

Pinctada

The Myers/Benton Chronicles

A Novel by Jeff Lee

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Pinctada

Pinctada margaritifera: Commonly known as the black-lip pearl oyster, the general consensus is that the quality of pearls from this species is the highest out of all pearl oysters; a marine bivalve mollusk in the family Pteriidae, this species is common in tropical, Indo-Pacific, coral reefs.¹

¹ From the Wikipedia entry for *Pacifica margaritifera*.

THE WELCOME

It is very late for most Tahitians, but not for him, a self-exiled American with arthritic knees and aching feet that should belong to a much older man; they make his midnight stroll along the harbor-side streets of Pape'ete in 1956 something of an annoying physical ordeal. A strong gust from the Pacific trades, unusual at this time of night, catches hold of the man's navy-banded boater and flips it off his head.

He watches the hat roll on its straw brim for several feet, and seeing the hat will soon fetch up against a big banyan tree that borders the promenade, he preserves his dignity by refusing to chase it. His pace does not change as he walks to where the walkway is closest to the tree, takes a casual look about and notes that he is the only pedestrian in sight. He steps onto the grass, retrieves the boater, and returns it to his head as he returns to the promenade and resumes his amble.

Sauntering alone under a Pacific night sky on the deserted streets of an exotic port does not disquiet him because the darkness is attenuated by occasional street lights along the

promenade and by the lit entrances of bars that are designed to lure denizens of the night—such as he is—toward the women and booze, and sometimes opium, that wait inside to treat the persistent affliction of loneliness that preys upon him when he is in port.

His deeply-wrinkled, tanned face, the scar that runs from the bridge of his nose and across his left cheek, the what seems to be permanent sneer carved into his mouth, and the reptilian cold of his gray-blue eyes suggest he has encountered worse in his life than whatever riff-raff might be out and about in search of easy pickings from visiting Aussies, Yanks, and Europeans.

His bowed legs sweep forward in a steady, rolling gait as though they are striding the bridge deck of the Picayune—the LSD² turned freighter that he has considered his wandering home for a bit less than ten years—as she slowly rolls up and over long Pacific swells. Unanchored as she is to any particular place or nationality, he is in no hurry to return to her; rather, he—Captain Matthew Stump—is eager to meet the Englishman who has promised to be waiting for him inside the strangely-named La Luna Morte.

The Englishman, Edward Carlyle—Teddy to his closest friends—has sent him a sealed note by way of a self-proclaimed, “son homme préféré,” (*his favorite man*) a young and very

² A dock landing ship (also called landing ship, dock or LSD) is an amphibious warfare ship with a well deck to transport and launch landing craft and amphibious vehicles. A ship with a well deck can transfer cargo to landing craft in rougher seas than a ship that has to use cranes or a stern ramp. (Wikipedia)

handsome, tall and fit envoy with extensive and complex geometric tattoos on both arms, which had suggested to Stump that the man was more likely Marquesan than Tahitian. In the small bar situated in a corner of the worn public room of L'Hôtel Parisien, the hotel Stump frequents when the Picayune docks in Pape'ete, the young man had offered two observations before he relinquished the note.

First, he noted that his boss, Carlyle, called him Hank, a name the young man claimed to hate because his actual name was Mahana, but he was mentioning the offensive "Hank," he told Stump, because it might be referred to in the note (it was not). Second, Mahana had declared he was the Englishman's favorite in a tone of voice that hinted, he, Mahana, was to be respected or there would be unpleasant consequences. Stump had reason to believe Mahana might be the *only* person in Carlyle's service at the moment, and Stump's response to the implied threat was an expressionless glare that resulted in the immediate transfer of the note to Stump, which had been followed by Mahana's hasty departure.

Stump had watched Mahana exit the public room before opening the note, which had been handwritten by Carlyle in a surprisingly illegible hand. The penmanship did not match Stump's recollection of the quintessential English snob that he had met a year before when Picayune's hook had been dropped in deep water opposite Atuona on the Marquesan island of Hiva Oa. The freighter had been offloading supplies for a small group of archeologists on assignment from the recent Heyerdahl expedition, of which Carlyle—the man Stump expects to be

waiting for him inside La Luna Morte—had been a member. Knowing that the Heyerdahl group had finished their analysis of stone tikis on Hiva Oa and had dispersed to their respective academic lairs some months before, it is the fact of Carlyle’s having remained behind that has piqued Stump’s curiosity. It is the only reason he has not ignored Carlyle’s request to meet.

It is Stump’s experience that once exposed to the heat, humidity, tropical diseases and parasites, and to his view, the decidedly non-Western lethargy of the remnants of a once complex and proud Polynesian culture, university-educated types like Carlyle are prone to depart as soon as they can, *unless* they find some lucrative and usually illegal venture that grabs the black heart of greed that Stump is convinced lurks inside each of us. It is the “unless” that is pulling Stump toward La Luna Morte and has his own black heart palpitating. He knows better than to acknowledge it by appearing eager and has extended his stroll thirty minutes past the time Carlyle has requested they meet.

Stump, wearing a worn but serviceable seersucker jacket over an open-collared and yellowing, white dress shirt, wrinkled khaki slacks, and his boater, now pulled tighter and tilted slightly forward on his head, drops a half-finished cigarette onto the sidewalk outside La Luna Morte. He grinds the fag into the concrete with the toe of a black boot, pulls open the heavy wood door of the bar and enters a dimly lit space perhaps forty feet square.

He knows the bartender, René, an expatriate sailor from Marseille who discovered Tahiti would be a good place to wait out the war after the freighter, in which he had been signed on

as a novice seaman, had been torpedoed and had sunk beneath him. René had decided to stay for good after “marrying” a fourteen-year-old, Tiare, who, now haggard and plump and looking near twice her twenty-seven years, shuffles barefoot in a dirty pareo among the small, round tables scattered in the space between La Luna Morte’s entrance and a bar running half the length of the back wall, wearily waiting on the half-dozen solitary expats in the bar who are in the synergistic process of getting drunk and licking life-inflicted wounds.

René, squinting from the smoke of a cigarette held between his lips, nods a cool welcome to Stump and then jerks his head toward a table in the darkest corner of the bar. A slightly balding, black-haired man in a wrinkled, white linen suit sits there with his back to the door: a sign in a place such as this of either stupidity or a lack of worldly experience, but possibly both, Stump thinks.

He approaches the man and inquires with a graveled voice honed by years of shouting commands into the wind from a bridge deck, “Carlyle?”

It is the face of the man Stump knows that turns his way, and when he recognizes Stump, the man stands and extends his hand. Is it possible that Carlyle is ever so slightly unsteady on his legs, Stump wonders? He shakes Carlyle’s hand, which, when Stump releases it, retrieves the half-consumed cigar that protrudes, Churchill-like, from the Englishman’s face.

“Wasn’t sure you were going to make it, old chap,” Carlyle says in a low voice as he glances at his wristwatch and gestures toward the opposite chair.

Carlyle runs his hand over his thinning and slicked back hair as he waits for Stump to sit. Carlyle follows suit, and as he settles into his chair, he tips ashes in the ashtray positioned in the center of the small table, stares at the captain, and waits for his reply. Stump extracts a gold cigarette case from his pocket, takes out a cigarette, and while in the process of lighting it, prevaricates in a diminished voice that matches Carlyle's: "Held up on board."

After exhaling his first drag, Stump is more truthful: "If it's not one thing, it's another."

"In port long?"

"The usual," Stump replies as he shifts his chair and positions himself so that he can cross his legs.

"And then off to the Marquesas."

"The usual," Stump confirms as he watches Tiare waddle toward the bar.

"And then the Gilbert's before heading on to Honolulu, I presume?"

The captain takes a long drag on the fag, turns, places the cigarette on the ashtray, and looks into Carlyle's eyes.

In a tone as emotionless as his ice-cold stare, Stump grumbles, "Why the fuck am I here, Teddy? More importantly, why are *you* here?"

"I've been waiting for *you*."

Stump leans forward with his forearms on the table, clasps his hands, and stares at Carlyle, taps on the table with his right forefinger, and says, "Not *here*, Teddy. Pape'ete."

Carlyle glances at Tiare, who is approaching the table. He looks at Stump and with a slight jerk of his head toward the serveuse, looks at the ashtray, and pulls on the cigar.

Stump sits back and stares at this presumptuous Englishman until Tiare interrupts, “Que puis-je vous obtenir capitaine?”
(What can I get you, Captain?)

“Cognac ma beauté.”

Tiare raises an eyebrow, sniffs a rebuttal, and with a sweep of her hand, she asks, “Quel genre? Nous avons beaucoup!”
(What kind? We have many!)

Stump’s mouth approaches a smile but subsides into its usual sneer as he responds, “Courvoisier, Chère.”

Tiare smiles but shakes her head as she turns to Carlyle: “Monsieur?”

“Amenez-nous deux,” *(Bring us two)* Carlyle requests.

The two men watch Tiare shuffle away, and when she reaches the bar, Stump reaches across the table and grips Carlyle’s forearm in his left hand.

“Why am I here?” Stump asks for the second time, the words low, drawn-out and threatening.

Carlyle looks down at Stump’s hand for a beat, and then yanks his arm free.

“I’m here to make you a proposition,” Carlyle says calmly before drawing on his cigar.

“Do it then,” Stump demands with a furtive glance about the room as he sizes up each of the other half dozen men in La Luna Morte.

He turns his gaze back to Carlyle, who looks at the ashtray, butts out the cigar, and leans slightly forward. From the inside pocket of his jacket, Carlyle extracts a slightly bulging and elongated, black leather wallet. It makes a light thump when Carlyle places it on the table suggesting the contents have some heft; he slides the wallet slowly toward Stump.

The captain looks at the wallet, again glances around the room, and then looks into Carlyle's eyes. Carlyle returns the look with a nod and expression that conveys, *go ahead; open it*. Stump does not lift the wallet from the table but opens it far enough to look inside, closes it quickly and slides it back to Carlyle. What Stump has seen, he surmises, is Carlyle's "unless."

With a tinge of sarcasm, Stump says, "I presume it's not a present, but if it were, I'd have to decline it."

Carlyle retrieves the wallet, and as he slips it back inside his jacket, his eyes gather a fiery intensity that his English reticence cannot restrain. He asks, "Did you *see* them?"

"You saw me look," says Stump as he lights another cigarette.

Tiare returns and deposits their Cognacs on the table. Carlyle says "Merci" and waits for her to walk away before turning back to Stump.

"Yes, but did you *see* them?"

What Stump is certain he sees is the extreme effort Carlyle is making to restrain an apparent sense of urgency. The captain takes a drag on the cigarette as he stares into the Englishman's eyes, taps an ash into the ashtray, and offers a slow nod that conveys, *Yes, I saw them*.

“Well?” Carlyle asks.

“Well, what?”

“There’s three dozen of them in there,” Carlyle whispers earnestly with a pat at a place on his jacket behind which the envelope rests.

“Three dozen?”

“Yes, *three dozen*, and that’s just a portion of the lot, the rest of which I’ve stashed at Atuona,” Carlyle responds in an emphatic whisper, “each one perfect. Perfect! And their dimensions...” Carlyle rolls his eyes to accentuate his reference to the size of what is in the envelope.

Stump raises his glass and says, “Felicitations,” as though he sees such things every day; and then he downs the Cognac in a single swallow.

Carlyle hisses his whispered response: “I don’t want your fucking felicitations.”

Stump glares at Carlyle for a beat, then turns toward Tiare, who is staring at their table, raises his empty glass and points at himself and Carlyle. Tiare nods in response and steps toward the bar. Carlyle downs his Cognac and stares at Stump who sees frustration in the Englishman’s eyes.

“What do you want?” Stump asks in an even, casual tone.

“I need a friend.”

“A friend?” Stump replies with as close to a smile as he can make.

He leans forward to continue but sees Tiare approaching and waits until she has placed the Cognacs in front of them before continuing; his whispered reply is cold and challenging: “You

don't want a friend, Carlyle. You want a fucking conspirator. Are you out of your mind wanting to meet me here to propose this? Half the yokels in this bar could be in the employ of the French. Hell, I think the only reason René stays in business is because the authorities subsidize this place as a spot they can use to monitor just the kind of business you're proposing."

"You don't know what I'm proposing," Carlyle protests.

"Oh, don't I?"

"No!"

"Enlighten me."

Like a reflex that is a tell for an amateur about to commit his soul to the devil, Carlyle glances over his shoulder, then turns back to Stump and says, "Tikehau."

"I know it. What about it?"

"Pristine. Untouched. Uninhabited."

"Uninhabited? Since when?"

"When was the last time you were there?" Carlyle asks.

"I've never."

"You said you know it."

"I've sailed by it every time I go from here to Rangiroa, or if the Picayune is headed directly to the Marquesas. No need to stop," Stump says. "There's a bit of a village on the southernmost motu,³ Tuherahera, or some such thing."

"Less than a dozen people are still there."

"Not uninhabited," says Stump.

³ Motu: an islet formed by broken coral and sand that, along with others, comprises the visible outer ring of an atoll

“Quite right, but only a few natives, two families that are destitute.”

“A few natives living on an atoll with a robust population of fish in its lagoon and lots of coconut palms on its motus are never destitute,” Stump counters.

“No authorities of any kind,” Carlyle offers, “Not since the end of the war.”

Stump makes a mental note of this and has already assumed that Carlyle has located an untouched bed of black-lipped pearl oysters, perhaps a substantial one, but he remains unsure as to what Carlyle needs from him. He *is* sure of the competence of the French authorities and their universal distrust of people like the captains of tramp freighters and visiting intellectuals, but he has seen the pearls in the wallet and knows if there is a way to get them to the world pearl market, there is money to be made. Still, he is wary of amateurs, especially rapacious amateurs of which Carlyle is likely one. They do not know what they do not know, he thinks. And yet...

“I still don’t know what you want from me. The passé into the lagoon is too shallow even for the Picayune,” Stump says, “and a passing aircraft couldn’t fail to notice her standing-to off some isolated motus of a nearly deserted atoll.”

“Getting them out of Tikehau is my worry, not yours,” says Carlyle with another reflexive glance over his shoulder.

“You’d be right about that,” Stump says as he finishes his Cognac and again raises it toward Tiare who Stump knows has been watching him and Carlyle conspire. He sees Tiare pass the

order on to René and then turns his attention back to the Englishman.

