began filing in. Kate spotted the TV-1 logo on the side of one of them. The guests were beginning to arrive.

Suddenly Kate gasped, and grabbed Ginger's arm. "Oh, look! Here comes a Hippo! Wow, another one! I hope they keep them far away."

Ginger thought she meant a hippopotamus. "A hippo...? Where?"

Kate pointed toward the esplanade. She felt Ginger's arm tremble then, and quickly turned to look at her. Her eyes were huge, and they were riveted on the two armoured personnel carriers advancing down the street.

"Oh, Kate. There's not going to be trouble, is there?"

"Oh, no. It's just a little show of force. I think it's meant to be reassuring."

One of the Hippos pulled to the curb and stopped, well short of the entrance. The other continued on, and took up a corresponding position on the other side of the street, underneath some trees.

"It's the Internal Stability Unit," Kate explained. "I see them differently than you would, I guess. They've always had white soldiers inside of them. You know...my proxies. If you can't imagine yourself sitting in there...well, I guess they'd look a little hostile."

The Hippos were menacing-looking, Kate knew. Although she could see some resemblance to a hippopotamus - their squat bulkiness, and enormous tires that lifted the belly of the vehicle well clear of the pavement - they looked more reptilian, to her. Fat crocodiles, maybe.

"You're not wrong." Ginger agreed, shaking her head.

"You have to admire their engineering, though," Kate suggested. "Look at the undercarriage. See how it's perfectly shaped to deflect the blast of a landmine? The short wheelbase allows them to manoeuvre

around obstacles. Go over barricades of burning tires. The screens stop all the rocks thrown at the windows. They do look a trifle homemade, I suppose."

"Trust me, Kate. They look fucking evil."

"I know. I hate them, too."

The trackbed was indeed speckled with yellow kernels of maize. A flock of pigeons were pecking at the grain on the pavement, where the traffic had crushed some of the kernels into a coarse meal.

A few Zulu women had laid out long sheets of plastic along the railway tracks, and were collecting the fallen grain. They'd weighed down the plastic with stones, and spread out newspapers to sit on, behind the bushes at the edge of the parking lot. One woman was nursing. Several groups of women were working a bit further down the tracks, arranging a new catchment area.

The yacht basin was coming to life. The parking area was overflowing with cars, and a queue was waiting to get in. People were laughing, and gathering into groups of friends, greeting others...a few limousines arrived. A small group of Zulus in traditional, ceremonial dress had gathered outside the Yacht Club entrance, and were being ushered into position in front of the television lights. Other than the

maize-gatherers, the Zulu dancers' were the only black faces in evidence among the large crowd.

"I've never seen this many Mercedes-Benzes in my whole life," Ginger enthused.

"Tell me what else you see," Kate said, challenging her.

"I don't know what you mean..." Ginger turned her head, and saw the anguish on Kate's face. Her arms were folded tightly across her breasts, and she seemed to be shivering. "What's wrong?"

Then, Ginger remembered the Hippos, and looked quickly. The soldiers were leaning casually alongside, smoking cigarettes.

"Well...I'm just wondering," Kate said. "You see the woman, next to the green Porsche? The one with all the yellow lace, and gold jewellery?"

"Yeah. Okay."

"Now look beyond her...just a few meters. You see them?"

A gang of black street children were squatting on the gravel trackbed, collecting kernels of the spilled maize, and putting them into wrinkled plastic shopping bags. Most looked to be less than ten years old, and were dressed more or less the same. Dirty, brownish-grey T-shirt. Full of holes. Ragged shorts tied up with a scrap of old rope.

"The kids? Yeah. I watched them sifting through the trash for the plastic bags."

"The couple with their backs to us?" Kate continued. "Talking to the woman by the Porsche? They must be looking right at them. Do you think they *see* them?"

"I don't know..." Ginger could tell that she was really upset. "Come on, Kate. Chill out. The kids look like they're having fun."

"I just wanted to be sure I'm not imagining them. I often get the feeling I see things that no one else sees."

King Goodwill would surely see them. The children were right next to the gate. Playing...scratching through the dirt for something to eat...just like the pigeons.

The warning bell started to ring, and the crossing barrier began to drop. The kids snatched up their harvest, and scurried underneath it. They jostled the woman in the lace dress as they ran past, and she frowned angrily, and began brushing the side of her dress with the back of her hand, as if cleaning it. The pigeons scattered, taking flight awkwardly, as a long train of empty carriages began to roll noisily past, heading for the grain terminal.

It was impossible to talk above the clattering of the train, and Kate turned her back on the scene, and tugged at Ginger's sleeve. They walked together, the length of the container, toward the shimmering lights across the harbour. Kate leaned close, and said, "Let's go. Let's go

back to *Trekker* and listen to some music. I got that parcel of dagga you wanted."

"Dagga...?"

"Dope, Ginger. Marijuana."

"Oh, wizard. But I thought you wanted to see King Goodwill?"

"Not anymore. Not *here*. Let's get stoned."

They climbed down the rungs welded to the side of the container, and skirted the crowd by walking atop the narrow seawall. As they were descending the ramp onto the dock, the big band at the Club struck up their first tune: an insipid version of 'New York, New York'.

## CHAPTER 9

### COCOS ISLAND

*Exile.* Solitude continues.

Doc wondered what he was going to do, now that he'd finished all his chores.

*Well. Another day in paradise, then.*

He carried little aboard *Exile* in the way of entertainment. The sails were fun to play with, sometimes, and the shortwave radio was wonderful, especially in the middle of an ocean where it seems so out of place, almost a miracle, of sorts.

Entertainment costs money, though, and in order to get money, Doc had to work. He hated to work, so he seldom had a lot of money. He couldn't afford much entertainment, and usually brought food, instead.

He had already done his fishing for the day, and set aside half a dozen meaty coral cod fillets to marinate for dinner. It had taken only ten minutes to catch them. He'd located a lovely fishing spot within

rowing distance of the anchorage, along the edge of a deep, coral-lined pool.

Doc was pleased that he wouldn't have to depend on his outboard motor for dinner on a daily basis, and had gratefully left it stowed below. The lagoon would be awash with motorists, soon enough.

According to Shaun, the fishing was much better further out, but the tradewinds had finally freshened, and often raised a nasty chop in the middle of the lagoon. Doc's inflatable dinghy was nearly impossible to row into a stiff wind, so he seldom strayed very far from the shelter of the islet. The wind direction was such that he stood a good chance of being blown straight through the pass, and out into the open sea.

The next stop was Madagascar. Over two thousand miles.

Doc had already rearranged his ground tackle. The unceasingly strong winds had prompted him to switch to his storm anchor. He'd also shackled on a shot of heavy stud-link chain, which he had deployed only twice before, during severe gales. He chose a spot conveniently close to the beach.

Then after further consideration, he had hauled everything up again, and moved it slightly upwind of the main anchorage, so that he'd be spared the drama, when the central area behind the beach became over-crowded, and boats began dragging their anchors.

It was bound to happen.

*Exile* usually stayed put. She was a seaworthy boat, even riding to her anchor. Doc always admired the design of ocean rescue boats, especially how waterproof they looked, almost submersible. He'd designed his boat with them in mind, putting a strong camber into the deck, and keeping it flush, without a cabin sticking up to catch the wind, or take the full impact of a breaking sea. He had tapered all her spars, and kept her rig as clean as possible, to keep windage to a bare minimum.

But he noticed that he'd neglected to take down his radar reflector.

Quite a few yachts carried them, hoisted aloft in the rigging. In theory, a radar reflector makes a yacht more readily visible to shipping, by enhancing the return echo of a radar pulse. Doc was convinced that they were nearly useless, as they were invariably too small to do the job intended. He thought of them as just another gadget that could come adrift during a storm, and cause trouble.

Doc had made a few simple modifications to one he'd found in a second-hand shop that rendered it truly useful. It looked like a large gelatine capsule, with a rubber seal where the two halves joined together, and a lashing eye at each end. He had removed the reflective metal bits

inside, and replaced them with plastic bags of marijuana. It held quite a lot.

He lowered it down, and rolled himself a couple of generous joints, minding the seeds.

Doc generally avoided carrying illegal substances through Customs, but he had come across this smoke quite by accident in Tanzania, and bought in bulk. He couldn't conceive of throwing it overboard. Not with the parties about to start.

He had cruised leisurely up the East African coast, after leaving South Africa, and spent several months in the company of the local fishermen, in the islands off Tanzania. Most were living rough, sleeping in driftwood huts, and drying octopus to sell in the markets on the mainland.

Doc routinely carried extra fishing gear, and an assortment of second-hand clothing, which he exchanged for fruit and garden vegetables. Children's clothing, for the most part, since it took up so little space. He tried to avoid simply giving things away, as if he were sponsored by some charitable organization, and preferred to barter whenever possible. But the Tanzanians he met had nothing to trade with. They couldn't keep gardens, since there was no fresh water on the

islands, and didn't produce handicrafts, because there were no tourists to buy them.

*They had...what? Some badly kinked nylon, wound around a flat piece of driftwood. A little glass jar, with few heavily-rusted hooks. Perhaps a pair of rubber goggles or a machete, and a sack of maize meal apiece.*

So he traded for dried octopus. Or leathery fish. It was the principle of the thing.

But there is only so much room for smelly carcasses aboard a small sailing boat. Doc was ready to cease trading, altogether, when a pair of amiable young fishermen stopped by with a twenty-litre cashew nut tin, nearly filled with manicured marijuana tops, which they had grown themselves in the Rufiji river delta.

*They were a lot like me, weren't they? Most of their day was spent sitting in the shade of the casuarinas, talking with friends, smoking a little dope, and watching the sunset in the hills on the coast.*

*They weren't all fishermen. Some were nomads, and refugees from the garbage-strewn cities, who had found a place where they could feel*

*more at home, closer to the sea. They could dive the reefs for crayfish, or jig for squid. The fishing was first-rate, so it wasn't like work, or anything.*

Doc's own menu had improved immeasurably.

Shaun had given him a lift to the grocery store at the Administrative Headquarters on West Island, and he had stocked up. A government-subsidized supply ship brought in fresh fruit and vegetables once a month, along with butter and cheese. There was decent wine on the shelves. Meat and ice cream in the freezer.

They even baked bread.

There was also a small agricultural research station, which grew tomatoes, papaya, and bell peppers. Doc couldn't remember the last time he'd picked a green pole bean. Alive, right off the vine.

It was a civilized arrangement, Doc thought. He had a picture postcard anchorage off a pristine, uninhabited island, all to himself. Then, tastefully out of sight, ten miles across the lagoon, stood the Coca-Cola sign, where he could obtain the treats of civilization, and then escape, feeling like a clever thief.

Doc took an apple on deck, and began idly polishing it on the leg of his shorts. They were a rarity in the tropics, and he hadn't eaten one for almost a year.

Compared to tinned fruit he'd been living on, the apple seemed really special.

*What's lost when you turn apples into applesauce? It's more than nutrients, or vitamins, or any other bits. What's lost is the apple, itself. Something beautiful that you can roll around in your hand, and admire.*

It was perishable, and belonged in a different category than the sextant, say, or the winch handle. He could stow those away and forget about them, but if he forgot the fresh fruit, it would perish. He'd feel really guilty, then. Wasting such a precious thing.

His sails and rope would also perish one day, although if he conscientiously covered the sails, and stowed the rope in a locker, they would last for years. He could largely forget about them, too.

Most of his food was perishable, of course. Soy sauce would ferment, eventually. Powdered milk turned rancid. Even the canned food would only last so long. Years, though. Usually, the metal tin would rust through first. The aseptic packs were even stamped with a date, so that he knew exactly how much time was left.

Yet, the demise of this particular apple was imminent. It was obviously ripe. Past it, really. Once the rot started, he could lose it in a day or two. Doc had no control over its fate. The apple, itself,

determined the time. By its ripeness. It was a perishable thing, independently.

Just like himself.

*For the most part, I imagine there's plenty of time left, and forget about it. But that just covers up the possible imminence, doesn't it? Assuming a life expectancy, like an expiration date on a food package?*

*Ripeness is not a prerequisite, in my case.*

*Apples don't care, though.*

*Funny about the fish. They don't seem to care very much, either.*

Even though Doc dove on coral reefs quite often, it never ceased to amaze him how prey could live in such close proximity to predators, and act so nonchalant about it.

A lazy parrotfish might crunch off a piece of coral, and scores of smaller fish would dart after the crumbs. A jellyfish might float past, oblivious as a passing cloud. Sharks often cruise through. Most of the fish just seem to hang out, as they would in an aquarium - part of a tranquil community of individual, yet interconnected life. All of it in constant motion, in a panorama of fluid, weightless movement.

Then, suddenly, chaos would reign, as a predator struck. Frightened fish would speed off in every direction, amid clouds of sand,

and mass confusion. In mere seconds, however, an almost unbelievable harmony resumed.

*You can't feel truly at home, there. Not swimming with the sharks. They never sleep. You need imagination to stay on top of the food chain.*

The water in the anchorage was clear enough that Doc could stand on deck and sight along the catenary of his anchor chain, twenty feet down to the bottom, then follow it across the seabed to the vicinity of his anchor, where it disappeared into the sand.

A pair of yellow angelfish were circling lazily around the anchor chain. The inhabitants of the lagoon would soon grow accustomed to swimming around his chain, he thought. He'd stay connected awhile, this time. He was on top of the food chain, and pleased to be there.

Doc had become well-acquainted with the virtues of chain, after years of living at anchor, shackled onto the end of a piece of it.

He often felt anxious after dropping the hook in an unfamiliar anchorage - worrying whether the anchor would hold, or what kind of predicament he'd find himself in, if the wind shifted in the middle of the night - but he seldom worried about the chain. It was so reliable that he

had come to trust it, for the most part, and just renewed the galvanizing every few seasons.

He didn't need a windlass on his little boat, and handled the chain often, when he was cruising, and anchoring in a new spot every few days. When he was pulling it up, and actually feeling the links in it, he was reminded of the connections, and that its reliability depended on every one of them. So he'd routinely inspect them, usually concentrating on the shackles, or just the last few links.

Even when he felt secure in an anchorage, he would still notice the chain when he was swimming around the boat, and feel inclined to inspect it.

The longer he stayed in one place, though, the more he would tend to forget about it. Especially in city harbors, where the water was so dirty that he couldn't see a single link beneath the surface, and wouldn't consider swimming. He would never see the chain then, and once it became fouled with weed, he was loathe to check it. Those lower links in the food chain can get pretty slimy.

There was no point in touching it, really. The very reliability of the chain seemed to sanction some neglect. He knew it was in good condition when he laid it down, so he just left it alone. Forgot about it. Not always, but most of the time.

Doc seldom stayed in one place long enough to get any barnacles on his chain, but he'd seen his share of neglected boats, moored with chain that almost looked solid, its links invisible underneath a thick crust of shells.

*They break loose, eventually, and founder on the rocks, often taking a few innocent boats along with them.*

*It's what happens, when you stay anchored in one place, too long. You start to believe that you're solidly connected, and secure. You forget that it's a chain, with individual links.*

*Corroding ones.*

*Hasn't same thing happened with the food chain? It's almost been rendered solid, covered over by the accretion of layer upon layer of civilization, so that it's a one-way connection now, like the hose of a harbor dredge, sucking everything up, bringing it to the top.*

Doc glanced along his anchor chain once more, and searched over the seabed, wondering if the fluke of the anchor was still visible, protruding from the sand. He'd been able to see a fair bit of it, the first day. Then less and less, as it gradually pulled home, with every strong gust. Now, it had disappeared.

*So. Reconnected, then.*

Doc leaned out a little further, noticing a few barnacles growing on the hull. His anti-fouling paint had a lot of miles on it, unfortunately, and had worn away in places, especially near the waterline. A few tufts of weed had taken hold, and formed a wispy little beard.

The water in the anchorage was so clear that he could see every blemish. The barnacles looked as unsightly as acne.

*Wouldn't hurt to have some fresh bottom paint, now would it? Or even a bright, new boot-top stripe. Why not? Display some colorful plumage.*

## CHAPTER 10

### MAROVO LAGOON

#### *Yacht, Miles Ahead*

Nigel had vague plans of taking *Rainblow* to the ice, someday, or possibly to the forested high latitudes, where there was always some risk of striking an iceberg, or a floating log. So he had built her on the heavy side, to withstand some punishment. It took a fresh breeze to get her surfing, but there was plenty of wind.

He'd shown Sophie the sights on Great Barrier, while they waited for the southerly winds of an approaching high pressure system to arrive; and by their second day at sea, the wind had steadied at a near gale.

The waves were high enough that Sophie often had to look up at them. They would continually overtake the stern of the boat, breaking on either side. Although she was terrified at first, she came to realize that they weren't in any danger, and eventually relaxed.

The boat would lift up and surge forward on the face of the crest with an acceleration that she could feel deep in her belly. A massive bank of wildly churning water would momentarily seem to surround her, and then collapse away with a loud hiss. The clear azure blue of the sea would change to an opaque turquoise from the infusion of all the air

bubbles, and then become white with foam, when they rose to the surface, and burst.

*Rainblow* wouldn't surf on every wave - only when they caught the crest just right - but they had plenty of exhilarating rides. Sophie discovered that she could predict when they were about to surf, just from the sound of the approaching wave, and the feel of the helm. Sometimes she'd call out to alert Nigel, 'Here comes a good one!'. Usually, though, she'd just hold her breath in anticipation, and let out a little whoop.

Or start laughing.

It remained scary at night, however, when she couldn't see the height of the oncoming waves. She'd hear them ominously gathering momentum, and begin to break, but the crests remained invisible until they formed some foam, which reflected the pale starlight. She would see an occasional muted burst of light from a breaking wave off in the distance, but in the absence of moonlight, the horizon was black.

Nigel explained that it could get very dangerous, indeed, with storm force winds, when the crests of much larger waves might begin to topple over randomly. Then, they might not simply break harmlessly on either side of the boat, but possibly on top of it. The immense weight of the wall of water could damage the boat. Crush something. It was a matter of luck, really.

In bad weather, the seas sometimes become confused, with a few wave trains superimposed on one another. There might be several cold fronts, for example, hundreds of miles apart, and the waves generated by them might arrive at an angle to each other, or have a different frequency. It was possible to encounter some waves of exceptional height, then, where the amplitude of the pair coincided. If you happened to be in just the wrong place, at the wrong time, well...bad luck.

Nigel had run into a bit of bad luck in the past. A dinghy resting in chocks on deck had been smashed flat, once; and a frame holding a photoelectric panel swept away cleanly another time, leaving behind only a few bolt heads. He didn't stow anything on deck, anymore, except for the dinghy. No choice about that.

Nigel reckoned that he'd spent over six hundred days at sea. In all that time he'd been in truly dangerous seas only five or six days. Less than one percent. The waves might be heavy, but they're also pretty soft. Rocks, reefs, and the other hard bits - they always posed a bigger threat. Like trying to pull the anchor up and get under way, before a strong onshore wind puts you in the surf; or being hit by a heavy squall when you're navigating through a maze of reefs, and you can't see a bloody thing.

The strong southerlies gradually eased over the next few days, backing to the east. The waves lost their sharpness, and stretched out into smoother rolling hills. They'd left the hard-edged streaks of cirrus clouds behind, and found the softer clumps of cumulus in the tradewind belt.

The sun felt warmer with the lighter winds. The water temperature had increased a few degrees, and they found that they could dispense with clothing entirely. The deck was totally dry, so they pulled the unused mattress off the bunk containing the dynamite, and wrestled it out of the hatch. It was fun to lounge around on during the day, and they slept under the stars.

Sophie usually avoided the entanglement of sexual relationships when she was working in the City, even though there was always a wealth of opportunities. The customers in the deli would constantly make passes at her, and a few of the regulars were remarkably persistent. It was like a game, which she had learned how to play quite well, and they never came out on top. She was always able to keep them in check. Perpetual check.

It was for the best. More and more people were taking up imaginary sex, anyway, since the casual kind had become too dangerous. The sex was lousy, too, when she was deflated. It usually made her

think of penetration - being skewered clean through - like the objects that the gardeners in the park went around stabbing with their pointed poles. Then, discarded.

It felt good with Nigel. With him, it was like...enclosing. Even so, it could still be painful, when she overdid it, and stayed out too long in the tropical sun, exposing some sensitive spots that seldom saw sunshine.

Sophie often travelled to mountainous places, and the immense flatness of the open ocean felt strange. Any landscape provides some variety, even in the City, where the towering buildings added some interesting elevation to the surroundings. She sensed that spending long periods at sea would tend to make a person more introspective, since there was nothing on the horizon to draw your gaze outwards. The waves were enchanting to look at - meditative, in a way - but provided no focus for thought. She was drawn more and more inwards.

She didn't think that she'd like sailing alone, as Nigel often did. He could sit for hours, happily watching the oscillating mechanism of the windvane steering gear, while she felt more inclined to read, or listen to the radio.

It was a more passive life than she was used to - she usually walked a lot - but she seemed to get plenty of exercise without even

trying. The motion of the boat had something to do with it, she thought. She was constantly using her muscles just to hang on, and move about. Even the simplest cooking involved some gymnastics - bracing herself in awkward positions, wrestling with things trying to escape from cupboards, chasing rolling vegetables, or trying to hold herself in one spot while she kneaded some bread. The sailing life was a healthy one, it seemed. She ate like a horse.

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They arrived in the Solomons near midday, when the sun overhead imparted a luminous glow to the light green water in the lagoon. It shone brilliantly, in contrast to the deep, dark blue of the surrounding sea, and highlighted the emerald clusters of islets inside. Nigel had been waiting to share this sight with her. As they approached the reef, still carrying full sail in the light tradewinds, she didn't disappoint him, and affectionately flashed that angelic smile of hers.

Nigel had navigated the reef passage several times, and knew that it looked much shallower than it really was. He steered to pass over a section where there was some nice coral. After many days of sailing across what appeared to be limitlessly deep seas, suddenly seeing the

bottom was dramatic, and the proximity of the coral formations was breathtaking.

Nigel took a slight detour after entering the lagoon, and sailed into the deep-water bay, so they could see the crane.

It was a massive piece of machinery, and Nigel estimated that the boom was nearly thirty meters long. They had installed it on a rocky outcrop at the head of the bay, on the only site where deep draught ships could access the mainland, without having to dredge the lagoon. The log transport ships would be secured to the cliffs, and loaded by crane.

The Consortium was denied the easier option of rafting the logs in the water, and loading them with the ship's crane. The fringing shelf and abundant coral heads in the deep-water inlet made it impossible to manoeuvre even a small launch to shepherd the logs. Rafted logs were also highly susceptible to sabotage, so the company had opted for a long-boomed crane.

The barge was still moored underneath the crane platform. Nigel realized that sinking it would effectively block ocean access to the site, and complicate any repairs. The wide, flat bottom of the barge wouldn't be easy to prise off the sticky, muddied seabed; and the cost of raising it might make the trees too expensive.

There was no activity on the deck of the barge, or anywhere near the crane, but they noticed some blue exhaust smoke rising from what was left of the rainforest, on a partially logged slope behind the crane site. A staging area had been cleared and levelled next to the crane platform, and was being used for log storage. Several rows of stacked logs stood ready for loading.

The logging company had exploited a traditional system of chiefly stewardship, by offering large sums of money to a few key people. Only two paramount chiefs were involved, and neither of them even lived on the island. Although the Consortium had gained access to only a portion of the island's forests, the logging would affect the ecology of the entire lagoon.

When Sophie saw what the logging was doing to the lagoon - the turbid reddish-brown water in the bay, and the erosion on the denuded hill - she could more readily understand Nigel's anger. But anger came terribly close to hate, and Sophie refused to hate. Mostly, she felt sadness. Maybe anger was the more appropriate response. She wasn't sure.

Perhaps she had been naive in expecting the flat earth people to relinquish their power without a fight. They persisted in their belief that they had been made in the image of God, which led them to believe that

they had divine sanction to do whatever they wished with the bits of earth under their dominion.

The round Earth people would inherit what was left, she knew, but what if there was only desolation? Wasteland? Holiness was irrelevant to the logging company. Their involvement was strictly business. Yet, for Sophie, the logging was essentially a religious issue.

And she was about to become a holy warrior.

It was scary. Not the act of attacking the crane, particularly, but rather the ease with which she had made the transition from having hopes and dreams, to justifying ends and means. There simply weren't any guidelines. Just a vague moral law within her, and her revelations that the Earth was holy.

Over a hundred islands dot the Marovo Lagoon, and the reef which encloses it. Mpane's village was located on a small, rocky islet just off the northern side of Vangunu Island, which the villagers referred to as the mainland. It was the sort of place that would be covered with vacation cottages, if it were in New Zealand, and have a few boats tied up to a rustic pier. It was a residential islet, in fact, and the villagers cultivated their gardens on the mainland.

The old fishing boat that Mpane had restored in Whangarei was moored off the islet, but he had moved off her, and was living ashore in the village. Nigel suspected it might have something to do with politics.

Mpane understood politics. Priests, too.

Nigel recalled how he had purchased a set of beautiful vestments from a sleazy pawnbroker in Auckland, as a gift for the village priest. Then packed them aboard with everything else, when he sailed the boat up to the islands the previous season.

Nigel wondered if Mpane had confessed that to the priest. Probably not.

“We’ll find Mpane at the boatshop, I reckon. That’s it, over there.” Nigel pointed toward a thatched structure on the shore of the mainland, directly opposite the village. “Could you steer for it while I unlash the anchor?”

“Sure. No worries.”

Sophie had gained confidence in her ability to handle the helm, and didn’t hesitate, despite her nervousness at being so close to the coral. She followed Nigel’s lead, and steered with her toes, standing on the tiller, hanging onto the backstay, and holding her head high, for the best possible view of the coral.

“Seems awfully shallow,” she said.

“It’s about three meters. The whole bay.”

“Is that Mpane’s boat? *Mongrel?*”

Nigel laughed.

*Mongrel.* That described Mpane, all right.

He had spent his early years at Catholic mission school on the mainland, knowing virtually nothing about his Kiwi father, other than the fact that he had been a cook on one of the New Zealand freezer ships, which regularly delivered mutton forequarters and sheep offal to the islands.

Solomon Islanders are among the darkest-complected people on the planet, typically having almost blue-black skin. Mpane’s was medium-brown. Combined with his slightly reddish hair, his physical appearance noticeably set him apart. He was teased constantly, and taunted by his classmates, which led to countless fights. And he was always on his own. Yet Mpane more than stood his ground, and nobody messed with him after awhile. Except the priests. Mpane lost count of the number of times they caned his knuckles for eating the copra plantation's coconuts. The hunger was no excuse, they said. Stealing was a sin.

When Mpane was fourteen, his mother informed him that he was entitled to New Zealand citizenship; and that, if he wanted to, he could

attend a Catholic boarding school in Auckland. His father had died, and after his derelict farm was sold, and the debts paid, there was enough money left over to cover the school fees. When she showed him his birth certificate, and the letter from the solicitor, Mpane was gone.

The city terrified him, at first. He made some Maori friends. Some Fijians. But he was always an outsider. There was simply no niche that he could slot into, but no tag that anyone could lay on him either, other than mongrel. He was truly one of kind - no gangmember, obviously - and, therefore, no threat to anyone.

Mpane knew how to work with wood, so he took an apprenticeship as a carpenter, and learned how to work with tools. He had spent his childhood paddling a canoe, the way city kids peddle their bicycles, and felt drawn to work on the waterfront. He soon became a familiar figure around the boatshops - one of those exotic characters you'd expect to find hanging around a harbour, where there's always a few castaways, and mongrels.

Mpane came to understand that he would never really fit in anywhere, and that being a misfit was his fate. He found some freedom in that. He began wearing dreadlocks. Then salting his speech with the American slang he gleaned from the movies. The combination gave him a bit of a Caribbean air - especially to those who had never been to the

Caribbean - and he found that some Europeans began befriending him, as well.

When he had saved enough money to rent a place of his own, Mpane moved north to Whangarei. There was plenty of work available in the harbour; and whether it was the friendlier feel of rural Northland, or simply his relief at escaping the slums, he felt cleaner there.

Nigel was building *Rainblow* at the farm in Whangarei at the time. They became good mates.

When Mpane first told him of his intention to salvage a derelict wooden fishing boat, and sail it up to the Solomons, Nigel dismissed it a rather extreme example of wishful thinking. The deck of the old boat even had some broadleaf ferns sprouting out of it, from collected pockets of rotting leaves and wind-blown dirt.

Mpane persisted, though, and replaced the entire deck, even built her a new cabin, using demolition timber and recycled fastenings, which he collected while repairing other boats. He left the interior virtually bare, and transferred the entire contents of his workshop aboard. Nuts and bolts, half-full tins of paint, scraps of hose, worn sandpaper...he loaded the lot.

Then, he lashed two extra drums of fuel on deck, and sailed for the Solomons. Nigel offered to loan him his spare, plastic sextant, but

Mpane seemed largely unconcerned about navigation. He had a compass, though, and fetched up in New Guinea, which wasn't that far off, really. Nigel had to shake his head in wonder, looking at a chart of the Coral Sea, trying to imagine how he'd managed to thread his way through the maze of reefs.

He suspected Mpane didn't have a clue.

Upon his eventual arrival in the lagoon, delegations came from nearly every village to welcome him home, shake his hand, and see the wondrous boat. He'd left them as an angry young teenager, who had lost his way, and returned home completely at peace with himself, and a very wealthy man.

It was a miracle.

Mpane had clearly won the support of the village elders for his boatshop. They had already milled enough timber to build several small boats, and erected an open, thatched shed to keep the rain off the stacks of drying planks. The skids for the slipway appeared nearly finished. Mpane thought the income gained from working on the visiting overseas yachts would be sufficient to finance construction of the new boats.

Mpane emerged from the boatshop, and walked to the water's edge to greet them.

"How ya goin', dude?" he called out.

Nigel hopped out of the dinghy and clasped him by the shoulders. Then tousled his hair. Mpane had some wood shavings tangled in his dreadlocks, just like he always did.

“Good to see ya, mate. Truly.”

“Well? Come on,” Mpane chided. “Aren’t ya goin’ to introduce me to the sheila?”

Nigel put his arm around Sophie, and smiled. “Meet Sophie. She's part of the team.”

Although they had bypassed the village, and rowed directly to Mpane's boatshop on the mainland, their arrival hadn't gone unnoticed. An armada of welcoming canoes was on its way from the home islet. Some wide-eyed children were already peering around the corner of the shed. Any discussion of the crane would have to wait.

But Nigel had to ask one question.

”How much time do we have? Before the ship arrives?”

“Three or four days, I reckon.”

Men from the village began arriving with their wood carvings, hoping to make a sale. Upon recognizing Nigel, however, they were inclined to leave them in the boat. Sophie was enchanted by the intricate designs, though, and began examining them, occasionally

selecting a carving she liked, and setting it aside for further consideration.

Many of the men in the lagoon were highly-skilled woodcarvers - perhaps the finest in the South Pacific - yet there were very few customers to buy their work. The possibility of an increase in tourism was extremely remote, in that there were no facilities, and endemic malaria kept most visitors away. So the villagers relied on the cruising yachts for their cash income. Occasionally, someone on a yacht would buy quite a few ebony carvings, with the intention of reselling them overseas, but the average sale was one or two per visiting boat.

The money allowed them to buy rice and flour to supplement their usual diet of fish and garden vegetables, as well as soap, candles, and kerosene; but the lagoon store had only a meagre offering of goods for sale. Even those were often poor quality, so the woodcarvers were usually keen to trade. They could obtain fishing gear, rope, and all sorts of decent tools which weren't available locally by trading with the overseas yachts.

Nigel thought that the men actually preferred to barter, since it avoided potential domestic disputes, as they could trade for whatever they wanted, and not have to argue with their wives over how to spend the money. Whatever deal was struck, however, always had to include a tithe for the church. The islanders were devout Christians, and the

church was invariably the focus of community life in the villages. Services were held every day.

Mpane had nearly completed his first boat - a planked dory with a small cuddy cabin. It was almost ready for final painting. Mpane had been working on it when they arrived.

"Any luck finding a buyer?" Nigel asked. He thought it might be the one flaw in Mpane's plan. Hardly anyone in the islands had the cash to buy boats like this. Mpane had fitted it out like a proper little yacht. He'd even put some of the wood carvers to work. A traditional Solomon Islands figurehead was sculpted into the top of the stem post, and the cabin door incorporated two carved panels - a dolphin, and a crocodile.

"Already sold," Mpane announced proudly.

"Really? No shit..."

"Got a real good price for it, mate. In yen, no less."

Nigel wondered how he'd managed that. "Who bought it?"

"The head forester from the Consortium. Nice bloke. Japanese. Wants to take visitors fishing."

"Bloody hell..."

"Cash in hand, dude. I couldn't exactly refuse to sell it to him, could I?" Mpane grinned. "The engines are coming on the first log transport ship. Twin Yamahas. I can hardly wait to see how she goes."

Sophie had been quietly listening in, and began to giggle. Mpane looked over at her, and found the mirth in her face irresistible, and started laughing himself.

The village priest arrived, and came directly over to greet them.

"Welcome, Nigel. Joseph told me that you might arrive this week."

"Good to see you again, Father," Nigel said, completely baffled. Who the hell was Joseph?

The priest immediately took hold of Nigel's arm, and led him off to one side of the shed. "Have you brought the explosives, my son?" he asked, almost in a whisper.

"What? How in hell..." Nigel blurted out, before checking himself. He wondered how much the kindly man knew.

The priest lifted a finger to his lips, indicating that a quiet response was preferable. Nigel hesitated, but was unable to lie to him, and simply nodded his head.