“So, let me see if I’ve got an idea where this is going,” Stump begins, “Instead of putting those black beauties in your pocket, or at the bottom of a sock roll in your trunk, and finding yourself back in England with a nice little nest egg, you’re looking to...”

Stump notices Tiare approaching with their Cognacs and waits for her to drop them off and depart before he locks eyes with Carlyle and continues in the same conspiratorial tone that Tiare has interrupted: “So instead of being smart, you’re thinking you’re brilliant and have a way to get some thousands of U.S. dollars’ worth of black pearls...”

“*Hundreds* of thousands,” Carlyle interrupts.

“*Hundreds* of thousands,” Stump scoffs. He downs his Cognac and continues, “You think I’m gluttonous enough to get involved in this, this, whatever this is, which at the moment is nothing short of preposterous.”

“It’s not preposterous.”

“You’re going to have to explain,” Stump says. “Who’s going to work the bed if there are so few people on the island?”

Carlyle replies matter-of-factly, “My man has put together a team of three trusted boys from Rangiroa as we speak.”

“Telling them what?” Stump asks.

“Nothing. All they will know is, if they go with Hank to a destination that will remain unknown until after they’ve left Pape’ete, they will end up rich beyond their wildest dreams.”

“This Hank is the boy I’ve met?”

“The same.”

“He’s what, sixteen or seventeen?”

“Eighteen.”

“Oh, *eighteen*,” Stump chuckles.

“What does his age matter if he knows his craft, can stay down for three minutes, and owes me his freedom?”

Stump decides there is no need to proceed further on this line of fantasy and asks, “Let’s assume you have the divers you need; how do you move the pearls and to where? You can’t bring them here. Too many big ears, too many loose lips, too many authorities eager to get their own piece of confiscated contraband.”

Carlyle leans back in his chair, downs his Cognac, smiles like Carroll’s famous cat, and responds by ticking off four things on his fingers: “Copra,⁴ Hiva Oa, the Picayune, and the Holy Spirit.”

* * *

Mou'a 'Orohena’s⁵ snaggleteeth peak has been in view on the horizon for hours, but the entire mass of volcanic rock that is Tahiti is now visible from the Serenity’s deck. White and billowing clouds are being blown west-northwestward from the extinct volcano by the ever-reliable trade winds, winds that are also driving the sixty-foot, steel-hulled yawl at ten knots over

⁴ The dried meat or kernel of the coconut, which is the fruit of the coconut palm (*Cocos nucifera*). Coconut oil is extracted from copra, making it an important agricultural commodity for many coconut-producing countries. It also yields de-fatted coconut cake after oil extraction, which is mainly used as feed for livestock. From Wikipedia

⁵ An extinct volcano located on Tahiti; with an elevation of 7352 feet above sea level, it is the highest point of French Polynesia.

long Pacific swells, some of which were born almost five-thousand-miles away along the coast of Peru.

To Bill Benton's almost eighteen-year-old eyes—over twenty hours removed from sleep—the westward moving clouds appear to have been birthed by a single cloud attached like a streamer to 'Orohena's highest heaven-piercing tooth. Benton's eyes are burning from sun and salt, but he is not about to close them as the destination of this months-long escape is in sight. A young woman's voice comes wafting back from the bow to the center cockpit as the Serenity's stern rises to another trade-wind-born swell.

“Can you see Pape'ete?” asks the voice.

Bill looks beyond Bambi—the bare-breasted eighteen-year-old who has called out to him—and as the Serenity crests the swell, he spies a thin, bright-beige line that divides the bottom center of the mass of vegetation and volcanic rock that is Tahiti, from the rolling Pacific that surrounds the island.

“I can,” he replies loud enough for Bambi to hear.

She directs a broad smile in his direction before turning her eyes—behind aviator sunglasses identical to the ones Bill is wearing—to another sailboat a quarter of a mile ahead and to windward of the Serenity: Marty and Mary Sterling's Moorea. The privacy afforded to sailors by distance and isolation at sea seems insufficient to Bill as he considers that Bambi—his partner in this scandalous escape—is standing in the bow with one hand on the forestay, naked but for the bottoms of the bikini she had insisted on buying during their stopover at Kahului on Maui.

Their destination is an hour away on this broad reach⁶ with all sails set, Bill thinks; perhaps some minutes more. There is a fleeting recognition of the miracle of their being here, and not for the first time, he has a fleeting feeling of alarm at being discovered as a fraud, a boy masquerading as a man. Were he a man, he thinks, he would not be blushing about Bambi's present state of undress being visible to the Sterlings on the Moorea, and as he thinks this, he sees Mary at the stern rail of the ketch—Mary being twice the age Bambi has told Mary *he* is—take off her shirt, and now bare-breasted herself, wave it over her head in their direction; Bambi waves an earnest and laughing response.

Bill understands that these uninhibited indiscretions are a result of what had transpired three days before on the sands of an isolated motu of Rangiroa. Only a year older than he is chronologically but much older in practice, Bambi has set the tempo for their relationship, and on the day in question, after some extended and suggestive bantering among Bambi, Marty and Mary—fueled by the Sterling's last bottle of rum—Bambi had laughingly dared Mary to teach her how a “mature and proper woman” should kiss a man. Mary had complied, and the resulting long and passionate kiss between her and Bambi had led to an erotic experience among the four of them that Bill cannot get out of his head.

⁶ A point of sail: a sailing craft's direction of travel in relation to the true wind direction; at 135° off the wind, a craft is on a "broad reach".

Acquiescing only in matters related to the handling and navigation of the Serenity, Bambi has usurped control in every other aspect of Bill's life, which began with what he has come to suspect was a contrived set of circumstances and emotional outpourings on Bambi's part that overwhelmed his naïve and needy heart. Bill has not confronted her with this suspicion of manipulation, and he cannot imagine a reason why he would do so because he knows he is on the razor's edge of what he believes anyone would consider a reckless affair. He has been worrying that one misstep on his part might sever the connection between them.

What can he do, he wonders, but accept without protest what has transpired, accept the fact that the image of Marty and Bambi entwined on a blanket spread on the sand of the tiny motu has been seared into his brain? He sees them together when he closes his eyes, thinks about what happened when there is not enough going on to distract him, and he blushes with the thought of another image: that of Mary, who is almost old enough to be his grandmother, her face inches above his own and contorted with pleasure. It was thinking about that moment at length yesterday when Bambi was below and making sandwiches, which had aroused him and made him feel like a cheat.

Bill had endured older boys bragging in locker rooms about their conquests with girls, claims that he suspected contained more imagination than conquest, events—real or conjured—that could not compare with what he has now experienced, but instead of some sort of perverse pride, he feels ashamed. He had made a feeble attempt to engage in the teasing repartee that arose

from the other three conspirators as they rowed from the motu back to their respective boats at anchor in the lagoon, and he had done his best to act blasé the next morning as the four of them finalized their plans for the two-hundred-mile sail from Rangiroa to Tahiti. The four would be landing at Pape’ete together, and knowing this, Bill dreads being in the intimate proximity of the Sterlings that is inevitable.

“What the hell do I say to them?” he says aloud.

“Did you say something, Billy?” Bambi calls out as she steps along the windward deck with one hand on the lifeline.

Bill gives her a little wave to convey that what he said was of no consequence and does his best to pretend that the memory of Bambi—with whom he knows he is desperately in love—having sex with another man, a much older man, is the farthest thing from his mind. Bambi climbs into the cockpit with the ease of someone who has grown comfortable moving about a rolling and pitching vessel in the open ocean and stands with the binnacle and steering wheel between herself and Bill. She grabs the binnacle with both hands and smiles a provocateur’s smile. Bill does not want to look at her or convey anything but disdain, but he is seventeen, and she is long and lithe with tanned and flawless skin covering a body that is a powerful testimony to her youth.

He feels himself responding physically and blushes. Bambi’s dark eyes flash understanding as she sees his cheeks darken beneath his deep-brown, sailor’s tan. She closes her eyes and shakes her head to let the trades comb her long dark hair. When

she opens her eyes, her expression turns coy, and she says, “You’ve been acting weird ever since we left Rangiroa.”

“I have not.”

“Oh, yes you have, Buster. I can read you like a book,” she declares with a smile of affection, not cynicism. “I know what’s buggin’ you.”

“Nothing’s buggin’ me,” Bill replies in a way that he knows is unconvincing.

“*Ran-gi-ro-a*,” Bambi taunts in singsong as she stares at him and smiles.

Bill pretends to ignore her by looking at the compass and then at the luff of the genoa, to which Bambi responds by grabbing his chin and turning his eyes to hers.

“It was just sex, Billy. We were just playing around, that’s all.”

“When you and I play around like that, it’s...well...we used to call it making love,” Bill taunts before returning his gaze to the trim of the sails.

“You aren’t *jealous*, are you? He’s twice your *age!*”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know,” she responds. “Is that why you’re upset? That he’s twice your age?”

“Maybe he knows more than I do. Maybe you want a man, not a boy. Maybe you play around with me because I’m convenient. You find one other guy in the middle of the damned South Pacific and *voila!*”

“*Voila?*” Bambi laughs in surprise. “You’re saying ‘*voila*’ to me like we’re in Miss Tolleson’s French class? I was watching

you with Mary. Seems like you had a bit of a goddamn ‘voila’ yourself, Bucko.”

“I don’t like it when you swear.”

“I don’t give a fuck whether you like it or not,” Bambi laughs. “Come on Billy, you know you’re not the boss of me, just like I’m not the boss of you.”

Bill snorts a response and looks past Bambi to their destination.

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” she challenges.

Bill glances at Bambi before returning his gaze to the compass and sails. He can see she is not angry, and certainly not confused, at least not as confused as he feels. The absence of apparent anger on her part sends a chill of relief down his spine; he recognizes this conversation is exploring new territory. He also recognizes that Bambi is studying him with questioning eyes, her lips pressed together but lifting into a slight smile. He decides—as he does at some point every day—that she is the most beautiful girl he has ever known, but he also knows that she is the most mystifying person with whom he has ever had to deal.

He looks into her searching eyes and cannot refrain from blurting out, “What?”

“You’re *scared*,” she declares in a tone colored with surprise.

Bill has never admitted fear to anyone before, and there is something worrisome about the possibility of doing so now. He senses Bambi might like him less, maybe even reject him if he acknowledges what he thinks is a declaration of weakness, but he imagines the loneliness of being friendless thousands of miles

from home, and despite his inexperience, he thinks that this person challenging him may, in fact, be challenging him as a friend. It is that, he decides, that is a gift this audacious young woman has given to him, a friendship that has provided the strength and moxie needed for two teenagers to steal his step-father's sailboat, survive a terrible knockdown in a North Pacific storm, and find Maui—a needle in a liquid, blue-green haystack—and now, Tahiti lies dead ahead.

Bambi breaks into his reverie, and with a broader smile asks, “Are you?”

“Am I what?” Bill responds with a smile of his own.

“Billy!”

“What if I am?”

“Do you think this is the first time I've seen you scared?”

The question takes Bill aback, and his response is to look into her eyes, which, because they are both wearing sunglasses is frustratingly impossible to do.

“How about the first time I asked if you'd let me kiss you?” she chuckles. “Or when my father appears out of the blue, and I have to introduce you as my boyfriend in the middle of our getting ready to run off? Or—here's a good one—when I fired a shot at the Sheriff at Friday Harbor? And none of those things were even half as scary as the storm. Come on Billy, I love it that I've known you were scared because you came through like my very own hero every time.”

“Dumb luck.”

“Bullshit,” Bambi counters.

She stands on her tip toes, leans across the binnacle and the wheel, closes her eyes and kisses him. Stepping around the wheel, she sits next to him on the curved helmsman's bench, puts her arm around him, and leans her head against his shoulder.

"Don't you see? I've been way more scared than you, lots of times, and your being scared too didn't make it worse, it made it okay because you were brave enough to actually deal with the scary shit." She leans away from Bill, makes a broad gesture toward Tahiti, and says, "Look where the hell we are, Billy!"

Bambi leans back into him, and after a few minutes, asks, "So what is it that makes what happened on Rangiroa scarier than the rest?"

"I don't know," Bill lies.

Still snuggling into him, she turns her eyes toward his and responds, "I think you do, silly boy. I think you're afraid you might lose me. Isn't that it?"

"If I say 'yes,' you'll think I think I own you."

"Will I?"

"You just told me I'm not the boss of you."

"I did, didn't I? Well, this is *different*," Bambi replies.

"How so?"

"I don't know," she sighs.

"And if I say I'm not scared of losing you?"

"You'd be lying," Bambi chuckles and hugs him tighter.

Bill smiles not just because of her little joke; he knows she is correct. What happened on Rangiroa unsettled what up until that moment had been a given.

“I don’t mean this like I own you—I know I don’t—but until the other day, I thought you were mine, kinda like I think a husband would feel about his wife.”

“We’re not married, Billy.”

“You told the Sterlings we *were*, Bambi, and we’ve been doing a pretty damned good imitation of it down to the dime-store rings we’re wearing. You even told them we were *twenty-six!*”

“If we told them the truth about our ages, they’d never ever buy the idea that we were married. I figured if they knew we were just kids, it would scare them off.”

“So?”

“So?” Bambi asks in reply. “We’ve needed them, Billy. We’d never have managed the refit in Kahului or even thought about passports, let alone how to get them. They *got* us here. Look where we *are*. We *needed* them.”

Bill sighs, shakes his head and looks out at the open Pacific.

“What?” Bambi challenges.

Bill looks into her eyes and says, “Everything feels upside down.”

“Maybe that’s just because we’re in the Southern Hemisphere,” Bambi offers with a smile.

“Very funny,” Bill scoffs.

Bambi cocks her head and with a melancholy smile says, “You really didn’t get a kick out of it, what happened with Mary and Marty?”

“No!” Bill says with more petulance than he would have wished.

“You should keep that to yourself,” Bambi says gently. “It would hurt Mary’s feelings.”

“Jesus, I’m not going to talk with them about it.”

“Okay.”

“But *you* sure seemed to like it, like you wanted it to happen, I mean,” Bill observes with some pique. “Didn’t you even think about how I might feel?”

Bambi gets up, straddles his lap, and replies, “I thought you’d be excited about something so wild, so amazing.”

“It was amazing, alright,” Bill says sarcastically, but he feels his anger subsiding as Bambi’s intimate position distracts him.

“Come on, Billy. It was Mary’s idea.”

“What?”

“She could see you two watching us kissing and whispered, ‘I think they’re getting turned on,’ and I said, ‘So am I,’ and she said, ‘You know, you’d be a treat for Marty after thirty years of only eating apple pie,’ and that was that.”

“That’s what she said? That was all it took for you to get all, you know, whatever?”

Bambi presses against him and says, “Billy B, it seems just talking about it is all it takes to get *you* whatevered.”

Bill looks into Bambi’s smiling eyes, sees she is as aroused as he is, and for a fleeting moment, he wonders if it would be possible to sail a boat and make love at the same time.

* * *

Edward Carlyle is staring five-hundred-yards across the Pape’ete Harbor at the Picayune, which is anchored fore and aft, and sees

a man he assumes is Captain Stump emerge from the diminutive pilot house at the top of the converted LSD. He watches Stump climb down a portside ladder to a rounded deck that protrudes over the deck below, where, Carlyle surmises—his having been a Royal Navy Officer—twin anti-aircraft guns had been mounted in wartime.

The intractable American, wearing a white uniform and his straw boater, steps toward the forward edge of the small gun deck, leans against the railing and gazes in the direction of two sailboats that have entered the harbor mouth under sail. Carlyle has also been watching the sailboats, as he idly whiles away the hot and humid afternoon beneath a banyan tree near where Rue Jeanne d'Arc meets Boulevard Pomare.

“Dear Lord,” he mutters, “I’ll be damned if I don’t feel like a bloody salmon poaching in a pot.”

Carlyle had noticed the sailboats over an hour before when he had seen two tiny triangles of white rising above the horizon. They ultimately revealed themselves to be the mainsails of a big sloop and a yawl, and as they had drawn closer, Carlyle had seen that they were moving swiftly, and had at their bows what clipper captains would have called “bones in their teeth.”

“Impressive,” he says aloud when he realizes both skippers intend to carry full sail into the harbor.

With the word seeming to hang in the dense air that envelopes him, Carlyle watches the sails come down smartly, with short crews for such large yachts no less.

Again, he says, “Impressive,” and takes a drag on a well-used corona.

The first vessel to venture toward the inner harbor—the sloop—is a white-hulled lady with a sheerline that appeals to Carlyle’s aesthetic sensibilities, helmed by a woman—he notes with some surprise—as a man stands at the bow, a man perhaps Carlyle’s own age, he thinks, even though he knows that at a quarter mile such a judgement is suspect. The second yacht is less likely to inspire an artist, he judges, but there is something about the robust beam and plumb bow of the black-hulled yawl that does appeal. She has the look, Carlyle thinks, of a lady capable of dealing with nasty seas without complaining.

“Something I’ve seldom encountered with any female of the *human* species,” Carlyle, with a chuckle, offers to no one.

He takes a long, satisfied draw on his diminished cigar, removes it and raises it slightly in welcome to the two new additions to the diverse fleet of vessels already at anchor in the harbor. As he returns the cigar to his lips, his gaze redirects to Stump, who appears to be as interested in the sailboats as is he. The two conspirators watch the inconsequential drama of the yachts dropping anchor a hundred yards from where Carlyle is seated, the sloop being the first to round into the wind, the bowman waiting until the yacht has lost her way before he drops the hook.

As the second yacht approaches, Carlyle’s eyes snap to the person standing within the yawl’s bow pulpit. In what tourists are surprised to learn is the outwardly prudish environment of Pape’ete, thanks to the adamant and decades-long persistence of Catholic and Protestant missionaries, Carlyle blinks at what he thinks must be an apparition: standing ready to release the

anchor is a dark-haired, bronzed and shapely young woman wearing sunglasses and what appear to be scanty black panties and an equally scanty black brassiere.

A few dozen men and women of all stripes have been traversing the promenade, some strolling, others moving with apparent intention, and among them, a few heads nonchalantly turn to watch the arriving sailboats. When the bodies attached to those heads stop and turn toward the water, other pedestrians follow suit until it seems to Carlyle that every person along the Boulevard is watching the near nude young woman at the bow of the black-hulled sailboat perform the process of dropping anchor with efficacy. And they continue to watch the yawl, on the stern of which Carlyle can see the name *Serenity*, as the woman, having waited for the yacht to snug up on its anchor chain, walks aft.

Looking toward the town, the young woman sees the eyes turned toward her and waves in earnest at the assembled spectators before dropping below into the *Serenity*'s aft cabin. The voyeurs, having been discovered, resume their strolls with something of self-consciousness about them. Carlyle, unable to restrain a momentary and involuntary blush, turns his attention to *Serenity*'s skipper.

"Why, he looks to be hardly more than a boy," Carlyle observes aloud, takes another puff on his cigar, and asks under his breath. "I wonder, is there anyone else aboard, an owner perhaps?"

Without turning around, Carlyle snaps his fingers toward the adjacent banyan tree, and a young man, seated on the lawn and

leaning against one of the tree's thick, aerial prop roots, turns his head toward the Englishman. With little effort, the man, Mahana Tetuanui, stands and stretches. Six feet in height and angular in form, the geometric designs of Marquesan tattoos⁷ are visible on the parts of his forearms that are beyond the reach of his linen shirt's shortened sleeves. Wearing an expression of superiority on a handsome face that suggests a European's genetic influence, Mahana exudes nonchalance.

Carlyle turns toward Mahana with a look of exaggerated annoyance and says, "Chop, chop, boy...and you can wipe that expression, whatever it is, off your face!"

For an instant, Mahana appears conflicted, then he casts his eyes down and his shoulders slump forward. Carlyle raises an eyebrow and smiles at Mahana's response, which, he thinks, is very much like that of a chastised dog.

"That's better, Hank, old chap. No need for arrogance here with me, who, I'd say, you know to be your good friend. Come closer; I have something for you to do."

Mahana approaches his boss man and hunkers down on his haunches next to the bench.

"You've been watching that black-hulled sailboat out there, right?"

"E." (*Yes*)⁸

⁷ Tattoo designs originating from the Marquesas Islands (that) can be recognized by 'trademark symbols', such as geckos, centipedes, Tikis, the Marquesan Cross and other geometric designs like consistent renderings of lines, arches and circles. From Wikipedia.

⁸ In te roa, the native Tahitian language.

“And that boy walking aft?”

“E.”

“I haven’t seen but one other soul aboard, a young woman...the very lovely young woman you have been ogling,” Carlyle says in a tone that causes Mahana to glance at the Englishman.

“Ah hem,” Carlyle continues, “I want you to watch them, follow them if they come ashore, meet them if you can, and find out where they’re from, what their intentions are. Do you understand?”

“A.” (*Yes, maybe*)⁹

Carlyle looks askance at Mahana and then extracts a handful of coins from his trouser pocket. He chooses seven, one-hundred-franc coins, stacks them and returns what remains to his pocket.

“Here,” Carlyle says as he extends the stack of coins toward Mahana. “Offer to buy them a coffee or tea or some such thing. Keep whatever’s left for yourself.

* * *

“I feel like somebody’s old maiden aunt,” Bambi grouses as she and Bill walk from a provisioner on Boulevard Pomare toward where they have beached their dinghy.

“You look anything but,” Bill says as he rebalances the packages he is carrying.

⁹ In te roa

Bambi appreciates what she believes is yet another loving lie from the handsome boy walking beside her. He has not seen her in a blouse and skirt since the day before they departed Port Townsend for the South Pacific, unbeknownst to anyone they loved or knew, and she has not missed wearing what she is wearing on this day: her school “uniform” of blouse, skirt, bobby sox and penny loafers.

Fortunate, she thinks, that she thought to bring this outfit given what Mary Sterling had told her this morning about the norms of dress in Pape’ete, which had surprised Bambi given what she had presumed she would find here. No wonder people on the quay had been staring at her when the Serenity had arrived yesterday. Well, too bad for them if they found me and my bikini offensive, she thinks.

“The old prudes,” Bambi mutters.

“What?” Bill asks.

“Just thinking out loud.”

“About what? Oh, wait. You’re still embarrassed about what Mary said about our ‘grand entrance’ yesterday.”

“I’m not embarrassed!”

“Okay,” responds Bill, stretching out the word to convey his doubt about Bambi’s assertion.

“I hope I gave them something to think about.”

“I’m sure you did. I know the sight of you in a bikini gives *me* something to think about,” Bill says with a grin.

Along with a smirk, Bambi delivers a backhand smack to Bill’s arm. He is so sweet, she acknowledges to herself, and then she has a flicker of unanchored discomfort, which has been

happening more frequently as of late, something, she recalls, about which she and Mary had talked that morning after Bill had rowed to the Moorea with Marty to help him replace a corroded tang, whatever the hell that was.

After the men had rowed off, Mary had made herself a pot of coffee without asking permission as Bambi, seated behind the salon table, watched the older woman completing the task as if the boat belonged to her. During the first days of their weeks spent together on Maui, Bambi had accepted Mary's sometimes parent-like audaciousness as being related to the age differential between them, complicated by what Bambi knew had become her and Bill's almost childlike dependence on the Sterlings. The two women had smiled at one another as Mary plopped onto the starboard settee and tucked her bare feet beneath her.

"I wonder if we would have made it here without you two," Bambi had reflected, her tone more wistful than thankful.

"Absolutely not!" Mary had replied sarcastically, "but then again, Marty and I were bloody clueless on *our* first go-round—took us five years—but we bloody well made it didn't we? Not much older than you in a boat we found abandoned in a yard. The yardmaster was only too glad to get the bloody thing out of his hair. Took a lot of gumption, blood, sweat and tears for us to do what we did.

"Did most of the work ourselves, you know, getting her ready, and then we took odd jobs to make a go of it in ports all over the world. Marty had five-hundred a year from his father's estate, which seemed like a king's ransom during the depression, but I didn't have one bloody shilling to my name, and his five-

hundred didn't go as far as we thought it might, what with haul outs and refittings and new sails and new rigging, but we sailed her all the way around, didn't we? Gumption's a good word. We had it, and you two bloody well have it too, don't you? You'd've gotten here eventually. And then, the two of you are in love. That'll keep you going, eh?"

Bambi had looked into Mary's eyes, and Bambi knew what Mary had seen was a young woman struggling not to cry.

"Well you bloody well do, don't you? Love each other?" Mary had prodded.

"I don't know," Bambi had whispered, and then she had broken down.

In response, Mary had moved next to Bambi, put her arms around the younger woman, and had gently demanded, "Tell me what's wrong."

Bambi had leaned into Mary until her crying had subsided and then had responded, "I don't *know* what's wrong."

"I think you bloody well do," Mary had said and then glanced at the percolator: "The coffee's ready. It'll help us get to the bottom of what's got you topsy-turvy."

Bambi had watched Mary as the latter retrieved mugs, poured the coffee and added the two spoonsful of sugar that Mary liked. Is this what it would have been like to have had a mother, Bambi had wondered, and when Mary returned to sit next to Bambi at the table, Mary had noted the questioning look in Bambi's eyes.

"Penny for your thought," Mary had said before taking a tentative sip of her coffee.

Bambi had looked at Mary for a moment as if gauging whether she was being polite or if she really wanted to know.

“I was thinking about my mother,” Bambi had responded.

“Oh God, that makes me feel bloody old,” Mary had laughed. “Here I am thinking we’re mates!”

“We are for sure, but that’s just a little confusing on top of what happened on Rangiroa and what’s going on between Billy and me,” Bambi had replied.

“How so?”

“My mother left when I was a little girl, and *her* mother took me in for a while. Granny was more like a man than a woman...ran a small ranch with a few head of cattle. My Dad couldn’t stand her. Used to call her a bulldiker, if you get what I mean.”

“I get the drift. Go on.”

“Around when I first got my period, things got weird, and I went back to live with my Dad.”

“Okay...” Mary encourages.

“It was weird mostly because he was gone for two or three weeks at a time on his boat, in port for a week, and then back out again.”

“And you were how old?”

“I’d just turned twelve when I went back to live with him.”

“That’s awfully young to’ve started menstruating.”

“I’ve had a head start over everyone with those kinds of things.”

“Breasts? Taller than everyone, even the boys?”

“The works,” Bambi had replied.

“And let me guess, your father was bloody useless when it came to such things.”

“He was never home anyway.”

“You said ‘boat.’ A fisherman?”

“It’s how he made his living.”

“I’m getting a little confused because I’m not sure where I fit into...ah,” Mary had interrupted herself and asked, “You’ve never had a bloody meaningful relationship with an older woman, have you?”

“I’ve never had a relationship with a *mother*. It just seems like if my mother had been able to find a way to stay, maybe she would have been able to, I don’t know...”

“Be your Pole Star, guide your way and the like.”

“Mm hmm.”

“And then you stumble onto *these* old bones...”

“You’re not old!” Bambi had exclaimed.

“Nice try, mate, but thanks. So here I am, a surrogate mother—albeit unwittingly mind you—and what do I do? I make bloody love to you in front of our husbands. No wonder you’re confused.”

“I didn’t know it was possible for two women to, you know, get involved the way we did.”

“Crikey, I’d think that at your age, that’s something you might have stumbled across at some point.”

Bambi had blushed, taken a sip of coffee, and then had closed her eyes, shaken her head and said, “I’m not as old as you think I am.”

“Whatever do you mean? I think you’re as old as you *told* me you are. How bloody old *are* you?”

Bambi had taken a deep breath, looked into Mary’s eyes and replied, “I turn nineteen in a couple of weeks.”

Mary’s eyes had widened, and she had frowned, but only for a beat; then her expression softened, and she had chuckled, “You’re a bloody baby, aren’t you, you lovely devil you?”

Bambi had sheepishly mirrored the smile on Mary’s face, and the two of them had started to giggle until Mary had sat up with a start and blurted out, “Crikey! How bloody old is your husband?”

“He’s a year younger than *me*.”

Mary had sat back and howled in laughter; “You little ripper! Here I thought he was three sheets to the wind, but it wasn’t the booze. It was what we were *doing*. He was bloody *stunned*, wasn’t he?”

“He *was*.”

“Oh my God,” Mary had said, “I made love to a bloody baby, didn’t I?”

“Hardly a baby,” Bambi had replied with a bashful smile.

“You’re bloody right about that, mate. I’ll be buggered if I didn’t enjoy myself. *Enjoy* myself? Bloody came like a tsunami, didn’t I? Who taught him what to do, you?”

Bambi had smiled self-consciously and shrugged in reply, at which Mary had guffawed and said, “Let me tell you something, girlie, I can bloody well guarantee this is something you would never have talked about with your mother!”