"Oh, marvellous! Our prayers have been answered." The man beamed with joy, and hugged him. When he stepped back, there were tears in his eyes. "God bless you, Nigel." He turned away, and walked jauntily back to his canoe. Then, he made a fist, and triumphantly punched the air.

Nigel walked back, scratching his head. He went up to Mpane.  
"Who's this guy Joseph? I don't know anyone here named Joseph, do I?"

"That's me," Mpane said.

"*Joseph?* Where'd that come from?"

"I got christened."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Well, Mpane's a heathen name. God won't accept names like that. Father Jerome told me I needed a proper Christian name. He picked it out for me. It's some dude from the Bible, I reckon."

"Uh-huh. So...is it all right if I call you Joe?"

"Piss off."

"Joey?"

Mpane growled, and turned to face him. He lifted his paintbrush, and held it out in front of him like a knife. It was dripping red lead primer.

Nigel raised his hands submissively. "No offense, mate. I'm a heathen, myself."

Sophie came to his rescue.

She held out a small ebony bowl, which had been fitted with a matching cover. A delicately carved circle of intertwined fish and dolphins were dancing in relief around the perimeter of the lid, and the edge of the bowl was inlaid with pearl shell.

"I just have to buy this, Nigel. Could you negotiate for me? He speaks hardly any English, and he doesn't seem to want money for it." She pointed out the artist.

"That's Harold," Nigel said. "He's one of the best. It's nice, isn't it?" Nigel ran his finger over the polished ebony. Harold walked over to join them.

"Hello Harold. Yu stop good?" Nigel asked, extending his hand.

"Mifela good tumas, Nigel. Yu orait?"

"Harold...missus blong mifela likem carving blong yufela. Likem tumas. Work blong yu...him he *expert*. Wanem yu like long disfela samting?"

Harold rubbed his chin. "Umm...wireless blong mifela him he bugger-up. Yu savvy work disfela samting?"

"No problem. Tomorrow morning, Harold. Yu stop boat blong mifela. Trade samting nice. Orait?" Nigel handed him back the bowl.

Harold grinned hugely, and nodded.

"What did he say?" Sophie asked eagerly.

"Harold wants me to fix his radio. He'll come out to the anchorage in the morning. We'll make a trade."

"Great!" Sophie rubbed her hands together. She looked Nigel in the eye. "You never told me you spoke pidgin."

Nigel grinned. "Mifela savvy talk pidgin all same long local fella."

Mpane's village was more prosperous than most. The more isolated villages, and those without good anchorages were seldom visited by the yachts, and had no cash income, at all. The woodcarving market was saturated, anyway.

The Consortium held out the promise of more immediate employment for these men, and many of them wanted the work. Factions were forming. The islanders who had chosen to become labourers had begun wearing yellow hardhats all the time, to show their allegiance to the company.

The manual labour jobs on offer, like cutting slash or mixing and hauling cement, paid very little. The Consortium had brought in its own loggers, machinery operators and mechanics from Indonesia, even though these positions had been included in their pledge to create jobs on the island.

There had already been numerous incidents - insults, racial slurs, even some serious injuries. One of the young labourers had come to blows with the Indonesian cook, who routinely added so much spice to the midday meal that the Solomon Islanders couldn't possibly eat it. The youth was promptly sacked. In his anger, he had returned to the base camp that night, broken into the storeroom, and stolen a shovel and a couple bottles of liquor. The unaccustomed alcohol soon proved his

undoing. The village chief was obliged to notify the police, who travelled all the way from Honiara, and took him away in handcuffs. He was given six months in jail.

The company had posted a security guard ever since. He spent most of his time patrolling around the storeroom and the mechanical shop, but visited the crane site several times during the night. Mpane recruited two youths from the village to spy on him, and they had spent three nights in the rainforest, observing his movements. They learned that the guard followed no apparent schedule. He had checked the crane at different times each night.

"Does he patrol on Sunday?" Sophie asked.

"Not sure," Mpane admitted, relaxing back into the settee on *Rainblow*, having finished, filling them in. He hadn't even considered asking the kids to spy on the Sabbath. "The Indonesians are all Muslims, though, so the Sunday work prohibition won't affect them. Most of them do maintenance work on weekends."

The base camp was equipped with refrigeration, and a generator ran continuously to provide the power. The Consortium had also installed lighting. Two bright halogen floodlights illuminated the crane platform all night. It wasn't quite as soft a target as Nigel hoped for, but he didn't think a solitary watchman would pose much of a threat. With

the aid of a lookout on land, they could set the charges as soon as the guard left. Nigel imagined that the bright lights would make him nervous as hell, but maybe having good light would make their job even easier.

Nigel was more concerned about failing to put the crane well and truly out of action, than he was of getting caught. After seeing the size of it, he was worried that might not have brought enough dynamite. When Nigel visualized the ideal demolition, he saw the crane somersaulting off the rocky ledge, twisting and breaking into pieces before splashing into the bay. He had been trying to add an exploding barge to this image, but there was some resistance.

"Have you been aboard the barge?" he asked.

Mpane nodded. "I checked out the crane the same day the barge arrived. Climbed on deck."

"D'ya reckon we could sink it?"

"Don't know, mate. It's likely to have watertight compartments, eh?"

"See any access to the hull?"

"No...but I reckon there would be. There's a big drum winch and a pump, driven by a water-cooled diesel. There'd be a thru-hull fitting on the water intake. Must be a way to get to it, eh?"

Nigel sighed. As much as he wanted to add the barge, the crane had priority. They couldn't risk skimping on the charge. He'd have to

examine the barge, himself. They had just missed the new moon, but the next few nights would still be dark.

"Let's inspect the site tomorrow night."

"Happen to remember my chainsaw, dude?" Mpane asked, rather timidly.

"Oh!" Sophie exclaimed. They'd completely forgotten Mpane's presents. In addition to the boatshop items that Nigel had gotten together, Mpane's friends on Great Barrier had sent along several boxes, a few of which were even gift-wrapped. When Sophie saw the expectant, hopeful look on his face, she felt guilty for having made him wait. She jumped right up, and fetched him a carton of apples. Mpane tore into it immediately. Next she brought out the case of Lion Brown.

When Nigel saw the beer, he groaned. "Bloody hell. What's come over me? Didn't even occur to me to offer you a beer, mate."

"No worries. These apples are brilliant."

Sophie went to sleep when the two of them opened one of the bottles of Mount Gay. She didn't smoke dope very often, or drink much beer, either. Rum was totally out of the question. The marijuana that Nigel grew was incredibly potent, and she was worn out from laughing so much.

Nigel was really proud of the latest harvest, she knew, from the way he'd shown her the package. One of their deluxe, presentation packs, he called it. The large, green buds had printed bands fastened around them, as if they were expensive cigars. GREAT BARRIER/EXTRA FINE.

Harold came out in his canoe about an hour after sunrise, with his broken transistor radio tucked safely inside a plastic bag. Nigel was still asleep, needless to say, and Sophie had to pummel him, just a little, in order to chase him out of bed.

But she had his tea ready.

"Look what Father Jerome sent over!" Harold had delivered a large basket of yams and fruit, garnished with some small orchids.

"Lovely," Nigel conceded, scowling miserably.

Fortunately, there wasn't a serious problem with Harold's radio. Just some corrosion on the contacts caused by a leaking battery, and Nigel didn't have to unduly exert himself to fix it.

Their trading session began with Harold's assessment of the ebony market. Supply was desperately tight, he explained sadly. Prices had soared. Profit margins were thin, and expenses were up - the school fees for his nephew, who cut the pearl shell; and the kerosene Harold needed

so he could keep carving late, very late, into the wee hours of the night. Even the grit on the sandpaper was coming unglued.

When Nigel hauled out his boxes of trade goods, however, Harold seemed reluctant to take very much. He chose with deliberate care - a wood chisel, heavy kitchen knife, an aluminum frying pan [Sophie preferred cast iron, and refused to use it], a spool of nylon thread, finally a packet of twenty-four white envelopes. Nigel added ten dollars in cash for the Church. Harold couldn't resist thumbing through a stack of old National Geographics, obviously coveting them, but not wanting to appear greedy. When Nigel offered five, the trade was successfully concluded, by mutual assent.

Sophie examined the bowl more closely. She spun the lid slowly, and stroked the flank of one of the dolphins with her fingertip. Then lifted the edge to peek inside the empty bowl. She resolved to keep it that way, and not fill it up with paper clips and loose stamps. It would contain a reservoir of memories, instead. Merely touching the ebony would release some, and opening the lid would allow them to flood out. As a reservoir, the bowl would work best if she kept it free of everyday silt.

They entertained guests all morning. Most of the men whose carvings had made Sophie's short list returned for another try, but the one bowl was enough for her.

Three other yachts were anchored off the village, and the owner of the large ketch stopped by to invite them on a scuba diving expedition to the outer reef. His name was Charlie. "We've got extra cylinders, and a picnic lunch ready to go," he said. "Should come back with a few crayfish as a bonus."

Sophie was eager to accept, since she'd never been diving before, but one look at Nigel was enough to convince her otherwise. She offered an apology, instead.

"Nigel's feeling a bit crook, I'm afraid. We had a bit of a session last night."

Charlie grinned. "I noticed the villagers crowding around when you folks showed up. You've been here before, I take it?"

Nigel finally spoke up. "Yeah. I've been here a few times. The bloke who runs the boatshop is an old friend."

Charlie waited expectantly, but Nigel made no move to invite him aboard. "So...where you headed this season?" he asked.

Sophie was curious to hear Nigel's response. They hadn't discussed it, at all. When he turned his head, and looked inquiringly at her, they both laughed.

"We're not sure, yet," Sophie said.

"The islands in Indian Ocean, maybe. The Seychelles, or Cocos," Nigel offered, as possibilities.

"Hey! We're headed that way ourselves," Charlie said. "I hear Cocos is brilliant. Maybe we'll meet up. We'll be staying here for awhile, though. Stop by, when you've settled in. You're welcome, any time."

Charlie shoved off with a friendly wave, and headed back to his boat. His dinghy was equipped with a powerful outboard motor, and could easily carry five or six people.

"Why are they anchored so far away?" Sophie asked.

"Well, it's a big yacht. They probably think the lagoon's too shallow here."

Nigel didn't seem the least bit interested in making their acquaintance. Sophie was rather disappointed, since she had been looking forward to making some new friends. "Charlie seemed nice," she said.

Nigel frowned. "You see that big white dome?" he said dismissively. "That's a bloody satellite receiver. The whole boat's bristling with high-tech crap. I don't know. Maybe they're afraid the locals would try to rob them."

Sophie said nothing.

Nigel examined the boat through their binoculars, and fiddled with the focus, until he could make out the name, *Miles Ahead*, painted across the transom. "Figures. The bloody thing is registered in *Panama*," he snorted. "Trust me. Boats like that are bad news."

Sophie had never seen Nigel in such a venomous mood. She decided that it might be wise to leave him alone for awhile. "Do you think Mpane would mind if I borrowed his canoe? To practice rowing?"

"Mpane would be honoured, I'm sure, if it weren't for the fact that he's bound to be sound asleep. Just take it."

Nigel would be unable to go ashore, without the dinghy. So she offered to tow it back, in case he began to feel better, and wanted to visit the village.

"I just want to go back to sleep," he sighed. "And by the way, you don't *row* canoes, Sophie. You *paddle* them."

"Oh. Right. Well...I guess I'll paddle the dinghy over and get it."

Nigel rolled his eyes. "Cripes. You don't paddle *dinghies*. Just canoes and kayaks. You *row* a dinghy," he explained petulantly, with the tone of an exasperated instructor.

Sophie lowered her head, and nodded with the humility of a chastened apprentice, not wanting to embarrass Nigel in his weakened condition by telling him that she intended to paddle the dinghy, anyway. One of the rowlocks on the boat was ready to fall off, and she didn't want

to be blamed for losing it overboard. So she used just one of the oars, and started paddling across. The wide dinghy didn't paddle very well, and kept wanting to turn in circles. But it was easy enough to switch sides with the oar, if she paddled standing up. Nigel was right, of course. Yet she couldn't let him get too arrogant about it. She was no pushover.

Mpane had dragged his canoe ashore, and was busy reworking the lashings on one of the outriggers. "How's Nigel?" he asked cheerfully.

"Suffering. And irritable."

Mpane laughed. He could have guessed. "He's always been a moody sort. I think he's feeling guilty about involving you in this."

"Did he say that?"

"Might have," he replied evasively, smiling at her. "Have a look at this." He handed her a wooden figurehead, similar to the one carved into the prow of the launch, which was under construction in the boatshed.

It resembled a dog, she thought, with oddly human facial features. Melanesian ones. Two hands were carved into the figure, below the face. They were holding a severed human head. The figure on Mpane's motor launch was far less fierce, and was holding a graceful bird.

"Tell me what it means," she asked.

"This one means war. Headhunting, eh?"

"And the other one? The bird?"

"That's a dove. I think the missionaries had something to do with the design of that one. It hasn't been all that long, you know. Just a hundred years, or so, and one of the fiercest cannibalistic societies in history has been transformed into one of the meekest." Mpane took the carving, and placed it onto a tenon he'd cut into the prow of the canoe. "What d'ya reckon? Glue it on?"

"Glue? You mean, like...permanently? What if it's only a short war?"

"Yeah. Bad idea. We'd better forget the glue."

Sophie sincerely hoped it would be a brief war. She was already feeling battle weary, and they'd yet to light a single fuse. She surveyed the grounds around the boatshop. The lagoon was breathtakingly beautiful, yet she was so preoccupied with the campaign that she had scarcely noticed the haunting calls of the birds, or the flowering trees shedding their petals into the water. Focusing so intently on pursuing a goal was beginning to make her blind, and deaf. Just like the flat people. She'd have to be careful.

Mpane hadn't quite finished with the canoe. He had faired the outrigger into a smoother foil shape, and wanted to give the whole boat a coat of paint. So Sophie abandoned her paddling practice, and helped him sand down the hull.

None of the islanders painted their canoes. The imported paint was far too expensive. They simply allowed the bare wood to weather in the sun. The climate encouraged dry rot, however, and the untreated wood would begin to decay after just a few seasons. Traditionally, they would just carve out a new one, but most of the lagoon dwellers continued to use decrepit, leaking canoes. Carving had become too much like work, here.

Mpane's canoe was still sound, and he knew it would last years longer with a few protective coats of paint. His incentive, however, was to gain boat speed. With a smooth hull, and a fresh film of paint, it would be the fastest canoe in the lagoon.

Sophie was busily sanding when she heard an odd sound echoing through the trees. She stopped sanding, and listened. It couldn't be a bird. "Do you hear that?"

"That's Charlie," Mpane said. "Did you meet him, yet?"

"This morning. But what is that sound?"

"A tuba."

Sophie found it hard to believe.

Mpane noticed. "Really. It's a tuba. They're heavily into music on that boat. You should see it, eh? They've got a complete recording studio on board."

Sophie thought she heard a saxophone, too. "Have they been here very long?"

"Little over a week. They practice every day. Even at night, sometimes. That's why they anchored way out in the lagoon. Didn't want to bother anyone."

The sound carried well over the smooth water in the lagoon, and she was able to recognize the jazz phrasing in what they were playing. She decided to row out, and listen in. Sophie loved jazz. Mpane didn't really need her help, anyway. "Do you have any wood screws?" she asked.

"Heaps. What d'ya need?"

"Just a few. For the rowlocks on our dinghy."

Mpane went over to look, and chuckled. Nigel had used roofing nails. He found some bronze screws, still in perfect condition, and helped her refasten both fittings. It was a long row out to Charlie's boat.

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Charlie was practicing in the cockpit, and saw her coming a long way off. He had already guessed that they wouldn't have an outboard motor for their dinghy, having noticed the old-fashioned gaff rig on their boat. Gaffers disdained modern technology, as a rule.

What irked Charlie, though, was that their disdain often translated into contempt. Contempt for state-of-the-art boats like *Miles Ahead*, which were fully equipped with sophisticated communications and navigation equipment. Charlie had a very good boat, but he wasn't all that interested in arguing the point.

Gaffers often attached some spiritual significance to their 'traditional' boats. Communing with the sea, and all that. Charlie merely thought of his sailboat as a vehicle, similar to a bus. Just a comfortable means of long distance transport for the band. Their travelling jazz band, Miles Ahead. On the road. The South Pacific Tour.

"Sorry if I interrupted your playing, Charlie," Sophie said, unshipping her oars, coming alongside. "The music was irresistible."

Charlie grinned. "Time to practice is one thing we have in abundance. It's Sophie, right?"

She nodded, uncertain if she had told Charlie her name, but somehow feeling she hadn't.

"Come on. I'll introduce you to the band," he offered.

Charlie began with Marley, on alto and flute, who had also been practicing in the cockpit. He smiled politely, and tipped his sax in salute. Charlie then escorted her below, and pointed out Laurel, on vibes, sound asleep on the quarterberth.

"Laurel's magic on the marimba. Piano, too. If we had one."

Charlie continued on, and led Sophie into the saloon. "And here, firmly in control, we find Wendy. Our engineer, percussionist without equal, and the love of my life."

Fully half of the main saloon was devoted to a recording studio. Wendy sat hunched over the mixing board, wearing a pair of oversized foam earphones, as she worked on a notebook computer, which displayed a color-coded musical score. She caught sight of them out of the corner of her eye.

"Well, g'day," Wendy said, swivelling around in her chair. "You must be Sophie."

Sophie was growing increasingly perplexed about her seeming notoriety. Wendy noticed the sweat streaming down her cheeks after her long row across the lagoon, and chided Charlie for his lack of hospitality.

"Have we run out of ice, or what?"

"Ah. I shouldn't think so." Charlie strode directly over to the fridge to see what was on offer. "Ginger ale, bitter lemon...ice water? What's your pleasure?"

"Water would be fine. An ice cube would be a treat, all by itself."

"Perrier, or reverse osmosis?" Charlie offered, playfully.

"Charlie!" Wendy cried.

"Reverse osmosis," Sophie requested. "Plenty of ice." She was familiar with the water-making devices, having heard them advertised in the City, with the inference that one should be leery of the municipal water supply. Charlie returned with a tall glass of ice water, with a slice of lime pressed onto the rim.

"See what happens? You try to respect the modern woman's right to choose. You aspire to political correctness, and wham! You get jumped on! I ask you. Where's the joy?"

"A little suffering might do you some good, you know. Musically-speaking," Wendy suggested.

"Hah! We keep trying that. I haven't noticed much improvement, yet."

Wendy had to laugh. "You're insufferable, Charlie. Why don't you show Sophie the boat? I'll make us some frozen coffees."

The sound system wasn't the only impressive feature on the boat. The varnished teak cabin sole, solid rosewood table, stainless steel galley...all of it had been exquisitely hand-crafted. Sophie happened to notice an ebony carving on a shelf behind the saloon table. A recent acquisition, no doubt. The pearl inlay was identical to that on her bowl.

A collage of photographs was hanging next to it, in a single large frame. She went over for a closer look. They were all photos of Charlie,

posing with his tuba in some of them; and playing in others, with various jazz bands. Most were informal photos, taken at jam sessions. Sophie was stunned. She identified Wayne Shorter. Bobby Hutcherson. Then recognized the intense, round face of Arthur Blythe - his eyes closed, and seemingly possessed, playing his alto sax. Sophie was awestruck.

"You played with Arthur Blythe!"

"Well, yeah. Sort of." Charlie was taken aback. Not many people were aware Black Arthur's music.

"You must be *really* good, Charlie."

"Well. I suppose I could be, if musical genius were infectious. You know...something that you could catch, merely by rubbing up against it. I just owned a jazz club for a few years."

Charlie had several hundred compact discs, which had been recorded live at his club. He began sifting through them, looking for the Arthur Blythe sessions that featured Bob Stewart on tuba.

"We've got a pretty interesting library," Charlie explained. "I had a nice collection to begin with, and when the band got together, everyone contributed to it. Wendy did a radio show in Australia, for awhile. African jazz and ethnic stuff. Laurel had a whole lot of modern stuff. She's an academic sort."

"And Marley?"

Charlie chuckled. "Marley carries his music in his gut."

As Charlie explained it, Marley was the only genuinely gifted musician in the band. He was flat broke when Charlie first met him, busking with his sax on the street. He'd even lost the case for it, so caught up in his playing that he hadn't even noticed when someone had stolen it - along with the day's takings - right from the pavement in front of his feet.

He'd been understandably suspicious about Charlie's proposal, particularly the prospect of living in such close company with three college-educated 'white folks'. Yet after a few jam sessions on *Miles Ahead*, and getting to know the band, he signed on for the tour.

Charlie stipulated that Marley had to learn how to read music. He'd worked diligently at it, under Laurel's tutelage, and achieved a remarkable level of proficiency in the short time they'd been together. Marley had even taken to studying transcriptions in Charlie's collection - solo improvisations by John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy, mostly - which were rather difficult to read.

Marley's presence in the band had virtually assured the success of their South Pacific Tour, particularly in Melanesia, where numerous African-American soldiers had been stationed during the War. They had left an indelible impression on the locals, with their shined shoes,

sharply pressed uniforms, and positions of responsibility in the Army. Especially the officers, who had white soldiers following their orders. Few islanders had ever encountered a black-skinned visitor from outside the region before.

Now, a crowd of children would follow Marley around whenever he went ashore, often vying with each other to hold his hand, or latch onto the tail of his shirt.

“Blender!” Wendy shouted, in warning. In addition to the sound of frozen chunks of espresso coffee being ground into slush, a high-pitched squeal briefly came over the speakers. It was a large, commercial machine.

“God, I hate that,” Charlie groaned.

The frozen coffee was a special treat, as their ice cream supply was limited, and irreplaceable, here. Marley descended the companionway ladder to join them. Laurel emerged, as well, and came shuffling sleepily into the saloon. One side of her face bore a delicate herringbone imprint, matching the pillows in the quarterberth.

Wendy brought glasses and the frosty blender bowl over to the table, and the whole band gathered around, while Charlie poured. He chuckled. "Impeccable sense of timing, our Laurel. She'd never miss a frozen coffee."

Laurel's yawn widened into a smile. "Oh, yum."

Sophie spoke up, when no one thought to introduce her. "Have a nice nap?" she asked.

Laurel stared blankly at her. "Who are you?"

"Sophie."

"Oh, sure. I get it. You're the one bringing the marijuana."

"Laurel!" Wendy cried.

Mpane had informed them about the shipment he was expecting from New Zealand, it turned out. With the arrival of *Rainblow*, and news that Nigel and Mpane were old friends, the band had come to the obvious conclusion.

Sophie grinned. "I think Mpane's package has arrived, actually."

While everyone was seated around the table, Wendy took the opportunity to air the videotape from their last concert, which she had just finished editing. It had taken place at a village on Malekula Island, in Vanuatu - just the sort of place where Charlie wanted to play - an island without electricity, where hardly anyone owned a radio, or had the slightest notion of what jazz music was all about.

There was a small cove off the village - Wendy picked it for its acoustics - and they were able to moor *Miles Ahead* close inshore, and secure it to some trees. Although many of the villagers watched from

canoes, rafted together alongside, everybody ashore had been able to hear, as well.

“That’s one of the church’s catering canoes,” Wendy pointed out, adding narration to the footage. “They paddled through the crowd between sets, with parcels of cassava and steamed fish, wrapped in banana leaves. It was a real kick.”

The concert had been a huge success, apparently. Charlie thought they’d finally solved the niggling problems with the electric generator, which had dogged their earlier efforts. Wendy had finally been able to use all four of her large speakers: one each at the bow and stern, and two hoisted aloft, amidships.

The core of Charlie’s playlist came right out of the tradition. Charlie Parker. Monk and Coltrane. Miles Davis, of course. The band had gradually added more African rhythms, since Wendy and Marley continued to look in that direction for inspiration. It was a trend that Charlie encouraged, since he was already looking ahead to their next venue. The Indian Ocean/Africa Tour.

The band would most likely break up after that, he thought, since Marley planned to strike out on his own when they reached South Africa. He often talked about his plans - finding a bassist and drummer in one

of the jazz clubs in Johannesburg, and starting up a band of his own. Perhaps heading off to Europe.

Meanwhile, Charlie was living out a dream. He was the leader of his own jazz band, and a helluva hard act to follow.

"Oh, let's have a party! Play some music!" Wendy urged.

"Yeah! Come on, boss," Marley added.

Charlie smiled. "All right. What d'ya say, Sophie? How about tomorrow night?"

"Oh, no! I can't..."

Sophie quickly covered her mouth with her hand. She had started to say that she couldn't make it. Not tomorrow. She wasn't free, then. She had to dynamite a crane. They had been talking, listening to music...it was already getting dark. And Mpane was scheduled to arrive at dusk to plan the reconnaissance.

"I really must go," Sophie declared. "I completely forgot. Mpane is coming out to our boat for supper. Maybe he'd like a day's notice about the party, so he could...uh...invite some friends?"

"Yeah. You're right. Could you mention it to him?" Charlie asked.

"Oh, sure. Glad to."

"Marley? Could you give her a lift back?"

Before they could shove off, Charlie dropped a mesh bag onto the bottom of the dinghy. A crayfish. Sophie started to protest, but Charlie wouldn't allow it.

"We caught an extra one for you," he said.

Mpane's canoe was already tied up behind *Rainblow*. He was sitting in the cockpit with Nigel. Sophie was relieved to see the bare stub on the prow of the canoe. It wasn't a war canoe. Not yet.

"Hey, Marley! How ya goin', dude?" Mpane called out.

"Good, man. Real good."

"Brilliant. You meet Nigel, yet?"

Sophie climbed aboard with the crayfish, while they transferred her dinghy to the stern of *Rainblow*, and exchanged greetings. Until that afternoon, she had been constantly in Nigel's presence since the moment she'd arrived at the dock in Auckland carrying her pack. She wondered if Nigel had noticed her absence. He'd been awfully irritable when she left. She tried to read the expression on his face as he turned to face her. He seemed happy to have her back, she thought. Perhaps, even a little apologetic.

She smiled happily, and held out the mesh bag. The crayfish didn't like being jostled, and started wildly flapping its tail. "Look! It's as big as a cat!"

Nigel came over to have a look, and stroked her affectionately on the cheek.

Sophie pulled him close. "Can we give Marley a Great Barrier cigar to take back?"

"What!"

"Please?"

"Aww! One of the big ones?" Nigel asked ruefully.

Then, he chuckled.

Sophie found a plastic bag for the marijuana, and passed it down. Marley took one look in the bag, and whistled. "Whew! Think I'll hurry this baby right on home," he said. As he sped off to rejoin his band, Sophie turned to face her own.

"Time to go to war?"

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The floodlights over the crane platform lit up the whole deep-water inlet. Nigel and Sophie waited in the canoe, hidden in the shadow the barge. When Mpane was in position to observe the road, and the route of approach taken by the security guard, he signalled with his torch.

Nigel then scrambled aboard, and searched the deck of the barge for access hatches. He found three identical steel plates, which were

secured with heavy bolts, and weeping rust from a thick accumulation of paint. They hadn't been opened in years, looked like.

Next to the large drum winch, however, he found a hinged hatch. It opened easily, squeaking on rusted hinges. He shone his flashlight inside, onto some steel steps. Then stepped inside quickly, closing the hatch overhead.

The compartment reeked of diesel fuel. He surveyed it by torchlight, and found a light fixture on the bulkhead. The switch worked. The light illuminated a small workbench, encrusted with paint, and scattered with rubbish. Flakes of rust littered the floor, which was nothing more than the bottom plating of the hull. The rust crunched underfoot.

A row of high pressure gas cylinders immediately caught his eye, as they were they only objects in the filthy compartment free of corrosion. They were secured to the bulkhead with a short chain. Oxygen. Acetylene. Three cylinders of each. He unscrewed the protective metal cap from one of them, and cracked the valve to the hiss of full pressure. He checked them all. One pair seemed a bit low. Half, maybe.

He searched the rest of the room. A couple of pipe berths were folded up against one side of the hull, their rotten canvas webbing hanging in shreds off the frames. There were a few solidified mounds of rusted chain. Empty paint buckets. A diesel tank.

There was no access to the forward compartments. The bulkhead was solid. Three pipes penetrated it, close to the floor, with a valve on each. They were all plumbed together and connected to a fitting on the deckhead with a heavy hose. The bilge pump, Nigel reckoned, with a valve for each of the forward compartments. Another large pipe emerged just underneath the deck plating. The vent, he thought. The raw water intake for cooling the diesel engine on deck was too small to be of any use. It would take days to sink the barge with a hole that size.

He heard Sophie tapping on the hull, relaying Mpane's signal that the guard was heading toward the crane. There was nothing further to be found on the barge, so he sat down on the steps to wait for the 'all clear'. Then, they could inspect the crane.

Nigel wondered if they could use the gas cylinders to their advantage. He had his cutting torch aboard *Rainblow*. Perhaps a few well-placed cuts to weaken the crane. Burn through a few bolts, or something.

The cylinders were too heavy, though. They couldn't possibly move them all the way up to the platform. He mulled over several other possibilities, without success. The acetylene torch would allow him to burn a hole through the hull, below the waterline, but not from inside. As soon as he penetrated the skin, there would be far too much steam.

The aft compartment was insignificant, in any case, compared to the huge chambers forward. They'd have to burn through all of the bulkheads. It would take hours. The steel was thick.

He abandoned the exercise when Sophie relayed the 'all clear', and hurriedly joined her in the canoe. They paddled to the base of the cliff. Mpane had already lowered the rope ladder for them.

Sophie grabbed hold, and steadied it while he climbed up to join Mpane on a ledge, which bore the weight of the cement pillars supporting the platform. The two of them stood above her, discussing construction details. Mpane did most of the talking, since he had monitored the building of it, step by step. Nigel wanted to know how much steel was inside it. How they'd reinforced it.

She stayed in the canoe, while they climbed up to examine the crane, itself. She could hear them talking, but couldn't follow the conversation. The inspection seemed interminable. She sat forlornly in the canoe, feeling redundant.

Then Nigel suddenly scrambled down the rocks, and the ladder fell after him, right into the bottom of the boat. Sophie saw Mpane dive off the top of the platform.

Nigel pushed off hurriedly. "Go! Hurry!" he urged, picking up a paddle, and starting them off towards the spot where Mpane would be expected to surface.

After picking him up, they paddled hard for the headland. Sophie didn't know that it was only a trial, and paddled for her life. When they reached the rocks, Nigel stopped paddling, and checked his watch.

"Eighty seconds. Not bad."

She turned around. Nigel was frowning, and seemed really dispirited. Their inspection obviously hadn't gone very well. "Let's head back," he sighed. "I'm bloody starving."

The cray proved worthy of a hearty appetite, as were the yams and fruit salad that Sophie prepared to go with it. They barely discussed the demolition. The possibility of a party on *Miles Ahead* proved to be a more interesting topic. Mpane had spent several hours sitting in a tree, thinking about it - while Sophie was doing the same, waiting in the canoe - and they talked about it animatedly during dinner, while Nigel brooded over the crane.

Mpane tried to interest Nigel. "Come on, dude. Quit fretting about the bloody crane. Think about the party, afterwards. We've got live music! It's a brilliant band, mate. Truly."

Nigel wasn't so sure. "But the same day? Won't it seem a bit odd? Cripes. The police will be investigating all afternoon, and then see a flamin' *party*?"

Mpane begged to differ. "Get real! There won't be any bloody *investigation*!"

"Why not?" Sophie couldn't understand what he meant. Surely some official body would want to know what happened.

"First of all, everyone will know who did it. Not any one of us, particularly. Just someone from the lagoon. Could be from any one of eight, ten villages. But no one will dare to ask which one. It's not polite to ask questions like that. Not here."

"The logging company will ask questions," she suggested.

"So what? We don't have to answer to the Consortium. They already know we won't cooperate."

Nigel couldn't believe it, either. "Come on, mate. They're bound to send the police from Honiara."

"They'll come all right, but not to investigate. The Home Affairs Ministry will be terrified by such a bold move on the part of the villages chiefs. They'll come to smooth things over. The logging company was too arrogant. They're outsiders. We're kin. It's a small country, eh?"

Mpane seemed pretty sure of himself.

"Want a beer?" Mpane asked, pulling a couple bottles from his case of Lion Brown, and holding one out toward Nigel.

Nigel shook his head. "Reckon I should mull over the demolition, a bit."

Standing next to the crane, he felt dwarfed by the size of it, and couldn't shake his concern that they might not have enough explosives. The castings were massive, made from patterns that were generous with the metal, like fifty year old tools. Designed to last forever.

Sophie noticed Mpane searching for a suitable spot to snap the cap off the beer, and handed him the bottle opener. "I'll make you some tea, Nigel, if you like?" she offered.

"Maybe coffee, eh? Some strong coffee."

"Coming right up."

Nigel had hoped to crack the engine block, at least. But it seemed unlikely. They wouldn't move it off the platform, either. Not thirty tons, or more. The dynamite would inflict the same sort of damage that a few boxes of firecrackers might do to an automobile engine. It might look ugly for awhile, but they could probably get it running again in a few weeks, once they procured the proper replacement parts.

"The fuel tank is almost full," Mpane reminded him. "We can use that."

"Yeah. I brought some flares." They'd have to replace all the hydraulic hoses, and the engine instruments. The little foam cushion. Not much else.

Sophie finished tidying up the galley, and set his coffee on the table. "Nigel? Move your knee?"

"What? Oh, sorry." Nigel shifted his leg, so she could open the cabinet door under the sink, and close the propane valve for the night.