After an energetic and mutual giggle, Mary and Bambi had settled back, and deep in reflection, they had finished their coffees. When she had drained her mug, Mary had placed it on the table, and in a tone more sober than that to which Bambi was accustomed, had observed, “This mood you’re in isn’t about mothers or what happened on Rangiroa, is it?”

Bambi had sighed and changed the subject with a question of her own: “How do you know if you’re in love with someone?”

Mary had turned her body toward Bambi and was looking straight into Bambi’s eyes when she had replied, “I think that’s a question that’s probably been asked since whenever people first invented questions.”

“Well then, shouldn’t I know the answer?”

“I don’t know whether you should or not, girly, not in words anyway. It’s the feeling, not the description. What you’re saying is that you don’t know whether you love the boy. Don’t forget, I’ve seen you two together. You look like you’re in love, young love perhaps, innocent and all, maybe naïve, but love certainly. Why are you questioning it?”

Bambi had turned her body toward Mary and had replied, “It’s not just one thing.”

“Tell me.”

“I never tell him I love him; well, I do, but it’s only after he says it first, and then I feel guilty—every time—that I’m just saying it because *he* said it, and when he says it, the *way* he says it sometimes sounds more like a question than a statement.

“Like he’s really saying, I love you, do you love me?”

“Exactly, and when he says it, I feel...I don’t know...I worry about hurting his feelings.”

“And you tell him you love him.”

“I do, but it feels more like an obligation than something sincere.”

“So, there’s never a time when you look at him that you feel your heart race, just a bit, at the sight of him?”

“I wouldn’t say never,” Bambi had replied, “but that only happens when I’m feeling, you know.”

“Do I?” Mary had scoffed but then had relented when Bambi leveled a libidinous look at her that could not be mistaken. “All right, mate, I know what you mean.”

“I’m feeling it now, don’t you see?” Bambi had asked, her voice suddenly low and husky. “Sometimes it feels like it owns me, the feeling, the...the wanting, and I can’t get it out of my mind, especially when I’m with someone I care about.”

“And you’re wondering if that’s love.”

“If it is, do I love *you* then?” Bambi had replied in a tone colored with more than simple conversation.

Mary had understood the implications of what Bambi had asked, but having lived decades longer than her companion, she had also grasped the complications.

“You’re attracted to me, is what you’re feeling—I can see that—but that’s not love, actual love, right? Maybe being in like, but not in love.”

“Is there something wrong with me?”

“It’s just bloody convention that makes you think that. Sheila’s can love each other, girlie, just like a bloke loves his wife,

but the world says it's wrong. Someday the world will change, if it ever figures out that people love who they love. What gets us bollixed is the sex thing, right? There's this thing where we assume we have to fall in love, don't we? I think we mistake the falling-into-love-business as thinking we want to spend the rest of our bloody lives with this person, when all we really want is to screw his bloody brains out, right?"

Both women had laughed, then Mary had continued in a more serious tone: "But sometimes we do fall into real love, don't we? We must because why else would poets spend so much bloody time cranking out poems about it, right? But I can tell you a secret, one I learned firsthand, one they don't tell young Sheila's like you. Falling in love, real love, can take a bloody long time, and between when the time comes that you no longer get all hot and bothered at the sight of your lover, and the time when just the sight of the old bother gives you this kind of bizarre fuzzy feeling that makes you feel warm all over—not hot, mind you, but warm—that's the bloody danger zone, that time in the middle.

"When we're in the danger zone, sex is the trap we fall into, girlie, when we think we're falling in love with a boy whose bones you want to jump. The trap gets bloody romanticized in novels and the cinema, and we're brain-washed to think it's love, but it isn't really, is it? Struth, I think feeling randy is just the stuff of loneliness or boredom or sometimes even revenge, and when you're my age, just the need to know somebody finds you bloody sexy can turn you on to someone you wouldn't otherwise have given a thought about."

“But on the beach, the last thing that happened was you and Marty...together...and it didn’t seem like it was because of loneliness or revenge or boredom...”

“Certainly not boredom,” Mary had chuckled.

Bambi had smiled when she continued, “Then what was I watching?”

“Two old mates deep in love, cementing the fact with one intense, serious screw, I suppose,” Mary had said with a contented smile, and then she had become more earnest: “We’ve been together for a long time, haven’t we, Marty and me, since well before the war. We’ve been through thick and thin, and the only thing I can say is that it was probably bloody love that saw us through. So, I can’t tell you what real love is, but I can tell you about what it does.

“If you saw something magical between Marty and me when we were making love, then what you saw was true love in the flesh, but as to what love *is*, I’m guessing that’s up to each of us to figure out. All I’m saying is, don’t get caught up in all the Hollywood nonsense about love; give you and your boy time for the pudding to rise before you decide.

“And beware of falling into that sex trap. It’ll get you if you’re wearing blinkers and aren’t on the lookout for it. I’m going to worry about you two, now that we’ve had this little chat, especially with us heading off for New Zealand in a couple of days, because I know friendship and shared experiences—or a good tussle under the covers— isn’t going to be enough to get you through the first months or years if you settle in these bloody islands. You can’t imagine how lonely you’re going to be at times,

and when you're in that bloody pit of loneliness—and you'll get there—the trap gets bigger and bigger, and to escape it, you two are going to come to the point where you realize how much you need each other, desperate-like, right?”

Bambi had looked away, her eyes on some imagined something about which Mary could only wonder, but Mary had persisted and again had asked, “Right?”

Bambi had returned her eyes to Mary's and replied, “Right,” but Bambi's mind had already begun to turn over in her mind the realities of how she and Bill had come to be in Pape'ete, about how duplicitous she had been in getting the boy to agree to leave his life and bring her here, and about the fear that what she had done was the first phase of what might prove to be a tumultuous mistake on her part.

As she walks along the promenade hours after she and Mary had parted that morning, Bambi glances at Bill and feels a slight palpitation. Is it the warm fuzzy thing that Mary had mentioned? He is handsome, isn't he, she thinks, and I know he loves me and would do anything for me—already has, in fact—but she asks herself, obligation and love aren't the same thing are they? What if my feelings for him are only born of gratitude for what he has done for me, or guilt about what I have caused him to leave behind? But then she considers what she has done for *him*. Without her, he would never have ventured on this remarkable journey, and what about her providing him with what she knows he has craved since she crawled under the covers on the bunk in Serenity's aft cabin at the end of the first day of this adventure.

What had Mary called it, the trap of sex? Maybe that was all it was for the two of them, she and Billy, a carnal attraction between the only two people in a boat in the middle of the Pacific. What if Bill's companion from Port Townsend had not been her but a man; would he have sex with him out of a kind of perverted desperation? Would Bill be as attracted to this imaginary crewman as she admits to herself that she has been attracted to Mary? She frowns because she feels angry for having thoughts unlikely to have entered her mind if she was still in Port Townsend. What would Billy think, she wonders, if he knew what she was thinking?

Look at him, she observes, toting all that stuff because he thinks it's what a loving husband should do. She feels a twinge of guilt at leaving Mary with believing the lie that she and Bill were, in fact, married, or was the twinge caused by the fear of being caught in another lie by this surrogate mother? Or was she revisiting her worry as to whether she truly loved this boy walking next to her? Bambi decides to venture a little experiment and gives her companion another but gentler backhand.

"What?" Bill asks with an eyebrow raised.

"I love you, Buster."

The words have the affect she has hypothesized: an affectionate smile cast toward her that conveys appreciation for what she has declared. The smile warms her heart, but it also brings another twinge of guilt.

It occurs to her that perhaps hers is a woman's love: an appreciation of a partner's commitment, a partner about whom the aphorism "love is blind" applies. Is that what has happened

between them? Is there something blinding that men succumb to? Is there something about me, she wonders, that has blinded this boy to all my faults? And is a woman's love something that is not a blind response, but a response contingent upon something else, something like Bill's clear devotion to her, his blind obedience to her wishes?

Perhaps, she thinks, it is her making love to him that blinds him, that makes him obedient. That would make him too much like a puppy, she thinks with a smile, but only for a beat because the thought has brought embarrassing feelings of manipulation and self-serving expediency. What else I am to do, she asks herself, if I expect to survive in this strange new world?

Bill breaks into her reverie with a question: "What's that guy doing with our dinghy?"

Bambi's gaze follows his eyes toward a young Polynesian man who is standing next to their beached, inflatable dinghy with his foot on its port tube.

"I think he's just looking," she replies.

"That better be all he's doing," Bill says.

"Or what?" Bambi asks with a curious smile.

"Or..."

Before he can finish, the young man sees them and waves at them. Bill and Bambi look a question at one another, then Bambi waves back and watches, as does Bill, as the young man sits on the dinghy, a clear declaration that he knows it belongs to them and that he intends to wait on them.

"What the hell does he want?" Bill asks.

"I'm guessing some service for a tip."

“Blood from a stone,” Bill mutters.

As Bill and Bambi near the dinghy, the man stands, and a broad smile appears on what Bambi decides is a very handsome face within a halo of long, curly black hair.

“Ia ora na! Maita’i oe.” (*Hello! How are you?*)

“I’m sorry,” Bambi responds, “we don’t...”

“You don’t speak te roa, but you are okay because I speak excellent English,” the man responds before rolling his eyes and continuing, “the only good thing about missionaries.”

The young man laughs, extends his hand to Bill, which Bill shakes, and then he says, “I am Mahana Tetuanui. My family, what’s left of them anyway, live on Fatu Hiva, but here I am in Tahiti, looking for new friends.”

“Fatu Hiva is in the Marquesas,” Bill says.

“It is! Have you been there?” Mahana asks.

“I’ve seen it on a chart.”

“A chart on your beautiful boat,” Mahana says.

Bill nods hesitantly, and Bambi senses a slight apprehension on Bill’s part, something she is not feeling as she looks at the Polynesian Adonis standing in front of her.

“Mahana is such a beautiful name,” she declares.

“It means ‘sun.’ I like to think my parents made me one day on the sand under a bright sun. I think, too, it is a beautiful name, but I don’t think anything could be more beautiful than you,” Mahana says with enough conviction to leave Bambi speechless. “I watched you drop the anchor yesterday; you are a good sailor, I think.”

“She’s a *very* good sailor,” Bill confirms.

“And beautiful,” Mahana adds with a look at Bambi that affirms his having witnessed her grand entrance to Pape’ete.

After an awkward pause, Bill asks, “Is there something we can help you with?”

“Ah, yes. As I’ve said, I am looking for new friends. People my own age, and I find Americans very interesting. I think we are the same age perhaps?”

“How old are *you*?” Bambi asks with a smile.

“I am to be eighteen in another month. And you?”

Bambi laughs and says, “Mahana, you should know better than to ask a woman her age.”

“Really? Is this an American...uh... custom?”

“It is,” Bambi replies, “but you’re right, the three of us are about the same age.”

“Just curious,” Bill asks, “How did you know we’re American?”

“From the little flag you flew when you came into the harbor. Just a guess, but a good one, yes?”

“Yes, a good one,” Bambi agrees.

“So, I am wondering, would you two be my friends? I can teach you much about Tahiti.”

“For a fee,” Bill mutters.

Bambi punches Bill’s arm and punctuates it with an exclamation, “Billy!”

She turns toward a crestfallen Mahana and says, “Just ignore him. I do. He didn’t mean anything, and if you give him a chance, you’ll actually come to like him. I did.”

Bambi and Mahana share a smile, and Bill cannot resist joining them; she continues, “I think it would be nice to have a friend our age since we’ve just arrived, and we don’t know a thing about this place.”

Mahana brightens and says, “I want to be your friend, no francs needed! Let me take you to a teahouse near here. I know the owner. He is Chinese, but no matter, his is a nice place, and I will buy us all a meal.”

“I like it!” Bambi exclaims and then looks at her partner: “Billy?”

“We have to take this stuff to the boat,” he replies.

Mahana says in earnest, “I’ll wait for you here. Not to hurry, okay?”

“Could be a while,” Bill cautions.

“It won’t be long. You must be hungry, so you will hurry, yes?”

Bambi smiles in reply and says, “We won’t dilly dally.”

“What is this ‘dilly dally’? Does it mean...uh...faire l’amour?” (*...make love?*)

Bambi laughs and replies, “Not really, but it could.”

Mahana’s expression is one of such confusion that Bambi laughs again, but it changes to surprise when Bambi kisses his cheek.

Bill stands transfixed as if he cannot believe what he has just seen, but he manages to ask, “What’s fair lamore?”

“I thought you knew some French,” Bambi laughs in reply as she and then Mahana begin to drag the dinghy toward the water.

“Well don’t just stand there, silly,” Bambi says to Bill.

Bill responds with a compliant smile, deposits the packages he has been holding into the dinghy, and then helps Bambi step over the transom and into the tiny vessel, the bow of which is now floating at the edge of the water. After Bambi positions herself on the wood seat in the bow, Mahana and Bill shove the boat further into the water. Mahana holds onto the rope that is affixed to the inflation tubes of the dinghy as Bill wades into the water, climbs aboard and ships the oars. Mahana gives the dinghy a shove, and Bill begins rowing.

Bambi sends Mahana a smile and a wave, which the young Polynesian returns in earnest.

* * *

When Mahana Tetuanui enters La Luna Morte, Tiare, passing by with a tray of drinks for customers, greets him under her breath with, “Où étais-tu? Il est fâché!” (*Where’ve you been? He’s angry!*)

Mahana scans the darkened and smoky room and spies Edward Carlyle seated in his usual, far corner with his back to the door and with a cigar wedged between his right thumb and forefinger, the cigar’s smoke curling toward a low-hanging cloud next to the ceiling.

The young man looks about, as if he is searching for an escape route, but he knows there is none, knows his existence is dependent upon this obdurate Englishman, and knows he has no choice but to engage him, which he does by going to the table where he stands, almost at attention, and stares not at Carlyle, but at René who is behind the bar.

Carlyle hisses a greeting: “Do you know how long I’ve been waiting for you?”

“No sir.”

“Two bloody hours. Two bloody *hours!* While you, what? Idle away the time with those two youngsters? On my francs?”

“I did not know when you expected me to...”

“Don’t you even think of contradicting me, you...you...insolent boy. Who’s kept you alive all these months?”

“You, sir.”

“Who rescued you from those, whatever they were, those disgusting seaborne degenerates who, God be praised, we threw to the sharks and whatever else is beneath the bloody sea?”

“You, sir.”

“You sir, you sir,” Carlyle repeats in a mocking falsetto. “You’re bloody well right it was me, and if you want to continue getting fat off my largess, don’t ever keep me waiting again! Is that bloody clear?”

“Yes sir,” Mahana responds while trying to imagine what a largess might be.

Carlyle casts an eye at Mahana to ascertain whether the boy understands the import of the lecture and is disconcerted to find that Mahana’s expression is ambiguous. The Englishman turns in his chair, waves at the ever-moving Tiare, and says, “Courvoisier,” loud enough for her to hear.

He looks at Mahana and commands, “Sit down, boy. I don’t suppose you’d like something to drink since you’ve probably been drinking on my francs for hours.”

“No, thank you,” Mahana replies with a decorum that reflects what he has learned from the missionaries who raised him from infancy until he was stolen at twelve by the men to whom Carlyle has referred.

The younger man sits in the chair opposite Carlyle, and the two of them wait in silence for Carlyle’s Cognac to appear: the elder puffs on his cigar and stares at the younger; the younger looks down at his folded hands. When Tiare arrives with his drink, Carlyle grabs Tiare’s wrist, downs the Cognac, and as he releases her, he hands her the empty glass and commands, “Un autre!” (*Another!*)

Carlyle watches Tiare waddle away, and after a few seconds, he turns to Mahana, and in a conspiratorial but amicable way, asks, “I wonder, Hank, do you think Tiare still amuses René?”

“Sir?”

“Come now, my boy, you’re no novice with the island girls; I’m certain of that!” Carlyle scoffs, “You get my drift. I know you do. What do you say?”

“I don’t know what to say, sir.”

“Well I’ll tell you this, my boy: you can have your island girls. They’ve done nothing for me but give me the bloody clap. Give me a beauty like your new friend, eh?”

Mahana looks at his hands and shakes his head ever so slightly.

Carlyle chuckles and says, “What’s the matter, Hank? Did you fall in love this afternoon? Cat got your tongue?”

As Tiare reappears at the table, her eyes meet Mahana's in a glance of commiseration. She places the Courvoisier in front of the Englishman, says, "Monsieur," and departs.

Carlyle watches her walk away and strokes his lower lip and chin as if contemplating whether Tiare might, in fact, be worthy of a tryst. He sighs, downs the Cognac, and smiles at Mahana.

"So, my friend," Carlyle says, "What did you learn about those two sea urchins?"

Mahana takes a deep breath as if he were about to dive deep for pearls and replies, "They're American."

"Quite obvious from my perch on the promenade, Hank. They were flying the bloody stars and bars. American from where?"

"From a little town. Very close to the ocean. I think they said it was called Port Townsend."

"All right, all right. Is it their boat, that Serenity?"

"Not exactly."

"Ah..." Carlyle muses, "Interesting. Whose is it then?"

"It is a long story."

"I'm listening," Carlyle responds as he leans his forearms on the table and stares at Mahana.

"Well...it belongs to his step-father..."

"What's his name?" Carlyle interrupts.

"I don't know."

"Christ boy, you spent all that time with him, and you don't know his name?"

"Oh, the *boy's* name," Mahana replies.

“Of course, the boy’s name, why in the name of God would I want the bloody step-father’s name?”

Mahana sighs and offers, “Bill Benton. She calls him Billy, but I don’t think he would like me to call him that.”

“She? The delightful apparition that ghosted into the harbor today?”

“E!”

“Her name? Tell me her name, boy.”

“He called her Bambi.”

“Bambi!” Carlyle exclaims; “What kind of bloody name is Bambi?”

“It’s not her real name, or so she said.”

“Well, then?”

“Brittany. Brittany Alistair...Benton.”

“All right, never mind all that.”

“But you asked...” Mahana begins.

“Bother what I asked. Just tell me, if it’s not their boat, how did they come by it?”

“I think they took it.”

“Took it? Stole it, you mean.”

Carlyle sits back, sticks his cigar between his lips, rubs his hands as if gleeful, and smiles. He removes the cigar and asks, “So why in the world would two...Wait, how old are they?”

“She’s almost nineteen; he’s almost eighteen.”

“By God, this is getting better and better,” Carlyle mutters. He again leans forward with his forearms on the table and continues, “So why would they have stolen a yawl and sailed halfway around the world to this god-forsaken place?”

“They said they could not take living in the small town. ‘Everybody in their business,’ they said, but they never mentioned what business they were in, and wouldn’t they want people in their business? I know I would want lots of people to be in my business.”

“If you had one,” Carlyle chuckles and responds, “Just an expression, Hank. Just an expression.”

“But I don’t understand.”

“It’s not important that you understand,” Carlyle says with burgeoning pique, “but it *is* important that I know why they ended up here.”

“They thought here would be ‘a paradise’ here, better than their town where it is cold all the time, she said, and she said they thought it would be better to start a family here.”

“Start a family, you say?”

“Yes sir.”

“They’re married?”

“They each wear rings like Christians.”

“Hmm, I wonder,” Carlyle says as he leans back against the chair.

He waves at Tiare who interprets the wave as a request for a third Cognac, which she brings to the table and asks, “Voulez-vous manger quelque chose, monsieur?” (*Would you like something to eat, Sir?*)

“What? Food?” Carlyle responds as if startled from his reverie, “No, no, nothing.”

He dismisses Tiare with a slight wave, turns to Mahana, and says as if struck by an insight, “By God! Hank, my boy, I bet she’s got a bloody bun in the oven.”

“Sir?”

“Pregnant, boy. Pregnant! This is delicious. Let me guess: they’re running out of money and starting to feel desperate.”

“How did you know?”

“Lucky guess, my boy.”

Carlyle chuckles as he draws a few last puffs from what is now a faltering corona. Mahana watches the Englishman with a worried expression that Tiare notices as she passes behind Carlyle. Her eyes convey curiosity; Mahana’s suggest she best leave the two conspirators alone, so she rolls her eyes and goes about her business.

Apparently having reached a conclusion, Carlyle stubs out the cigar in the ashtray on the table and indicates by gesture that he would like Mahana to sit in the chair to his right, which Mahana does.

Carlyle leans toward his subordinate, and in a near whisper, asks, “Will you meet them again?”

“Yes, tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow, tomorrow. Good boy. On what pretense?”

“Pardon?”

“The reason—la raison—you fool. The reason why you’re going to meet with them.”

Mahana, with an effort, clears a flash of anger from his face and responds, “They said they needed food. I told them I would take them to Le Marché.¹⁰

“Excellent, excellent. What time?”

“Around noon,” Mahana replies.

“Brilliant, my boy. I’ll just happen to be strolling through the market when you arrive. Act surprised, but don’t hide the fact that you work for me, understand?”

“I think so.”

“You damned well need to *know* so. If you don’t, it might scare these two bloody blunderers away.”

* * *

It is a night with a new moon, and the stars are shining brightly as Carlyle waits on the principal quay of Pape’ete harbor. The trades penetrate his linen suit and cool his skin, but he still feels uncomfortable in the unending humidity and takes a handkerchief from a pants pocket to wipe perspiration from his face. He has not been waiting long, perhaps no more than ten minutes, and seeing the Picayune’s Zodiac¹¹ cast off from its mother ship, he knows his wait will soon be over.

A few notes passed to and from Captain Stump’s ship earlier that evening have precipitated a meeting between Carlyle and the Captain. After a few hours of contemplating what it is he should

¹⁰ A large, municipal marketplace located a block from the Pape’ete waterfront founded in the middle of the 19th Century.

¹¹ Zodiac Nautic: French company that invented inflatable boats referred to as Zodiacs. (Wikipedia)

say to Stump, Carlyle is still uncertain, but he has concluded that he, Carlyle, is holding the trump card. He is certain he need not worry about how he will explain what he has discovered about the Americans and how his discovery will impact his plans to exploit his fantasized monopoly of Tikehau's black pearls.

"I'll just let things flow," he mutters and then glances about to see if he is alone on the broad, concrete quay.

It is not long before the big Zodiac arrives at the quay, having been pushed there by a large Roness outboard affixed to the boat's plywood transom. Carlyle navigates the narrow concrete stairs that lead from the top of the quay to the water, and with some assistance from a seaman when Carlyle nearly loses his balance on the rounded starboard float, the Englishman deposits himself on a seat and prepares for the short run to the Picayune.

She is an ungainly, even ugly, vessel, this Picayune, which reveals itself as much larger than it appears from shore as the Zodiac speeds toward her. The speed of the ride is exhilarating to Carlyle, but he remains silent and does his best to display the English reticence he feels compelled to exhibit.

The Zodiac approaches the stern ramp of the former LSD, and when close enough, lines are tossed and retrieved, the inflatable is brought up against the ramp, and Carlyle steps aboard the Picayune, but not for the first time. While working for Heyerdahl, who was investigating the giant stone tikis on the mountainside above Puama'u on Hiva Oa, Carlyle had logistical responsibilities that required dealing with the usually testy Stump when the Picayune called at Atuona, the only town of significance on the island.

Carlyle follows an old Marquesan covered with tattoos through the labyrinth of metal stairways and passageways that lead to the top deck of the ship, on the forward-midships of which there is a smallish, steel deckhouse that Carlisle knows contains the captain's quarters, the radio room, and the quarters shared by the Chief Engineer and the First Mate. The latter is a Tahitian with, Carlyle remembers, the most foreboding countenance he thinks he has ever encountered, making the Mate's first name, Huamanava, which means "peace-welcome," one of the most inappropriate monikers ever attached to a member of the human race.

Carlyle follows the tattooed guide—whose name is Aifatu¹²—into the deck house and stands back as the old man raps twice on the wood door of Stump's private quarters.

From the other side of the door, Carlyle hears a familiar voice call out: "Come on in."

Aifatu opens the door but remains in the passageway as Carlyle steps over the high sill and enters the cabin.

Stump lifts a tumbler of Scotch to Carlyle as he hollers, "Māuruuru Māuruuru roa, Aifatu." (*Thank you, Aifatu.*)

Aifatu manages to say, "Aita pe'ape'a" (*You're welcome*) before he disappears behind the closing door.

"Not many of your ilk have been blessed to visit the Captain's lair," Stump says, "And here you are for the second time. Scotch?"

"I believe I will. Thank you."

¹² The name means "messenger" in te roa.

“Sit,” Stump says as he gestures at one of two, well-worn, brown-leather club chairs in one corner of the—all things considered—spacious cabin.

As Stump goes about pouring a few fingers worth of Scotch into a large tumbler, Carlyle surveys the room. Not much has changed, he thinks. While the square footage is ample, he thinks that he could not imagine spending a great deal of time in a cabin with a ceiling so low he could touch it if he wished. As it had been during the first and only time Carlyle has seen it, the cabin is a bit disheveled for a man who must know the importance of discipline on the high seas, Carlyle thinks. The bunk is unmade, a heap of clothing appears to be in the process of growing in the opposite corner from the club chairs, and two pairs of renegade shoes have landed in a disorderly pile beneath a small desk.

Stump hands the scotch to Carlyle, and having refilled his own glass, he sits in the matching chair. He lifts the glass to Carlyle who reciprocates, and each sips the contents of their tumblers. Carlyle has a moment of hesitation as he looks at this captain—who is only slightly less unkempt than his cabin—and considers whether enlisting Stump into his grand plan is wise. But Carlyle quickly concludes, the fact that Stump has survived and perhaps even thrived for the better part of the ten years that have passed since the end of the Pacific War, in a part of the world that tends to challenge the endurance of expats, is testimony to the probable dependability of this potential accomplice.

“You like?” Stump asks with a slight lift of his glass.

“Very nice.”

“Eighteen-years-old. We took it from a big, dismantled ketch we found adrift about six months ago—no one aboard—but whoever abandoned her left a number of bottles of good scotch and some passable Madeira, not to mention a drawer full of American dollars, two revolvers, ammo, and a few other useful odds and ends.”

“Did you manage to salvage her?”

“We could’ve, but the Mate talked me out of it. He was right, of course. Input would definitely not have equaled output.”

“The hull must’ve been worth something.”

“No doubt, but the time involved would have interfered with our business. Time is money, Teddy. I know even you English understand that,” Stump says with a—for him—friendly smile.

“So, you left her adrift?”

“Scuttled the old broad. If I couldn’t get a few bucks out of her, I don’t see why someone else should. More importantly, the damned thing was a menace to navigation. If Huamanava hadn’t been awake on watch that night, we might have run her over. Nope. No salvage for me. Davey Jones Locker was the only thing that made sense,” Stump says and drains his tumbler. “But you’re not here to chat about the sad destinies of abandoned sailing craft, are you?”

“I’m not.”

“Well?”

“You recall our earlier conversation?”

“Of course. I’m not senile just yet.”

“I saw you watching two sail come in today.”

“What of it?”

“My man talked with the crew of the big black yawl.”

“Your boy, you mean,” Stump scoffs.

“Whatever. You’ll recall the four key parts of my plan, I suppose?”

“Catchy, as I recall. Let’s see: copra, Hiva Oa, the Picayune, and the Holy Spirit, wasn’t it?”

“Exactly.”

“And if I remember, one link in the chain that was missing was the matter of getting the copra—actually, the pearls perhaps stowed in bags of copra—from Tikehau to Atuona.”

“Puama’u, actually.”

“Ah, I know it. There was a copra plantation there, I’ve heard. Interesting,” Stump says thoughtfully as he strokes his chin.

I was beginning to think that obstacle...”

“The Tikehau ro Atuona obstacle.” Stump clarifies.

“Exactly. I thought it was going to be bloody insurmountable.”

“But now you’re feeling optimistic,” Stump concludes.

“I am.”

“Thank God. I could hardly sleep with worrying about you,” Stump says with undisguised sarcasm.

He stands and steps toward a credenza on which the bottle of Scotch rests, picks it up and shows it to Carlyle, who nods. Stump crosses the cabin to fill his guest’s glass, returns to the credenza to fill his own, and then returns to the club chair.”

“I’m all ears, Teddy,” Stump says in a tone devoid of enthusiasm.

“That yawl is the linchpin to a fortune.”

“Quite a stretch, I’m thinking, but I’m still listening.”

“According to Hank...”

“Your boy.”

“My boy. According to him, they stole the bloody thing.”

“What? The yawl?”

“Exactly, old chap. They stole her.”

“Runaways, then. That’s interesting,” Stump says casually.

“Looking to find paradise, I guess.”