Nigel recalled the gas cylinders on the barge. Other sources of power were available to them, besides the dynamite. There might be a way of using the powerful barge winch, for instance, or possibly even the crane engine, itself. He wondered how far the sound would carry. The loggers would hear an engine starting.

Surely.

Mpane snapped open the second beer. Nigel watched the cap as it flipped through the air, and fell spinning to the table top. He repeated the event in his imagination, and saw his image of the perfect demolition, with the crane cabin in midair, tumbling end over end as it fell...exactly like a flipped bottle cap.

Then he pictured the huge boom on the crane. What if they could use it like a giant bottle opener? Pull down on it? Really hard?

Nigel grinned. "I've got it! It's so bloody simple. We'll use the barge to sink the crane!"

## CHAPTER 11

### COCOS ISLAND

*Beach.* Cleaning up after the tourists.

The first boat to arrive was unworthy of a place on the guest list, and Doc was glad to see the back of them. He watched their white triangle of sailcloth slowly recede, until it was obscured by the palms on Northwest Island.

*And don't bother coming back, either! You...rapists!*

They had stayed less than twenty-four hours, and ferried out close to fifty gallons of water from the tanks. Several bags of coconuts, too. Then they scattered litter around the campfire they'd started, right in the middle of the beach. Even threw beer cans at the rats.

Bought the boat in Singapore, they said, and hurrying to get to the Med.

*Damn, thoughtless tourists.*

*Don't even have a clue that they'll be arriving off the Horn of Africa at the height of the vicious southwest monsoon gales, and be facing headwinds the entire length of the Red Sea, in sweltering midsummer heat.*

*It'll serve you right.*

Doc realized that he might have to stop hand-feeding oatmeal to the rats, since they would be in jeopardy if they lost their fear of humans. For all he knew, it might have been pudgy Botha, or lithe little Kate, who came scampering down the beach to investigate, and then got pelted with cans. They were really quick, though, and wouldn't be easy to hit, but there was always the possibility of a lucky shot.

Doc had just finished cleaning up the mess left by the campfire - so the bona fide guests could stroll on the beach without getting smeared with charcoal - when he saw Shaun's patrol boat approaching the anchorage.

"G'day, Doc!" he called out. "Couple more yachts on the way."

"Yeah? Hope they've got better manners than the last lot."

Shaun chuckled, and threw him a line as the launch edged into the sand. "A Swedish yacht called in a few minutes ago. Said there's another boat right behind them. Lend me a hand, eh?"

He hefted a heavy battery onto the gunwale. Doc carried it ashore, and set it down on the sand. There was also a large photoelectric panel, and a few cardboard cartons.

"What's all this stuff?"

"The volleyball, I reckon. Plus all the food you ordered."

"Already? I didn't see the supply ship."

"Came in air freight. An Air Force training flight."

"How handy. Up for a coffee? You should have some time to kill before the boats get here."

"Capital. I want to talk to you, anyway."

*Exile.* Duty calls.

Doc switched on his VHF, in case the arriving guests called back, and they relaxed under the awning.

"You're joking. A *job*?"

"Why not, Doc? It's not as if you've got a whole lot else to do."

"Well...I can always go fishing."

"How about me? I've only got three weeks left to catch that grouper, and it's going to get hectic soon, with all the yachts."

There was money in the budget for Shaun to hire an assistant, and he thought he could use the help. Installing the solar panel and a light fixture over the picnic tables, for a start.

"Couldn't I just help you catch the grouper? We know where it hangs out. It's almost tame. We could dive down, and put the hook right in its mouth. By hand."

"Come on. I'm serious. I thought you could use the income. Those pistachio nuts you ordered weren't cheap, eh?"

The bill that Shaun presented him with - for all the nuts, as well as the coppa and prosciutto hams - was rather steep, he thought, even with Shaun's generous discount. But the wages on offer were even steeper.

"You must have a good union, mate."

"Not bad, eh?"

"Well, I guess I could lend a hand. Part-time, anyway."

"Brilliant."

Shaun must have been confident that he'd accept the offer, and had brought along the forms for him to sign, even issued him an Australian tax number.

"I can't sign this one," Doc announced.

"Why not?"

"An oath of allegiance to the Queen? Americans can't do that, mate. It's treason, I think."

"But, you have to take an oath. I looked it up in the regulations."

"Well, maybe I could sign it. If we add just one word, right here."

"What?"

"I could pledge 'fiduciary' allegiance to the Queen, I guess."

"What's that?"

"Oh, it's just a legal term, that takes my special circumstances into account. It's still an oath, I'm sure."

"No worries, then. How do you spell it?"

"Here. Allow me," Doc offered.

"Beaut. Thanks."

Doc wrote in the change, in the appropriate spot, and asked Shaun to initial it. He then added his own, and signed it. Doc thought his lack of Australian citizenship might pose a bit of a problem, but he didn't mention it. "When do you want me to start?"

"Whenever. You know about those solar panels. Maybe, tackle that first. Just keep track of your hours, eh? I put in a copy of the official Handbook with all your other stuff. Would be good to read through it, I reckon."

A salty-looking boat rounded the point, flying the Swedish flag. A couple, looked like. Once they were safely inside the lagoon, they began dropping the sails.

Shaun opened his briefcase, and pulled out what Doc assumed was his Harbormaster's cap, but when he handed it to him, he saw that it said 'Assistant Harbourmaster', Australian Customs Service.

"Thought you might like my old hat, mate."

Doc soon discovered some surprises hidden inside the cartons, in addition to the spare volleyball. A 9mm automatic pistol, with a nylon holster bearing the Customs Service emblem; two pairs of stainless steel handcuffs, and a large bundle of plastic wire ties, for mass arrests; a pair of night vision binoculars, and a hand-held VHF radio. Plus the Handbook.

He'd already read through his collection of paperbacks several times, and would have to wait until a few more boats arrived before he could swap for fresh ones, so he opened one of the jars of pistachio nuts and began leafing through the Handbook. It was dry stuff, although a couple of the chapter headings caught his eye. Interrogation: Theory and Practice. Body Cavity Searches: Anatomy and Techniques.

Doc glanced at his clock, and noted the time.

*What the hell. Might as well put in a few hours work.*

## CHAPTER 12

### APPROACHING NEW GUINEA

*Yacht, Footloose*

The doldrums.

Claire thought the odd-sounding name fit the scene perfectly. There were often times when the tradewind seas reminded her of landscapes - like the rolling hills in Wyoming, or the sand dunes on the Oregon coast - but the doldrums were incomparable to anything she'd ever seen.

It was an odd place.

The polished surface of the sea looked slippery, as if it were covered with oil. The reflected image of the clouds undulated, ever so slowly, with the barely discernible ocean swell. She knew that the water would appear absolutely flat if she were to photograph it, but she saw it as a surface that had melted, warped a little, and was still soft.

*Footloose* had already been becalmed two days.

The calm air seemed heavy, thick with humidity, and the hazy, muted sunlight made her feel sleepy. The whole ceiling of the sky looked wet, and underneath it banks of cumulonimbus clouds mushroomed higher than she thought it was possible for clouds to go.

The doldrums were a band of convergence, John explained. The North and South Pacific tradewind systems both bring air towards the equator, where it piles up, more or less, and gets pushed aloft. The rapidly ascending, moist air produces frequent thunderstorms, often accompanied by impressive lightning displays.

Occasionally, a small weather cell would form, all on its own. She had watched one develop, as it grew from a small, grey base into a soaring dark cloud, with numerous flashes of lightning in the narrow, intervening space between the cloud and the sea. The isolated cell remained stationary for nearly an hour, just a few miles away. Only small ripples appeared, radiating from it.

It could get really windy underneath a black one.

The miniature electric storm would make a lovely time lapse photograph, she thought.

Collecting the individual lightning flashes, perhaps, and gathering a sheaf of them under a dramatic accumulation of cloud, the whole of it surrounded by blue. The sea was the same color as the sky, and she could barely see the horizon. There was hardly a line. The perfectly stable platform necessary to shoot the lightning wasn't available, though, so she watched intently, and caught the bolts in her imagination, instead.

When she first moved into her cabin aboard *Footloose*, Claire had kept her camera hanging on a hook, where she could grab it at a moment's notice. But it was stowed deep under her bunk now, and most likely buried under many layers of clothing, since she hadn't used it for months. She always remembered it, though, when an appealing image caught her eye, and triggered a yearning for it. A longing to hold it in her hands, like a cigarette.

She couldn't bring herself to throw her expensive camera overboard, though, like discarding a pack of cigarettes. So she continued to suffer through cravings to resume the habit, knowing that her camera was still there, with half a roll of film left inside it.

Half a pack.

Gaining mastery over her addictions was a worthy goal, she thought. Claire figured she needed the practice. It was sad, in a way. Photography had been redefined, from being an activity she loved, into little more than an addiction. Yet another lost love. There weren't that many left to lose.

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The estrangement began in Fiji, where Claire had developed her film from the first leg of the trip. The only outlets for processing film were annexed to tourist hotels, since photography wasn't an indigenous activity, but a luxury which the Fijians could live without.

She discovered that she could buy more fruit and vegetables at the local market than she could carry, for the same cost as developing a single roll. The amount was comparable to what she would have to pay in Honolulu, but the contrast in Fiji was remarkable. A thin strip of transparencies - compared to half a dozen tomatoes, a couple pineapples, ten oranges, large bunches of scallions and a local variety of spinach, a woven reed basket full of sweet potatoes, two papayas, a bag of onions, and a huge green cabbage.

No wonder the Fijians thought all tourists were extravagantly wealthy. Maybe, even a little stupid. The film simply wasn't worth that much. Not even close.

Many of the shots had come out more or less as she expected - the kind of photographs you soon pack away in a drawer, only to pass around when guests stop by, and the small talk wears thin. Travelogue images of coral atolls, and white beaches fringed with palms. Tropical sunsets.

The photographs she cared about were uniformly awful. She had tried to capture the changing textures of the sea on film, but the images all looked pretty much the same, just...water. The lovely patterns that she had seen on the surface of the sea never reappeared in the photographs. She really didn't know why. The patterns she'd photographed on land - fused into the lava, or rippled into the sand - were some of her favorites.

On land, she felt totally in control. She was one who moved - went on a hike, or drove through the mountains in her station wagon - but on the sea it felt as if the whole world was on the move, and she were the one standing still. Even the boat seemed to have a life of its own, always moving under her feet. The waves came at her, and the squalls approached. The dolphins visited. She couldn't choose her images, and had to accept whatever came along.

She'd seen some wind patterns - sailing through areas of strong current, or confused tidal streams - where the sea surface resembled the skin of lizard, or the carapace of a sea turtle. She could distinguish a hazy shading in the photos, but the living, vibrant texture was lost. The photos looked like vinyl upholstery.

One of the atolls they visited had only a few constricted openings in the fringing reef. The currents passing through them were dramatically violent, especially during a spring tide. She had hiked two

miles across razor-sharp, craggy coral to reach one of these passages, on a day when heavy surf was crashing onto the reef. But the breathtaking whirlpools she witnessed hadn't emerged from the developing bath.

Claire was beginning to think that some images simply defied capture, and could only be experienced. The ocean was adept at hiding things, she knew. She seldom saw anything floating on the sea.

Just the odd sighting. A few fuzzy weeds that looped over her toes, once, when she was sitting on the leeward rail with her feet dangling in the water. A coconut husk, bobbing up on the waves, which she happened to notice when it brushed against the side of the hull. When she happened to sight something, it was often like spotting a flea on a dog - there one second, and gone the next.

The water in the doldrums was so smooth that she could see the other seafarers, who were ordinarily hidden by the camouflage of the waves. A plastic colander floated past, trailing thin threads of grassy weed, and captained by a small blue crab. The rim was dotted with tufts of reddish algae, and the bowl with something resembling dark green moss. The crab swam cautiously over to the boat, and scratched at the anti-fouling paint along the waterline, but found nothing appealing, and retreated rapidly to the safety of its own little craft.

A worm-eaten scrap of wood, a plastic crate, a green glass fishing float inside a net of faded yellow rope...all floated past in turn, every one providing a home for various seafarers. Claire had snared the fishing float with the boathook, thinking it collectible, but when she lifted it from the water, she discovered that the net was festooned with huge goose barnacles. The writhing mass of long, rubbery necks was too intimidating to consider touching, and when the barnacles began making burping noises, she promptly dropped the glass float back into the sea. She wasn't all that interested in collecting things, anyway.

Why did she love photography, then? Collecting images on her film?

She had seen advertisements in photography magazines promoting professionally organized safaris in Africa, where you carried your camera into the bush, instead of a gun. You were almost assured of coming home with trophies. Something to hang up on the wall.

Something dead.

Her own photographs had begun to seem like that.

The patterns attracted her the most, she knew. How she always noticed the spiderwebs on a dewy morning, or the veins in a leaf. Gills in a mushroom. Such natural orderliness seemed especially remarkable, when she compared it to the seeming anarchy in her own life.

Presumably, the patterns were produced according to different natural laws. The laws of crystallization and thermodynamics governed the formation of a snowflake; and those of aerodynamics and gravity accounted for the undulations in the sand dunes. Genetic codes determined how the spider spun its web.

Whatever laws were involved, the patterns invariably drew her eye, and her camera, as well. It was almost like a coded signal - a genetically compatible bar code - that produced a pleasurable mood. It had to be genetic, she thought.

Yet, it made no sense. She could understand how the symmetry of a flower might attract a bee, with its faceted vision, and thus fulfil its function, but the attraction seemed irrelevant in her own case. The natural laws, too. Why did it happen? It hardly seemed the kind of trait that would be selected for. Not something so totally absorbing, and tranquillizing.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the natural patterns was not that they existed, particularly, but that they should be so *beautiful*, while the patterns she recognized in human society were becoming increasingly repellent. Rather than attracting her eye, they were forcing her to turn away.

She was too idealistic, she knew.

Idealism had once been fashionable, though. She could remember talking with her small circle of friends for days on end about ideals of justice, and freedom. How they had become intoxicated with notions of changing the world. Of showing others the way. The way life was supposed to be. The 'others' had different ideas, of course, and were often content with no 'ideals', at all.

Claire recalled the lava fields she had photographed on Maui, and how irresistible the natural forces must have been. How inexorable the flow. She felt ridiculous when she thought about it. Their ideals had as much chance of changing the world as she had of staunching a flow of molten lava, by standing alongside, and urging it to rise up and resist.

Idealism isn't stylish, anymore.

Nihilism is in fashion, now. Nothing works, anyway. Nothing really matters, either. So why not just go with the flow, and enjoy the ride?

Yet lava consumes everything in its path. Animals are defenseless against the onslaught. Trees get pushed over and incinerated. Plant life, and even the soil, itself, gets buried. The landscape is rendered sterile. Still no one asks where the flow is going. If there's a goal.

The loveliest, most fertile islands in the South Pacific were volcanic, but the barren lava field she climbed in Hawaii had barely

taken its first evolutionary step towards fecundity, and had an awfully long way to go to before it attained paradise. Whereas, human evolution appeared to be heading in the opposite direction, moving inexorably downhill, consuming paradise as it goes. Steadily gathering momentum, as if under the influence of an attractive force, as irresistible as gravity.

What were those attractive forces, anyway? They were infinitely stronger than her ideals. She couldn't imagine going back, and trying to oppose them, anymore.

They were genetic forces, weren't they? Addictions?

While Claire was as susceptible to their allure as everyone else, she didn't think they could control her life, again. Not even those vile little pheromones, or whatever genetic narcotics they were, that had degraded her from being an independent woman, into a pitiable junkie.

She couldn't join the flow, either. Not after she had defined what everyone seemed to find so fascinating as being little more than varieties of addiction. Those dazzling little pixels could do some amazing tricks, almost irresistible to the eye. More special effects. A little more skin. Inexorably, the addiction grows. The endless, insatiable addiction to *novelty*.

So she had escaped. Or, gone into exile. Whether it was a path she'd chosen, or if she'd simply been forced aside, it seemed irrelevant,

since she'd broken the hold. Destined now to live her life outside the flow. Forever alongside, as an observer.

The doldrums were unusually quiet, she noticed. In the absence of waves, there was simply no echo. She whistled, and the sound instantly vanished out to sea. Not a trace returned to her ears, and it made the whistle appear peculiarly abrupt, and clipped off, like blowing dust into a giant vacuum cleaner.

It was similar to what happened when she sat watching the waves, when the sea seemed to devour her thoughts, sucking her mind so bare that she could feel herself merging with it, and had to turn her gaze away in order to regain her independence.

She experimented with a few different sounds, and was tapping on a stanchion with the winch handle when Mary peered quizzically out the hatch, wondering about the noise.

"Everything okay?" she asked. Mary had read accounts of sailors losing their sanity, when becalmed for long periods in the doldrums.

"Oh. Sure. I was just playing. It's eerie. The acoustics, I mean." John and Mary were so respectful of her privacy that she sometimes forgot she was sailing in company.

"Johnny wants to motor for a few hours to put a charge on the batteries. You wouldn't mind?"

Claire laughed. "Fine by me. Maybe we'll find some wind."

It was their third day in the doldrums belt, and she was ready for a change. They had managed to make some miles during the wind squalls, but the wind was so fickle that they had grown weary of hoisting and continually adjusting the sails, only to drop them an hour later, when the ripples on the sea smoothed out yet again.

She saw a bird take flight, abandoning its perch on some flotsam, the moment John started the engine. She imagined that seabirds would find the doldrums rather tiresome, too. Unable to glide on the wind, they were forced to exert extra energy to remain aloft.

It flew off following a straight path, as if it had a destination. A goal. Finding the wind, maybe. Or a remote atoll, and its nesting grounds.

How did it know which way to fly, she wondered?

## CHAPTER 13

### COCOS ISLAND

*Beach.* False alarm.

Doc noticed the unusual silence, as soon as he woke up. He peered out the portlight at the palms, which hung absolutely still, in calm air. There wasn't a breath of wind. The lagoon was smooth as mercury.

It seemed suspicious, but the barometer hadn't moved so much as a millibar. He leaned across the chart table and rapped the bezel with his knuckle, and the needle held steady. No worries, there. It would be a hot day, at any rate.

*So. An early start, then.*

Doc donned his Harbormaster's hat, and rowed ashore to install his coconut spike. He had been combing through the ruins of the cable relay station, the day before, and found the heavy steel rod, embedded in a sheath of concrete. The exposed portion had largely reverted to iron ore, but the cement coating had preserved the butt end. After chipping

away the concrete, and tapering the end to a sharp point, with a series of hacksaw cuts, the spike was perfectly serviceable.

There were no trees on the island, other than the palms, and hence no firewood, except for the odd bits that happened to wash up on the reef. Palm fronds were fine for kindling, but once the feasts began in earnest, they would need hundreds of coconut husks to fuel the barbecue. The nuts were excellent eating, but rather small, and the convenience of using the spike would encourage consumption.

He chose a spot off to one side of the grill, and buried the steel rod so that the sharpened end was left exposed, sticking up at an angle. After impaling a coconut, he could pry apart the husk by levering it against the spike.

He husked half a dozen.

As he was tossing them into the bottom of the dinghy, the warning siren went off.

*We'll sound the hooter when there's a cyclone coming, Shaun said.*

The continuing fine weather and persistent tradewinds had lulled Doc into believing that the danger of an end-of-season cyclone had

passed. He hardly knew where to start, if he had to get *Exile* ready to go to sea.

He dragged his dinghy off the beach, and hurriedly rowed back to the boat to radio Shaun. Three other yachts had settled into the anchorage, and their crews had come on deck, wondering about the siren.

Shaun answered straight away. "Well, g'day, Doc. I was hoping you'd call when you heard the hooter. How ya goin'?"

He didn't sound all that concerned, Doc noticed. Then again, Shaun wasn't living on the water. "Shaun...could you please tell me what's happening? Over."

"Well...it's pretty quiet, over here, eh? I was wondering...ya keen to come over, and watch the rugby? It's Auckland against New South Wales. They're both good sides, eh? What d'ya reckon? I'd be happy to motor over, and pick ya up. I'll even throw in a feed."

Fortunately, Doc was forced to hold his tongue until Shaun finished talking, and released his transmit button. He realized that all three boats in the anchorage were probably listening in. "The rugby sounds great, Shaun, but, uh...isn't that siren supposed to be the cyclone warning? Over."

“Cripes, Doc! I’d sound the hooter over and over, if a bloody storm was coming. We don’t mess around, eh?”

“Oh. Right.”

“So...what d’ya reckon? Up for a little footy?”

*West Island.* The seat of government.

Shaun lived in a pre-fabricated, metal office building, next to the air field. A satellite dish was mounted at one end of the roof, and Cocos light beacon at the other, atop a sixty-foot steel mast. Shaun climbed it every morning, to assess the quality of the surf, before committing himself for the day. He had built a makeshift rack into the cross-bracing of the light tower to hold his surfboards.

A shark jaw was mounted on the door.

Shaun’s living quarters resembled the inside of his briefcase. Everything was hopelessly jumbled together. Empty potato crisp packets and dirty clothes littered the floor, and half the desktop was covered with empty foil food containers. TV dinners, looked like.

Shaun was studying the latest weather chart, which he had brought up on the office computer. He accidentally tipped over an empty

beer can with the mouse, and it rolled off the desk and fell to the floor. Shaun sighed.

“We could sure do with a secretary, eh? Bloody oath.”

Computers made Doc nervous, so he kept his distance, and looked at the screen over Shaun’s shoulder.

“The wind should pick up overnight, I reckon,” Shaun pointed out a feature in the Southern Ocean. “Once this depression moves off to the east, it’ll blow like stink. Let’s look at the satellite imagery...”

A vast area of fine weather surrounded Cocos. The spiralling weather systems to the south showed up well in the time lapse photos. Doc shivered. One storm went all the way to Antarctica.

“You know, Doc...while we’re at it, let me give you a quick tour of our online network. You should be able to check a passport or a registry through the computer, even if I’m out of the office, I reckon.”

“What does it, uh...check for?”

“Whatever’s in the database. Felony convictions, extradition requests, outstanding warrants...we’re online with Customs in Canberra. That ties us into the international grid.”

Doc wasn’t liking the sound of this. “The grid...?”

“Customs Net. Interpol.”

“Aw...I couldn’t. Really. I mean...I wouldn’t even have a clue how to turn it on.”

Shaun laughed. “We never turn it off. Here, let me show ya.”

Doc was captivated by the novelty of the video graphics, and kept his eyes glued to the screen as Shaun explained the procedures. He pretended to listen.

“Okay, Doc. See these? Here?” Shaun pointed toward a row of icons on one corner of the monitor. “These are the search engines for WARRANTS.”

The Scotland Yard icon was cute, Doc thought. A little bloodhound.

“Now, you can choose from the menu,” Shaun continued, “Or, just select SEARCH ALL. That always covers it. Takes a tad longer, but we’re hardly in a hurry, eh?”

Doc sighed. “Guess not.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Aren’t we going to watch the rugby?”

“Cripes! What time is it?”

They still had twenty minutes until kickoff, as it turned out, and Shaun suggested a quick trip across the air field to the store, to pick up some cold beer. He had a pass key, apparently.

On their way back Shaun stopped opposite a heavy, padlocked steel door, set into a concrete bunker next to the runway. He fumbled through his keys, again.

“This’ll just take a minute.”

“What’s in here?” Doc asked.

“Dinner.”

The underground storage bunker had been blasted into the coral rock, and the walls bore traces of the holes drilled for the explosives. Shaun switched on just the light bulb at the bottom of the stairs, but it was enough for Doc to appreciate the cavernous size of the place. A small forklift was parked under the light.

“The Army stored a whole field kitchen, down here,” Shaun said. Opposite the stairs stood several pallets, packed almost to the ceiling with rows of cardboard boxes. The floor was strewn with cartons that had already been opened. Shaun reached inside one and lifted out a stack of foil trays, like the ones littering his desk. They were irradiated military rations, ready-to-eat.

“What’s your pleasure? Chicken ala king? Or beef stroganoff?”

## CHAPTER 14

### SOUTHERN OCEAN

*Yacht, Trekker*

Kate blamed the mayonnaise. Of course, Hennie thought the accident was his fault, for steering carelessly; while Anneliene believed she was the culprit, for dropping the jar when the boat lurched. Although Kate was the one who insisted on the mayonnaise, in the first place, tuna salad just wasn't the same without it, and she didn't see that as something she should feel guilty about. Obviously, it was the sharp glass from the broken jar, and the slipperiness of the dressing that caused it.

They were running before the gale, and not in any danger, really, when a breaking wave sloughed the boat sideways, causing it to heel over sharply. Anneliene tried to hold onto the jar, as she grabbed for the handrail, but the impact of the boat slamming into the trough threw her against the cabinet, and it flew out of her hand. It landed on the middle rung of the ladder, and literally exploded, sending shards of glass and splatters of mayonnaise all over the steps and the cabin floor. The scare she received on being thrown across the galley was compounded by the fright of the flying glass, and she let out a scream.

Hennie heard the crash, and Anneliene's scream, but was ignorant of the mayonnaise laying in wait for him on the steps. When he came charging below to investigate, he didn't have a chance. The cabin was already wet with the water carried inside by dripping foul-weather gear, and with the addition of the salad dressing, the ladder wasn't negotiable. It was over in a second.

When Kate ran out of her cabin, there was blood everywhere, and he was grasping his knee, in terrible pain. The cuts on his hand and arm were deep, but not as bad as all the blood first led her to believe. The knee, though, was serious. Hennie knew what it was. Torn cartilage, and a recurrence of an old rugby injury. He'd been tackled in midair by the ladder, with his knee in an awkward position between the rungs.

They didn't have time to sort all this out, though, before the boat went wildly out of control on another crest, and broached badly, tossing all of them to one side of the cabin. Kate slid on the mayonnaise, and sliced her toe on the glass. The sliding hatch was open, and a deluge of water showered inside.

Kate heard the vicious slap of the mainsail, suddenly filling with wind on the wrong side just before the impact, but had no idea what she'd find when she rushed on deck to regain control of the boat.

Her heart sank. The reefed mainsail was in shreds, and flapping wildly in the wind, and the aluminium boom was badly bent. The preventer line had parted, allowing the boom to swing rapidly across the centreline of the boat, and hit the running backstay on the leeward side. The boom was creased around it, and the reef points on the sail had ripped out, and taken long swathes of sailcloth along with them.

She managed to furl the torn sail, fending off the flailing whips of sailcloth with her arm, and got the situation stabilised on deck, leaving the boat to fend for itself, with no sail set. As she was returning below, she noticed that the radar dome was slightly askew on its perch over the stern, but there didn't seem to be any other damage.

Anneliene had stanchied the bleeding with butterfly bandages, and immobilised his fingers with a whole roll of gauze. The cuts really needed stitches, but she thought it would be all right, as long as he didn't try to use the limb. She had taped a soft towel around it, as a cushion. Kate helped her wrap another towel around his knee, before taping on a couple of splints, and binding it all with an elastic bandage.

"We ripped the mainsail, Pa. The boom's bent."

"Anything else?" His face was white as bone.

"No. We're safe. We can ride it out."

"Can we mend the sail?"

"Sure," Kate said, although thinking it impossible. Not at sea. The rips were too long and jagged, and they didn't have a sewing machine.

They half carried him to the stateroom, and wedged him into the bunk with cushions from the saloon. Anneliene wasn't sure how badly he'd injured the knee this time, but he'd had surgery on it twice, in university.

The voyage had gone smoothly, Kate thought. Until the mayonnaise, anyway. There were a few niggling leaks that the gales exploited, and the autopilot had burned out after just a week at sea, but they had made steady progress, and their spirits stayed high, despite the gales. Now, though, they were in trouble.

Without the power of the mainsail, their boat speed would be reduced, but even worse, they would no longer be able to hold a tight course into the wind. Several times they had taken an unfavourable southerly tack, searching for steadier westerly winds, but were invariably driven back by the gales, and the heavy seas. They had opted to stay on the fringe of the Southern Ocean, and tolerate the variable winds, but the last gale had cost them another degree of latitude. They were too far north.

*Trekker* occasionally took a severe blow from one of the breaking seas. Kate worried, each time, that she might have made a mistake in

not continuing to run before them, but she didn't want to give up any more latitude. The pilot chart showed an increasing frequency of easterly winds, the further north they went, and she knew they'd be hard pressed to hold the course for Perth. The motion of the boat was chaotic without the sails set. Anneliene felt queasy, so Kate cleaned up the blood.

The gale continued as darkness fell, and a few waves even accelerated them sideways, and crashed over the boat with enough force to send water squirting inside, all around the perimeter of the saloon hatch. Kate recalled that Doc had warned her about it, after the two of them had taken the hose off the dock, and tested all the deck openings for leaks with a high pressure spray. It had only leaked the tiniest bit, then.

Even after an hour had passed without hearing the frightening rush of a wave bearing down on them, she still couldn't sleep, and kept worrying that one might yet impact the boat with sufficient force to cause a capsize.

Her restless tossing in the bunk became intolerable, and she went into the saloon and huddled in a corner of the settee. The barometer was mounted above her, and when she tapped the glass, the needle jumped up a few more millibars. The gale would end soon, she thought. She couldn't remember a time when she had felt so completely exhausted.

She listened to the sound of her heartbeat, almost pounding in her ears. It seemed eerily quiet, other than that. She couldn't even hear the howling of the wind in the rigging.

Then, she heard a metallic, creaking noise, and watched in fascination as the main hatch gradually began to open, ever so slowly, like a heavy floodgate. She puzzled over it, feeling remarkably calm, even when the water began pouring in, in a wide, smooth sheet. Soon, though, it became a raging whirlpool, swirling all around her, and suddenly Anneliene was there too, shaking her.

"Wake up, Kate. We have to get going."

It was well past dawn, she noticed. They were rolling uncomfortably in the swell, but the gale was over.

Anneliene had made them both some hot porridge. When Kate saw the little puddle of butter on top, and the scoop of melting brown sugar - just the way she liked it - she knew that everything was under control. Once again, her steadfast Mother had smoothed it out.

Kate felt rather childish, then, especially for her continual silly quarrels with Hennie - about the trim of the sails, the tension in the halyards, or even the weather forecasts - which were regularly soothed over by Anneliene's patient mediation. She was an incredibly strong woman, Kate realized, with a flood of affection.

As they sat together, Kate explained what she thought needed to be done. One of her friends on the jetty had been in a similar predicament, and given her some good advice.

They went right to work. After stripping off the ripped sail, they managed to straighten the boom by wedging the end under the windlass drum, and levering it back. The aluminium extrusion was still deeply dimpled, with a few cracks radiating out, so they splinted it like Hennie's knee, using the oars from the dinghy and several rolls of reinforced tape.

Their intermediate headsail wasn't the right shape, but after they wrapped a long triangle of excess cloth around the boom, and lashed the ends, it fit reasonably well. With sail slides clipped onto the jib hanks, they could raise it just like the old sail. Even the simplest task was painstakingly slow on the pitching deck, and they laboured most of the morning before they were ready to hoist it.

The improvised mainsail had little shape to it, Kate saw, but at least they were moving again. Anneliene went below to check on Hennie, and give him a progress report.

With Hennie unable to take a turn at the helm, the demands of hand steering would be tiring for just the two of them. Kate began to wonder if she should try the self-steering techniques that Doc had explained to her, which utilize the power in the sails to directly steer the boat. Doc steered his own boat that way, and routinely slept through the

night, while a sail controlled the tiller. In fact, he'd predicted that their electric autopilot would self-destruct before they reached Australia, and even shown her how to rig the tiller, and the steering lines. Hennie hadn't allowed her to experiment with it, though, and insisted on having someone constantly on deck. The situation was different, now.

Anneliene returned, and sat down next to her at the helm. "Let me take over, for a bit. I made you a sandwich, and your Father wants to talk with you."

"How is he?"

"Hurting," she replied, frowning.

She picked up the sandwich on her way past.

"How's it look?" he asked.

"Not bad, Pa. Not bad, at all."

"What kind of course can we hold to windward, do you think?"

"Sixty degrees, maybe. I'm not sure. The wind's still southwest."

"We'll just see what happens. Your Mother said you did a beautiful job with the sail. I'm proud of you, Kate."

"Thanks, Pa. Would it be all right if I tried the sheet-to-tiller self steering? Just to see if it works? We might need it."

"Do you have to disconnect the wheel?"

"No. I can use the emergency tiller."

"Fine, then." He looked highly sceptical.

"How's the knee?"

"Hurts like hell. Would you take our position, and bring me the chart?"

She nodded assent, and went to get it. Although the digital display of the instrument was illuminated, it indicated no reliable satellite fixes, which had never happened before. She switched it off momentarily, and waited, but the caution icon remained. The antenna was mounted on the framework supporting the radome, and she rushed to check it, remembering that she'd seen some damage.

It was gone. The mounting bracket was still in place, but there was only a dangling wire where the antenna used to be. "Look, Mom. We've lost the GPS antenna."

"Oh, no!"

Kate knew they didn't have a spare one. It was largely her own fault, she recalled. 'It's highway robbery! We don't need it. We've got our sextant.' She considered the implications for a moment.

"Could you tell Pa? Please, Mom?"

She briefly heard him cursing, but couldn't make out his exact words. Her Mother soon reappeared, smiling sympathetically.

"Can you manage the steering, while I get some sleep?" Anneliene asked.

"Sure, Mom." They had decided on four-hour shifts at the helm. Four on. Four off.

"Here. Your Father asked me to give you this. I know you can't read while you're steering, but maybe you can look at the pictures," she said, handing her the book, 'Celestial Navigation for Beginners'.

"Oh. Thanks."

Kate didn't think there were too many good pictures in it, but she thumbed through it, anyway, just to make sure. It was all maths, she knew, and one of her least favourite subjects. She set it aside, and played with the steering, instead. The navigation could wait. They were fifteen hundred miles from land.

She spent several hours fine-tuning the sails, and fiddling with the elastic, which balanced the pull from the sail on the tiller. Almost giving up, at times; but encouraged when it would work for a few minutes. She experimented with the tension in the control line from the sail, and the stiffness of the elastic, until she finally mastered it.

She sat back, and watched. Ten minutes.

Twenty.

The boat yawed, either side of the course, but no more than she would have done, steering it herself. After an hour had passed, and they

were still on course, she was convinced it wasn't a fluke. She couldn't resist celebrating her hard-won freedom by making a cup of tea, but found she still felt nervous about leaving the helm unattended, and checked the compass several times while the water was heating. She was hungry, too. Just the one sandwich, all day.

Kate decided to cook dinner.

She had never really learned how to cook. Their live-in maid had regularly done all the cooking, except on Sunday, when it was Anneliene's turn. Nearly all her schoolmates had maids, too. None of them knew how to cook, either.

The freezer was almost empty - only one pack of steaks, and a pork roast - and they would soon be left with only their tinned food. They still had potatoes, however. So she made a cottage pie, using a tin of savoury minced beef for the filling. Anneliene's alarm clock sounded while the pie was still in the oven, and Kate quietly retreated to her station - chained to the helm - relishing the surprises that awaited her Mother.

Anneliene soon stuck her head outside.

"Kate, how did you manage...?"

"Look Mom, no hands!" she said, proudly pointing to the steering wheel. The wheel was still functional, and turning, while the line

attached to the tiller steered the boat. Its movement appeared magical. "I haven't touched it for almost two hours."

By the following morning, the wind had vanished. The barometer remained very high, and they were probably right in the middle of the high-pressure system. Southeast tradewinds to the north of them, and westerlies to the south, with little wind in between.

The engine had contributed substantially to their progress, and Hennie routinely started it up whenever the variable winds were too light to make the miles under sail alone. Even though *Trekker* had very large tanks, they had already burned most of their fuel. They had to keep some in reserve, for charging the batteries, and making port; so after motoring all day, and into the night, they had to shut it down for the duration.

When Kate arrived for breakfast, Hennie was sitting at the table drinking a cup of tea, with his leg sticking out rigidly into the aisle. A plate had been set for her, and the sextant was resting on top of it.

He smiled pleasantly. "Dig in, Kate. The sun's up. The sea's smooth. Let's get the morning off to a good start, and find out where the hell we are."

It was a team effort. Kate took the sights, and Anneliene did the plotting, with Hennie's help. He had to pass a competency test in celestial navigation to obtain his South African skipper's license, but that was years ago, and since the test had been administered by one of his friends from the Yacht Club, the test was less than rigorous.

They kept the book open.

After taking the noon sight, they had a reasonably good idea of where they were, although it was obvious that more practice was needed. A few position lines were almost off the page.

The gale had driven them even further north than Kate anticipated. The pilot chart showed a northerly set to the current in their vicinity, which might have contributed to it, and they would have to allow for it in the days ahead. The current was even stronger as they approached the Australian coast, and would continue to push them to the north.

When the wind returned, it came from the southeast, and soon freshened. Although they couldn't have known it, at the time, they had encountered the tradewinds and would see nothing but steady southeast winds for months. They might have altered this fact had they changed tack and headed back towards the Southern Ocean, but that meant sailing southwest, and away from their destination, in a partially

disabled boat. The jury-rigged mainsail stood up to the wind, but it didn't perform as well as Kate had hoped.

It was wet and tiring sailing, continually pounding into the head seas. After a few days, they were all cold and weary. Hennie still had difficulty moving around down below, and couldn't possibly go on deck. Kate had little success with the self-steering, managing to hold a steady course to windward, but one that was too close to the wind, and very slow.

The water leaking below was beginning to take its toll, as well, as the moisture travelled unseen along the inside of the overhead lining, and down the bulkhead that contained the electrical panel. The compass light failed, first, and then the navigation lights. Hennie quickly discovered the salt water on the circuit breakers, and managed to restore the compass light, but at the cost of reopening one of the cuts on his hand. As if in retaliation, the refrigeration failed a few hours later, from water seeping inside the cabinet and dripping onto the electric motor that ran the compressor.

They had grown accustomed to having some interludes of relative calm, but the southeast wind blew relentlessly, and offered no respite.

"I think we're about here," Kate said, making a small cross on the chart.

"Doesn't look promising, does it?" Hennie said, almost to himself.

"We'll have to tack south, again."

"No. We're injured, Kate. The route south is too rough, and too long. What do you think about running for Cocos?"

It was only a small dot on the chart. "It's almost due north," Kate observed.

Hennie nodded. "It should be downwind, all the way. Can you get the self-steering to work?"

"Downwind? I think so. But what's Cocos like? I don't know anything about it."

"Lots of yachties stop there. We'll be able to make repairs, and then carry on. The Admiralty pilot says there's an ideal anchorage in the lagoon, over clean white sand." He had located the chart, and spread it out for her.

She remembered it, then. A coral atoll. It was just the kind of place Kate wanted to sail to, right from the start.

"Looks great to me."

"I just hope we can find it. Could you take over the helm? I want to discuss it with your Mother."

It was the right decision, Kate thought. As they had grown increasingly tired, and demoralised by their lack of progress, they were also becoming careless, and apathetic. No one bothered to sponge up the

puddles of water, anymore, or had the energy to prepare a hot meal. The trend was spiralling toward another disaster.

The conditions improved dramatically as soon as they took up their new heading. The apparent wind eased, since they were running with it, and there was no longer any spray. The boat straightened up, and the harsh, jarring motion ceased. Kate was surprised how quickly she was able to reset the self-steering, having once mastered the technique. They were soon able to stand back, and appreciate that they were really moving again. The sea rushed past, and they left their apathy in their wake.

The days flew past, and the miles, too. Kate struggled to keep up. The position lines from her sextant sights kept advancing rapidly up the page, as they sped north. Trying to figure out where the lines were supposed to intercept occupied most of her time. She worked diligently at it, but since they sailed almost a hundred miles during the hours of darkness, she had to start all over the next morning.

As they approached the latitude of the atoll, accuracy became crucial. The maximum range of visibility of the lightbeacon on the island was only twelve miles, which was about as far as they could afford to be off course, even in daylight, and still hope to sight the palms.

When their noon sight placed them just one day's sail away from the island, they spent the rest of the day navigating. Kate thought they had a decent fix at dusk. Hennie was satisfied, and switched on the radio, in case there were any ships nearby. If they maintained their speed, they would sight land by mid-morning. They monitored the compass closely, throughout the night.

Kate wasn't worried, so much as excited. If they didn't see the atoll, they could always heave to. They'd discover where they were, eventually. She felt optimistic, and was slightly disappointed when the island wasn't on the horizon at dawn, even though it was too soon to expect to see it.

Her disappointment grew as the morning slowly passed, and the horizon remained empty. As noon approached, Hennie decided to stop, thinking that a steadier platform might enable them to get a more accurate sextant sight.

"I don't understand it, Kate. This says we should be right in the middle of the lagoon. We're doing something wrong."

She checked the figures, and they went through the book again, step by step. Kate hadn't touched the adjustment on the sextant, and they rechecked that, as well. "I don't know, Pa. It seems right." She was crestfallen. After all that practice, she was convinced of her competency,

but there was never any way of confirming it. Never any land, or signposts on the sea.

Then she nearly jumped out of her seat, and grabbed for her Father, when a voice came over the radio, as loud and clear as if the person speaking were right in the cabin.

"Yo, Doc? You want anything from the store?"

They were flabbergasted. The VHF couldn't transmit very far, and they would have seen an island.

It could be someone on a ship, she thought. Hennie made a move toward the radio, just as a second voice came from it, not so loud, and breaking up, occasionally.

"G'day, mate. Yeah...would, actually. You know...frozen cheesecakes I ordered? Could...bring me one? They're in...box...bottom shelf."

"No worries," the first voice said.

Anneliene spotted the island, then. She thought it was a mirage, at first. A broken, shimmering green line along the horizon, to the west, and visible only when the boat was carried atop one of the long swells. "I see it. I see land," she said quietly, hardly believing it. Then, she cried loudly, "Land ho!"

Kate rushed up on deck, and Hennie hobbled after her. Kate couldn't see anything at all, but the look of discovery on her Mother's

face was convincing, and she continued to search where she was pointing. Then, it was there. She had been expecting to see something like a bump, something sticking up. In one spot.

But the atoll was so *wide*, Kate felt inclined to move her head, in order to look from one end to the other. She would have missed it, she thought, since it wasn't what she was looking for, at all. They were less than ten miles away. Hennie let out a howl, and hugged Anneliene, almost knocking her over. They got under way immediately.

They huddled together, enchanted, and watched the low puddle of green gradually emerge from the sea, and become spiked with the tops of the highest palms, and then congeal into distinct clumps of islands on the atoll reef.

"It's a beautiful sight, Pa," Kate said, putting her arm around him.

They carried on under sail, until they were within a mile of the breakers on the reef, and approaching the entrance. Hennie felt more comfortable handling the boat under the power of the engine, so they dropped the sails before attempting the passage into the lagoon. Anneliene took up a lookout position on the bow, to watch for coral, and Hennie made the call.

"Port Control. Cocos Island Port Control, this is yacht *Trekker*."

## CHAPTER 15

### COCOS ISLAND

*Exile.* Office hours.

Another one. They'd be a community soon, Doc thought. He set down his cheesecake, and went below to answer the radio. He enjoyed these long distance calls, but it would get irritating having to keep the radio turned on when the harbor filled up with boats, and everybody started chatting on their radios all the time, as if they were telephones.

Maybe he could issue a decree. Restrict them to some obscure channel, or something.

Doc called back. "G'day, folks. Cocos Harbormaster here."

"We request permission to enter the harbour, please. This is yacht *Trekker.*"

Trucker? Charming name for a boat, Doc thought, chuckling to himself. "No permission required, buddy. Just keep truckin' on in, and pick yourself a spot. You got a chart?"

Kate recognized his voice. She remembered hearing the name, Doc, over the radio, but she must have been too surprised by the call to make the connection. Now, though, his American accent was

unmistakable. She reached to grab the microphone out of Hennie's hand, but he gave her a harsh look. "It's Doc, Pa! My friend from Durban." She insisted, and he handed the microphone to her, somewhat bemused.

"Doc? Is that really you? It's Kate! Kate de Beer...? Hello? Doc...?"

Doc waited patiently for her to release the microphone lever, so he could talk back, marvelling at the pleasant twist that fate had arranged in the guest list. He heard some mumbling, and then the click.

"Hi Kate! What are you doing here? Over."

"Me? I can't believe it! Doc! I thought you were on your way to Thailand! We were heading for Perth, and...hold on...okay. We're approaching the pass. Is it tricky coming in?"

"No worries. Don't turn too soon, after you've cleared the point. Wait until you've passed a few big coral heads. The yellow bits. Keep them to port. Don't worry about the green bits."

"Here we go!"

*Trekker*. Settling in.

"That's when the boom bent," Kate explained, before devouring another piece of the cheesecake. "Yum...I thought we might capsize. I really did."

It was a glorious occasion for them, Doc knew. The first island landfall was always special, and this one even more so, given their ordeal. Even though there was a piece missing from the cheesecake, it hardly detracted from its appeal, and after he heaped sliced bananas over the three pieces, they probably didn't even notice.

"How many days?" he asked.

"Forty-six," Hennie answered.

"Whew. Well, I think you made a wise choice, coming up here," Doc told him. He thought it partially offset the incredibly dumb decision he'd made to venture into the Southern Ocean on his first crossing, with winter almost at hand.

"I'm so happy you're here!" Kate enthused.

"It's really good to see you." Doc smiled. Kate had a wide band of brown suntanned across her eyes and nose, like a raccoon, corresponding to the opening in the hood of her parka, which she'd bundled around herself, hand-steering for days on end in the cold waters of the Southern Ocean. The back of her hands were brown, too, but the

rest of her was a recently sunburned pink. She'd really filled out, he thought.

"You like my new hat?" he asked.

"Terrific. How did you manage it?" Kate replied, smiling.

"Long story." They badly needed some uninterrupted sleep, he could tell. All three of them looked sun-glazed, and drained. The stories could wait.

"You know, Doc," Hennie commented, "I'm really surprised there isn't a tourist resort, here. It's a perfect spot for one, don't you think?"

"And it's so clean," Anneliene observed, surveying the anchorage. Then, she gasped, covering her mouth. She looked worriedly at Doc. "There is a laundromat here...isn't there?"

*Beach.* The community bulletin board goes up.

Doc had uncovered a cork-faced board in the underground bunker, and mounted it on the timber framework supporting the water tanks, where it would be illuminated at night by the light over the tables. He posted his notice in the corner.

## NOTICE

From: Harbormaster's Office

Re: Thought for the day.

You solitaries - you who have seceded from society  
- you shall one day be a people.

From you - who have chosen out yourselves - shall  
a chosen people spring, and from this chosen people - the  
meaning of the Earth.

Nietzsche

*Exile.* Office hours. Two boats clearing in. One out.

Doc heard a soft knock on the hull, but was mystified when he looked out, and didn't see anyone; until he lowered his gaze, and noticed a bright pair of eyes peering at him over the top of the toerail. It was the little girl from a Kiwi catamaran, one of the early arrivals. She was just about school age, he thought. "Good morning, Lisa. How are you?"

"Fine."

She had a very businesslike expression on her face, but he could barely see her, so he stepped up and sat on the edge of the hatch. She had her younger sister along with her, sitting shyly in the dinghy. "Is there something you wanted to ask me?"

"We're worried about our Daddy."

"Why is that?" Doc glanced briefly at their boat, which looked normal. Wally was lounging in the hammock underneath their spacious awning, reading a book. He didn't see Stella.

"He doesn't have a job."

"Oh. Yeah. I noticed that. Is there a problem?"

"No."

"So...what's wrong, then?"

"You have a job."

"Well, sort of. Yeah." Doc nodded respectfully. "But there's not much work to do here, Lisa. It's not that kind of place."

"There's always work to do."

"Well..."

"He says he's never, ever going to work, again," she said gravely.

"I see. In that case, it might be serious."

"We think it might be wise if the two of us start our own business. Could we do that, d'ya s'pose?"

What they had in mind was a daily refuse collection service. Lisa was hoping he could put some diesel fuel into a smaller container, since she couldn't lift the big one. Doc agreed to burn whatever they collected, himself, which seemed acceptable, and they rowed ashore to post their sign on the new bulletin board. Although it was a modest start, it signalled an upturn in the island's economy.

**SISTERS RECYCLING CO. Ltd.**

Trash Collection Every Morning

09h00

[DONATIONS ACCEPTED]

*Trekker.* Full moon.

Kate wasn't sure. It might have been the fiery, passionate sunset over the lagoon. Or, perhaps, the exquisitely romantic moonlight when they rowed back to the boat. Whatever the reason, her parents were really going at it. Anneliene didn't seem to be making much of an effort to muffle her excited gasps, and Hennie was grunting like he was in the middle of a scrum.

They'd always been so reticent about it, before. Their house in Durban was quite spacious - with her parent's bedroom upstairs, in front; and her own out in back, facing the ravine - and she never had to listen to the sound of their lovemaking. Anneliene's moaning was implausibly loud, she thought.

Even when the house was sold, and Kate no longer had the boat all to herself, they must have conspired to limit their scrummaging to times when she was either asleep, or off running errands in the city. She had heard them a few times, when she stayed up late watching videos, but the earphones were pretty effective, and it wasn't a big deal.

Even at sea, when she was sitting quietly in the cockpit steering the night watch, their passion was muted. Hennie did frequently start the diesel at dusk, though, when the wind was light. She wouldn't have heard them, then. The engine was right underneath the cockpit, and it was even louder than her Mother.

Now, though, the thin plywood bulkhead separating their cabins hid little of what was happening in the adjacent bunk.

It had been such an idyllic day. The island was so beautiful it was almost sensuous. When she walked the length of the reef with Doc, she'd taken out the bands holding her ponytail, so the tradewinds could flow through her hair. Then lifted her chin to let the breeze caress her

neck. The mist from the surf was almost as fine as fog, and its coolness tingled on her skin, and salted her lips.

The two of them went swimming through a cut in the reef, where the current had carved a deep canyon, which was lined with cascades of brilliant coral. She'd never experienced anything like it. All the exotic shapes, and surreal textures...colours, and all of it was alive. Floating through the cut, and carried along by the current, she felt like she was immersed in a phenomenal aquarium. The fish seemed tame. Even the sharks.

After lunch, they went fishing in Doc's inflatable dinghy, anchoring it on the coral shelf well into the lagoon, and dropping their hooks along an underwater ridge which was the continuation of the canyon.

Doc looked so different. When he was working in the harbour in Durban, he often seemed sad, and when their conversation inevitably drifted into South African politics, and the deteriorating situation in the rest of Africa, he would become even more forlorn. The dour expression she had become accustomed to had vanished. He looked so happy. Now that he was swimming every day, he was leaner, and refreshed.

They quickly caught enough fish for dinner, but spent most of the afternoon in the dinghy, talking. Even that seemed new. Her forty-six days at sea had changed their relationship, she thought. She was no longer innocent. She had experienced the intensity of several storms at

sea, and he seemed to respect her opinions more because of it. He appeared to listen with genuine interest, when she recounted stories of their voyage, and related what news she had of their friends. He even seemed to look at her differently.

Of course, her camisole might have had something to do with that. He'd always seen her wearing baggy sweatshirts, or Hennie's old rugby jerseys, but they were just too hot for the tropics. She noticed his eyes on her breasts, now and then.

Her shirt wasn't obscene, exactly, but when she tied up the sides to let the breeze cool her midriff, it did pull tightly across her chest. The cloth was rather thin, though, and surprisingly transparent, when she scooped some water over herself to cool off, and happened to spill some down her front.

There wasn't much room in the dinghy, either, and as they sat facing each other, their legs crossed. She rubbed her calf against him, occasionally, and allowed her touch to linger, but he didn't seem to notice.

Her parents joined them for dinner on the beach, and Hennie brought a few bottles of wine. He still had difficulty walking, and struggled to get into the dinghy, but it was only a short hobble up the

beach to the tables under the canopy. Kate wore one of Anneliene's silk blouses, and brought some candles for the table.

Although the fish was marvellous, it wasn't quite the intimate, romantic dinner that Kate hoped for. The Swiss couple came ashore, and stayed to share some wine, and the men turned on the electric light so Doc could illustrate some points about self-steering. Their conversation shifted to a discussion about various techniques of drying and salting fish, and the incredible versatility of the coconut palm, while she sat quietly, wishing that she were alone with Doc.

After the Swiss rowed home, Doc asked if anyone wanted to meet the rats. "They're cute," he said.

"They won't bite?" Anneliene asked, lifting her feet up onto the bench.

"No," Doc chuckled. "But if you want to pet them, just use one hand."

"Where are they?" Hennie asked.

"Oh, they'll come here. I'll have to turn off the light, though. There's good moonlight. We'll be able to see them."

"I'll get the light!" Kate volunteered, jumping up. When she sat back at the table, she pressed up close, and put her arm around his waist.

He whistled sharply four or five times, and the rats came running. They gathered around his feet, rubbing their fur against his ankles. A few were jumping excitedly, others racing playfully in circles around the table. Even though the canopy shaded the moonlight, Kate could see them clearly. One even did a backflip.

Doc had brought some balls of porridge, and when he leaned down to reward the rats, his shirt rode up his back. She slipped her hand underneath and ran her fingertips lightly over his skin. She heard him talking with Anneliene about the rats, but paid little attention.

Their evening ended, afterwards. Anneliene helped Hennie down to the dinghy, while she gathered everything into a wicker basket, and followed after them. The crescent beach was bathed in moonlight, and she stopped at the edge of the palms to survey the scene. Her parents wouldn't see, she realized.

When Doc moved to step past her, she threw her arms around him and kissed him. Not their usual peck on the cheek, either. It might have been a trifle clumsy, she knew, since her tongue slid awkwardly across his teeth, but it definitely got his attention. He seemed a little terrified, but she was convinced she saw a smile on his face when she glanced back, after snatching up the basket, and sauntering off to join her parents.

Kate realized that she'd never even made love in a bed. In the back of a station wagon, a few times. On the beach. It had never been even remotely romantic. Just awkward, juvenile groping that got out of control. Her control, anyway. Even though she'd consented, it still felt like rape, afterwards. It was always so frantic.

Anneliene's moaning climaxed, then, on the other side of the plywood, and Kate realized that her own fingers were wet, and she buried her face in her pillow to keep from crying out, herself, as she increased the pressure.

## CHAPTER 17

### MAROVO LAGOON

*Yacht, Rainblow*

The time had come to go to war.

Sophie agreed to time the fuse. She burned a short piece of it in the galley, but the sparks threatened to melt the linoleum, and it made a lot of smoke.

They couldn't think of any better place to test it. The smoke would be even more obvious wafting through the rainforest, or drifting away from a canoe. They needed to burn a few decent-sized pieces at least, to get a reliable measurement of how fast it burned. She covered the floor with a couple of wet towels.

Nigel took the meteor flares on deck, and began working on the detonator in the cockpit, where he could also act as a lookout. It was a simple operation to prise out the percussion caps from the distress flares - they resembled shotgun shells, with aluminium jackets - so that he could glue in fuses, instead. These were for the barge.

Flaming arrows, more or less.

He needed a pair of little carriages, to guide the meteors after launch. First he made a paper pattern, and wrapped it around a flare to

test the fit, then cut the carriages out of aluminium from a half-liter beer can. The hand flares were easier to rig. He merely had to cut a slot for the fuse with a razor blade.

Nigel had only used dynamite twice. The first time, it was three sticks, tucked inside a bulldozer on Great Barrier. It was vandalism, really. Effective, though.

The other time, he had just blasted a hole in the ground for a latrine. The hard clay soil was a bitch to dig with a shovel. So he set off the sticks one at a time, inside holes he'd bored into the ground with a post hole digger.

Needless to say, he would have to rely on intuitive engineering. He thought the dynamite would be more effective if he could briefly contain the initial pressure of the explosion - focus it - by putting a really strong band around the main charge. It had to be flat in shape, and thickness of three sticks, so that it would fit into the narrow space underneath the engine. A thick, welded steel collar would be ideal, he thought, but he didn't have the stock. Layers of fibreglass roving would also work well, but that was obviously 'yacht' stuff. Or a boatbuilder's.

The best indigenous solution he could come up with was rice bags, cut into strips. Lots of them, stitched together. The stuff was strong.

When the charge was finished, Sophie thought it looked like a big camembert cheese. With a case and a half of the dynamite inside. Two coils of fuse were taped to the top, ready to open it.

"Will it blow up if we drop it?" Sophie asked.

"I don't think so." Nigel had already rigged the blasting caps inside, not wanting to risk doing a shoddy job of it while they were on the platform, and would have to hurry.

"In other words, we shouldn't drop it, then."

"Probably not."

When Mpane paddled out that night, Father Jerome came with him. He brought a small bottle of holy water, and insisted on blessing the war canoe, but he was mostly curious to see what dynamite looked like.

The big parcel had already been wrapped, but the secondary charge was a rather impressive bomb, all by itself. This one was for the vandalism. And insurance. Just in case they failed to sink the barge. The overlapping sticks were simply taped together around a pipe, with a fuse coming out each end. Nigel worried that the initial, main charge might snuff out the fuses, so he had packed the last few inches inside the pipe to protect them.

It was neatly done, and Father Jerome was most pleased. He had prayed that he'd be shown something big. Before his departure he said a brief prayer over the explosives, and promised to keep a vigil for them.

Their return engagement would simply be a repeat performance of their rehearsal, except tonight they'd stay on, for the final act. They would have to wait awhile in the canoe, though, so Nigel brewed a thermos of tea to bring along.

They waited offshore, until Mpane made his way along the rocks, and signalled the 'all clear' from his lookout position. Then they paddled in swiftly, and tied up alongside the barge. Nigel hustled across the deck carrying the propane tank, while Sophie followed with the rest of the equipment. She closed the compartment hatch behind her.

Nigel switched on the light. The cabin appeared untouched since his last visit.

"Oh, yuk," she said. "What an awful boat."

"A ship, Sophie. Ships *carry* boats," Nigel corrected her. The deck of the barge could easily accommodate eight or ten yachts the size of *Rainblow*.

Although she'd told him that she wanted to learn all the proper boating words, it seemed like an odd time for a lesson. "We carry a little boat on *Rainblow*, Nigel."

"A dinghy. Boats carry *dinghies*."

"Oh. Right. A ship, then. But isn't it an act of piracy to sink a ship?"

"Well...yeah...I reckon. S'pose it is."

How depressing, he thought. First, a terrorist. Now, a pirate.

"Couldn't we pretend it's a boat?" she asked.

"Cripes. Why would we want to do that?"

"So we wouldn't have to worry about walking the plank."

"Worry about hanging. They hang pirates," he said resignedly.

"You sure? I thought they hung mutineers. Who walked the plank?"

Nigel sighed. "Just cut the hose, okay? Call it a bloody boat, if it'll make you feel any better. What the hell. Boats are easier to sink than ships."

"Great!" Sophie smiled, and rubbed her hands together. She took out the knife, and handed him the rucksack. "Off you go!"

Sophie took several minutes, cutting through the heavily reinforced bilge pump hose. By the time she'd finished, Nigel had already plumbed the propane tank, and the first pair of gas cylinders. The feed from all three led into a single plastic pipe, which he slipped inside the severed hose. She had the tape ready, and began wrapping the joint.

"Try to make it really tight," he advised.

Nigel had estimated the total volume of the barge, then calculated how much propane would be required to form the optimum explosive mixture with the air inside. The spare tank on *Rainblow* was just about right. They'd divide it up between the three compartments. One at a time, to be sure they were filled evenly. He opened one of the valves on the bulkhead, and began filling the first compartment with the mixed gases.

Nigel had once witnessed the wreckage of a well-built steel yacht, following a propane explosion belowdecks. The hull was badly bulged out between each of the successive frames, and buckled, where the deck seams had opened up. The trunk cabin had split in half, and lay twisted at an odd angle atop the wreckage. And that was only from some propane accumulating in the bilge. The oxy-acetylene would add a tremendous amount of power, and acceleration.

He reminded Sophie not to make sparks. Some of the gas would eventually escape from the vent, and accumulate around where they were working.

It was almost time for Mpane's signal. Nigel sat on the steps, where he could observe the flashes when he cracked the hatch. Sophie switched off the light. It came on schedule. Two flashes, 'all clear', followed by one flash, 'no sign of the guard'.

Despite the 'all clear', Nigel didn't want to risk taking to the canoe, and going ashore to disconnect the mooring cables. Not until the guard had actually finished an inspection, and left. Just like before.

So they started working on the detonator. They fastened a wire to the vent pipe and led it straight over to the hatch. The meteor distress flares would travel along the wire, like a cable car, and fire directly into the body of the barge. Nigel tried one of the carriages, and it slid smoothly. Sophie helped him rig the two flares, each with its own fuse, which they would lead independently out the hatch.

Nigel always liked having a back-up. In addition to the extra flare, he ripped some strips of rotten canvas from the pipe berths, and draped it around the vent pipe. They'd splash around some diesel before they left. There would be enough fire to set it off, one way or another.

The propane tank was already getting cold. Nigel hefted it, and decided they'd put in enough. They exchanged the empty oxygen and acetylene cylinders for full ones, and began filling the next compartment.

Mpane sent the 'go' signal, and they went ashore.

The two mooring cables were slack, since the barge was riding quietly to its anchor. But the wire cables were heavy, and it was slow work moving them. Mpane lowered some ropes, which they tied to the

eyes in the cables. They would hoist them up later, after the guard's next inspection.

They returned to the barge, and unwound thirty meters of wire rope from the winch on deck. Nigel flaked it out in the bottom of the canoe, and took the end ashore, while Sophie went below to switch cylinders, and fill the last compartment.

When Nigel rejoined her belowdecks, he smelled the acetylene instantly. The odour was nauseating. They were almost ready to abandon ship - could have left right then, really - but Nigel wanted his propane cylinder back. This adventure had cost him a packet already, and the donations had been a bit thin.

It was irritating, when he thought about it. The same commune that sent up the bottles of rum, and all that chocolate, for Mpane, had pleaded poverty and chipped in a measly ten bucks. They knew he'd send them a carving, that's why. But, then again, the chocolate had tasted pretty nice with the rum.

"I think it's empty, Nigel." Sophie seemed a little woozy, from the fumes.

"Let's go." Nigel cut the hose, and grabbed his tank. He reached to switch off the light...and froze.

His hand had passed close enough to the bulb to feel the heat. He stared at the glowing filament...then at the old, corroded switch...sniffed acetylene. He withdrew his hand very slowly, and backed away. He realized that propane vapour would be sloshing around his ankles, as well, and he suddenly wanted to lift up both feet. The first few sparks from the fuse would probably set it off.

He gingerly splashed some diesel over the canvas, and followed Sophie out the hatch. She had led the fuses out to the side of the barge, where she could light them without leaving the canoe. Nigel closed the hatch, and was struck by how pitifully small the fuses appeared, leading into the huge barge. It was an *awfully* large bomb.

An hour passed. The canoe was wet, and Nigel was dying for a cigarette. The thermos was empty. He was starting to get annoyed. A professional would never tolerate this, he thought. A genuine terrorist would have garrotted the guard, quickly rigged some limpet mines, and already be home eating dinner.

Crap. He knew he should have made some sandwiches.

They took turns watching for the signal, and it was Sophie who saw Mpane walk right out onto the platform, and wave them ashore.

They paddled swiftly to the rope ladder, and Nigel went up. The mooring cables were long enough to be wrapped around the top of one

pillar, and secured to the next with a shackle. Sophie helped pull out the slack, as they went aloft, until she could no longer reach them.

Nigel had worried about the wire ropes possibly slipping down the pillars, when they came under load, but there were some cavities in the cement to pull them into, as well as misaligned edges to rest them on. One of the supports didn't mate properly with the top of the platform, and there was a wedge-shaped gap where they had botched the cement forms, and gotten the angle wrong. He could see a reinforcing rod inside, and the cable nearly reached it when he jammed it securely into the crack. The thick wires were too stiff and springy to get them as tightly as Nigel would have liked, but it wouldn't matter. There was ten meters of water under the barge.

The wire rope from the winch proved troublesome. Nigel had hoped to secure it to the hook hanging from the end of the boom, to gain the extra leverage, but after repeated attempts to throw a rope around the hook, they gave up, and decided to climb the boom, instead. The steel cross-bracing provided plenty of footholds, and Mpane was able to climb it easily. He went up about halfway, then pulled up the cable, and hooked it directly to a girder.

Nigel lowered a rope, and Sophie sent up the dynamite. He dropped her the ladder, then all the lines; and she cast off to return to the barge.

There was too much slack in the winch cable, and she took it out slowly, reminding herself with each pull not to make any sparks. The adjustment was critical. The initial load had to be taken by the cables attached to the pillars.

After the cable was as taut as she could make it, she eased it back out a bit, until it looked looser than the others. She had to assess it herself, Nigel told her. She secured it carefully to the bollard next to the winch, and returned to the canoe to stand by her fuses, covered in sweat.

Nigel slid the main charge into the clearance between the stationary base plate, and the bottom of the engine. The base wasn't going to move. It was on top of solid rock. The engine was designed to move, of course, but not in the direction they were going to push it. They had leverage, too. Three meters, to the hub.

The secondary charge fit snugly into a cavity between the front of the engine and the cabin, where it would do a lot of damage to all the hydraulics. They rigged the bundled handflares close to the fuel tank, and taped all the fuses together. Even if the crane survived, it would only live on as a broken, burned out shell.

"What d'ya reckon, mate?" Nigel asked, stepping back.

"She'll be right," Mpane felt.

"You know, it really pisses me off to have to do this to such a beautiful piece of machinery."

"Brand new, eh? The lady's waiting, though."

"Ready?"

"Truly."

It was all clear. Nigel signalled Sophie, and she lit her fuses. He waited until she had pushed off, confirming ignition, before telling Mpane, "Fire."

Then the two of them dove into the water. Sophie was waiting to pick them up, and they paddled for the headland, and turned in behind the rocks.

Sophie thought she saw sparks, where the fuses turned into the hatch, just seconds before the blue flash. They all ducked instinctively when they felt the tremendous force from the exploding barge.

Nigel caught a glimpse of one of the meteor flares escaping, and shooting out across the water. Something large whistled overhead, and splashed into the bay, well behind them. He hunched over even further, and smacked his forehead on the propane cylinder, which was lying in the bottom of the canoe.

"Crap," he muttered.

"Nigel! You hit?" Sophie whispered worriedly. She leaned forward to help him, just as he jerked himself up to look, and they collided.

"It's going down!" Mpane cried joyously, gripping the sides of the canoe, and shaking it.

Nigel searched for the barge, and thought he spotted the winch, but everything was obscured by a cloud of spray and smoke.

Then two cement pillars ripped out cleanly, and fell away from the platform. The remaining pair split, and crumbled when the end of the boom jerked down, as if it had hooked a huge fish. The boom started to sway, and all eyes were on it when the floodlights suddenly went out, followed by the sharp crack of the main charge.

They sat anxiously in the canoe, frustratingly blind following the loss of the bright lights, and listened...heard something crack...then, a grating squeal, like metal tearing...until the second charge ignited the atomized fuel into a fireball that lit up the entire bay. The boom had ripped away, and was just entering the water. The burning body of the crane emerged from the flames, tipped, and fell as the whole platform collapsed. There was no trace of the barge.