“Apparently.”

“Cleared customs?”

“Apparently.”

“So, they’re not total rubes? Or is the jury still out?”

“I’m going to meet them in Le Marché tomorrow at noon, accidentally on purpose, you might say.”

“I might not.”

“Pardon?”

“Don’t mind me, Teddy. Go on, go on. I’m totally engrossed.”

Carlyle clenches his jaw in response to Stump’s continued sarcasm and looks at the captain.

“What?” Stump asks. “*I am. Totally. Go on.*”

Carlyle is not convinced, but he knows his plan will not work unless Stump agrees to transport him and the Tikehau pearls the twenty-seven-hundred miles from Hiva Oa to Honolulu, where he knows Stump can introduce him to less-than-reputable businessmen likely to have connections in the world market for contraband pearls.

Carlyle sips his scotch, glances at Stump, and says, “There are a lot of coconut palms on Tikehau.”

“So I’ve seen.”

“Money to be made by someone.”

Stump makes a face that replies, *maybe*.

“But that someone...”

“Whoever he might be,” Stump interrupts.

“That’s the bloody point. There *isn’t* such a person. The government has only a passing relationship with the atoll—I’ve been told there hasn’t been a Frenchman on Tikehau since before the bloody war.”

“You’re certain of that?” Stump challenges.

“Even if the bloody Frogs showed up from time to time, what reason would they have to question the entrepreneurial efforts of an enterprise—an aboveboard, duty-paying enterprise, no less—that is producing and shipping copra?”

“What reason indeed?” Stump replies without enthusiasm.

Carlyle gets up and steps to the credenza where he holds up the bottle of scotch, tilts it to ascertain its contents, and empties the bottle into his tumbler.

Without turning around, Carlyle says, “I’m disappointed in your apparent lack of vision, Captain.”

Stump stares at Carlyle’s back for a beat, strokes his chin as he goes down the list of responses that is growing in his mind, and concludes he has grown tired of playing with this Englishmen.

“Time to get down to brass tacks, Teddy. It’s not complicated, is it? These American kids are on the balls of their ass and...”

“Pardon, old chap?”

“Forgive me. Sometimes I lapse into Brooklynesse.”

“You’d be from *there* then?”

“Long, long ago, Teddy, but let me start again with a bit more clarity: somehow, you’ve discovered they’re out of money but would have the means to make some *if* they were to agree to use their yawl to transport copra from Tikehau to Puama’u, but let’s not stop there. Why not add Rangiroa and other atolls to the itinerary to make it worth both our whiles to transport the copra, and then there are the supplies the little communities on the atolls need, supplies the boy can bring to them. That boat must have a sixteen-foot beam, which means a lot of bags of copra can be stowed on deck without interfering with her handling.”

“I’m thinking at least fifteen tons of copra, maybe more.”

“Maybe more, and with that waterline—must be sixty feet at least—she’ll do ten knots under full sail, which means a bit less than three days from Tikehau to Puama’u Bay, where I’ll pick up the copra, along with the ‘*hundreds of thousands*’ of dollars’ worth of pearls you’ve promised, right?”

“You’re spot on,” Carlyle says, sounding a bit nonplussed.

“There’s an American priest at Atuona—I assume he’s the Holy Spirit of which you spoke—I know him well—who you’ve managed to coerce into being an agent of sorts in your absence because of some funny business you’ve no doubt discovered, which has nothing to do with pearls and everything to do with

young girls—or boys—and you’re blackmailing him. Or perhaps you’ve promised him a tiny portion of the haul. Anyway, he’ll ingratiate himself with the American kids and will let you know if they’re not toeing the line. How’s my vision, my Limey friend?”

Carlyle, who has turned and is staring at Stump, grudgingly replies, “Remarkably astute, for a Yank.”

“There is this one thing that may throw a monkey wrench into your brilliant plan,” Stump says with a tone that continues to convey an apparent lack of enthusiasm.

“Which is?”

“It’s a twenty-four-hour reach from Tikehau to Pape’ete, but two-and-a-half days from Tikehau to Hiva Oa. People talk, Teddy. Eventually, somebody in the capital is going to hear about a yawl transporting copra to Puama’u Bay instead of Pape’ete, and people are going to start wondering why.”

“I’ve considered that.”

“Well?”

“Three things. One, I’m arranging for the word to be spread that I’m investing in reviving the copra plantation at Puama’u, where we’ll accumulate copra from the atolls. Two, the Philippines have a corner on the copra market, but there are at least two men—I’ve spoken to one and heard about a second—who are trying to lure copra to Honolulu because there’s a mill in San Francisco looking for product.”

“And Hiva Oa is on the way north.”

“Precisely.”

Stump strokes his chin as he stares at Carlyle for a beat, and then he says grudgingly, “You’ve got me there, Teddy. Now what about this third thing?”

“Pretty matter-of-fact. Hiva Oa is where they will live, the Americans, I mean, so it would make sense for the boy to return home as often as he can.”

“Live where, in Atuona?”

“I’m thinking Puama’u,” is Carlyle’s reply.

“Tell you what, Teddy. When...no, *if* you can convince the two of them to settle on that God-forsaken island in that pisspot of a town, Atuona, or on that plantation, let me know, and I’ll think about getting involved in your shenanigans, but not until.”

Carlyle slugs down the scotch he is holding, and says, “I’ll know by tomorrow evening.”

“I’m planning on hauling anchor at sunrise tomorrow morning and won’t be back for a month.”

“Delay your departure for a day.”

“Time is money, Teddy my boy. Time is money.”

Stump stands, yawns as he stretches, and says, “And speaking of time, you best be getting back to town. I promised the boys on the Zodiac they could have shore leave as soon as they drop you off.”

“You’re still interested, at least?”

“I haven’t written you off just yet. I’m patient.”

“And unduly wary,” Carlyle suggests.

“There is that, for which I will not apologize. Wariness has kept me out of hot water this far into the game, and it has me

wondering how you stumbled upon all of this, how you managed to get to and from Tikehau and Hiva Oa?”

“There’re some things that you don’t need to know about,” Carlyle replies, “and besides, that’s old news.”

Stump glares at Carlyle and his tone turns sinister: “I get nervous when someone entices me into a scheme and don’t know all the players, Teddy. I hate surprises.”

Carlyle looks down from Stump’s gaze for a moment, and when he looks up, Stump can see the Englishman is conflicted. After a sip of scotch, Carlyle looks at Stump and says, “I give you my word...”

“Really,” Stump interrupts. “Your word?”

“As a gentleman,” Carlyle responds with spleen “I give you my word that in a few weeks, after we’ve picked up the pearls and are at sea on the way to Honolulu, I’ll explain, but until then, you’ll have to trust me.”

Consideration of the possible rewards of this business enterprise with Carlyle cause Stump to restrain the instant rebuke that arises in his mind about the reliability of this conspirator; instead, he acquiesces: “I’ll trust you, Teddy, for now, but if I don’t get answers before we reach Honolulu...”

Leaving Carlyle to imagine possible consequences, he extends his hand, which Carlyle shakes. Before releasing the Englishman’s hand, Stump’s mind takes a different tack and he declares, “I envy your accidental meeting tomorrow, my friend.”

Stump releases Carlyle’s hand and the latter asks, “And why would that be?”

“That young woman might be one of the more remarkable specimens of her gender that I have seen in a long time, and you’re going to get to speak with her, up close, aren’t you, you lecherous prick?”

“I am,” Carlyle responds with a glint in his eye.

“I’m beginning to think there’s more than simply subterfuge about there being a five-day round trip from Tikehau to Hiva Oa, or more if you have him stopping at the other atolls; days when that poor beauty will be without her beau in that fetid place.”

“You know,” Carlyle responds with faux surprise, “That thought never crossed my mind.”

“Bullshit,” Stump laughs as a salacious smile appears on Carlyle’s face.

* * *

It is nearly eleven-thirty in the morning when Carlyle emerges from L’Hôtel Parisien. He has arranged for his linen suit to be pressed, and his shirt has been freshly laundered and starched. He has decided not to wear a tie, but he did ask the concierge to arrange for his boots to be spit-polished.

With a few moments to kill, he saunters the short distance to the waterfront, which is close to his route to Le Marché, and he is surprised to see the Picayune still at anchor in the harbor.

“Interesting,” he mutters in acknowledgement, as he passes through the usual crowd of citizens, expats and tourists who stroll the promenade at midday.

He stops when he is in sight of the market, and with the promptness that Carlyle has been trying to instill in him, Mahana appears with the Americans in tow. Carlyle watches the trio enter the market, which is composed of three, steel-roofed, open buildings arranged in a horseshoe, from which a myriad of smells have coalesced into an aroma that is, Carlyle decides, somehow enticing.

Carlyle waits until Mahana and his new friends disappear into the crowd before he crosses the promenade and enters the market. He spies his quarry a few aisles away and progresses toward them with a contrived nonchalance, even purchasing a mango along the way to validate a reason for his presence.

Mahana, who Carlyle notes has done his furtive best to avoid appearing as though he is looking for someone, makes eye contact with his boss and shepherds Bill and Bambi to a fish vendor where Carlyle has begun to question the freshness of the day's catch.

“Monsieur!” Mahana exclaims.

Carlyle turns toward his boy, smiles and says, “Hank, my boy. Fancy meeting you here!”

“Please to meet my friends, Monsieur,” Mahana exclaims with such delight that Carlyle almost believes his boy's enthusiasm.

“I'd be delighted,” Carlyle says as he extends his hand toward Bill, and as the men shake hands, Carlyle looks at Bambi and asks, “And who is the beautiful apparition?”

“This is my new friend, Mademoiselle Bambi,” Mahana responds as Bambi smiles with disbelief etched into her

expression, “and this,” Mahana continues with a gesture toward the Englishman, “is Monsieur Edward Carlyle.”

“Charmed, I’m sure,” Carlyle says with a slight tip of his straw boater.

In the presence of the Englishman’s accent and practiced formality, Bambi cannot resist performing what suggests the beginning of a curtsy while saying, “And this is my husband, Billy, or Bill, rather. William Benton.”

Carlyle smiles at Bill and nods with a touch to the brim of the boater; Bill nods in reply.

“Delighted to meet you both,” Carlyle declares. “I see Mahana is introducing you to Le Marché.”

“We were in here yesterday,” Bambi replies, “but we were fish out of water, so when he offered to show us the ropes, we took him up on it.”

“You met him yesterday?” Carlyle asks.

“We did,” Bill answers.

Carlyle turns to Mahana, and with a stern expression, says, “I’m wondering why you didn’t share this with me, Hank.”

“I didn’t plan on seeing you until this evening,” Mahana extemporizes.

“Quite right, my boy. You would’ve told me then, I’m sure,” Carlyle says and makes a mental note regarding the quickness of his subordinate’s thinking, as well as a second note to beware of it.

“Then it is fortuitous indeed that I’ve stumbled across you,” Carlyle says to the Americans; “I awakened this morning wondering how I was going to speak with you, and here you are!”

The Englishman studies the faces of the two youngsters to ascertain whether either has doubts as to his veracity. The boy seems gullible enough, he thinks, but the girl—this woman, rather—may be having second thoughts.

He looks at Bambi with a smile and continues, “Of course, now you’ll be wondering why in the world I would want to speak with you.”

“And you’d be right,” Bambi confirms in a friendly tone.

“I saw your grand entrance yesterday,” Carlyle says.

Bambi blushes and says, “Apparently, that was a big faux pas.”

“Not at all, my dear. First,” Carlyle turns to Bill and declares, “I want to congratulate you on your seamanship, my boy. Top shelf. Watched you come in under full sail like you’ve been sailing the Pacific for decades, especially with only one crew!”

“And what a crew,” Carlyle says, turning toward Bambi. “You definitely brightened the day for many a soul on the promenade.”

“Great,” Bambi says ruefully, “but I’ve gotten some opinions to the contrary, which is why I’m wearing this get-up that we bought yesterday.”

She performs a theatrical curtsy that causes Carlyle to smile and clap in approval at the high-collared, ankle-length, Victorian dress she is wearing, one that hints at, rather than denies, the existence of the youthful body Bambi had displayed upon her arrival.

Carlyle glances at Bill and sees he is a bit disconcerted by his wife’s behavior and decides it is time to focus on the husband.

“Yours is a beautiful companion, old chap,” Carlyle begins, “and she is right to question why I’m wanting to speak with you. I’m wondering, could I steal you away for a bit to discuss a business proposition over a brandy? I find it loosens the cogs in my mind, don’t you? But let me get straight to the point: the proposition I have in mind would involve you and that yawl of yours.”

Turning to Bambi, Carlyle continues, “It won’t require more time than it takes to down a brandy or two. And if William here, and I, can come to some understanding, we’ll share what it is with you forthwith because, knowing women as I do, I am sure you will want to weigh in on a final decision, but I’m thinking this is something best begun between just he and I. Would you mind?”

Bambi sends Bill a wary look before turning back to Carlyle and saying, “I won’t mind at all, provided I can borrow Mahana as chaperone.”

“Mahana,” Carlyle says, “You wouldn’t mind that at all would you, chaperoning your lovely friend here during our absence?”

Mahana nods and replies, “My pleasure, sir.”

“Good,” Carlyle says as he reaches into his pocket, extracts some coins, and hands them to Mahana before turning back to Bambi and continuing, “Let me see if I can sweeten your experience, and your opinion of me, by allowing Hank to contribute to your shopping tab.”

“We can’t accept your money,” Bill says cautiously.

But Bambi's response confirms Carlyle's view that their circumstances are such that the boy will come around: "Billy, it's a lovely gesture. Thank you, Mr. Carlyle. Mahana and I will be just fine, and I do appreciate your offer. Shall we meet you here?"

"Why not meet us at La Luna Morte? Do you know it?" Carlyle asks.

"I do," Bambi replies with a smile. "We passed it yesterday, but certainly Mahana will take me there."

"He will indeed," Carlyle says before turning to Mahana and directing, "Give us until, say, one o'clock," before turning back to Bambi and declaring, "and perhaps we'll have something concrete to discuss by the time you arrive. It's settled then?"

"It is," Bambi confirms.

She looks at Bill and can see he is not eager to leave her, so she tells him, "Go on, Billy. Mr. Carlyle may have something in mind that will be a help. And Mahana and I will have fun shopping, won't we?" she says to the now wide-eyed Mahana, who nods and smiles at this beautiful and now confirmed, in his mind at least, American friend.