"You beauty!" Nigel exclaimed.

"Overkill, mate," Mpane added.

"Let's go!" Sophie pleaded.

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Charlie was about to spread some mayonnaise on his bedtime crayfish sandwich, when the shock of the massive detonation resounded through the boat. He threw the jar into the sink, and dropped into a crouch, below the countertop. "Holy shit!" he yelled. "What the hell was that?"

He listened to the rumble of the echoes coming off the hills, then bolted up on deck. Something had exploded close by, he knew. Something huge, like a volcano. But there weren't any active volcanoes here, that he was aware of.

The whole lagoon was black, except for the familiar white glow behind the hill, from the lights at the log export terminal. The Southern Cross shone above it, and he realized he was looking at a clear night sky, not a dark cloud of ash.

Then he noticed what appeared to be a cloud of white smoke billowing up, illuminated by the floodlights underneath. He barely had the chance to puzzle over the significance of it, before it suddenly disappeared, along with glow along the ridge. This was followed by the unnaturally sharp report of a second explosion.

No volcano, he recognized. High velocity explosives. For sure.

Charlie searched in vain for clues, in total darkness, until a burst of yellow light lit up the lagoon, followed by yet another explosion. He could see the reflection of flames, flickering in the trees on hillsides

around the bay, but only for a moment, then the lagoon suddenly went dark again. And became very quiet. He heard shouting, coming from the village on the islet. Some commotion below, as well.

"What's happening, Charlie?" Marley's head appeared in companionway, and Laurel soon joined him.

Charlie was stunned. It was unbelievable. "It's the crane! I think somebody blew it up!" Charlie shouted, lifting his arms in bewilderment.

The whole band piled out into the cockpit, even though there was nothing to see. Laurel was keen to take the dinghy, and go over to investigate, but no one volunteered to accompany her, and Charlie vetoed it. It seemed like an inopportune time to go motoring around the lagoon.

Charlie noticed that a few kerosene lamps had been lit in the villages, and he went below to fetch his night vision scopes, curious to see what was happening ashore. Surely the locals would be even more astonished than he was. Things like this simply didn't happen here. He could even imagine the village elders worrying that the Second World War had started up again.

Charlie couldn't understand why most cruising sailors eschewed the use of night vision equipment, even though they swore by their binoculars. Personally, he felt blind sailing at night. The radar screen

and scanning sonar on *Miles Ahead* provided some idea of what was around him, but it wasn't the same as actually being able to see. Surely, it was better seamanship to keep a proper watch at night, and that meant seeing everything.

He kept his starlight scope stowed in its case, right over the chart table, next to his binoculars. Night vision. Day vision. Charlie liked having both.

He was convinced that he would have run over a few fishing dhows, without them. He had safely piloted past scores of unlit, wooden fishing boats in the coastal waters off India - throughout Southeast Asia, as well - even encountering some dhows as much as fifty miles offshore. They seldom showed up on radar, unless the range was turned down to a mile or two, which it wouldn't be when he was sailing along at ten knots in open waters. Sometimes the fisherfolk would have a torch, and flash it frantically when they saw *Miles Ahead* bearing down on them, but more often than not, Charlie avoided hitting them because he'd seen their boats through the night scope.

He had an infrared scope, as well, that served as a backup. It wasn't as versatile - barely picked up breakers on a reef or rocks awash - and he couldn't fit telescopic lenses to it. But the infrared sensitivity was sometimes useful. Especially for viewing people. Anything warm-blooded showed up extremely well.

Charlie selected the starlight scope. The electronics simply amplified the available light - each little dot - before displaying it on the screen. The image was slightly grainy, and a dull green.

A sizeable crowd had gathered on the grass, outside the church, he noticed. A kerosene light was burning just inside the doorway. Charlie identified the village priest, working the crowd, embracing people. Charlie zoomed in on him. Father Jerome was wearing a tie. At one o'clock in the morning. It seemed odd. He didn't appear too worried about the explosions, either. In fact, he was smiling.

Charlie scanned some of the other villages, but couldn't see anything of interest. Just a few fuzzy dots from the villager's kerosene lamps.

The band kept pressing him for details - frustrated by the lack of information - so he set aside the starlight scope, and described the sequence of events. The billowing white cloud of smoke, and huge ball of flames. The three explosions. Charlie didn't have much else to tell them, really. It was over in a matter of seconds.

He gave the infrared scope a try. The water in the lagoon was almost the same temperature as the land, after midnight, and washed

out the image. Still, he scanned the surface of the lagoon for boats. The people in them would show up well.

He had just begun to scan the shoreline, when he spotted the canoe, close up against the maze of mangrove roots. Three people were crouched low in the boat, paddling purposely. Charlie might have missed them with the star scope, as they were deep in the shadow of the mangrove canopy. He immediately identified the dreadlocks. The boatbuilder, Mpane.

They went directly to the Kiwi boat.

This was getting really interesting, he thought.

Why did Sophie have a blackened face? And the propane tank? What was that for?

Charlie had to laugh. It never ceased to amaze him what people would do, once it was dark outside, and they thought they were alone.

Charlie switched back to the starlight scope, which afforded a much clearer image of *Rainblow*. A lamp had been turned on inside the cabin - a 'traditional' kerosene one, he noted with amusement. The dull, yellow light streamed out the portholes, allowing him an occasional glimpse of someone moving around down below. After ten minutes or so, Mpane appeared on deck, and paddled the outrigger canoe back to the islet.

Needless to say, Charlie was no longer apprehensive about venturing out on the lagoon. He stuck his head inside the companionway to see if any of the band were still awake. Wendy and Laurel were slouched in opposite corners of the settee, passing a joint back and forth, and sharing a glass of port.

“Anyone up for an adventure?” he called below. “Thought I’d motor over to see what’s left of the crane.”

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Sophie kept expecting to hear sirens, or see revolving blue lights flashing ashore. Even though she knew the islands in the lagoon didn't have anything like that - no firetrucks or ambulances, either - it was still hard to accept when absolutely nothing happened.

She heard some of the villagers cheering. Then the clanging of the church ‘bell’, which was nothing more than an old gas cylinder, suspended from the branch of a tree at the end of a stout chain. Several other ‘bells’ were struck around the lagoon, seemingly in response. But the celebrations were only a brief interruption of the silence.

Sophie reminded herself to tell Father Jerome where he could locate a new gas cylinder. The one in the village was really rusty. Old enough to be a war relic, she thought. Possibly even salvaged from a

bombed-out ship. Seemed a shame to let the six bells on the barge go to waste.

They could then recover Nigel's brass fittings, which had been left behind in their haste to abandon the propane-filled barge. Nigel thought that he'd also wasted a whole case of dynamite, but there was nothing to be done about that. Sophie was happy just to have escaped with her life, given all the shrapnel that went flying overhead when the barge detonated.

After Mpane went ashore to deliver the news to Father Jerome, Sophie sat down in front of the mirror, and began cleaning the charcoal off her face. She'd removed only half of it, when she heard the sound of an outboard motor, moving at high speed across the lagoon.

She rushed on deck, and spotted it at once. The boat carried two powerful searchlights - one aimed dead ahead to illuminate the water, and the second sweeping a broad arc from side to side. She dropped into a crouch.

“Nigel! It's the police!”

Nigel couldn't bring himself to open his eyes. “What police...? There aren't any police.”

“Well, somebody's out there. Come see for yourself. They're headed for the crane.”

Nigel reluctantly pulled himself to his feet. Having smoked a celebratory joint with Mpane, he was scarcely in the mood for any more drama. He peered out the hatch just as the boat began rounding the point, and caught a glimpse of its searchlights.

“Cripes.”

Sophie suddenly wanted to hide.

Nigel didn’t seem all that concerned, though. “Must be the guy from that ketch - Charlie,” he said. “His Boston Whaler would be as fast as that, don’t ya reckon?”

Sophie hadn’t even thought of Charlie. She could readily make out the anchor light, atop the mizzen mast of *Miles Ahead*, but nothing more. She couldn’t tell if their dinghy was missing, or not. The lagoon was too dark.

“Well, whoever it is, they’ve made their point. We’d better dispose of the evidence.” she suggested. The cabin was still littered with cut-up rice bags, odd pieces of fuse, and the prototype, beer-can carriages that Nigel made for the detonator.

“Awright,” Nigel sighed. “I’ll give you a hand.”

The speedboat returned twenty minutes later, and motored directly to *Miles Ahead*. Sophie spotted several people in the glare of the searchlights, but by the time she’d fetched the binoculars, the light had

been extinguished, leaving her once again in the dark. For all she knew, the police could be interrogating Charlie.

And *Rainblow* might be next.

Her face was still smudged with charcoal. She carried her mirror over to the kerosene lamp, and began scrubbing away the last incriminating traces.

The boat left *Miles Ahead* after ten minutes or so, and headed straight over. Sophie went on deck to meet them. When the boat had approached to within fifty feet, they shined their blinding searchlight directly at *Rainblow*. She covered her eyes.

The light immediately went out, and they cut the motor. A voice called out. "Sophie? Is that you? It's me, Wendy."

Sophie heaved a sigh of relief. The momentum carried them alongside. Wendy fended off from the bow. Laurel was handling the engine.

"Saw your lights," Wendy explained.

"Incredible, huh?" Laurel said. "Have you guys heard anything?"

Sophie feigned ignorance. "Did you go over to see the crane?" she asked.

"Yeah. Charlie couldn't resist," Wendy related, with a little laugh. "Crane's gone. The barge, too. They sunk the bloody lot."

"Wow. Did you hear the explosions over here?" Sophie immediately realized her gaffe, and quickly covered it. "Out there, I mean. All the way out there, on your boat?"

"Hear them? Are you kidding? Charlie thought a volcano had erupted!" Laurel said, laughing as well.

"Want a hot chocolate?" Sophie offered.

Nigel was hardly in the mood to entertain visitors, but tried his best to be hospitable. He rolled them a joint.

"You know these folks, Nigel. Who do you think did it?" Laurel asked.

Nigel rubbed his chin. "Commandos from Papua New Guinea would be my guess."

Wendy and Laurel's eyes both widened.

"Yeah. As a payback, I reckon. For the Solomon Islands' support of the rebels on Bougainville. The Bougainville Revolutionary Army. The rebels sabotaged the copper mine on the island, and eventually closed it down. Papua New Guinea lost a huge chunk of its tax base."

Wendy slapped the table, suddenly animated. "Oh, won't Charlie be pissed that he didn't hear about this before he sent the fax!"

Nigel stared blankly at her. "Fax...?"

“Yeah. He was polishing up the story when we left. He’s probably sent it off, by now.”

"A story...?"

“Yeah. Charlie has this thing about becoming a foreign correspondent. Now that he’s upgraded the satellite hook-up, he can freelance from anywhere in the world. He can even transmit videotape. He’s always sending stuff off to CNN and Sky News. Nothing’s ever come of it.”

“You never know,” Laurel interjected. “This might be the break he’s been waiting for.”

*Bloody hell.*

Nigel didn’t like the sound of it. He’d much rather have the police chasing after him than Rupert Murdoch. “What, uh...what did he have to say?”

Wendy shrugged. "Oh, just the facts about the crane, and the explosions. Then a paragraph about the barge sinking, and the big oil slick.”

*Crap.*

*An oil slick?* The bloody diesel tank on the barge, Nigel reckoned. Now they weren't just pirates, but polluters, as well.

“He had some sort of angle, something about monkey-wrenching,” Wendy added. “You know, Edward Abbey stuff. But he wouldn’t let me see that part.”

“I think he might have seen something,” Laurel speculated.

Wendy glanced at her, looking surprised. “Really? You think?”

“Well, sure. How long was he sitting outside with those night vision scopes? Must have been half an hour, at least. You know how bored he gets, sitting still.”

Wendy chuckled. “True enough.”

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Nigel began stripping off the sail covers before Wendy and Laurel had even made it back to *Miles Ahead*.

“Can’t we at least say good-bye to Mpane?” Sophie pleaded.

“At three in the morning?” Nigel tossed the mainsail cover down below without bothering to fold it. Although the breeze was slight, they had enough wind to fill the sails, and slip quietly out of the anchorage without having to start the engine. “Trust me. Mpane will understand. Now, come on. Give me a hand with the anchor.”

## CHAPTER 17

### LOUISIADES

#### *Yacht, Footloose*

John was furious, and mouthing obscenities, which was as close as he could get to cursing, Claire knew. They had just been deported from New Guinea, he told her, and had to leave the country within twenty-four hours.

This was the John's first visit to the country, and he had relied on information in a cruising guide, which stated that yachts could arrive unannounced, and acquire the necessary permits at the port of entry, just as they were accustomed to doing throughout the rest of the South Pacific. The law had been changed, however, and tourist visas were now issued on arrival only in the capital, Port Moresby, while they were trying to clear in at Misima, in the Louisiades.

He should have obtained proper visas before entering the country, the Immigration official sullenly informed him, pointing out that a citizen from New Guinea would surely be turned away from America without a valid visa. Claire felt the official had some justification for seeking revenge, but kept the opinion to herself.

John wasn't about to put to sea, though. Not until a tropical depression in the Coral Sea had either dissipated, or moved further away. Besides, he resented being told what to do. They'd treated him like a common criminal, he said.

"We'll sail when the forecast is clear, even if we have to wait a week or two," he insisted.

They had to quit the tiny harbor at Misima, however. John figured they could wait for a more promising forecast at the outlying islands in the southern part of the archipelago, where they were unlikely to encounter any Customs officials. Claire could tell that ignoring the edict worried him, though, since there was really no way of foretelling the consequences in the event they happened to get caught.

They had actually arrived in the archipelago ten days earlier, and slowly worked their way through the chain of outer islands to the first official port of entry at Misima, which was an illegal act, in itself. Yachts weren't allowed to stop without clearance. But it had given them an opportunity to see some of the country, at least.

The mountainous islands were a welcome change from uniformly flat coral atolls in Tuvalu and Kiribati, where they'd spent the cyclone season. Claire had pleasantly discovered that the fractured rock surfaces were easy to climb. Most were rather arid, with only a few trees

and sparse patches of bushes on the slopes, and she could usually find a clear path across the rocks.

Claire had no regrets about leaving Misima. The place was a mess. The landlocked harbor was awash in beer cans, many of them still afloat, and the roots of the mangroves were draped with clumps of plastic bags, and fast-food wrappings. The rutted track which led from the wharf up to the store was even worse, with rubbish trampled into the mud, and dumped randomly along the verge. The littered landscape would probably have escaped notice in Honolulu, but it stood out dramatically here, in sharp contrast to the pristine surroundings she'd been immersed in for months.

It sadly reminded her of America, she had to admit. A thought which was reinforced when she passed a group of local youths, squishing through the mud, wearing high-top sneakers, with their baseball caps turned around backwards, making a comical attempt to imitate the 'attitude' of their rap culture heroes. They had jobs at the gold mine, Claire surmised, and some money to spend, probably for the first time in their young lives. Their costumes seemed as out of place as the all the trash, every bit of it imported, and the shoddiest quality imaginable.

She talked to a few people gathered outside the store, most of whom were drinking beer and chewing betel nut, and came away with

the impression that they were actually proud of the litter, as if it were a badge of affluence, and visible proof that they were finally participating in the world economy.

The slimes field at the mine provided ample evidence of the nature of that participation. Claire had a panoramic view of the site soon after clearing the harbor entrance, when they sailed right through the discolored water emanating from it. The sheet of fine slime descending into the bay was as smooth as freshly trowelled cement, and surely as sterile.

Another badge, of sorts. One of piracy, just like the logos on the clothing.

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Less than fifty miles from Misima, at a few islands in the southernmost portion of the archipelago, they discovered that many of the villagers still used traditional shell money. Painstakingly cut by hand from specially graded types of shell, the small discs were then bored, and strung into long lengths. The individual strands were then sanded perfectly smooth. Some species of shell were more highly prized, so the various strands had different values, almost like denominations of

currency. Sanding down the dense shell was extremely tedious work, and even though they were actually manufacturing money, the people were obviously very poor.

Yet they lived in immaculate, neatly-raked villages, while their relatively rich relations on Misima lived surrounded by squalor. There was an exquisite irony in it, she thought. Karl Marx would have loved it.

Their deportation proved fortuitous, as it turned out. Claire would have missed the traditional regatta, otherwise.

They were anchored off a quiet village, at the time, awaiting a window in the weather, before making for Torres Strait. There was no school on the island, so most of the children stayed with relatives on neighboring islands during the week. The men who remained in the village spent most of their day sitting under a big mango tree, chewing betel nut.

They were very agreeable, although rather shy, and seldom had much to say when they paddled out to barter crayfish. They gratefully accepted some sweet coffee, though, and took exaggerated care when spitting out their betel nut juice, so as to avoid staining the deck.

They offered to grate some for her, so she could try it out, but their purplish-black teeth made it seem unappealing. Each man invariably carried his own kit with him wherever he went, in a wicker shoulder-

strap purse specially made for the purpose, with a little homemade nutmeg grater inside, along with all the betel nuts, and a jar of lye. The soil around the venerable mango in the village was dyed a deep purple from several generations of juice.

Claire had climbed up to the top of a bluff overlooking the anchorage, and was relaxing in the shade, herself, when she noticed the regatta approaching. Five boats, in all. Four were obviously native craft, since they were flying unusual-looking, rectangular-shaped sails. The fifth appeared to be gaff-rigged yacht. By the time Claire hiked back down, two of the native boats had already been hauled up on the beach.

They were larger than dugout canoes, although similar in design, with a single outrigger, although constructed from planks, dory-style. The men in the village were welcoming the visitors like kin, and it was clearly a special occasion. The boats were elaborately painted with designs that reminded her of Australian Aboriginal rock art, and decorated with long strands of cowrie shells, draped along the gunwale like bunting.

There were other ornaments, as well, but the one that really caught her eye was affixed to the top of the mast on one of the boats. It was a fluorescent light tube, broken at one end. Tufts of feathers and streamers of colored plastic were fastened into the cracks in the glass. The metal fitting was still intact on the other end, and some desiccated

goose barnacles were dangling from the pins. They'd found it washed up on the beach, she guessed, and must have liked it.

Their sails resembled the woven floor mats she'd sat on in Fiji, made from split pandanus fronds. Or some kind of fronds, anyway. Although the sails appeared quite strong, they would be terribly heavy, especially in the rain.

Then Claire noticed the pig. A very forlorn-looking pig, she thought, lashed on its side atop some planks, which formed a crude deck on one of the boats. The regatta was a wedding party, delivering a pig to the father of the bride.

The gaff-rigged yacht sailing in company with them had anchored close to *Footloose*, she noticed. Two people had left the boat, and were rowing across. John and Mary had witnessed the regatta from the cockpit, she imagined, and were waiting at the rail to welcome them. Claire was beginning to feel like an intruder at the family reunion on the beach, anyway, so she slipped away, and rowed home.

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"I don't care if it's part of their culture, or not, Nigel. It's really mean to treat a pig like that," Sophie insisted.

"How else could you carry a pig on a canoe?" Nigel queried.

"I don't know, but they could at least carry an umbrella for it, or something."

Claire was drawn to them immediately. They made her laugh. In addition to their amusing anecdotes about the wedding party, Sophie's story about the jazz concerts had them all in stitches.

"Well, that finally explains it," Mary sighed. "All these years we've been sailing through the islands...after awhile you start to believe you actually understand their culture. So we always bring along some hard candy and a little extra powdered milk, a few magazines - just simple things we know the islanders like - and suddenly we get all these requests for *jazz music* cassettes! We were mystified, I'll tell you!"

Sophie giggled. "Charlie would be tickled to hear that, wouldn't he?"

Nigel shot her a dirty look.

They'd already had a few heated arguments over *Miles Ahead*. Nigel had overreacted, she felt. The band would never rat on them. Sophie was sure of it. Nigel had been woefully hungover when he met Charlie, and had talked with him for all of a minute. Yet he came away firmly convinced that Charlie was a clone of the upper-crust, private-school Kiwis who had looked down on him as a kid, just because his father raised sheep.

When John and Mary learned that Nigel had also completed a circumnavigation, the three of them began swapping sailing stories. Claire commiserated with Sophie about the plight of the pig.

"This isn't the first time," Sophie said. "I've seen the kids throwing rocks at the dogs, and none of the adults seem to care, let alone do anything to stop it."

"Funny. I've noticed it, too. On Vanuatu, curved boar tusks are a cultural treasure, but in order to get them, the islanders have to knock out the incisors on the animal's upper jaw. Then the lower ones grow unimpeded. The tusks eventually grow in a complete circle, and pierce the boar's lip."

"Oh, yuk. I don't know...I suppose one shouldn't, but I find it hard not to judge a culture by how well they treat their animals."

"Nigel doesn't agree?"

"He says I should try and balance that with how well they treat their children."

"How about the way they treat women?" Claire asked.

"Yeah. That's another one, isn't it?"

Claire had to laugh. "We've stopped at a few islands where you'd swear there weren't any women, at all, the way they kept out of sight."

Sophie chuckled. "Nigel has excuses for that, too."

"Like what?"

"Oh, you know. Out of sight, out of mind. Like the Islamic veil, only made of thatch."

"It must be easier to think of the islands as a paradise, if you happen to be a male," Claire speculated.

"Isn't that the truth. It seems bizarre, but many of the islands in the Western Solomons are matriarchal. Even in New Guinea. It's actually the women who own the land."

"Does it really make any difference?"

"Of course not. The men still control everything. They probably just got bored doing the bookkeeping."

"Figures."

Nigel and Sophie planned to spend a few more weeks in the Louisiades. They had obtained a six-week visa by clearing in at another port of entry, where the Customs official was more amenable. Nigel had spoken to him in pidgin, which helped, Sophie thought.

*Rainblow* had been invited to attend the wedding feast.

"You won't regret bypassing Misima," Claire said. "The place has been trashed. They've opened a gold mine on the island..."

Sophie interrupted. "We sailed right past Misima," she said. "Nigel's still seething over it. I'd appreciate it, if you didn't mention it to him."

Claire saw them off early the next morning, when they left to accompany the regatta on the last leg of the wedding procession. Before quitting the anchorage, *Rainblow* sailed around in a circle, and passed close alongside.

Nigel blew a conch.

"See you in Cocos!" Sophie cried.

## CHAPTER 18

### COCOS ISLAND

*Exile.* Opening the office.

Doc woke up to the sight of a large, expensive ketch, anchored next to the mooring buoy, with a quarantine flag hoisted. They'd negotiated the passage into the lagoon in total darkness, oblivious to the danger posed by the scattered coral heads.

Talk about blind luck. It was a deep draft boat.

Panamanian flag, no less. Doc was tempted to call up Shaun, and ask him to motor over to clear them in, but he already knew what he'd say. 'But that's silly, Doc. You're right there.'

Of course, he was *there*. He was *always* there, doing all the work, while Shaun did all the fishing. They'd have to discuss this.

*Miles Ahead.* Clearing in.

"There's a yachtie rowing out Charlie," Wendy observed, peering out the portlight.

"You talk to him, okay?" Charlie was busy making coffee.

"No worries." Wendy went up on deck.

"Morning," Doc said, as his dinghy came alongside.

"G'day," she replied pleasantly.

"How was the trip?"

"Good, thanks. I'd invite you up for coffee, but we're still under quarantine."

"Oh. Sorry." Doc grinned, and turned around his baseball cap so that the insignia faced front. "Australian Customs Service. At your service."

Wendy smiled at him, skeptically. "You have an unusual accent for an Aussie, eh?"

"That's funny. I was thinking the same thing. You don't sound like a Panamanian, at all."

"I'm not."

"Me, either."

"Either, what?"

"Either one. I'm Doc. American, for the most part, but on her Majesty's service, nonetheless. We're equal opportunity employers, here."

"Wendy," she said, laughing. "Aussie."

"Well, hey! Welcome home, then. Coffee...?"

"Sure. Come on aboard." She turned, and started below.

"Charlie? You're not going to believe this..."

Doc had worked on some impressive yachts over the years, and had seen more elegant woodwork than that on *Miles Ahead*, but it had to rank near the top, with all its impressive equipment. Scanning sonar, no less. Although the sleek, modern styling wasn't particularly to his liking, it was a nice boat.

He was quietly looking around, while Charlie filled in all the forms, when he spotted the seed on the soft leather upholstery, hiding in the wrinkled corner of the piping. A fat marijuana seed.

The last time Doc visited America, the Coast Guard was actually seizing boats, if they discovered so much as a solitary, defenseless seed. It was foolhardy to allow the embryos to lie around unattended, when you cleared through Customs.

"Hmm..."

He reached down and picked it up. Then casually set it down on the table next to his coffee cup, and began idly rolling it around, flicking it lightly with his finger.

Shit, Charlie thought, cursing himself.

The Customs officer seemed so disarmingly nonchalant that Charlie had been suspicious right from the start. Now, though, he was totally baffled. The guy had taken a few matchsticks, and arranged them

into a miniature soccer goal, of sorts, and was shooting the damn marijuana seed into it. Charlie couldn't decide if he should say anything or not, and kept his eyes on the paperwork, pretending not to notice.

"Mind if I smoke?" Doc asked politely.

"No. Of course not. Be my guest," Charlie replied, without even looking up.

Doc had a joint stashed away inside his pack of Camels, and jiggled the half-empty pack to find it. The marijuana wasn't obvious. Doc routinely used a cigarette stub as a convenient filter, and rolled his joints well enough that they could almost pass for ready-made. He'd just lit it when Wendy returned with a steaming pot of espresso.

"More coffee?" she offered.

He smiled. "Oh, nice. Smells like French Roast."

"Close. It's Italian, actually." Wendy reached around to pour, then abruptly stopped. She sniffed. "What's that? Hey! Is that...?"

"Tanzanian," Doc said. He grinned, and offered her the smoke.

"Taste?"

"Oh, you bastard!" Charlie cried, smelling it, too.

"But...I thought you said I could smoke," Doc said, feigning injury.

## MILES AHEAD

-INTERNATIONAL FAXES-

-ELECTRONIC MAIL-

Sent and Received

See Wendy

*Exile.* Office closed. Two in. Granted temporary clearance by radio, on account of the weather.

Doc was sitting in the cockpit, minding the hose. The raindrops were as large as grapes, he thought. Green grapes, plopping into the lagoon.

Once it became clear that the torrential rain was more than a brief squall, he'd lowered his awning into its catchment position, and collected more than fifty gallons. The main tanks and large jerricans were already full, which left only the odd assortment of empty containers gathered at his feet. The rain seemed to be easing.

The frenzied activity in the anchorage had tapered off, as well. The scene had been chaotic after the initial squall came through, when everyone scurried around closing their hatches, and rigging their own rain collectors. Some had rinsed out salty clothes, or washed their hair.

One had even scrubbed his deck. Now the boats were closed up tight, like so many sleeping turtles. Everyone had retreated below.

Except Kate.

*Trekker* was anchored off his stern. Too far away to talk normally, but close enough to be neighbors. Kate had moved their dinghy around to the bow, and tied it in a position where no one in the anchorage could possibly see her, except him. Then, she casually stripped off her halter top, and began shampooing her hair.

“Isn’t this the greatest!” she called gaily, across the water.

Doc tried to act blasé about it, as well. He’d visited his share of beaches, and seen plenty of topless women...but this was more personal. He stole several glances at her, but Kate caught him, every time. She began rinsing herself with rain water, which had accumulated in the bottom of the dinghy, ankle-deep.

“Get enough to fill your tanks?” she shouted, over the sound of the rain.

Doc sighed, and nodded his head. He watched her squeegee the water from her skin with the flat of her palm. She had tanned quickly.

“How many litres?” she yelled.

“Uh...around two hundred, I reckon.”

Kate cupped a hand to her ear.

Doc couldn't bring himself to shout, and used his hand to signal the digits.

"Two hundred! Hey! That's great!"

Kate smiled, and suddenly stood up in the dinghy, presenting him with a clear profile of her breasts. She tilted back her head, and began combing out her hair with her fingers. Her nipples rose up into the cool rain.

It was a performance, meant for his eyes alone.

The gallon jug which Doc had been filling was overflowing. It had been spilling over his feet for some time, in fact. Upon finally noticing it, he cursed himself, and switched the hose over to one of the empties. Despite his better sense, Kate was starting to have an effect on him. It was a bit of a worry. She usually got what she wanted, he recalled.

*Exile.* Supply ship arrives. Two in. One waiting offshore while the ship negotiates the channel.

The ship dwarfed the palms as it passed the tip of the islet. After clearing the reef, it sounded a long, deep blast of its air horn. Several yachts blew their own comically feeble horns, in response. Wendy laughed.

“Well, folks,” Doc said. “Our ship has truly come in.”

“Calls for a celebration, I’d say,” Charlie proposed.

“Yeah? Ya reckon?” Wendy queried.

“Of course. Our ice cream has arrived.”

“Well, hey. In that case...” Doc reached for the radar reflector.

“Wendy? Do the honors?”

*Footloose.* Close inspection by the Customs officer.

"Johnny! Come look who's here!" Mary called below.

"G'day, you old salt," Doc said, when John's face peered out the hatch. "Thought you'd be playing golf in some retirement village, by now."

"Well, I'll be darned." John bounded up the ladder, and clasped Doc's hand. "Been a long time, ol' buddy. Lot of miles, too."

"Been back to Fiji, again?" Doc asked, embracing the pair of them.

Claire watched their reunion with affection, no longer surprised when John and Mary met up with old friends in the remotest places. They appeared to have them scattered all over the world. Mary introduced her, but after shaking his hand, she was content to listen,

while they related their separate adventures, going back to the time they'd spent cruising through Fiji together, many years ago.

She noticed him looking at her, occasionally, and when their eyes met during a lull in the stories, she had to ask him about his cap. "Are you really the Customs officer, here?"

"Well, kind of. Assistant Harbormaster."

John either hadn't noticed, or thought it was only a souvenir, because he was rendered speechless, and only managed to point a finger at the hat, before doubling up with hysterical laughter.

"It's not as bad as it looks, Johnny. The Harbormaster's just a rookie. He needs some guidance." It was hopeless trying to communicate with John, and Doc smiled engagingly at her, laughing a little himself. "Better tell him to behave himself, Claire. I have handcuffs."

Doc tried to be circumspect in his use of the wide-ranging discretionary powers bestowed on him, as a result of his alliance with the Queen, but there were temptations. In addition to having access to the marital status, occupations, birthdates, and all the other information that everybody was required to supply on the forms, the passports themselves were often quite revealing.

He studied Claire's with interest.

The woman in the photograph looked like a different person. The skin was sallow, with a sprinkling of freckles. The dark red hair fell straight past the shoulders, and was clipped off cleanly by the bottom margin of the print. But it was the sad, anorexic-looking face, and vacant blue eyes that Doc found most intriguing. Especially since the woman sitting across from him had penetratingly intelligent eyes, and a lovely sheen of naturalness about her. Her hair was quite short, now, and the tips were bleached reddish-blond by the sun.

She had been having persistent trouble with a sunburned nose, he thought.

The passport had been issued almost nine years ago, but she hadn't used it. Only for a one-day round trip across the Mexican border, several years back; and not again, until the entry stamp on arrival in the Tokelau Islands, while she was sailing with *Footloose*. She was married when she applied for it, since there was a spouse declared on the passport, although with a different surname. She had drawn two neat lines through it, crossing it out. No children, he saw.

Yet, she had checked 'never married' on the entry permit form. It seemed more emphatic than divorced, somehow, as if she might be pretending it had never even happened. Doc found it amusing, since it was precisely what he did, himself. His own divorce was ancient history, and nobody's business, anyway.

Even more amusing was the fact that she had written 'observer' in the space where visitors were required to declare their occupations. Doc often felt disheartened by the way ordinarily independent-minded people could become so obedient when answering the stupid, intrusive questions on the forms. He found her entry charming.

He always wrote 'retired', himself. His was the better one, he thought. Tactically, anyway. 'Observers' seldom get a pension.

"It's not a very good likeness, is it?" Claire observed, looking sideways at the passport, and then inquisitively at him.

"You look completely different."

"It's probably the tan. Or the hair."

It was an invitation to look closely at her face, and one which he gladly accepted. "Oh, the tan, for sure. But...it's more than that." He completely lost himself in her eyes, though, and couldn't decide on the most appropriate form of flattery. Wiser? More alive? Even more beautiful? He had to say something. "Younger. You look years younger, in person."

She dismissed that one. "Oh, I feel ages older. Thankfully."

"We'll let you in, anyway. Which would you like? A rectangular stamp, with black ink? Or, a triangular one, with red ink?"

"Oh, red."

"This is a new one, on me," John said, holding up one of the forms.  
"Livestock Deaths at Sea?"

Doc groaned. "Oh, hell. I thought I took all those out."

"Let me see," Claire asked, holding out her hand. John passed it over. "What's it for?"

"Who knows? What are any of them for? Some livestock ships pass this way carrying sheep to the Middle East. Maybe that's why they put it on the list. I thought of it as a joke, at first - you know, asking little yachts how much livestock they had to bury at sea - until I gave the damn thing to Henri on the Swiss boat. They lost their cat, apparently. Dove into the water, chasing after a dried-up flying fish that his wife scraped off the deck, and threw overboard. Cat couldn't abide the waste, I guess. Henri asked me if he was supposed to declare it. Heidi started sobbing. I felt just awful."

"They couldn't rescue it?" Claire asked.

"No. They searched for over an hour. The ocean just swallowed it up."

Claire nodded.

Of course. The sea was always hungry. She knew that.

*Miles Ahead.* Dinner gossip.

“I can’t remember the last time I had roast rack of lamb,” Doc said. He helped himself to a thick slice, and passed the platter. The whole band was seated around the saloon table. Laurel handed him the yams.

“Any impressions of the new arrivals?” Charlie asked.

“Mmm...” Doc mumbled, nodding his head, while he finished chewing. “That pilothouse ketch, *Footloose*? Turns out they’re old friends of mine. They were sailing a smaller boat, last time we met, so I didn’t have a clue, at first. They’re really nice folks. Been around three times.”

Charlie whistled. “That’s a lot of miles.”

“You folks have any friends headed this way?” Doc asked.

“Reckon not,” Wendy replied. “We left our friends in the South Pacific behind, when we made tracks for Singapore.”

“What about *Rainblow*?” Charlie asked. “Nigel said they might come here.”

Wendy seemed delighted. “Wouldn’t that be a kick?”

“Wait a minute. This boat is named...*Rainblow*?” Doc asked, seeking clarification.

Charlie nodded.

“Wouldn’t be a Kiwi boat, by any chance?”

“Yeah. Great Barrier Island.”

“Well, fancy that. I have a New Zealand boat named *Rainblow* on my WANTED list.”

Wendy gasped, and almost knocked over the Merlot. “No! That can’t be! No one even suspected...”

“Hey!” Charlie quickly interjected. “Don’t jump to conclusions, Wendy.”

“Must be some other boat,” Laurel speculated.

“Do you remember what they’re, uh...wanted for?” Charlie asked, sounding a little concerned.

“Something to do with New Zealand Customs, I think. Yeah, that’s it. They left without proper Customs clearance. Three years in a row, apparently.”

Wendy giggled. “Sounds like them, doesn’t it?”

Charlie leaned close, and whispered something in her ear. She whispered back. Laurel joined in, and they huddled in conference. Doc waited, rather amused.

“Doc...?” Charlie began. “If these folks happen to show up here...will you be forced to arrest them?”

Doc almost choked on his food. Everyone at the table was watching him, as he struggled to stop coughing. He finally managed to

clear his throat. "Hey! Come on! I'm not about to *arrest* anybody. Good grief. Do I look like a cop?"

The table was silent, and the whole band continued to stare at him. Then Marley burst out laughing. Laurel followed suit.

Charlie grinned. "We could have fun with this."

*Exile.* Shaun's coffee break on a busy morning. Four in. One out.

"She's keen on ya, mate. Not that I can fathom, it. A grizzled old sod like you," Shaun teased.

"It's just a hormone bloom, or something." Doc grinned, recalling some of Kate's playful poses. The insouciant pout. The swimsuit model.

"Nah. I can tell. She's ready to pounce, Doc."

"She's only nineteen."

"Bloody hell. Even worse. Such a stunning sheila, too."

"She is pretty, isn't she?"

"Pretty? That hardly captures it, mate."

"Nothing will come of it."

"Sodding idiot..." Shaun shook his head disconsolately. "It's enough to break my heart."

Doc had agonized over asking Shaun, but what the hell. "I know she'd love to learn how to scuba dive," he said. "Interested in giving her lessons, by any chance?"

Shaun's eyes widened. "Well...sure. Who wouldn't?"

"I'll mention it." Doc was beginning to feel some sympathy for the grouper that Shaun had been pursuing for months. It was terribly unsettling having attractive lures pass seductively before his eyes, all day long. With the pair of anglers off scuba diving, they'd both get some relief.

*Reef Teeth.* Private tour.

The island was very narrow near the point, and Doc led the way through the sparse fringe of undergrowth, with Claire close behind. After winding their way past a few palms, and across some of the rocks on the northern shore, they reached an indentation in the reef, where there was a flat coral shelf. The soft coral had eroded away in places, and left a series of curving ridges - parallel veins of a harder coral, which were sticking up, like teeth in the jaw of a shark. They were bleached white, and set off by a palate of smooth stone. Many of the teeth were worn clean through.

"They must be ancient," Doc assessed. "Before the coconut palms, even."

"They're lovely," Claire said, walking around to view the teeth from different angles, and observe the shadows. "It almost looks Islamic. You know, with all the stone filigree."

"Of course, they could be even older..."

"Thanks, Doc." She looked up, and smiled radiantly. "Especially for making me bring my camera."

It was really nice of him, she thought. He'd known that she would like it, just from looking at some of her prints. The shadows created jagged edges of sunlight on the inner rows of teeth, and the patterns were exactly right for her. Right on the button.

When she studied the grin on his face, it seemed playful, yet very sly. He hadn't brought her here to see some coral, but to give her a feeling. A mood. An enjoyable one. She realized that Doc might be dangerous, giving her pleasurable feelings like that. On purpose.

Doc sat on the rocks watching her, while she photographed the teeth - laying flat on her stomach, at first, for a few low angle shots - as the surf swirled around her toes. She allowed his gaze to wash over her,

he thought, but grudgingly; so he soon got up and walked a short way along the reef to grant her undisturbed intimacy with her art.

Like so many of the independent women he met - of course, he didn't meet all that many of any description, leading the life of an exile, as he did - Claire seemed to have 'not available' written all over her face. And in Claire's case, it was spelled out ostentatiously. In neon.

He didn't want her to feel uncomfortable.

Yet the prohibition made no sense. It reminded him of a 'keep off' sign posted next to a mature, wildly healthy lawn. He was tempted to venture a few steps, but women weren't lawns. He wouldn't trod on her feelings. Walk all over her. He could wiggle the sign, though, to see how firmly it was embedded. There was nothing dishonorable in that. He headed back.

Claire was standing just outside the arc of the teeth, with her head cocked sideways, assessing the image. She glanced over, and smiled. "I think I'll shoot the rest of the roll in the morning. It might be even more dramatic just after dawn."

"Maybe. Yeah. The shadows would be good."

"You know what I like the most? That these amazing formations were created from dead rock. Completely by accident."

"One of the mysteries of evolution, I guess."

"Interesting way to put it. Do you know much about it?" Claire asked.

"About what?"

"Evolution."

"Rocks, you mean?"

"People." She smiled.

"Well...more than I'd like. It's depressing. The geneticists seem determined to turn life into a machine."

"Hmm. It's been liberating for me. The patterns have given me some guidance. Every time I uncover a new one it gets me another step closer."

"Closer to what?" Doc asked.

"Gaining mastery over my own evolution."

"There's something immutable about the genes, though. You can't change them."

"I happen to like mine, just the way they are. I just want to control them, that's all. It's a lot easier once you understand their influence."

"Oh, I agree. Definitely."

"Why are you smirking, then?"

Doc couldn't help it. He was smitten. "Your genes seem to have that influence on me, Claire. They're awfully cute."

Although she glared at him, ultimately, she brightened, first. Just long enough to let him know that the sign wasn't set in cement. It was stuck into much softer stuff. Sensitive, though.

## VOLLEYBALL

International Test Match

Australia vs USA

16h00 Friday

*Beach.* Harbormaster's palm.

"It's really sad there aren't any seabirds, here," Claire said.

Doc had carried a second tatami mat with him when he rowed ashore, hoping she'd stop by. "I saw a pair of boobies, just a few days ago," he replied encouragingly, but she looked distinctly unimpressed.

"No. Don't tell me. You want to exterminate the rats."

"Well, relocate them, maybe."

"Don't be silly. They're like toxic waste. Who's going to give them a home?"

"It doesn't seem right. Islands like this are the only places the seabirds have left."

"But the rats have no options, at all, Claire. At least the seabirds are free to wander off, and look for a home somewhere else, just like us."

"Where?"

Doc had to laugh. "Hey, don't ask me. I have the same problem, myself."

Claire seemed to enjoy digging, he noticed. She had excavated a trough in the sand in between the mats, and was smoothing out the bank with her hand. She pulled a dried branch from the bushes, and began idly stripping off the shrivelled leaves, baring the stems. She cracked them into short lengths, then began sticking them into the sand on her side of the trough, in an ever-lengthening row. Like a picket fence.

"Why do you like the rats?" she asked.

"I don't know. Because they're cute, I guess." He considered praising their resourcefulness, and enviable pragmatism, but thought better of it.

"They crawl around in the garbage pit every night. That's not cute."

"True," Doc admitted, recalling how dusty they looked after working the pit, all night. Like tired, little coal miners. Covered with ashes.

"Wouldn't you rather be a seabird, than a rat?"

"Well, the feathers put me off a bit. I'd rather be a wandering albatross than a pigeon, though."

"Oh, I don't know about that one," Claire said, shaking her head.

"Come on! The wandering albatross is a truly magnificent bird."

"Not such a good role model, though."

"Why not? Sure, they live alone most of the time, and they must get pretty cold, but they live free. With some dignity."

"They're almost extinct."

Doc was crestfallen. "Aw...shit. I didn't know that."

"Afraid so."

"Shit. They went about as far away from people as you can get. The Southern Ocean." Doc fell silent, and she put her arm around him and patted his shoulder.

"They'll hang in there. They're probably gathered together on some lonely island, doing pretty much the same things we are. Except for the volleyball, of course." Her smile was infectious.

They would be *mating*, Doc thought, pushing aside a few strands of her hair, away from her eyes. He was tempted to repeat the thought with

added emphasis, and have another stab at telepathy, but he knew it didn't work. "Yeah. Maybe they saw the scientists waiting in ambush to crimp metal bands around their feet, and decided to lay low for awhile. I'd do the same thing, myself."

*Trekker.* A very special meal.

"It's really kind of you, Shaun," Kate said, holding onto the launch, while Hennie gingerly lowered himself aboard.

"My pleasure. I know the surgeon's keen. Hennie's his first Springbok, I reckon." The clinic aboard the supply ship was extremely well-equipped, and Shaun had arranged for a thorough examination of Hennie's knee. They were anticipating arthroscopic surgery.

"There's some fish and a baked potato in the fridge. You can put them in the microwave," Anneliene told her.

"I'll manage, Mom. Don't worry."

Kate had mentioned Hennie's appointment to Doc. However, he was unaware of the impending surgery, or the fact that her parents would be spending the night aboard the supply ship. It was for the best. He had been acting so shyly around her that he might not have agreed to

come over for dinner, if he knew she were alone. It wasn't a lie. He simply didn't ask.

Although Kate wanted the dinner to be special, she knew her limitations, so she selected a simple recipe, and followed it closely. Roast chicken with a curry stuffing, and a green salad with some cold, flaked fish. She wanted to make a potato salad, but they were still without mayonnaise. The island store only stocked glass jars.

He'd be suspicious if she were all dressed up, so she wore an old shirt, with some anti-fouling paint stains on it.

"Where's the folks?"

"He needed surgery on the knee, Doc," she said, with obvious concern.

"Surgery? Whew."

"I'm so happy you came over. I'd feel wretched if I had to eat dinner all alone. You're hungry, I hope?"

"Starving."

"It's just a chicken."

"Smells wonderful."

They ate a relaxed, informal dinner with their plates on their laps in the cockpit, and between them they devoured the whole bird. It wouldn't have fed four. She went below to make some coffee.

She quickly set the table, and lit the candles. Then slipped into Anneliene's sexy red blouse, and let down her hair. When the coffee was ready, she switched on the CD player, and called him.

She immediately noticed the panic on his face, but was expecting it. His coffee was a safe distance away, across the table, and she smiled demurely, and motioned to him to sit down. "You've been avoiding me, you know."

"With good reason."

She wrinkled her nose, and gave a little sigh. The cherry cordials were slightly melted, but still nice. She ate one slowly, and caught the dripping syrup with her tongue. "Do you remember what you told me, when I asked you why you always sailed alone?"

"Sure. Women."

"As I recall, you said that you had a bad habit of falling in love with women who wouldn't love you back. Women who might, now and then. Or, who could, possibly. You said that you'd decided to break the habit. That it was too painful."

"I said all that?"

"Umm. That's why I thought you'd understand."

"Understand what?"

"What I'm feeling. It's not a habit with me, you know."

"Oh. I see." Doc didn't know what else to say. This couldn't be happening. It wasn't possible.

"I'm not as complicated as you are. I know I can never be the spiritual mate you're looking for. So I'm not a threat. I know you're attracted to me."

He couldn't deny it. Her beauty was as natural as that of a wild animal - an otter, maybe - while the majority of women tried to emulate parlor poodles. Kept animals, really. He was captivated by her playfulness. Her fierce independence. What was it then? That she was vulnerable? Young? That Hennie would want to kill him?

She seemed impatient, waiting for his response, and began fidgeting in her seat, but he just couldn't think.

"I know what you're thinking," she said. "That I'm just an infatuated little girl. Look at me. I'm not a little girl, Doc."

She stood up close to the table, with a seductive smile on her face. Posing, almost. When she turned and strode over to the stereo, he realized that she'd wriggled out of her shorts while she was sitting across from him.

"Kate!" he growled.

Her blouse pulled up when she leaned over to switch off the music, and he saw that she was nude underneath. She turned, and walked slowly toward him, unbuttoning the front of her blouse.

"Kate...stop!"

She halted a few paces away, still smiling, and undid the last button. Her blouse fell open. "This is an encouraging sign, you know. I was worried that you might look away."

He quickly averted his eyes, and looked up toward the deck. He was in trouble, now. She was enticingly, irresistibly beautiful. When he turned and gazed over her once more, she moved a step closer.

She reached down and moistened a finger with her sex, and used it to massage one of her nipples, while reaching out with her other hand, and running her fingers lightly over his cheek. Then under his chin, gently lifting it.

Doc didn't have any options, really. What else could he do, when confronted with an erect, glistening nipple like that? He licked it. Just one lick. That's all it took. The other nipple followed, then her fingers, and the delicious, exotic taste of her lingered on his tongue, even as her own entered his mouth.

He sought another taste, at the source, and when he found it, he was ready to make a meal of her, but she soon pulled him up.

"Please. Take me to bed," she gasped.

It was rather cute of her to put it that way, he thought, since she did the taking, literally dragging him off the settee, and into her cabin. The bunk had already been stripped of its covering, leaving a smooth,

clean sheet and a few pillows, ready and waiting. She had propped a partial pack of birth control pills conspicuously on top of the bureau, preempting any inquiry about them.

The incredible self-confidence of this woman filled him with awe. He had been celibate a long time, and he savored the exquisite feel of her. The soft fuzz on her calves and thighs, the incredible suppleness of her skin...the way she quivered against him. He brought her close, several times, but lingered as long as he could, and when she climaxed, he thought her cries might be audible all over the anchorage.

He laid his chin on her shoulder, out of breath. Beads of sweat were suspended from the tips of his hair. "You're rather loud, you know that?"

Her eyes were closed, and strands of her own hair were clinging to her lip. She smiled thinly, and puffed them away. "It must run in the family." When he tried shifting his weight, she buried her face in the crook of his neck. "Don't move!" she pleaded.

He couldn't if he wanted to, since her legs were still clamped around him. The sweat sandwiched between them soon became unpleasant, though, and she allowed him to roll off, but kept her nose against his neck, nuzzling.

She reached over to the bureau shelf, and produced a small, moist towel. "Ah, shame! The ice has all melted!" she said, with obvious disappointment.

"Ice? You had ice...?" Doc closed his eyes, and started laughing. "I'm beginning to feel like the victim of an organized plot."

She began rubbing down his chest with an ice cold towel. "I'm always organised. You know that. You're not feeling victimised, are you?"

"Hardly."

"Good. I won't be a nuisance. I promise." She started on his neck. "You were really nice to me. I won't forget."

He propped himself up, and kissed her. "You got another towel?"

"Umm. Let me finish your front. Then you can do my back." There were four towels, actually. One for each side. She didn't want to hurry. The last towel was reserved for her front, and if he had some time to recover, she thought he might be aroused before he finished. She was right.

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*Rainblow.* Sailing in with style.

"Wow! Look at all the boats!" Sophie exclaimed.

Nigel smiled, and began easing out the mainsail once they cleared the point, and the sails saw the full force of the wind, again. They were slightly overcanvassed, now that the wind was forward of the beam. He assessed the spacing of the boats, and decided they had enough room to manoeuvre. "Let's do a sail past. Strike the tops'!"

Sophie jumped to the task, buoyed with enthusiasm by the colorful sight of the community of international yachts, with all their flags flying. A volleyball match was in progress, she saw, and smoke was rising through the palms behind the beach.

They had to make several close tacks before they were in position to make a run between the maze of anchored boats. Once Sophie had them settled on their final tack, Nigel ducked below to fetch the conch.

"Look! There's Charlie's boat! The band's here!"

"Aww, bloody hell..."

"Come on! They're my friends! Blow the conch!"

Charlie was practicing in the cockpit. They came up silently, under sail, and took him by surprise as they sliced closely alongside. *Rainblow* was well clear of the bow before he was able to recover, and answer the conch with a loud blast from his tuba.

"Hi Wendy!" Sophie yelled. "Hi Laurel!"

Other yachts sounded their horns in welcome, in an amateur chorus of squeaks and beeps. Sophie had to steer a slalom course around a few boats, and tacked again to head back for another run. She spotted a Kiwi flag, and steered for it. Lisa was at the rail, blowing her toy horn, and waving happily. "Good on ya!" she called out.

She tacked yet again, and made a pass along the beach. Claire recognized their boat, and was standing at the water's edge, waving.

Sophie grinned, and waved back. "I think I'm going to like it here, Nigel."

*Miles Ahead.* Alerting the authorities.

Charlie made the call. “Doc? They’re here, Doc. *Rainblow* just sailed past us. Over.”

Doc had noticed the gaff-rigged boat the moment it cleared the point. He had watched with interest, as they carried on under sail. Most boats routinely dropped their sails, and approached the anchorage under power.

“Okay, Charlie. Give me a few minutes to get into the uniform.”

Doc would hardly appear menacing, rowing up to *Rainblow* in a patched-up inflatable, so they had decided to use the dinghy from *Miles Ahead*. Charlie soon motored over to pick him up.

Doc had borrowed a pair of camouflage fatigues and a flak jacket from the bunker. His Customs Service pistol was strapped on his hip. His sailing shades were large, and mirrored.

“You look mean, Doc.” Charlie said, nodding his approval.

Doc grinned. “I’m the Customs Agent from Hell.”

*Rainblow*. Betrayed?

Sophie sensed something was badly wrong when Charlie ignored her invitation to come aboard, and remained seated in the dinghy, staring glumly out over the water.

“Can you identify them?” Doc asked, brusquely.

Charlie nodded.

“Speak up!” Doc ordered.

“Yeah. It’s them.” Charlie said, choking on the words.

“All right. Wait here.”

“Charlie...?” Sophie pleaded. “Please! What’s going on?”

“He has nothing more to say. From now on, you’ll have to talk to me.” Doc grabbed his briefcase, and boarded *Rainblow*. He took a few steps toward the bow, and paused to survey the boat. Then went up to them.

“Passports?”

Nigel extended his hand with the documents. Doc snatched them away, and slipped them into his pocket, without even scrutinizing them. “Are you aware that you’re wanted for questioning by the New Zealand authorities?”

Nigel scoffed. “Wouldn’t surprise me. The useless sods have been questioning me, my whole bloody life.”

Sophie eased Nigel aside, sensing that he was about to lose his temper. “Wanted? In what regard?”

Doc glared at her. “I’ll ask the questions here, if you don’t mind. Now, tell me, Nigel - a professional, like yourself - did you really think that you could sail from Great Barrier Island without proper Customs clearance, and not attract attention to yourself?”

Nigel said nothing.

Doc clucked. “Well...what can you say? Really. You should know better than to think you could fool HMS Customs. We know *everything*.”

Sophie gasped. “Everything...?”

“That’s right.” Doc retrieved his briefcase, and removed a small, gift-wrapped box. He held it out to her. “I’ll have to ask you to identify this. Open it, please.”

Sophie accepted it hesitantly. She fumbled with the ribbon, before pulling apart the box to reveal a carved, inlaid-shell figurehead.

“Lift it out, please.”

She did as he said.

“Now, turn it over.”

Her hand started shaking, when she saw the square mortise which Mpane had carved into the base. A folded piece of paper was tucked inside.

“Go ahead,” Doc urged. “Read it.”

Sophie unfolded it. The note was written in block letters, by an inexperienced hand. It said, 'DENK YU TUMAS, HAROLD.'

"Sophie! Nigel! Yoo hoo! Over here!" Wendy hollered from the deck of *Footloose*, just abeam. Laurel had them both in clear focus as they turned in unison, and stared into the video camera.

Charlie whooped. "Gotcha!"

*Miles Ahead.* The party starts.

"We stayed in the lagoon only a few more days after you guys left," Charlie said. "The last we heard from Mpane was that a moratorium had been declared. The Indonesian crew was dismantling the base camp, and packing up the machinery."

"Brilliant. What about Mpane's launch?" Nigel asked.

"He said it would probably go on the barge with the bulldozers."

"Crap. I was hoping he'd get to sell it, again."

"I still can't believe you two," Wendy said. "I didn't even take it seriously when Charlie told me. Not until I heard it directly from Mpane."

"We haven't blown up anything, since. Honest," Sophie said.

Nigel grinned. "We're all out of explosives, at the moment."

"Nigel!" Sophie cried.

"You wouldn't have any of that nice smoke left, by any chance?"

Wendy asked hopefully.

"No. We've run out of that, too," Nigel said sadly. "Actually, I was expecting a thorough going over by Aussie Customs. I must be on some list, somewhere. They usually hassle me. It's a bit slack, here, eh?"

Doc smiled. "Thanks, Nigel. I appreciate that."

"This calls for a celebration," Charlie declared. "We've plenty of other drugs haven't we, Wendy?"

"Come on, Charlie. Not now. How about smoothies? Kahlua with chocolate ice cream suit everybody? There's some espresso cubes in the freezer."

"Frozen coffee!" Sophie enthused, clapping her hands together, and rubbing them eagerly.

*Exile.* Doc's supply ship arrives. Three in. One clearing out.

"You go through a lot of these, eh?" Shaun said, passing Doc the case of pistachio nuts, and the rest of his special order.

"Thanks, mate. You bring my pay packet, by any chance?"

"No worries. Here ya go."

The envelop was pleasingly plump, he noticed. Thin, crisp hundreds, no less. "Thanks, boss." Shaun habitually hated working weekends, and had gratefully ceded him all the overtime pay. It added up. If it continued doing so much longer, he could consider becoming a philanthropist.

"You need any more forms?" Shaun asked.

"Forms? Oh, no. Plenty forms left. Heaps." Ever since he'd declared them optional, nobody bothered filling them out. Doc had been recycling the same set all week. "I've been handing out a lot of your booklets, though. Plenty of requests for those."

## BOOK EXCHANGE

09h30 Tomorrow

FREE CINNAMON ROLLS

Courtesy of HMS Customs

*Beach.* Harbormaster's palm. Mid-morning.

"She'll never make it there, Doc. The sand's too steep," Claire speculated.

They were watching the army of hermit crabs advancing steadily up the beach, to regain the shade of the bushes, after a night's browsing along the shore. The sun was still low enough in the sky that the palms shaded the beach, and the soft sand felt comfortably cool.

"Yeah. No chance. The shell's too heavy," Doc agreed.

The final ascent was tricky, as the dry sand crumbled away easily, and left abrupt cliffs that were nearly impassable for the small crabs. The sand soon gave way, and the crab tucked itself safely inside, as its shell rolled rapidly backwards to the base of the ridge. It landed upside down, but quickly righted itself, and began trudging back up the sand for another try, in the same spot.

"The highest I ever counted was eighteen. They always seem to make it, eventually," Doc added, propping himself up on the mat, on one arm.

"Is that one of yours?" Claire asked, pointing to a pinkish cone shell, just crawling over the summit.

"Yeah. That's a good, lightweight one. Ideal for climbing, I think. They shunned it, initially, until I enlarged the opening. Then, it was snapped up."

"This one?" She indicated a brick-red mitre.

Doc nodded. "They really liked those."

"How many shells did you bring ashore?"

"I'm not sure. Well over a hundred. I lined them up in shiny rows, just like a used car lot. Sold ten to fifteen, on a good night." The shell fauna on the island was limited, and most of the hermit crabs lugged around burdensome, chipped shells, heavily laden with a calcareous crust.

"I'm not surprised. Your sleek, imported models are lovely. This one's marvellous." She picked up a red turban shell, and peeked underneath at the claw of the withdrawn inhabitant, tightly guarding the entrance. Then, set it back, exactly where she'd found it.

"I suppose I've put some of the crabs at risk," Doc conceded. "The yachties will notice the shells. A few are from Madagascar, and they wouldn't have seen them in Australia, or the South Pacific."

"Don't tell me you're feeling guilty," she teased. "I thought you used them for bait."

"Well, sometimes. If there's nothing else. But it's not the same as killing them just to steal their shells."

They watched several more tumble backwards, and one of them dislodged a few fellow climbers as it rolled past. "Why did you bring them?"

"I guess I was curious if the exotic new shells would disrupt the community. Clearly, the ones with lighter shells are at an advantage."

"How could you tell?"

"I don't know. Maybe they would fight over them, or something. Nothing changed, though. They still hang out together. The attractive shells didn't seem to have any impact, at all. Socially."

"Maybe they use other criteria when they select their mates."

"Like what?"

"Perseverance, maybe." She smiled, as another attempt by the stubborn crab was thwarted by the sand, and it rolled back down, once again. "The shells come and go, don't they? As the crabs grow? This one's got heart."

"True." The repeated assaults were having an impact, as the sand ridge was slowly eroding. "I noticed that you picked up the fancy turban shell to look at, though."

"Well, sure. The intricate patterns are so attractive, that you can't...resist..." She felt his toes stroke her ankle, then gently move up the length of her calf, and she lifted herself up on one elbow to face him, while shifting her leg. When she looked into his eyes, she understood that she would only have to move ever so slightly toward him, and he would kiss her. She considered it, but bit her lip, instead, and looked back just as the crab struggled toward the summit.

"Look! It's going to make it!"

Doc sighed. "I wonder if crabs pant?"

"Perseverance rewarded," she announced happily, as it crawled onto the flat, and struck off for the leaves.

"I'm not sure if it's such an admirable achievement, though," Doc suggested.

"Why not?"

"If it tried climbing just a few inches over this way, it would have made it easily on the first attempt. There's no ridge, there."

"Of course. But it would pay a terribly high price for that choice, in the end," Claire said.

"What do you mean?"

"Imagine how complicated a life it would be faced with, afterwards. It might even stop, and wonder if the ridge was worth climbing, in the first place."

"It would pay an even higher price, if it did that."

"How so?"

"It would shrivel up and die in the midday sun. Alone. Right on the beach."

Claire grinned. "See? It's exactly like I said. A simple life can get complicated, really fast."

*Exile.* Sharing the harvest. Three in.

"It's really a beauty," Doc said, lifting the big coral trout aboard. He enjoyed the relaxation of fishing with a handline, but the meaty trout made him think he should try some spearfishing.

"Thanks for taking it. Charlie always spears more than we need," Wendy said.

"Fishing's good here, isn't it?"

"It's like swimming through a fish market," Nigel said. There were still five or six fish laying in the bottom of the dinghy.

"You coming ashore for the jam session?" Wendy asked.

"Wouldn't miss it."

"Thanks again for the smoke, Doc," Marley said.

"Don't mention it."

## VOLLEYBALL

All Island Championships

Barbarians vs Sisters Recycling

16h00 TOMORROW

*Rainblow.* Seeking an alternative to war.

"How can we start a new *religion*? We can't just decide to do something like that," Doc said.

"Why not? People do it all the time." Sophie was adamant.

"Cults, you mean," Claire said.

"A cult is just a baby religion, isn't it? All religions were cults, to begin with. Just a little germinated seed, that took some time to take hold and grow, before it was able to flower, and bear fruit. It's only a matter of how many new seeds sprout, and establish roots."

"It won't be easy," Doc said.

"We have to start small. I know that."

Claire was shaking her head. "It's not that I don't care, Sophie. That's not it, at all. I've just abandoned my attempts to change the world."

"We don't have to change it. It will change, all on its own. All we have to do is nurture the first few seedlings, and help them find fertile soil."

"I'm having a problem with this," Doc said. "I keep remembering this little house I rented for awhile, that had a small yard in front. There were plenty of dandelions in it, and I'm rather fond of them. A nice shade of yellow, I think. I worked my way around the yard with a bag of

manure and a hoe, scattering the seeds, and, well...the neighbors attacked with lawn mowers just when it was coming beautifully into bloom. There's a lot of well-entrenched lawns out there. Don't you think your seedlings will find some herbicides waiting for them?"

Claire started laughing, and they both looked at her. "Sorry. You reminded me of all the lovely mushrooms I've come upon in the woods that had been kicked over by spiteful hikers. It happens all the time, when they're growing on a lawn."

"Oh. I thought it was a good analogy," Sophie sighed.

"Well, it is, but I'm not sure you understand gardeners. Or lawns. You did grow up in New York City, after all," Doc suggested. "How much fertile soil do you find there?"

"Plenty. For the kind of seedlings I'm talking about. There's a lot of people with a big hole in their lives, that was left behind when the roots of the old religions shrivelled up."

"That's where you intend to plant your seedlings? In those empty holes?"

"Right."

"You've got some stiff competition," Doc chided.

"What do you mean?"

"Come on, Sophie. The list is endless. There's a hell of a lot of money to be made if you can gain access to that space. Think of all the

advertising. When people seek fulfilment, they don't go to church, anymore. They go shopping."

"People want something that will endure, and grow. None of that stuff lasts."

"Even better," Doc laughed. "Then, they can sell you a new one. There's enticing stuff for every hole, really. If nothing else, there's always cocaine to go up the nose."

Sophie was close to tears, Claire thought, and she took hold of her trembling fist, while glancing severely at Doc.

"Don't worry, Claire. I won't hit him."

"Oh," Claire said, a little confused. "Good."

"It makes me mad, though."

"What?"

"Being talked to like that. I'm not naive, Doc. I think I understand people a lot better than you do. How could it be otherwise? You're always alone."

"I don't understand people, at all. I know myself fairly well, I think. I didn't mean it about the lawn. Honest."

"I think he made a good point, though," Claire claimed. "How can a religion compete with all those addictive attractions? It seems so out of control."

"But the emptiness explains why it's become like that. The old religions and philosophies have lost their power to provide any meaning. When everything is threatening to become meaningless, there's not much point in caring too much. You take what you can get. As far as attractions go, there's nothing comparable to the glaciers, or the Grand Canyon. The Ocean. The whole Earth makes all the competition look pitiful."

"I think I share your views, Sophie, but not your faith. The Ocean and the Grand Canyon have been around for a long time, and people haven't grasped it, yet. It hardly seems likely to happen, now. You'll need something more than that to start a new religion, I think," Doc insisted.

"Like what?"

"Well, something like everlasting life. Or miracles."

"We've already got that. The whole Earth is about as everlasting and miraculous as anything we could possibly hope for."

"People want immortality for their own skins. And miracles to shrink their hemorrhoids," Doc said.

"That's silly."

"They don't think so."

"Well, I haven't exactly worked it all out, yet. I can't do it all myself," Sophie said forlornly.

"Maybe I could work up some more enthusiasm if we could call it something other than a *religion*. The word really puts me off," Claire said, frowning.

"I'm not that fond of it, either," Doc concurred. "Too many negative connotations. As drugs go, religion has some rather unpleasant side effects."

"Call it myth, then. I just know we need something powerful, if it's going to actually lead people to change the way they live, instead of merely speculating about it. Try to imagine the countless millions glued to their television sets at the moment. What would induce them to switch them off?"

"Excluding a power failure?" Claire asked.

"Right."

"An earthquake, I guess. Or a hurricane. Some natural disaster."

"No. I don't think so. They'd watch even more intently, wouldn't they? To see all the horrific details?"

"A war, then."

"You think they'd turn off a good soap to go out and fight?"

"They seem to," Claire said, shrugging.

"Yuk. I suppose they do. That's the point I'm trying to make, I guess. Only an appeal from a tremendously powerful force would pry them away."

"Why do you want them to turn off their televisions, anyway?" Doc asked, looking baffled. "What would they do, then? Hang out on street corners? Take up eco-tourism, maybe? Surely you don't want them flocking en masse to the Grand Canyon. There's not nearly enough parking."

"The masses of people aren't going to disappear, Doc. Not everyone can afford to travel. They have families. Jobs. But a pilgrimage to one of the Earth's holy sites can heal people. Don't you believe in the possibility of redemption?"

"I suppose."

"We have more allies in the wasteland than you think. We have to try something. I don't want my kids to be left with just the barren icebergs in the Southern Ocean to sail to. What kind of legacy is that?"

"I didn't know you had kids," Claire said.

"Nigel and I are planning to start a family."

"Wow." Doc thought the responsibility of becoming a permanent parent was particularly immense. He'd brought quite a few boats into the world, even took care of several of them, and watched them surge to life on the sea, but at least you had the option of selling them.

*Everywhere.* Chaos. Heavy squall sweeps through the anchorage. Three boats drag anchor. No damage.

## NOTICE

From: Harbormaster's Office

Re: Thought for the day.

Oh Solitude! Solitude, my home! I have lived too long wildly in wild strange lands to come home to you without tears.

Nietzsche

*Miles Ahead.* Kicking the habit.

"I'd feel ridiculous just throwing them overboard," Sophie said.

"You should hold onto one pack, at least. Just in case," Wendy suggested.

"They're not tranquilizers." Sophie smiled, and happily pushed the pile of birth control pills across the table. "I'll probably feel a bit nervous when I get pregnant, but right now I feel blessed."

"Nigel knows about this divestiture, I take it?" Laurel asked, taking her hand, and giving it a squeeze.

"You bet. He broached the subject, in the first place."