* * *

Stump, doing his best to blend into the diverse crowd of humanity thronging Le Marché, has been watching the interplay among the four players in Carlyle's drama, and after Carlyle and the young American leave the market, Stump makes a beeline toward Bambi.

He approaches her and her remaining companion from behind and says, “I beg your pardon, ma’am,” in his most civilized voice.

Mahana’s face expresses something close to alarm at the appearance of the American captain, but Bambi’s expression is a mix of curiosity and hauteur as she looks at this middle-aged specimen of a well-worn but possibly advantaged American who appears interested in speaking with her.

“What may I do for you, sir?” Bambi asks with calm and studied politeness while Mahana fidgets next to her.

Stump endeavors a slight bow and a touch to his straw boater as he says, “Captain Matthew Stump of the Picayune, the freighter you’ve no doubt seen anchored near your yawl.”

“I’m aware of it, and you’re its Master then?”

“I’m pleased to say so, yes, but I’m more pleased to make your acquaintance,” Stump says and pauses for a beat before continuing, “And you are...”

“Oh! Where are my manners? I’m Brittany, Brittany, ah, Benton, but everyone calls me Bambi.”

“Then I shall as well,” Stumps says with something approximating a smile.

Bambi reaches out to shake Stump’s outstretched hand, but he takes hers and kisses her fingers like a French gentleman; she laughs and declares, “Well, *that’s* sweet! I guess there’s a first for everything.”

She is relieved to see Stump chuckle, but the thought is displaced by a harrumph from Mahana.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Captain Stump, this is Mahana Tetuanui.”

“We’ve met, haven’t we Hank?”

A crestfallen Mahana manages to begin, “My name isn’t...”

Stump interrupts, “Yeah, yeah, I know. You and your boss seem to have differing opinions about your name, but let’s put that aside for a minute, why don’t we? I’m wondering if you’ll honor me with a favor...” Stump continues as he takes Mahana’s elbow and walks him a few steps away from Bambi.

As she watches the two converse in low tones, she is not feeling apprehensive even though she is certain the Captain is contriving something involving her. She sees Stump transfer a clandestine banknote into Mahana’s hand, after which Stump turns and returns to her. She also sees that Mahana is looking at her with concern written across his face, but this American captain’s eyes hold more attraction for her than do Mahana’s. Behind the American’s cold gaze, she senses a latent passion in those eyes.

A slight smile and a raised eyebrow convey, more than do the words that follow, that she is not intimidated by Stump’s American brazenness: he does not yet know that she is the daughter of a leather-skinned trawler captain nicknamed “Growler,” who has survived many brutal winter forays into Alaskan waters, a toughened man who she has been able to bend to her will whenever the need has arisen.

“What have you been conniving with my friend, Captain?” Bambi asks.

“You know, I have done exactly that,” Stump admits with a chuckle.

“Whatever for?” she responds.

“I’m leaving in an hour for the Marquesas, and then on to Honolulu. I won’t be back here for several weeks, so this is the only opportunity I’m going to have to speak with you.”

“Again, whatever for?”

“Let’s take a stroll outside the market. Hank has promised to follow at a discrete distance. There are a few things I’d like to talk with you about, privately.”

Bambi looks strangely at Stump, but when he extends his left elbow toward her, she slips her hand inside it and follows the Captain out of Le Marché with Mahana, as promised, staying several strides behind them.

“You made quite an impression yesterday, young lady,” Stump says pleasantly.

“Jesus Christ,” Bambi blurts out as she stops and spins toward him, which elicits a guffaw from the Captain.

“So, I’m apparently not the first person to acknowledge it,” he chuckles.

“No, you’re not,” Bambi replies, and then she cannot resist chuckling herself. “How was I to know...”

“No need to explain yourself, young lady,” Stump interrupts as he again extends his arm, and again, Bambi accepts it, and they resume their stroll.

“You were a sight for this sailor’s sore eyes.”

“Glad I could be of help,” she scoffs. “I hope that isn’t why you want to speak with me.”

Stump stops and turns toward her with a warning glance at Mahana that stops him in his tracks. The captain casts an intense stare into Bambi’s eyes, from which she does not turn away.

“There are three things I want to speak to you about,” Stump says. “First, I want to verify that you’re so in love with the skipper of that yawl that you would not consider running away with a slightly older and much handsomer freighter captain and un homme du monde.”¹³

Bambi looks at him in astonishment for a beat, and then she laughs, “You’re kidding, of course,” to which Stump smiles and replies, “Of course!”

Stump resumes walking, and Bambi follows, still holding onto his arm with Mahana following at the same measured distance. Despite Stump’s confirmation, Bambi is not convinced that Stump’s intentions are free of self-serving interest. What if I had said, she wonders, “I’m not in love with that boy and would be happy to run away with you?” What would this stranger have said then?

“And the second thing, Captain?” she prods.

“I wanted to congratulate you on the offer that the Englishman has made to your, ah, husband, I presume?”

Bambi stops, clasps Stump’s elbow and turns him toward her. “You presume correctly about the latter, Captain, but as to the former, I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”

Stump smiles at what he perceives to be a tigress in front of him. Good God, how I would love to have the chance to tame this one, he thinks, but he knows such an endeavor would involve pursuing a long track and managing a difficult capture

¹³ ...a man of the World

while all the while conducting a successful subterfuge to convince her he is an ally, and not a predator.

“Uh oh, it seems I’ve let the cat out of the bag,” Stump says with a contrived sense of discomfort.

“Since you have, and if you want to be my friend, tell me: what is this offer?”

“Forgive me, but I think you should hear it from your... what is his name, your husband, I mean?”

“Bill. His name is Bill, and I’m an adult so stop using that tone of voice like you think I’m a child!”

Stump is taken aback but does his best not to show it and responds, “I do apologize. I have no intention to, to...”

“Treat me like a child?”

“You are clearly not a child,” Stump falters.

“So?”

“Pardon?”

“The plan! What is this plan?”

“Well,” Stump begins in a humbler tone, “Teddy—that’s the Englishman—he, Carlyle, is a business acquaintance of mine who’s been trying to take advantage of an as yet unexploited copra harvest...”

“Copra?”

“Coconut, my dear, that’s been husked, split and dried. It’s the only real money crop in the islands, so there’s money to be made transporting it, and acting as the middle man. Teddy wants in on Tikehau’s copra.”

“That’s an atoll next to Rangiroa. We passed it on our way here.”

“I’m impressed,” Stump says with sincere surprise.

“Don’t be. If you take the time to find out, you’ll discover I’m not a fool.”

“I’m beginning to appreciate that you’re quite the opposite.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Stump touches the brim of his boater in reply.

Bambi continues, “So where does my Billy enter the picture?”

“The yawl.”

Bambi’s expression conveys immediate understanding as she stares at Stump, who, after a few seconds appears uneasy.

“You see, the passages into Tikehau...” he begins.

“Are too shallow for the likes of the Picayune out there,” she nods toward Stump’s ship without taking her eyes from his. “Am I right?”

“You are.”

“But the Serenity would be able to enter the lagoon, load up this Tikehau copra—that’s what you called it, right? Copra?”

“Right.”

“Copra,” Bambi continues, “that Billy brings back here.”

“Actually, it would be better if the copra ended up at Puama’u.”

“Where the hell is that?”

“An abandoned copra plantation on Hiva Oa, a bit more than six hundred miles east-northeast of Tikehau.”

“He won’t agree to that,” Bambi declares.

“Because?”

“Because I’m going to be here, not on Hiva Oa or on Tikehau.”

“But dropping the copra at Puama’u, the leg to Honolulu has been somewhat shortened, and it saves having to pay a warehouseman here, which is a big savings for Carlyle...and that may allow Carlyle to provide a slightly bigger cut for your husband,” Stump adds in a way that suggests to Bambi the latter advantage has been mentioned as an afterthought to sway her opinion, and not a primary consideration for him and Carlyle.

“And having a yawl to do the transport saves the expense of fuel for a powerboat,” Bambi adds.

She stares into Stump’s eyes and attempts to conjure what else is lurking behind them; Stump stares back as if attempting to ascertain whether this person is indeed just a girl or whether she is a mature man in disguise.

“You sound like you’ve been around the block a few times, young lady,” he declares in a tone that conveys a newfound guardedness.

Bambi takes a breath, looks away for a beat, then back at Stump and disregards his comment with a command: “Let’s keep walking.”

She takes his arm and they resume the stroll, with Mahana faithfully shadowing the pair, and they continue for several yards before Bambi points out, “You said there were three.”

“Three?” Stump queries and then says, “Ah, yes. Three things. Why don’t we sit on the bench there, in the shade?”

And they do. Stump glances at Mahana who stops fifteen yards away but does not take his eyes off of Bambi.

“Well?” she says as she settles her long dress over her legs.

Satisfied with the dress’ appearance, she looks at Stump, who thinks, it’s like she’s *challenging* me; by *God*, what a spitfire! But he says, “There may be no point in my offering what I’m about to offer if you decide to contradict your husband in this matter, so let me preface this with an ‘if.’”

“Offering what, Captain?”

“Hiva Oa is something of a backwater, you see?”

“No, I don’t see.”

“Of course. How could you?”

“I hope you’re cautioning me, and not patronizing me.”

“I am offering you a caution, but none of what I’m about to say means a hill of beans unless you decide to settle on Hiva Oa.”

“That’s the ‘if.’”

“Exactly.”

“Go on, then.”

“I just want to offer my services to you, gratis, of course, given that we’re now friends, should you be in Atuona or at Puama’u and find yourself—there’s only one way to say this—in need of escape.”

“Escape?” Bambi scoffs.

“Exactly.”

“Whatever would I be escaping from, ‘*exactly?*’ Cannibals?”

Stump chuckles and replies, “No, no, nothing like that; hasn’t been any of those kinds of shenanigans in the Marquesas since just before the turn of the century or thereabouts. Of course, there may be a few old-timers in those islands who still long for a taste of what they used to call, ‘long pig.’”

“That’s disgusting, Captain,” Bambi asserts.

“I suppose so, but life can put us in unexpected situations, can’t it? I’ve found that Americans who are used to an easy life—learned through my own personal experience, mind you—we’ve often found life in the islands, especially the Marquesas, hard as hell to adjust to.”

“I’ve just traveled thousands of miles in a sailboat. Not exactly filled with creature comforts, you know, and I adjusted,” Bambi counters.

“Granted, that’s impressive, but the isolation, the day-to-day sameness without, well, without being able to just go down to the local store and buy a nice dress like the one you’re wearing, for instance. Not being able to do that gets old pretty damned quickly, and some folks come to the point where they’re desperate and just can’t take it anymore.”

“And you think I’ll get to that point?”

“I don’t know, but you don’t know either—you can’t possibly know—until you’ve lived there,” Stump answers.

Bambi looks at him with shrewd eyes and says, “I don’t believe you.”

“What?” Stump responds with surprise.

“You *do* hope I’ll get desperate. You’re chummin’ for a big fish, Captain, and I’m the fish. I *am* the fish, right? You’re trying to entangle me in a net of your design.”

Stump stands up, his expression filled with indignation, and declares, “You’re out of line, young lady. I’m offering you a berth back to civilization when the time comes, and it *will* come when you can’t take that pestilent place any longer and need to escape.”

Bambi stands and says with controlled defiance in her words, “You don’t know me, Captain. You don’t know me at all. I would never succumb to any such challenge, and if I did, I’ll be damned if I would ever turn to *you* for help.”

Mahana, sensing things are amiss, hurries to Bambi’s side; she and he exchange a glance. She shakes her head slightly as a warning not to get involved, but it does not keep Mahana from sending a piercing gaze toward Stump.

Stump looks away for a beat, and when he looks back at Bambi, his expression is composed. He bows slightly, touches the brim of his hat, and says, “Ma’am, thanks for this little chat we’ve had; the pleasure has been all mine, I’m sure, and I wish you well,” and without waiting for a reply, he turns and walks toward the quay where the Picayune’s Zodiac awaits him.

Bambi turns to Mahana and says, “I want you to do something for me.”

“Anything,” is the reply.

“Go to La Luna Morte and tell Billy I won’t be joining them; that I want to go back to the boat.”

“But you haven’t bought any food.”

“Tomorrow’s another day.”

“But they will ask why, and what am I to say?”

“Tell them you have no idea why I want to leave. Period. No idea, do you understand?”

“I do.”

“And one other thing, under no circumstance are you to tell either of them that I’ve been speaking with Captain Stump. Can you do that?”

“So many secrets,” Mahana worries.

“Are you my friend?”

“With all my heart and soul.”

“Then you will keep that secret, at least until I see you again.

Do you promise?”

Mahana feels the power of Bambi’s gaze and gulps.

“I promise,” he confirms.

Bambi smiles, seals the promise with a kiss on Mahana’s cheek, and says, “Tell Billy I’ll meet him at the dinghy.”

With a racing heart—whether from adoration or nerves or both, he does not know—Mahana watches his friend walk away.

* * *

As he fastens a second line from the dinghy to Serenity’s starboard stern cleat, Bill glances at Bambi who is disappearing down the aft cabin companionway ladder. A warning shudder runs down his spine, having been sent there by a sensor in his brain, which is attuned to her. He takes an extra turn around the cleat with the pendant and grumbles, “Not one word. She didn’t say one damned thing to me. She’s pissed about something, but the whole goddamned way out here: not one fucking syllable.”

Bill stands and stares at the Picayune, the anchor chain of which is being hauled in with a metallic roar. He can feel the distant vibration of the two big reciprocating steam engines in her belly as her skipper urges the freighter toward the spot where the anchor still grasps the harbor bottom. He is close enough to see a man wearing a straw boater among other men standing on what is a relatively miniscule bridge, considering the size of the

ship. Perhaps that's the skipper, Bill decides, and notes the man seems to be staring at him, or at least at the *Serenity*. Bill sends him a hearty wave, but the man turns away.

"Prick," Bill says as he stifles the urge to give the man the finger. He shakes his head as he turns toward the aft cabin's companionway.

"I hate this," he whispers as he acknowledges he is going to have to do what he has learned is required at such times, something learned from dealing with his mother, a woman who, he is aware, wielded conditional love like a medieval monarch's axe. Bill knows he must submit to his silent and angry partner in such a way that conveys his acceptance of full responsibility for whatever transgression he is certain Bambi is waiting to reveal, regardless of whether he is guilty of it or not.