"What's he up to, anyway? I haven't seen him lately," Wendy inquired.

"He's been reading a lot. Doc lent him a few books. He's been busy studying."

"I thought he might be sick, or something."

"Well...he's been going through a bit of a mid-life crisis, actually."

"*Nigel?*" Laurel looked astonished.

"He was a little depressed after we left the Solomons. He felt his life lacked direction."

"I think you'd be worried. Considering." Wendy rattled the pills in one of the blister packs.

"Well, I was, for awhile. He was terribly upset when we sailed past the gold mine in New Guinea. There's this big expanse of slime, that flows right into the Ocean, and he stood on deck, cursing. He said he'd wasted half of our dynamite. Said it was all his fault."

"He wanted to blow up the mine?"

"Uh-huh. To start with."

"What else?"

"You name it," Sophie shrugged. "The TV stations, first..."

"No..."

"Look, it's okay. Really. We've worked through it. He understands. Even if we took one out every week, they'd rebuild them that fast, and we'd just have to start all over. You'd have to go after the satellites, wouldn't you? We could never afford to do that."

A prolonged period of silence followed, until Wendy asked, "So what's he studying?"

"Religion. We're thinking of starting one. Want to hear about it?"

*Beach.* Maintenance work. Slow day at the office. One in.

The path over the coral rock to the garbage pit was hard and smooth, and Lisa had ferried her toy wagon ashore to help cope with the growing volume of rubbish. While most yachts generated very little waste, the population had swollen to twenty-six boats, and with just a wine bottle here, and some orange peels there, it added up. Doc lit a fire under her takings for the day, and walked back to the tables.

Lisa was sitting on the bench, sorting through the flotsam she'd cleaned off the reef, separating out the useful items, like the toothbrushes, and trying to match up the stray rubber-soled sandals into recyclable pairs. She had constructed a driftwood shelf at the end of the trail leading to the reef, and had lined up the sandals on it, as if it were alongside the entrance to a Buddhist temple. The coral was too sharp to walk across without shoes.

"What's the tally, Lisa?" Doc asked.

"Twenty-four." She smiled cheerfully. It was payday. Sisters Recycling had successfully tendered for the contract to clean up the reef.

"Okay. Let's see. At ten dollars a bag, that's two hundred and forty dollars. Right?"

"I reckon."

"Here you go." Not bad, Doc thought. Only six years old, and, in less than a week, she'd earned more than twice the annual income of an average Tanzanian.

## NOTICE

From: Harbormaster's Office

Re: Thought for the day.

Beauty is truth, truth beauty. That is all you know  
on Earth. And all you need to know.

Keats

*Beach.* Harbormaster's palm.

"You've been through some bad storms, haven't you, Doc?" Claire asked.

"Sure. You're bound to, if you sail long enough."

"We made it all the way from Hawaii without hitting a bad one. A cyclone that swept through Fiji passed fairly close, but we were already headed away from it. Even so, the seas were awesome."

"Johnny wouldn't get caught out easily." Doc had a lot of admiration for his seamanship.

"I felt so small," Claire said pensively.

"How do you mean?"

"Insignificant, I guess. I wedged myself into a corner, and watched. Every once in awhile, one of these beasts would curl up majestically, and tumble over. Gracefully, almost. Then, the whole ocean seemed to tremble. I felt like a little flea, clinging to the flank of a charging elephant, and the herd stretched all the way to the horizon."

Doc grinned. "I know the feeling."

"But why did I feel so *elated*? Wouldn't you expect the opposite? Realizing that you're so...irrelevant?"

"Well, it's the truth, isn't it? There's always something exhilarating about uncovering the truth."

She drew out the corners of her mouth, apparently dissatisfied with that, and began smoothing away the patterns that she'd been drawing in the sand. "I suppose it is the truth, but thinking about it doesn't make me feel all that wonderful, now. Just irrelevant."

"Put aside the question of relevance, for the moment. Consider being alive. In the midst of all that monumentally indifferent, almost unbelievable power, being alive seems really special. Almost miraculous. Did you feel that?"

"Yes. Exactly like that." She smiled appreciatively.

"Didn't it seem like some kind of revelation? Something irrefutable?"

"It seemed so clear to me, at the time, but there were no words for it. I suppose it was something like a revelation. Maybe, that's why I keep wondering about the meaning of it."

"Don't you think part of the revelation must be that, in spite of the evidence, there is something meaningful about being alive?"

"But what, exactly? That's what I've been trying to figure out."

"It's just not that clear-cut, is it? It's a wonderful *mystery*," Doc said, as if relating a secret.

"But it's frustrating when you can't solve a mystery. When you're just left hanging."

"A good mystery only gets frustrating when you run out of clues, doesn't it? You won't come up with a tidy solution to this one. All you can find are clues, I think. And an ever more exquisite mystery."

"Give me a few clues, then," Claire requested.

"Try to recall how you felt, as a flea. Weren't you afraid that your elephant might trip, and crush you?"

"Oh, sure. At first."

"That wasn't what you found so elating, was it? The fear?"

"No. It was exciting, though. We were really busy, getting the storm jib up, and lashing things down, so there wasn't much time to

think about it. It happened hours later. When I was watching the waves. I wasn't scared, then."

"The fear and excitement must have affected you, initially. The adrenaline, or endorphins. Whatever."

"I guess. But that wears off." She recollected wondering if the genetic effects had anything to do with it, and deciding they hadn't. She felt too calm.

"Did you ever consider the possibility that you might die?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I tried not to think about it."

"I think that might have been what happened, though. I think it takes an intense encounter of that sort to penetrate the fog that covers up the clues. The first time, anyway."

"The *first* time? You have these revelations often?" she smiled, and stared at him incredulously.

"Well...yeah. You get better at it, with practice. Once you've discovered a little opening through the fog, it gradually gets bigger, and you find more clues."

"In that case, why don't we discuss your mystery, instead of mine. Your own seems to have a more well-developed plot."

"Oh. Sorry."

"Don't be silly. Come on. I'm fascinated." She rolled onto her stomach, crosswise on the mat, folding her arms in front of her, and rested her head on them.

"Well...when I'm alone out on the ocean, I wonder about things. I seldom mention it, though. Most people already think that singlehanded sailors are a bit odd, you know."

"Wondering about the meaning of things hardly seems strange, Doc."

"I can't help feeling remote, though. The mystery doesn't even exist for most people. Not everyone encounters a storm at sea. People aren't very comfortable with mysteries. They just want answers. Isn't that why religions came to be so popular? Each one claiming to have the one, true solution? Or, science, too, for that matter. By claiming that there really aren't any mysteries that can't be solved?"

"People have more or less forgotten the miraculous nature of life, I think. They seem to be left with only the bodily sensations of it, like the physical side effects of taking a dose of peyote, with none of the incredible mystery. That's where the meaning lies.

"It seems to take a coronary or a malignancy before they take the time to think about it. It takes some thought to appreciate a good mystery. You really have to pay attention, or you'll miss the clues."

Claire looked intently at him. "That fits with something I've been thinking. People are leading ever more frenzied lives, now, and trying to cram in as much as possible before their time expires. There almost seems to be a kind of desperation to it. When you're that busy, there's no time to ponder mysteries."

"As if time was empty, and needed to be filled up."

Claire smiled. "With activities."

"Sure. Whatever."

"And their space, too. They need to fill it up with *stuff*."

She smiled tolerantly, as Doc leaned across, and playfully filled in the deep hole that she had excavated in the sand. "You still haven't told me about you own mystery," she reminded him.

"Okay. Let's see." He picked up a handful of sand, and let it trickle slowly off the edge of his palm. "Do you think of time as flowing? Like an hourglass?"

"I guess. Yeah." She sounded unconvinced, and a little perplexed by the apparently unrelated question.

"It's funny, that. I never experience time as flowing, or passing, anymore. There's really no movement involved. If anything, it seems that time *arises*. What it is, of course, is my own *life* arising, and each moment seems like a miraculous gift.

"Think about what happens when you encounter an opening in a bank of fog. There is a feeling of discovery, a moment when you can see with remarkable clarity, but only something which was already there. Something which had merely been covered up.

"The revelations we're talking about are just like that, I think. You encounter something that was always there, really. Merely obscured. You get a glimpse of your very *own* time arising, and rediscover the possibility of living an authentic life.

"When it happens to me, I get the feeling that everything which has passed before really has no claim, at all, and that every future moment is radically free, and *mine*. Yet, along with this freedom comes a vague feeling of concern. That there really are some things that matter, and that not everything matters equally.

"It's like choosing a hero. I've switched heroes over the years, I guess. I gave up on people, a long time ago. It was wolves, for awhile. Then, beavers, and otters. Now, my hero is beauty."

"Beauty...?" she said, puzzling over it.

"Right. Beauty is a marvellous mystery, isn't it? There seems to be no particular reason for it to exist - it's irrelevant, really - but encountering it always seems meaningful. That's my real job, Claire. Noticing."

"Like a career, you mean?"

"Exactly. Of course, it has drawbacks, like any job. When you're searching for beauty, you constantly uncover ugliness, too. It's not an easy job, but someone's got to do it, don't you think?" Doc nodded seriously, then grinned.

"So, when you're reclining here on the beach, idly watching the clouds float past, you're actually...working?"

"Of course. Doing the job properly takes *time*, Claire. Time is very shy, you know. You have to be quite still, and patient, before it will come up to greet you. I'm rather fond of it, actually. It's always there waiting for me, like a loyal dog."

"How nice," she said, laughing merrily. "Especially when you consider that your boat's too small to keep a pet."

"You know, it might be the frenzy you spoke of, and all the noise it generates, that explains why people have lost interest in the mystery. They seldom find any meaningful clues, anymore, because the very best ones are like time, itself. Soft, and unpretentious. Like the shadow of a leaf on the sand. Or a bird's footprint in the snow."

"Gills in a mushroom."

"Sunlight in your hair."

His sudden shift from the imaginary to the personal caught her by surprise, and when she looked into his eyes, she started to panic. He

was steadily pursuing her, and gaining ground rapidly. He didn't seem the least bit worried about taking emotional risks, and that was scary. She was encountering a storm of emotions, but felt elated.

When he leaned close to her, she saw it coming, and ducked sharply, as the volleyball whizzed by, just grazing his nose.

"Sorry," Laurel shouted as she sprinted past, trying to catch the ball before it rolled into the water.

"Hey, you guys!" Charlie called. "Come and play!"

*Trekker.* Hennie and Anneliene's evening out.

"I had a nice chat with Claire today," Kate announced.

"Oh. What about?" Doc asked reluctantly.

"Lots of things. Photography. Feminism. We talked about you a bit. I can see why you like her so much."

"Did you happen to mention, uh...you know..."

"This?" Kate wiggled her hips, while still astride him. "No. Not regarding me, anyway. She was curious if you had a girlfriend when you were in Africa, though. She's weakening, I think."

"Interesting."

Kate was making last minute arrangements, he thought. *Trekker* was seaworthy again, and nearly ready to sail for Singapore, where Hennie planned to haul the boat, and install a proper wind vane steering gear. Kate had taken it upon herself to lobby Claire, he thought. As a potential replacement. She had a scheme. He could tell.

"You'll have to tread softly, Doc. She's pretty cynical about sex. She had to deal with some horrific abuse cases, in her work."

"She never said a word about it."

"Didn't she tell you about her husband, either?"

"No..."

Kate smiled. "Aren't you curious? What do the two of you talk about, all day? The weather?"

"Well...she's a bit..."

"She was only a year older than me when she married him. And guess what?"

"What?"

"She was a virgin."

"Kate!"

"Is she in for a treat, or what?"

"Come on. I feel really uncomfortable talking about her. Under the...uh...circumstances."

"Oh. I thought you'd be excited by the news." She moved tentatively on top of him, assessing the situation, and grinned.

"You're incorrigible!"

"I know." She leaned forward, and dragged her nipples playfully across his chest.

"Won't your parents be back soon?"

"I told them I'd pick them up."

"Henri will row them."

"Unlikely. I stole their oars."

## **MILES AHEAD**

PRESENTS

TEQUILA SUNRISE CONCERT

Indian Ocean/Africa Tour

05h30 Friday

FREE DRINKS

*Rainblow.* Marketing the faith.

"What do you think?" Sophie held up one of her prototype T-shirts. She had meticulously painted the Earth on them, copied from a NASA photograph, and added a few holy words. She is the Way. Peace Be Upon Her. The one depicting an Earthrise on the Moon's horizon was particularly handsome. She Is Risen. "They'll be good advertising, won't they?"

"They're lovely," Claire said, spreading one out across her chest. The delicately detailed logo was tastefully small, and positioned right over her heart. "I'd buy one of each."

"We'll only use the best quality shirts and silk screen paints, so they'll last. Earth tones would be best, I think."

"Don't forget the Ocean," Claire reminded her.

"The best place to sell them is the informal sector, don't you think? Fleamarkets, street fairs, that sort of thing. There's so many unemployed people, now..." She sighed briefly, but her enthusiasm was irrepressible. "I'm trying to close the deal for the initial shipment. Charlie sent some faxes for me, to price the shirts, and my sister in Israel might help. We could sail up the Red Sea, and do them in the Holy Land. It's a proven location for launching a new religion."

"Who's going to pay for all this?" Doc asked.

"I'm negotiating a loan."

"Charlie?"

"Right. There's something I could use some help with, though."

"What?"

"Our Holy Book. We have to spread the Word, don't we?" she declared, looking directly at Doc, and smiling encouragingly.

"Me?" he acknowledged, aghast. "You want *me* to write it?"

"Come on. Even a Holy Brochure would do."

He thought it over for a moment. "If this takes off, you'll print quite a few of them, won't you?"

"Millions. Hundreds of millions."

"Have you given any thought to the...uh...royalties?"

"You want a T-shirt?" she offered cheerfully.

*Exile.* Office hours. Two in. One out.

## NOTICE

From: Harbormaster's Office

Re: Thought for the day.

The wasteland grows. Woe to those who harbor  
wastelands within.

Nietzsche

*Beach.* Harbormaster's palm.

"I think Sophie's found a devotee to her faith," Claire announced.

"Who?" Doc rolled over on his side, facing her.

"Lisa."

Doc chuckled. "They spend a lot of time together, don't they? Did she say something?"

"She was singing a little song while she was loading her trash wagon. I didn't catch all of it, but it went something like, 'Mother Earth loves me, this I know. Mother Earth loves me, the dolphins told me so.' "

"Cute. I like that."

"I don't think Sophie's made inroads with the rest of the fleet."

"There's little point in evangelism, here. Most of us are already disciples, at heart."

"Nobody's helping her organize, though."

"Course not. It would cut into the time available for fishing. Or volleyball. Look around."

A volleyball game was in progress - eight a side - and the grill was crowded with people tending their sizzling fish. Nigel was helping Laurel carry her vibes ashore for the evening concert, and Wendy was wading through the water with a drum on her shoulder. Others were swimming. Reading.

"Our community hardly needs a new religion, Claire. That's for the wasteland. It's easy to forget about it, here."

"Why do we keep talking about it, then? It almost seems like an addiction."

"Thinking can hardly be defined as an addiction, no more than food can."

"Anything can be carried to extremes, Doc."

"Not *life*. You can never be too alive. Or too enlightened."

She fell silent, then stretched out her arm toward the bushes, and picked up a small, whorled shell. The claw of a dead hermit crab dangled limply underneath, and a few ants dropped onto the sand, and scurried off. "It's scary, sometimes. Thinking too much can make you unhappy."

"Sure. It's noticing the ugliness, isn't it? One of the drawbacks? Happiness isn't really one of my goals.

"Allow me a comparison. Imagine the life of a timber wolf; and then that of, say, a poodle. The wolf gets cold and wet. Goes hungry, sometimes. Has fleas and ticks to contend with. Mange. The poodle, on the other hand, has few worries. Plenty of food regularly appears. It has a dry bed, and gets petted and pampered. The 'happiness' pursued in the wasteland is the carefree life of poodles, I think.

"I'd prefer the life of a wolf, myself. So would many of the poodles, I imagine, once they experienced life beyond the fences. A wolf would be unhappy living the life of a poodle, but it doesn't seek happiness in living the way it does. It simply lives according to its nature. It seems called upon to lead an authentic life. I hear the same call. The call of conscience, you might say."

"You look awfully happy, though," she said affectionately.

"At the moment."

"So what are your goals, then?"

"I think up new ones, all the time."

"Name one. Top of the list."

"To sleep with you."

"Shit!" She flopped over, onto her back, and stared at the sky. "I knew you'd turn out to be dangerous."

"You asked."

"I didn't ask *that!*" When Doc started to move in her direction, she turned her head, and bared her teeth. "Don't try anything, you...wolf."

*Miles Ahead.* Withdrawal from the bank.

"You sure it's okay? You've got enough?" Claire asked.

"No worries. I have a year's supply," Wendy reassured her, sliding the pills across the table. "These used to belong to Sophie, anyway."

"She referred me, actually."

"I'm beginning to feel like a drug broker."

"I feel pretty silly, really. I probably won't even need them," Claire said, unable to hide her embarrassment.

"From what I've seen, I'm amazed you haven't needed them long before this."

"Really...?"

Wendy was unable to control herself, when she saw the innocent look on Claire's face, and was overcome with mirthful laughter. "Oh, Claire, everyone in the anchorage has been wondering when it was going to happen. There was even talk of starting a pool, for awhile."

"Oh. I had no idea."

"The pair of you are virtually a fixture under Doc's private palm tree. It's just affectionate gossip."

"Tell me. I'm curious."

"I think people are envious how you two seem to be able to enthrall each other, for hours. Charlie would fall asleep in five minutes."

"Is that all?"

"Well...I can tell you, I reckon. It's not offensive. Laurel decided that you were attempting to perfect techniques of metaphysical sex. Orgasm without sweat? It's an attractive thought, you have to admit. It's been hot, eh?"

Claire smiled. "Tell her it doesn't work."

"Shame. You would have made a fortune."

*Exile.* Office hours. Nothing happening.

"Oh, all right," Claire agreed, and began massaging his neck.

"That's magic," Doc said, lifting his cramped fingers from the keyboard, and stretching his shoulders. "You wouldn't feel like doing some typing, by any chance?"

"Not on your life." Claire laughed. "It's not going too well, is it?"

He stared down at the page. He'd typed only two words. Thou shalt. "I seem to have reached an impasse, haven't I?"

"Looks like it."

"How can I write a holy book? The only things remotely sacred, that I'm aware of, are pistachio nuts and blueberry cheesecake."

"What happened to beauty?"

"Okay, so I've left out a couple of things, but, really...holiness is another mystery, isn't it? How can you turn it into a *system*?"

"Maybe you should try a different opening."

"You think? Oh, what the hell." He typed 'not'. Then, paused, reconsidering the move. Thou shalt not.

"Litter?" she suggested, sniggering.

Doc grimaced. Then, in a rapid series of confident, bold strokes, he typed 'dye pistachio nuts'. "That's it, Claire!"

"That's your holy inspiration? Thou shalt not dye pistachio nuts?"

"No. 'That's it', as in, I quit!"

*Miles Ahead.* Withdrawal symptoms.

"We just couldn't go through with it," Sophie sniffed.

"Don't cry," Wendy said sympathetically, setting a card of pills down on the table, and putting her arm around her. "Tell me about it."

"Here," Laurel offered, handing her a glass of water.

"Thanks."

"Did Nigel have second thoughts?" Wendy asked, as Sophie fumbled with the pills, and punctured the foil to get at one.

"He's gone limp." She swallowed one, then closed her eyes, and sighed deeply. "He says he feels impotent. Politically. It's affected his libido."

"Oh. So you actually...couldn't..."

"Right."

"The pills won't help."

"They'll help me. I've been craving one all week."

"Don't ya reckon you should make some practical arrangements, first? You're not just going to have a kid on the road, are you?" Wendy asked.

"Well...on the boat, I guess."

"I suppose you could. Sure. But, you'll have to make some plans soon, eh? For the kid's future? You know. Something more...stable."

Wendy was right, Sophie realized. She didn't want her children loitering around fleamarkets, while she was busy selling T-shirts. What kind of life was that for a little kid? They'd have to come up with a plan. Calmly sort through the options. She was unconsciously tapping the table with the blister pack, and the sound of the pills clattering inside caught her attention. "What's in these things, anyway?" she wondered aloud, while examining the fine print on the foil. "I feel better, already."

*Rainblow.* Fireworks for the party.

"Where did you get them, Doc?" Nigel asked, examining one of the grenades.

"The bunker. There's an underground storage bunker near the airport," Doc explained. He'd found several cases of colored parachute flares, and smoke canisters, but thought the fireworks display would be a lot more impressive with some rockets. "We should be able to fire them straight up, I think. I'd love to have some aerial reports, to go along with the flares. Here's the manual."

Nigel read from the frontispiece. "Dear Soldier. Congratulations on choosing the RPG-320XE rocket propelled grenade. This stylish

weapon represents a major breakthrough in explosives technology, for the discriminating..."

Doc interrupted. "Skip ahead a few pages. Just after the section on armored vehicles. There's a helicopter in the corner." He was confident they'd be able to use them, but the launcher seemed unreasonably complicated, and Doc usually had trouble even turning on a modern television. They never labelled the switches, anymore. Maybe Nigel could figure out how to fire the things. Doc didn't want to blow up anybody's boat. He left him with the instructions, and went back to the dinghy to get the rest of the grenades.

Nigel hefted the launcher to his shoulder, admiring the well-engineered feel of it. The fine balance. The laser sight was equipped with a digital rangefinder, and he took aim on Charlie's boat through the open hatch to try it out, but couldn't figure out how to work it, and went back to study the manual.

The weapon was marvellously versatile, and could fire armour piercing, incendiary or fragmentation charges; and be set to detonate them on impact, or with an internal timer. It was a professional tool. No doubt about it. He read through the specs.

"Nigel? Give me a hand?" Doc called.

Nigel went to join him on deck, and helped him haul the heavy fibreglass canister aboard. "What's this, mate?"

"Air-to-air missile. It would make a great finale. It's big enough. Ready?"

"Heave!"

*Rainblow.* The fireworks raise sparks.

"You promised!" Sophie shouted, clenching her fists.

"It's not what you think," Nigel said, raising his hands submissively.

"Tell me, then. What's going on?"

"They're fireworks. For the full moon party."

"Oh, really? They look like bombs, to me!"

"Honest. Doc requisitioned them from the Air Force armoury."

Sophie decided he was telling the truth. "What are they?"

"Rocket propelled grenades. We'll shoot them up in the air, like skyrockets. We've got a nice selection. These are like big firecrackers, and the boxes over there are phosphorous shells. A white starburst, I reckon."

"They look terribly expensive."

"You're not wrong. These fat ones? Each one is equivalent to three cases of dynamite."

"Wow."

"Let me show you." He picked up the launcher, and helped her adjust the shoulder rest until it fit her perfectly. "Try aiming at something. Here. Through the scope."

"Oh, cool! It's like a see-through video game," she said, while moving the launcher up and down. Back and forth. Nigel demonstrated how to engage the safety, then briefly switched on the laser, and showed her how it worked. The targeting icons illuminated when he loaded one of the grenades, giving her something else to play with.

"This is amazing, Nigel. There must be a little computer inside."

"I thought you'd like it."

She experimented with it awhile, then set it down. "What about the big one?" she asked, pointing to the missile laying on the settee.

"That's an air-to-air missile. Turns out we can't use it. There's no way we can be sure it'll go straight, without a computer, or something. We'll take it back."

"Why does it have all those decals on it? It looks like one of those Grand Prix cars."

"Corporate sponsors, I reckon."

"But a *brewery*?"

"Aussies are a funny lot. I've told you that."

"What's 'Gotcha'? Is that the name of the missile?"

"No. A brand of surfwear."

## MILES AHEAD

PRESENTS

FULL MOON PARTY

Indian Ocean/Africa Tour

21h00 SATURDAY

FIREWORKS AT MERIDIAN PASSAGE

Courtesy HMS Customs

*Exile.* Vacation schemes.

"Come on, Claire. You'll love it. My boat is fun to sail."

"But how can you possibly need a *vacation?*" she asked, laughing, and shaking her head. "You don't work that hard."

"Claire! How can you say that? I'm under a lot of stress!"

"I thought you always sailed alone." She eyed him warily.

"That's beside the point. A vacation should be a break from the routine, shouldn't it?" He spread out the chart. "Look. North Cocos is

just a four-hour sail. We can spend the night, and sail back in the morning." Shaun had told him the island was bit scruffy, and the anchorage would be horrible if there was any southerly swell, but he had to try something.

It was a tiny atoll, she saw, barely a mile in diameter. She visualized an exquisite annulus of palms surrounding a turquoise lagoon. Her first truly uninhabited island. It was exciting. Just the two of them.

"There won't be a single...human footprint on the whole island," Doc said. He didn't know if there were any rats, or not.

"Where would I sleep? You only have the one bunk."

"You can use it. I'll sleep on the floor." Unless the anchorage was too rough, he thought. Then they'd have to sleep on the beach. He only had one sleeping bag, though. They could share.

"Right here?" It was adjacent to the bunk, and her feet were resting on it.

"I don't mind, at all. Honest."

His boat was lovely, and she was eager to sail on it. The brass kerosene lamp next to the bunk would make the cabin cosy at night, she thought. Romantic. She stifled her panic. "Okay. I'll go."

"Great! Let's leave tomorrow!"

"Hmm. Don't you think we should wait for some easterly winds?" she queried, examining the chart. "The anchorage looks pretty exposed to these southerlies, if you ask me."

"Oh. Yeah. I guess it does, doesn't it."

### CRUISING AFRICA?

### HARBOUR INFORMATION

### CHARTS / SURVIVAL TIPS

Aboard Trekker

Thursday 16h30

Landmine Identification and Demonstration

Courtesy HMS Customs

*Bunker.* Inspecting for possible rat damage.

It was refreshingly cool underground.

"Let's get the missile put away, and I'll show you around," Doc said. He lifted his end of the canister, so Nigel could get his fingers underneath, and they slid it off the forklift, into the rack.

Doc reached around the steering wheel to the controls, and lowered the forks to the floor. "I don't know what's in half of these crates. Ammunition, mostly. These are cluster bombs, I think."

"Bloody hell." Nigel shook his head, in disgust. They were designed to maim people, just like the fragmentation grenades. There were stacks of them. "You could start a war with this lot."

"Care for a smoke?" Doc offered.

"Ta."

"Camel? Or Tanzanian?"

"Oh. You brought one?"

"Yeah. Here."

"Capital."

"Helps me maintain my sense of humor. This place can get depressing."

"You're not wrong. Why do you come down here, at all?"

"Just for the landmines."

He appeared serious, Nigel thought, but it was hard to tell, with Doc.

"I've been dumping them over the edge of the reef. They'd wind up planted in Africa, otherwise. They'll sit here another few years, and then show up on the surplus market. All that stuff ends up in Africa."

Doc gave a little laugh. "I've already filed the report. 'Landmines found in unsafe condition due to rat damage, and satisfactorily buried at sea.' They have plastic cases, you know."

"That brightens my day, mate." Nigel chuckled. "The smoke helps, too."

"Sophie mentioned that you were feeling a bit low," Doc said, sharing the confidence.

"Let me ask you something, Doc. Do you ever feel like you've been backed into a corner?"

"Well...relegated to the wilderness, maybe."

"No. I mean...pushed to the point where you feel you have to fight back. Like a cornered rat."

"Fight back against what?" Doc motioned expansively, and shrugged his shoulders. "I stay out of their way, Nigel. Wolves, albatross...lots of endangered species use the same strategy. You've got to keep moving. Use your wits."

"What if there's nowhere to run?"

"There's still some safe spots left."

"Fewer, mate. You can't go back to New Zealand, you know."

"Why not?" Doc liked New Zealand. It would remain a liveable destination for the rest of his lifetime, anyway.

"They'd never let you leave."

"What do you mean?"

"You can't sail singlehanded from New Zealand, anymore. It's against the law."

"I'll bring Claire." Doc brightened at the thought.

Nigel shook his head. "Your boat doesn't comply with the new safety regulations, Doc. Not even close."

"Aw, shit. You mean..."

"Right. You'll need the lot. An inboard diesel, self-inflating liferaft, SSB, EPIRB, GPS...it's a bloody long list, mate. You'll have to install a proper toilet, eh?"

Doc scowled, stunned by the news. "How come they let you out?"

"They didn't. I always use forged clearance papers."

"Oh..."

"It'll get even worse, I reckon. They want you to buy more of their fancy technology, you see. Soon, they might even require cellular phones. Internet access."

"So, without even knowing it, I could sail...right into...prison."

"Reckon so."

Doc hung his head forlornly, overwhelmed by the injustice of it. He must have overlooked a seed, and when it popped, some burning ashes fell from the joint. "Watch the sparks, Nigel. Those cases you're sitting on are full of limpet mines."

"S'truth? No fooling?" He jumped up. "Limpet mines! Can I have a look?"

Doc was feeling a little hungry, and walked over to fetch a couple of the ready-to-eat meals, while Nigel was checking out the mines. The military rations were inedible, for the most part - especially the stroganoff - but the potato chips and steak pies weren't half bad. He carried them back, and handed one to Nigel, who was cradling a mine, admiring it.

"These could come in handy, mate."

"Yeah?"

"Have you heard about those new platforms that they're intending to moor offshore? To harness wave power?"

"The BBC mentioned it. Scotland, wasn't it?"

"That's it. The first one sank, but the useless sods will have another go, I reckon. As if they didn't waste enough electricity, already. Now they want to clog all the coastlines with that crap."

"You wouldn't, you know...would you?"

Nigel nodded deliberately. "That's just the trouble, isn't it? Everybody simply sails on by. They'll whinge and moan, hold meetings and wring their hands, but nobody's willing to take a few minutes to dive down, and clamp on a few limpet mines. Nobody wants to get wet."

"Wet...? How about...*hunted*?"

Nigel shrugged, and passed him the roach. "We're already hard-core criminals, mate."

"Well, yeah...I suppose. But terrorism?"

"Doc! I'm not a bloody terrorist! You can't *terrorise* a piece of equipment, now can you?"

"No. I guess not." Doc started laughing. "You sure could blow the shit of it, though. With one of these."

*Beach.* Harbormaster's palm.

Doc couldn't stop worrying about the rats. The fireworks display had been his idea, in the first place, but now that the festivities were about to begin, he was having second thoughts. Claire had taken her place next to him on the second tatami mat, and was drying her hair after her morning swim.

"Claire...?"

She shifted her weight onto her elbow, and brushed a few wet strands of hair behind her ear. Doc was lying on his back, with his hands clasped behind his head, staring at the clouds. Tufts of cumulus were scattered overhead, drifting off toward Africa.

“What?”

“These rocket-propelled grenades might frighten the rats, don’t you think?”

Claire couldn’t see the expression on his face to tell if he were serious, or not. Sounded like it. She smiled. “Well, they scare the hell out of me, Doc. So, yeah. I wouldn’t be all that surprised if they terrify your rotten little rodents.”

Doc sighed.

Having already posted the announcement for the fireworks show on the bulletin board, he couldn’t very well cancel it now, on account of the rats. His high-profile position as resident Harbormaster invited public scrutiny. People would talk.

“I don’t know, Doc. This jazz concert might terrify them even more. Look at the size of the speakers that Wendy’s bringing ashore!”

Doc pushed himself up, and took in the scene.

Preparations for the gala evening were beginning to gather momentum. Charlie had started ferrying the band’s sound equipment ashore, so that the dinghy would be available for spearfishing during midday, when the light was best for diving.

Nigel and Marley had promised to bring back a hundred pounds of fish.

Sophie had declared the occasion the first official holy day of her new religion - their inaugural Full Moon. Every religion needed a worthy calendar of holidays to celebrate, she felt. The one, naturally occurring day per month seemed about right. They could always add an occasional eclipse event, later on.

A bamboo raft had washed up on the reef during the week - consensus had it drifting all the way from Indonesia. Sophie had salvaged one of the longest poles, and was excavating a hole to erect it on the beach. One of her hand-painted Earth flags would soon be flying from the masthead.

Kate had already taken down the volleyball net, and was busy raking the court, which would serve as center stage for the evening. Hennie and Anneliene were husking coconuts, while Lisa toiled alongside, piling the husks into her wagon, adding to the already huge mound which stood ready to fuel the grill. The yachts were bringing potluck, supposedly. Doc had heard rumors of crusty loaves of freshly-baked sourdough bread.

Mary's apple crumble.

"A proper little community, aren't we?" Claire observed.

Doc nodded. Over seventy people were gathered on the island, and the beach was just as clean as he found it that first day. “Working well, isn’t it? Most of these people didn’t even know each other a couple months ago. We’re a community of strangers, really.”

“Is that your latest NOTICE?” Claire asked, eyeing the typewritten announcement tucked under Doc’s towel.

“Yeah. Here.” He handed it to her.

#### NOTICE

From: Harbormaster’s Office

Re: Thought for the Full Moon Holiday.

Invisible, and outside the wasteland of the devastated Earth, dwell the shepherds.

Heidegger

*Miles Ahead.* Setting the stage.

“Okay, listen up everybody!” Wendy shouted, addressing a clutch of dinghies gathered at the stern. “Marley and Nigel are still out fishing, so for the time being, those of you assigned to rigging the sound system - maybe give Charlie a hand, awright? We’ll get the generator up and running.”

Shaun had just arrived with the portable power plant, which HMS Customs had requisitioned from the storage bunker. The supply cable was seventy-five meters long, so that the noisy generator could be set well back into the palms. Even so, Charlie planned to erect a sound barrier around it, with a heavy tarpaulin, and some of the fallen palm fronds.

Wendy clapped her hands. “Okay, we’ve got a lot of work to do. So let’s get started, everybody. Off you go.”

The dinghies began heading toward the beach. After weeks of relative idleness, Charlie’s call for volunteers had yielded an abundance of willing hands, ready to undertake some productive work. Sophie had agreed to handle the lighting chores, thus freeing Wendy for more percussive work on stage. Wendy ushered her below to go over the playlist.

Some tunes were 'hot', she explained, and needed red lights. Others were 'cool', and required the blue lights. A few tunes started off cool, and progressively warmed up, requiring a gradual shift between the two. Some were neither hot, nor cool, and needed white light.

"What are those, then?" Sophie asked.

"Those? What d'ya mean?"

Wendy had truly kicked into high gear, Sophie noticed. She looked maniacally happy. Her long, fine hair was piled up on top of her head, and stuck out wildly all around.

"I mean, if they're not hot, or cold?"

"Oh. Centred, maybe. Or round."

"Round...?"

"Just follow the list. It's colour-coded. There's a few tunes where we'll need the lights on cue. The ultraviolet spot, for instance. See here? The purple stars? Then, here. Blue on top of white?"

Sophie listened attentively as Wendy rattled off the rest of the instructions, grateful for her stints at the deli, where the ability to remember a hastily delivered, complicated order was frequently rewarded with a nice tip.

"Any questions?" Wendy asked, finally. She was practically panting.

Sophie had to laugh. "Well...one, actually. Are you on 'speed'?"

Wendy smiled ecstatically. "Does it show?"

*Volleyball Court. The Full Moon Concert.*

By the time Marley took his place on stage, a dozen blankets had already been spread out on the beach, staking claim to the front row seats. When Marley began playing a few notes, in between adjusting the reed in his mouthpiece, a mass exodus took place from the picnic tables, as everyone scrambled to find their places.

Sophie had the best seat in the house, perched atop the water tanks, where she could watch the whole band, and pick up Wendy's cues. Marley had scaled a few of the palms, and rigged the stage lights aloft. The wires led overhead to a switching console on top of the tanks.

"Sophie?" she heard.

Sophie glanced down and saw Kate, dressed to kill, in a sexy, low-cut red blouse.

"Have you seen Doc?" she asked.

"Not for awhile."

“I can’t find him anywhere.”

Sophie shrugged. “Ask Nigel. The two of them were organizing the fireworks.”

The concert began in total darkness. Wendy had mixed two tracks of African thumb pianos, with a third track of mixed drums, and programmed them on her computer to move lightly over the audience. As the swaying rhythms slipped to the left, then slid to the right, Wendy began backing up Laurel's vibes with her congas. It was her own arrangement of the Miles Davis tune, 'So What'.

The lights came on dramatically as Charlie and Marley joined in, with a sustained opening chord. The band was dressed all in white - Marley even had a white beret - and the combination of the blue lights with the UV spot brought them on stage in a brilliant burst of luminescence.

A cheer went up.

The audience was enthralled, and remained in the powerful hold of the music - through Laurel's solo, then in the grip of Marley's - until the end of the tight closing chord. As the white stage lights came on, Charlie acknowledged the applause, and picked up the microphone to say a few words.

“Our honored guest has finally arrived, folks. Have a look,” he said, pointing toward the heavens, where the moon had just cleared the top of the palms. “Come on! A rousing welcome, everybody! Let’s hear it for the Full Moon!”

Amid further cheering, the band launched right into Thelonious Monk's, 'Epistrophy', featuring Wendy and Laurel; closely followed by John Coltrane's, 'My Favorite Things', with the UV spotlight on Marley's inspired solo. The set continued with further classics, and concluded with a rousing red light rendition of Dave Brubeck's, 'Take Five'.

They played for an hour and a half.

The band took a break between sets, and retired to a makeshift dressing room backstage, behind a big plastic tarp. Charlie's tuba required a lot of breath, and his shirt had soaked through. Wendy began sorting out their change of costume. Laurel couldn't wait, and stripped off her long white dress, and stood around in just her underwear.

Sophie climbed down from the water tank to join them. Nigel came over, and put his arm around her.

"Well, look who's here! My little Tiger! Guess what? I'm playing my Maori drum. In the second set of a jazz concert, no less. How about that, eh?"

He was grinning chemically.

"You, too?"

Charlie had brought his big blender ashore, along with a cooler filled with frozen cubes of orange juice. Sophie volunteered to make smoothies for everybody.

"There's some Cointreau," Laurel advised. "That might be good."

"Here," Sophie offered, handing her an interim chunk of the frozen juice. "That was a beautiful set."

Laurel grinned. "Went well, I think."

Sophie reached to switch on the blender, but Laurel quickly caught her hand. "Unhh..." she mumbled, before pulling the orange cube from her mouth. "Better switch off the speakers. The feedback could be life-threatening through the big array."

Wendy reappeared, wearing a floral print Hawaiian shirt, and carrying two sets of mallets, similar to those that Laurel used with

her vibes. She began spraying them with a clear liquid. Sophie was puzzled.

"What's that?"

"You know the stuff they use in nightclubs? To stamp the back of your hand? Should be brilliant with the UV spot, don't ya reckon?"

"Cool." Sophie held out a glass. "Smoothie?"

"Capital." Wendy ran the frosty glass over her cheek. "Where's Nigel? D'ya reckon he'd mind, if I sprayed his hands?"

"Not sure. Nigel's a bit touchy about chemicals." Sophie considered it for a moment, then giggled. "Here. Just spray his glass. A little more. Get it real wet."

"Smoothie, Nigel?" Sophie offered.

"Aw, thanks Tiger."

She pressed the glass firmly into his grasp. "A bit stoned, are we?" she inquired happily, noting his hugely dilated pupils.

"Me? On, no. I wouldn't say stoned. Not that, exactly. No. Alert, I'd say. Yes. Very alert. A little cold, though. My hands are very cold."

"It's the smoothie, Nigel."

"Ahh. So it is. Cold isn't it?"

Claire made a brief appearance backstage, and after making the rounds, congratulating the band, she drew Sophie aside.

“You haven’t seen Doc, by any chance?”

“Not since the barbecue.”

Claire had put on eye shadow, Sophie noticed - a lovely emerald green that nearly matched her eyes. Some flecks of gold glitter were glued to the tips of her hair. She folded her arms tightly under her breasts.

“Damn. Where could he have gone?”

*Quarantine buoy. Awaiting meridian passage.*

Doc felt a little foolish hiding behind the quarantine buoy. Although, given his general lack of will-power, it was probably the safest place. Kate had already been aboard *Exile* twice, searching for him during the break between sets.

He shifted uncomfortably on the plywood thwart, wishing that he’d brought a cushion. With two cases of rocket-propelled grenades stacked in the dinghy, he barely had room to move. He shaded his

flashlight, and briefly checked his watch. According to the Nautical Almanac, the meridian passage of the moon would occur at 23h47m.

Damn. Still an hour off.

*Volleyball court.* The show goes on.

The second set opened with a recorded track of steel drums. Marley came in briefly with his sax, issuing a call to arms. Wendy responded with her congas, playing them with the mallets, as if they were tympanies. The mallet heads left glowing blue traces in the muted UV light.

Nigel watched in utter fascination, as she took up the rhythm. The little white pill that Wendy had given him was no larger than a grain of rice, but it made him feel as if he could beat out a rhythm on his drum with just his tongue. He contented himself with tapping on his thigh.

The blue stage lights came on momentarily, to the resounding wail of Marley's sax. Charlie answered the call with his tuba, mimicking the sound of a big bass drum. He picked up the tempo.

"Ready, Nigel," someone whispered.

When Marley called again, Nigel closed his eyes and went for it, like a racehorse that had been restrained for hours, suddenly given its rein. He followed Wendy's lead. Nigel wanted to run much faster, at first, but remembered her instructions. "We're all harnessed together, and I'm in the lead."

He soon found his stride - moving from side to side, as his excess energy allowed him to - while staying alongside Wendy. The tuba was right there, too. Right next to him, and all of them pulling together as one. It was magic.

Marley came in a fourth time, and Laurel joined the team. She hopped all over the track, dancing in circles around the rhythm. They picked up speed. Running faster, and faster. Flying.

"Ready..."

Nigel finally opened his eyes. A blur of dazzling blue arcs surrounded Laurel. His drum was glowing, too! And his hands! On fire! Then, he heard Marley's commanding cry, 'Stop!'. And the fire went out.

The white stage lights came on, as the crowd roared their approval.

"Brilliant," Wendy exclaimed. "Absolutely, fucking brilliant."

Nigel sat staring at his hands.

“Yo, Nigel? Feeling all right?” Sophie called out. “Are your hands still cold?”

The playlist for the second set was much looser, and more eclectic. Wendy and Laurel played a haunting, ethereal duet, with a lot of improvisation. Marley and Charlie played a tune on their own, as well - with Marley soaring off, and exploring possibilities, while Charlie took his only serious solo of the evening.

They all came together for a long, wide-ranging piece that reminded Sophie of Miles Davis', "Bitches' Brew", and after several encores - for which they dragged her onstage to shake a big gourd rattle - Charlie went up to the mike, holding his arms wide and sweating profusely, and concluded the concert with, "Sorry, everybody. No mas. Mifela killem finish!"

## NOTICE

From: Harbormaster's Office

Re: Phosphorous Burns

In light of the spectacular nature of the fire aboard Yacht *Rainblow*, HMS Customs is pleased to report that damage appears confined to the cockpit awning.

All yachts are advised to inspect their decks and canvaswork for phosphorous burns. Claims may be filed during office hours.

*Footloose.* Boycott enters its third day.

A pattern had developed, Claire knew. She'd wake up and go for a long swim before her morning coffee, usually followed by a bowl of muesli with sliced fruit. Then she'd sit under the canopy. She might read, or spend an hour writing in her journal, although what she really did was wait.

Wait for Doc.

If there weren't any boats wanting to clear out, or new arrivals to clear in, he'd stretch out in the cockpit with his coffee, and toss pistachio nut shells over his shoulder into the water. Their eyes would meet, sometimes.

He'd wave.

She'd wave back.

He'd soon row ashore - always by mid-morning, it seemed - and walk along the beach. Maybe burn the trash that Lisa had piled into the incinerator drum. Or rake the volleyball court. She'd see him settle under his palm tree, eventually. He'd unroll his pouch of woodcarving chisels, and play with one of his chunks of wood.

Wait for her.

She would soon feel restless, and swim the short distance to the beach, leaving the dinghy available for John and Mary. It didn't seem to matter how indirect a route she took, or whether it was actually her intention or not - she always ended up there, sitting under the palm. It was his pheromones, she surmised.

They evidently had a long reach. Even after she learned what he'd been up to with Kate, and resolved to boycott the palm, she still couldn't resist searching for him on the beach, now and then. She glanced ashore. Doc was leaning listlessly against the trunk, gazing

right at her, in fact. When he moved his arm to wave, she frowned and tossed her head aside. Then stared down at her journal.

Oral sex in the dinghy, no less.

Although Claire was embarrassed for having spied on the two of them when they went fishing, it didn't alter the fact. Doc had been confiding in her, and chastely resting his head against her own leg, just an hour or so before he had it wedged intimately in between Kate's.

Since she'd routinely spurned his advances, it wasn't really a betrayal. Not technically. Yet it hurt just the same. He'd even unrolled the second tatami mat, she noticed, as if he were advertising the space.

Vacancy.

It wasn't fair. That was her spot.

*Exile.* Five out. Depression sets in.

## NOTICE

From: Harbormaster's Office

Re: Thought for the day.

Homelessness is coming to be the destiny  
of the world.

Heidegger

*Footloose.* Madagascar gets trashed.

"Bubonic plague? Are you certain, Doc?" Mary asked worriedly.

"Heard the report on the BBC," Doc explained. "Six dead already, and several hundred cases in hospital, apparently."

"Did they say what part of the country was affected?" John asked, spreading open one of their charts, and pulling out his reading glasses.

"Right where you're headed, actually. Mahajanga. It's the largest city on the northwestern coast. I'd imagine it will spread quickly, though. You know...by people who are already infected, fleeing the city in panic."

"So you don't think we should go?"

"Well, I don't mean that, exactly. Just that it might be wise to wait for awhile. You can hang here, and then spend some time cruising the Seychelles. Maybe head down to Madagascar at the change of monsoon."

"They'd have the outbreak under control by the time we arrived. Surely."

Doc whistled between his teeth. "Wouldn't count on it. I cleared in at Mahajanga, and frankly, the place stinks. Right in the central part of town, where you'd expect to find a park, or something, there's this sprawling refuse dump. Dogs were scavenging through the garbage, chasing after the rats, little kids taking a shit right in the middle of all of it...flies like you wouldn't believe. Then, the stench from the fires..."

"Maybe he's right, Johnny. Perhaps, we should wait until the epidemic's run its course."

John seemed unconvinced.

"Of course, the real worry is the general lawlessness of the place," Doc went on. "A Swedish singlehander was murdered not far from Mahajanga a couple years back. Then two people on a South African yacht were hacked to death with machetes a bit further up the coast. You don't carry a gun aboard, do you John?"

"Of course not," he replied, with a pained expression on his face.

Doc didn't want to unduly scare them, but the accounts were true, and well...he was desperate. "Besides. Why do you want to leave Cocos so soon? I thought you liked it here."

John shifted his glasses down his nose, and looked quizzically over the top of them. "We've been here almost six weeks, Doc."

"Well, yeah! That's just what I mean. The two of you never used to be in such a hurry. Has, uh...Claire mentioned anything about, uh...wanting to leave?"

"Funny you should bring it up. She'd constantly raved about how much she loved the place, until just the other day..."

*Rainblow.* Some sound advice.

"You think I'm overreacting, don't you?" Claire asked.

"Well...sort of," Sophie hinted.

"I never suspected that Doc was so...promiscuous."

Sophie sighed. She slowly shook her head. "His affair with Kate was pretty innocent."

"Innocent! Have I missed something? It was broad daylight!"

Sophie couldn't help giggling. "Well, maybe not innocent, exactly, but it wasn't serious. Besides, it was their farewell tryst."

"He could have girlfriends stashed all over the world, for all I know."

"You don't really believe that?"

"No. I suppose not," Claire admitted. Doc just wasn't the type.

"He's miserable, you know."

"Well, serves him right. So am I. He must know I feel. I mean, it's so obvious."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that. Remember the tequila sunrise party? You punched him pretty hard, didn't you? When he tried to kiss you?"

"In *public*? We were right on the beach!" Claire wailed. She dug her nails into the Kauri mast as if she were trying to strangle it, but from the expression on her face, Sophie could tell that Claire was only acting.

Acting in self-defense.

Sophie reached out, and put her arm around her. "You'll just have to forgive him," she advised.

Claire butted the mast, and allowed her head to rest against it.

"Just take control of the situation. Doc will do anything you tell him to. Believe me."

Claire's eyes widened, and a glowing smile gradually spread across her face, as the wisdom of Sophie's advice sunk in.

"God. He will, won't he?"

*Rainblow.* Armed and dangerous.

"So what's in these two?" Sophie asked, pointing with her toe at the two aluminum cases tucked underneath the saloon table. "More fireworks?"

"No...not exactly," Nigel hedged. Sophie already seemed upset, and she didn't even know what was in them, yet.

"Well...exactly what, then?"

"Promise you won't lose your temper?"

She frowned suspiciously, and examined the cases more closely. She noticed stencilling on the side of one of them, and began swivelling it around with her foot. When she'd pushed it

halfway, it accelerated rapidly all on its own, and snapped against the steel pedestal plate with a loud clank. She jumped back.

"What the hell?"

"Magnetic," Nigel explained. He smiled sheepishly at her, and took a deep breath. Then, closed his eyes, and blurted it out. "Limpet mines."

Doc had a major role in this scenario, she surmised. The cabin reeked of marijuana, and Nigel's moronic grin was unmistakable. She walked over to the radio, and switched it on.

"Doc? Come in, Doc. This is Sophie."

While waiting for his reply, she calmly opened one of the grenade canisters, took out an incendiary, and slipped it into the launcher.

"Yo. What's up?" Doc replied.

"We need to discuss Nigel's new fireworks, Doc. I'll give you ten seconds to start rowing. Or I'll try one out." She braced herself on the ladder, and was fine-tuning the focus when Doc popped his head out of the hatch, and saw her taking aim.

One worried gopher, she thought, almost laughing as she tracked his frantic movements through the scope.

"Honest," Doc pleaded. "There's no conspiracy."

"I've always wanted some proper limpet mines, Tiger. You know that."

"Then explain what Charlie was doing with the passwords for the Australian Customs' central computer, and these diplomatic passports," she demanded, dropping the pair of new documents onto the table.

Nigel picked one up, and opened it. "I don't know anything about them."

Sophie then aimed the grenade launcher at the obvious culprit. Doc raised his hands. "All right. I confess. It was my idea. Charlie was helping me get them registered in the computer."

"Why did you issue them?"

"Well, with the, uh...munitions aboard, you know...if you find yourselves in a tricky situation, these diplomatic passports might help."

"Are they genuine?" Nigel asked, examining the embossed photo, and the official diplomatic seal.

"Look real, don't they?" Doc grinned proudly. Shaun had showed him the procedure for checking out any suspicious passports through the computer in the office. These would work anywhere in the world, once they were filed properly.

"So you're not planning a war, then? Without telling me?"

"Of course not," Nigel said. "We're a team."

"Can I see the limpet mines?"

"Sure."

"They're magnetic, you said?"

"Yeah. They work just like...fridge magnets. They stick on."

"Oh, neat..."

"Sophie?" Doc asked timidly. "Could you please take your finger off the trigger?"

"Oh. Right." She smiled apologetically. "Come on, you guys! Don't look at me like that. The safety's on...isn't it?"

*North Cocos* A lovely vacation.

"It's a shame we can't have campfires like this at the anchorage," Claire said, using one of the branches to gather the embers, before breaking it in half and laying it on the fire. They had scavenged enough driftwood to build a big fire, and broken branches from a few dead bushes to use for kindling. But it was too dark to search for more.

Doc watched the light from the campfire flickering across her face, casting warm, soft shadows on her cheek. Curls of her hair hung loosely around her eyes, and the sun-bleached tips seemed to sparkle, as if the salt had crystallized on them, following their swim ashore. She looked so lovely.

He'd done it, again. Fallen irretrievably in love with a woman who had sworn off intimacy altogether. In Claire's case, with the resoluteness of a devoutly reformed alcoholic. Chastely laying alongside her on the public beach was bad enough, but the thought of spending the whole night alone with her - an unbridgeable whisper away - suddenly seemed almost unbearable.

The sail up to North Cocos could hardly have been better. He had taken in a reef in the mainsail before they departed, but after a few miles Claire lobbied for full sail, and they shook it out. The seas weren't that high, but they seemed so, after spending so many days in the smooth water in the anchorage. It was exciting sailing, sliding off the sides of the swells, and skimming along the troughs. She moved over the deck of his boat as if she belonged there, and responded excitedly to the liveliness of its motion through the waves. They made a swift passage.

Claire insisted on trying out all the sail combinations. When she took over the helm, she decided to harden up and beat to windward for a few miles, just for a change of pace. She was in a remarkably playful mood, Doc thought, and kept him busy changing sails, adjusting lines, and laughed hilariously when she slammed the bow into a steep sea and doused him with spray when he was up on the foredeck. They were able to run downwind for the last few miles, and surfed wildly on some of the bigger waves.

A blue-footed booby appeared as they approached the island, and hovered curiously over the stern to observe them, as well as the boat. It soared up to explore the mainsail, and made a few awkward flaps of its wings, passing through the turbulence off the leech. The booby then flew off in a wide circle, and came back from astern for another look.

Claire seemed unusually affectionate, and kept teasing him when he took over the helm. Especially as they approached the reef, when he had to concentrate on steering, and couldn't defend himself. They anchored in surprisingly smooth water, just off the beach. She immediately set to work furling the mainsail, doing a much neater job of it than he would, himself.

He was coiling up some of the lines, and tidying up the cockpit, when she came up and happily threw her arms around his neck, and

kissed him under his ear. Unprecedented moves, for her. She seemed to freeze passively against him, though, as he gently caressed her. Explored her.

Then, she suddenly ripped herself free, and rapidly turned away, but not before he recognized the look on her face. He could have dealt with panic, or fear. But what he saw was anger, and he couldn't bear it.

When she faced him, she was appealingly biting her lip, like she often did when she was seeking support. But he no longer knew how to act toward her. He realized that he was reluctant to even touch her, fearing that even the slightest brush against her skin might cause a wound. To both of them. He'd smiled, and pretended to be anxious to explore the island, then stepped around her and dove into the water, and swam ashore.

Claire took the last branches and began building a small pyramid over the waning fire. It crackled briefly to life. "If people could return to watching campfires at night, instead of televisions, they might begin to wonder again. Tell stories."

"Wouldn't work. There'd be too much smoke," Doc said, surprising her. He'd been silently staring into the fire a long time.

"Welcome back," she said, pulling up her knees, and cradling her chin on them. "You've been really quiet, all evening."

"It's the fire, I guess. It's even more tranquillizing than watching the sea."

"That's all? No mysteries?"

"You. You're a mystery to me, Claire."

"Ah. I thought so. Well, I haven't solved that one, either."

No real harm done, she thought. Doc was still sulking, though, and martyring himself, by sitting on the wrong side of the fire to avoid being close to her. The bark on the small branches emitted thick smoke as it burned, and he kept rubbing his eyes.

He'd get over it.

She hadn't meant to pull away from him. It was the last throes of her panic, she thought. Yet she still couldn't believe it. He'd actually intended to strip her. Right in the cockpit. In broad daylight. Just like Kate. It wasn't what she had in mind.

The booby that followed them into the anchorage had flown over the stern, once more, just as Doc was peeling back the straps of her swimsuit. It was hovering overhead, watching...and she was already starting to panic from the intensity of his touch, and, well...it happened.

But it was only a slight blemish on their wonderful day. It felt so nice being able to play, again. 'Play' hadn't been allowed, before. Not while she was in mourning. Claire needed to find a new hero, since her old one - the woman in mourning - had become obsolete. The mourning was finished.

Claire had recalled the animals that Doc once adopted as heroes. Beavers and otters. Wolves. All playful animals, she realized. Claire admired cats, so she had pretended to be a cat. A playful cat. It was fun.

Doc had never slept on the cabin sole before, and it felt odd looking at his woodwork from the perspective of a cockroach. He noticed a few table saw tracks on the underside of one of the sea rails, and a bead of glue on the bottom edge of a cabinet door. There was a spider web in the toe space.

Still, the view wasn't that unflattering. The deck beams looked handsome. He laid on his back, and stared out the open hatch at the moonlit sky, and identified Jupiter.

Claire was surprised how comfortable she felt, stretched out in Doc's bed. His smell surrounded her, and permeated the pillow.

The sheet on the bunk appeared to be almost new, though. Clean and fresh smelling. He'd borrowed it, she guessed.

"Doc?" she whispered.

He closed his eyes, and considered not replying.

"You asleep?"

"No," he answered finally. "What?"

"Can I tell you a story?"

He sighed. "I guess."

"It's a story about betrayal. I've never told it before. Not to anyone. Still want to hear it?" she asked, clasping her arms around herself. She had to warn him, she felt. It was only fair.

"Of course. I could use a few clues."

"I hardly know where to begin. Trust, maybe. Or devotion."

"This is about your ex-husband, I take it?"

"Well, he's part of it, of course. The rotten shit. In his heart, he must have known he was worthless, so when I continued to love him, he lost respect for me. Or else he found it necessary to debase me, in order to justify his betrayal. But the important part of the story is about me. Something I think you should know."

She could scarcely believe how easy it was to tell him about it. All the demeaning slights. The lies. She kept it as brief as possible. "That's about it," she concluded. "I was ready to take a knife to

myself. Cut a new hole for him in my belly, if only he would have loved me there."

"So you're afraid the same thing might happen, all over again?"

Doc asked.

"No, Doc! Shit. You missed the whole point. That could *never* happen. Now, I'd turn the blade of the knife around."

She leaned over the edge of the bunk, and peered down at him. He was lying flat on his back with his arms folded behind his head, and the sheet gathered around his waist. She reached down and pressed her finger firmly into his navel. Her fingernails were sharp. When she was sure she'd made her point, she rolled back out of sight.

"Oh. I see." He reached down and gingerly checked for blood.

"I thought it was only fair to warn you."

Claire laid her head back down on the pillow, and smiled. It was a really a small boat, she realized. But she didn't own very much. There was room for it. She wasn't sure where she would hang her thyme plant, though. They'd find a spot.

She sat up and lit the kerosene lamp. "Do you recall the day we watched the hermit crabs crawling up the beach?" she asked.

"Sure."

"Do you remember what I said might be a desirable trait, in a mate?"

"Perseverance, wasn't it?"

"Right. It's been painful to watch, sometimes, but you never gave up on me. Continually clawing away at the defenses I've built up over the years. Dusting yourself off. Trying again. I love you for it, I really do."

Doc pictured the little crab, struggling up the sand, and wasn't sure if he was that pleased with the comparison.

"You know, Doc, there's no way a man would have ever climbed on top of me again, without perseverance. You haven't changed your mind, have you? About wanting to sleep with me?"

"I've wanted to do that from the moment I saw you."

"I know. Me, too. I apologize for making you do all that climbing. I'll help you over the edge, this time." She extended her hand over the side of the bunk, and beckoned with her fingers.

"Come here."

*Miles Ahead.* A miracle in the making.

"Video? Sure. We've considered experimenting with it," Charlie said. "Seems rather pointless, though. I always listen to jazz with my eyes closed."

"Well, this wouldn't be a music video, exactly," Sophie explained.

"What do you have in mind?" Wendy queried.

"A holy video. We've decided to launch our new religion on television."

Wendy smiled, bemused. "TV spots are expensive, eh?"

"No, Wendy. It wouldn't be an advertisement. We want to produce a miracle."

"A miracle...?"

"Right. But we need some help with the special effects. Doc? Why don't you run through it?"

Doc was stretched out on the settee, with his head nestled in Claire's lap. At the mention of his name, he jerked himself up. "Sophie! For crying out loud! I was only kidding!"

He'd been smoking dope with Nigel. Just for the fun of it, the two of them began compiling a list of abominations that rightly

deserved to be blown up. Doc was unaware that Sophie had even been listening, let alone taking any of it seriously.

"Come on. Humor me," Sophie pleaded.

When Claire added her voice, Doc relented.

"All right. Let's see. Picture the opening scene shot just after dawn, with a slow sweep over a profusion of wild flowers," Doc began, trying to visualize the video treatment. "Then the camera lifts, and focuses on a family of foxes, trotting up a hillside, casting long shadows on the grass. As the foxes approach the top of a ridge, several brown bears crest it from the other side. Maybe a few rabbits."

"A army of animals, gathering to witness the miracle," Sophie interjected.

"Add a bamboo flute, accompanying their ascent. A whisper of rustling grass," Doc continued, warming to the idea. "The procession halts in a line along the ridge. The animals gaze out upon the valley below, as the scene expands to include a vast farm of wind turbines, paralleling the freeway down in the valley."

"So, what's the miracle?" Wendy asked, growing impatient.

"Doc?" Sophie prompted. "Time to go to war."

"Now visualize this. A solitary black cloud begins to form in a cleft in the hills, building ominously as it moves over the valley,

darkening the ground around the turbines. The churning of the rotor blades drowns out the bamboo flute. A roll of thunder rumbles off the hills. The rotors spin faster, and faster. The bearings begin to squeal. Imagine the din of helicopters.

"Then, a solitary ribbon of lightning strikes one of the turbines, and sends it toppling over, with an explosion of white sparks. A second flash. One more falls.

"The bolts of lightning come in rapid succession, soon becoming a maelstrom, and turbines crash to the ground all around the wind farm, shorn off as cleanly by the lightning as stalks of wheat before a scythe. They topple with the wind, sending their rotors cartwheeling across the field.

"Then silence. The black cloud dissipates, as the sun rises behind the hills. A thin haze of smoke lingers over the fallen turbines, like mist over a harvested field, and softens the light. The scene shifts back to the animals on the ridge, and zooms in on one of the bears. The bear raises the small placard. WE'RE SORRY, BUT WE JUST CAN'T TAKE THE NOISE, ANYMORE."

Nigel laughed. "What d'ya reckon? A miracle?"

"You want to blow up a wind farm?" Wendy asked incredulously.

"Think of it as rural beautification," Doc suggested.

"Could the computer put helmets on the rabbits?" Sophie asked.

"Helmets...?"

"Little infantry helmets. With a round Earth insignia on the side?"

"I reckon. But the ears might pose a problem, eh?"

"Oh. Right. Maybe the bears, then. Can you do that?"

"Well...not at the moment." Wendy laughed. "But I've seen more sophisticated computer-generated graphics in TV commercials."

"The computer can choreograph the lightning storm to match the explosions, can't it?"

Wendy nodded. "I reckon. That's easy, compared to the animals."

"So what happens with the video tape?" Charlie asked.

"We deliver it to the TV stations," Sophie said. "We make some phone calls, first. Reports to the police about the lightning storm. Eye-witness accounts to the newsradio stations. They offer cash rewards for good news tips. If our calls are convincing, they'll put them on air."

"Try this," Doc suggested. "A woman calls in - a commuter with a cellular phone. She reports that her life has been saved by a brown bear, that flagged down her vehicle, and forced her to stop,

moments before she was blinded by a flash of lightning. She attributes it to a miracle.

"Another commuter phones in. Hysterical. Announces that the wind farm has been struck down. Speaks of divine vengeance. We make five or six calls. Animals attacking the power supply. Bears blocking the freeway. The radio station dispatches its traffic-watch helicopter, which quickly confirms the incident. Sees the freeway clogged with cars, and a large crowd gawking at the wreckage. Everyone tuned in to the commuter traffic report will hear rumors of a miracle."

"Meanwhile, we rush our video tape across town," Sophie added. "We'll need a van, or something, with all the computer equipment, so we can add our special effects enroute. We tell the TV studio that it's an amateur, eye-witness recording."

"Now, what happens next?" Doc asked rhetorically. "The TV station would have already aired a news report, and dispatched a film crew. So they'll be keen to view the tape. They'll think they've been handed exclusive footage of a major, breaking story. When they discover the tape is actually the work of saboteurs, they'll realize it's an even bigger story. Our images will be far more compelling viewing than any of their own. They'll broadcast our bear."

"People believe what they see on television," Sophie said. "It won't matter what the announcers say. A million people will have seen a resolute army of animals, carrying the banner of the round Earth. An army capable of unleashing the forces of nature. The fury of Mother Earth, herself."

"It has the makings of a myth, I'd say," Doc added.

Charlie clapped his hands. "I love it!"

"The software will be expensive, eh?" Wendy cautioned.

"Sky News just might buy it..." Charlie speculated, thinking aloud.

"Buy what?" Sophie wondered.

"Why...the story, of course. Rupert might even give us an advance to cover production costs. He'd insist on exclusive rights, though."

Sophie began to fret. Diapers, toys...she'd really need the income. "Does that mean I can't sell my T-shirts?"

*Exile.* Office closed. Turning out the lights.

"Next year, Shaun!" Doc yelled, across the water. "You'll catch that grouper, for sure!"

Shaun stuck up a thumb. “No worries!” he hollered back. He waved a last time, then opened the throttle, and headed out across the lagoon.

“Well...so much for the volleyball,” Claire said, rather wistfully.

Shaun was putting everything in storage for the upcoming cyclone season, and had taken back both balls, as well as the net. Doc had also lost his job, of course. But he’d done his bit, breaking in the rookie. Shaun had agreed to forward his unemployment cheques to Zanzibar.

“Yeah. Well. We can’t have much of a game with just the two of us.”

Claire gave a little laugh. “True enough.”

They had been alone in the lagoon for more than a week. Neither of them was anxious to leave. Yet Doc had vetoed their most obvious option, which was simply to remain in Cocos over the summer. Staying on would be folly, he felt. Or at the very least, bad seamanship. The atoll offered no place to hide during a cyclone.

Now, having bid his final farewell to Shaun, Doc felt some obligation to actually leave. Tomorrow, perhaps. Meanwhile, Shaun had brought over a five-pound bag of jumbo California pistachios as a going-away present. Doc grabbed a handful, and settled back into the cockpit cushions.

“You know, it’s funny. When I sailed in here six months ago, there weren’t any people. And yet the lagoon seemed positively brimming with life. Now it just seems empty.”

Claire glanced around the anchorage. “Empty. Yeah. Our community upped anchor, and left.”

Doc sighed. “I suppose we should take down Sophie’s flag.”

On the day *Rainblow* left for Mauritius, in company with *Miles Ahead*, the community hadn’t completely disbanded. Half a dozen boats were still in the anchorage, so Sophie left it flying. But the thin nylon flag wouldn’t last through the cyclone season. The trailing edge had already frayed badly in the steady tradewinds.

“Aww, let’s leave it,” Claire proposed. “Stake a claim.”

Doc shelled a few pistachios while he pondered the question. In the end, he had to disagree. “I think Sophie would have wanted us to lower it. I mean...isn’t that how it all went wrong? Everyone staking claims?”

Claire conceded the point. “Maybe so. But face it. Everything’s been claimed, and already been given a name. She’ll have trouble winning converts.”

“Well, she’s always got us.”

Claire laughed. “Fine pair of disciples, we’d make!”

“What were they called again? The twelve of them?”

“The ‘Apostles’, you mean?”

“Right. Apostles. That’s us, Claire. The Apostles of the sailing life.”



Exiles at the Oasis  
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