Bill descends the companionway ladder facing forward and receives a defiant glance from Bambi, who finishes unbuttoning the top of her dress and lets it fall to the floor. He notes she has no apparent discomfort in assuming a confrontational pose in her underwear.

"I've got a bone to pick with you, Buster," she says with flashing eyes.

"I know."

"You don't know."

"Okay, I *don't* know, but I have a feeling you're going to tell me I *should* know."

"You're goddamned right I am," she responds as she turns her back to him and demands, "Unhook my bra."

Bill complies, Bambi slumps her shoulders forward, and the bra falls onto the double berth. She takes one of Bill's white T-shirts, which hangs from a hook on the forward bulkhead and slips it on before turning around.

"Are you going to tell me why you're pissed or am I going to have to guess?" Bill asks in a non-threatening way. "Whatever it is I did, I'm sorry."

Bambi spits out, "You're *always* sorry! I wish you had enough sense not to do so damn many things you have to be sorry *about*."

Bill closes his eyes and takes a deep breath in order to blunt the angry reply that is on the tip of his tongue.

"You're going to have to tell me, Bambi."

"I shouldn't have to."

"I can't read your mind," Bill offers in a tone that is near apologetic.

"You should know me well enough by now that you don't *have* to read my mind."

"What more can I say? I said I'm *sorry*," Bill replies in a tone that suggests his patience is beginning to run low.

Bambi looks into Bill's eyes, senses his frustration, and considers the fact that without this boy in front of her, the only other allies she has in this supposed paradise is a young Polynesian man with uncertain loyalties, an American captain with questionable designs upon her, and the Sterlings: the Aussies who plan to sail out of Pape'ete Harbor for New Zealand the day after tomorrow.

"Okay," she says and exhales as she sits on the berth. "Were you going to tell me about Hiva Oa or just surprise me?"

Bill is clearly taken aback: “I don’t know what you mean?”

“Bullshit, Billy. Let’s see if I can enlighten you. How about a couple clues? Copra? Tikehau? Atuona or Puama’u on some godforsaken island in the Marquesas? Any of that ringing a bell?”

“How do you *know* this stuff?”

“While you were chatting with the Englishman, I had a long and very interesting conversation with the captain of the freighter anchored next to us.”

“It’s just hauled anchor.”

“Then the freighter that *was* anchored next to us,” she says with evident irritation.

“What’d he want?” Bill says with apparent concern.

“At first, I didn’t know, but then he happened to mention my apparently infamous introduction to Pape’ete, after which it started to become clear...oh what the hell...I think he wanted to get me into bed.”

“Jesus, Bambi.”

“What?” she challenges with a loud voice.

Bill responds by looking away and deflecting her gaze with a dismissive gesture.

“Nothing,” he says.

“I think he and the Englishman...”

“Carlyle,” Bill clarifies.

“Whatever! He and Carlyle are in cahoots.”

“I *know*. So, *what?* There’s nothing illegal about it. They can help us make a living. We need the money!”

“Copra,” Bambi says.

“That’s right.”

“And you’re the lucky so-and-so that gets to transport it from Tikehau to Hiva Oa.”

“That’s *right!*” Bill exclaims.

“Ever been there? No! Know *anything* about the place? No! Willing to leave me in some god-forsaken hellhole while you’re out sailing the seven seas? Fucking *yes!*”

“That captain told you that it’s a hellhole?”

“In so many words, yes! Do you know they were still eating people in the Marquesas sixty years ago?” Bambi asks as she stands and turns away from Bill.

He can see her shoulders begin to shake and realizes, and not for the first time, that this person in front of him is not as bold as she pretends to be. Bill goes to her, and when he puts his arms around her, she turns, leans into him, and as her arms circle around him, she begins to sob aloud.

“You’ve already decided to leave me all alone in some awful place where I won’t know anyone.”

“That’s not true,” Bill responds.

Bambi leans back, tears streaming down her cheeks, and says, “It *is* true. The captain *warned* me. Like it was a done deal, and I had no *say* in the matter.”

“You have a say.”

“Oh really?” Bambi responds with a shove that separates the two. “And when was I going to get this say?”

“Well,” Bill replies, “*Now*, is as good a time as any.”

“Never again, you son of a bitch,” she declares through her tears; “never again are you going to go off like some bigshot and

make a decision about my life without me being there. Do you understand?”

“I’m *sorry!*”

“Do you *understand?*” Bambi yells and begins pounding on Bill’s chest.

Bill grabs her wrists, but she continues to struggle for some seconds until Bill’s greater strength overcomes her will. She wrenches her arms free, stares at him for a beat, and then her face contorts into sheer misery as she drops onto her back on the berth and wails. The strategies in Bill’s toolkit of support do not include what to do in a situation like this, and his default response is to stand there, staring, as the tormented soul of this person to which he knows his heart is bound gives vent.

It is not long before Bambi tires from her outburst, and after a deep breath, she opens her eyes, looks searchingly into his for a beat, and then turns away from him and lies on her left side, her knees tucked nearly into a fetal position.

Feeling daring in addition to feeling desperate, Bill sits on the edge of the berth, leans toward Bambi, places a hand on a lock of hair that has fallen over her forehead, and with his fingers, he gently combs the hair back. Emboldened by the absence of rejection on her part, he carefully lies next to her, tucks his knees behind hers, places his right arm over her, and softly nuzzles the nape of her neck. Bambi settles back into his embrace and sighs. It is not long before each of them falls into a deep sleep.

* * *

They had not slept for very long, and it had been Bambi who had awakened first. She had turned to face Bill and kissed him in a way she knew would not only awaken him; she knew it would tell him she wanted to make love, and they did.

As they lay in the afterglow of what had transpired, Bambi told Bill she was sorry, acknowledged that she felt they were in over their heads when it came to dealing with Stump and Carlyle, who she categorized as “grown men,” and further acknowledged that had she been in the same circumstance as had he, she might have gone off with the Englishman to discuss business. After all, she confessed, hadn’t she gone off with Stump when he asked her to?

“What the hell do we do?” Bambi asks in a soft voice.

“I’m worried that we’ll be out of money soon.”

“I know, so, did what’s his face...”

“Carlyle...”

“Did he make you an offer that sounded good?” Bambi asks.

“He said we’d get a five-percent cut of whatever I deliver,”

Bill answers with some hesitation.

“Five percent doesn’t sound like much. What’s that work out to?”

“Depends on how much Serenity can carry.”

“Okay...well?”

“He thinks the boat’s big enough to carry fifteen tons on deck.”

“Fifteen tons!”

“It sounds like a lot, but we can try it. Maybe we can even carry more.”

“More?” Bambi asks with concern.

“The more she carries, the more we make.”

“So how much is a ton of copra worth?”

“He said it’s been going up about five percent a year.”

“Dollars and cents, Billy. I want to know dollars and cents.”

“It’s been around seventy dollars a ton.”

Bambi looks at the forward bulkhead for a beat and then offers, “That’s a thousand-and-fifty bucks, Billy, which means we’d make like fifty-two bucks a trip. That’s bullshit.”

“Well,” Bill begins defensively, “he’s got to pay the islanders that get the copra ready and his boys that’ll help me load it and stuff and help with Serenity, and then he said he has to pay the shipper...”

“That’s Stump.”

“I guess,” Bill concurs, “and then Carlyle has to have his cut.”

“How much is *that*?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know. Did you think to ask?”

Bill scowls as he sits up and leans against the aft bulkhead, but he does not reply. Bambi glances at him, hoists herself up and kisses him. He does not respond at first, but when he does, Bambi waits for a few seconds before she pulls her lips away and stares into his eyes.

“I’m just worried he’s taking advantage of us,” she says, and when he looks away, she gently turns his face so that she can look into his eyes and continues, “I love you, Billy, and I don’t want you to be made a fool of.”

“I guess that’s what I am then, right? I’m a fool.”

“You’re not a fool, but I think that son-of-a-bitch is playing you for one. We need to ask for a bigger cut.”

“How big?”

“As big as we can get, silly.”

Bambi straddles Bill’s lap, kisses him, leans back and says, “Let’s shoot for twenty percent.”

“What if he says ‘no’?”

“We’ll negotiate, Billy. How many trips a month?”

“What do you mean?”

Bambi laughs and says, “Come on, Billy. Stay with me here. How many times a month are you going to be hauling this copra stuff?”

“Two.”

“So that’s twenty-one-hundred a month, right?”

“Jesus, I don’t know. You’re like a human adding machine.”

Bambi laughs and says, “Let’s ask for twenty-percent and settle for, say, fifteen. That’d be...what...three-hundred-and-fifteen dollars a month. That’s almost four thousand a year. We could absolutely live on that.”

“He said the copra market’s getting hot.”

“Maybe or for certain?”

“I don’t know, but he said there was a house at Puama’u...or a bungalow or some such thing...thrown in rent free.”

“That sounds good, right?” Bambi asks.

“Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“He said the only neighbor we’d have is an old woman who, he said, would be happy to cook and clean and could be, I don’t know, like a guide or something to help us get settled. And we’d have to stay with her until the bungalow was fixed up.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“Nobody’s lived there since the war; well, nobody except some explorers or something who stayed there for a couple weeks in the spring.”

“I’m not so sure *that’s* good,” Bambi frowns. “She could be a nut.”

“Carlyle swears she’s really a good woman, and if you’re pregnant, Carlyle said this woman’s like a legend or something on the island with delivering babies.”

“Jesus Christ, Billy. You talked to this man about my being pregnant?”

“Well, I was worried about what we’d do, you know, and who else could I ask?”

“Okay, that’s actually kind of sweet, but what it sounds like is that there’s no hospital on the island,” Bambi observes.

“I don’t think so, but there is a medical officer who’s apparently got a good reputation. Carlyle claims he’s met him.”

Bambi’s frown softens as she rolls off of Bill and onto her back, her face a picture of deep contemplation. Bill settles next to her, and as he places his hands behind his head, he cannot resist glancing at her body, and what he sees arouses him.

Bambi notices, loses her contemplative expression and chuckles, “You boys are strange creatures, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know what that’s supposed to mean,” Bill replies with some surprise.

“The hell you don’t, Buster,” Bambi laughs.

She turns to him, slides her thigh onto his belly and props her head on her hand as she looks at him; Bill stares at the cabin ceiling and blushes.

“See,” she says with an impish smile; “it’s as obvious as the nose on your face what’s on your mind, but you get embarrassed when you get found out.”

“I’m not *embarrassed*,” Bill protests but without conviction.

“You’re *blushing!*” Bambi retorts.

“It’s just that, well...”

“Well, what?”

“I never knew a girl could be so...”

“So, *what?*” Bambi laughs and pinches his nipple.

Bill responds with a twitch and an “ouch!” And then he continues, “I don’t know, so *easy* about stuff.”

“Who’s easy and what stuff?” Bambi challenges with another pinch.

“Stop it!” Bill says with a laugh and continues, “*That* stuff...and being *naked* in front of each other.”

“Oh, *that* stuff. Turns out it’s not so hard, is it, that ‘stuff’? Oh wait,” she says with faux surprise and an intimate touch, “Turns out *some* things are hard.”

“Stop it,” Bill giggles as he rolls her onto her back, straddles her, and kisses her.

The kiss continues for several seconds until Bill raises his head and looks into Bambi’s eyes with an intensity that not only

warms her heart, it convinces her once again how much this boy must love her, that whatever magic she effortlessly conjures at moments like this allows her to control this boy. As she reflects on this momentary acknowledgement, she feels her heart calm and her anxious mind relax. A bit. And then as he kisses her again, the thought crosses her mind that she has to be careful.

He's not stupid, she thinks, just naïve, and in time, he might begin to realize just how much he has made himself vulnerable to her whims and wishes, and if he ever does, she worries, he might resent how she has exploited his carnal needs, and if *that* were to happen, she considers, he might rebel, and then what would happen to her, she being thousands of miles from home? Stump's leering eyes flash into her mind along with the question, and she shivers.

While her thinking is prescient, Bambi does not realize that while Bill is kissing her, he is, in fact, considering his inability to avoid the power of her intimacies, which he knows overpower his will and his reason. He knows she has been using this power without relenting during the months they have spent in their self-imposed exile, but he is terrified of losing moments like this, intimate moments his sheltered life in a small, Olympic Peninsula town never allowed him to imagine were possible. He is also sensing, and not for the first time, an amorphous fear of losing control of his life.

He lifts his lips away from Bambi's when he feels her shiver and looks into her eyes with a gaze that she senses is about something other than making love.

"What is it?" he asks.

“Nothing,” is her reply, “I guess I’m back to wondering about what it is we should do.”

“Carlyle wants to introduce us to someone.”

“Who?”

“The old woman we’d share the house with.”

“The one from Hiva Oa? She’s here?”

Bill rolls off of Bambi and lies on his back; she turns and nestles next to him, touches him as a lover does in such a position, and with her mouth close to his left ear, she whispers, “She’s in Pape’ete?”

Distracted by her ministrations, it is a moment before he is able to concentrate enough to respond, “She’s with her nephew a few miles up the coast.”

“When does he want us to meet her?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

“When were you going to tell me?”

“When you weren’t mad.”

“What if I was mad for days?”

“You wouldn’t be, would you?”

Bambi mounts her lover, and the next minutes pass as minutes do in such situations.

When they are finished, Bambi settles next to Bill and whispers into his ear, “This is moving way too fast for me.”

“I’m beginning to feel the same way,” Bill replies, “but I’m really nervous about our money.”

“Do we want to appear too eager?”

“What do you mean?”

“I think it’s possible he’s desperate and needs the boat. Let’s play him along.”

“How the hell do we do *that*?” Bill asks.

“I’ll be damned if I know.”

The sound of oars being stroked in nearby water interrupts the conversation, and the two young lovers look at each other. A few seconds pass and there is a sound that might be the butt end of an oar knocking on Serenity’s steel hull.

“What’s that?” Bambi asks.

Bill shrugs and makes a face that conveys he has no idea, just as Mary Sterling’s teasing shout answers the question: “Ahoy, Serenity. You two at it again?”

* * *

Matthew Stump glances at Huamanava as the First Mate prowls the bridge on the Mate’s assigned watch, which had begun fifteen minutes before. Stump knows not to interfere because he does not want to aggravate the irascible man, and because he has the utmost confidence in Huamanava’s ability to oversee every possible duty, function, or unexpected disaster on the Picayune.

Stump’s is a lonely life, not that he has ever complained to anyone about it, except for rare drunken rants in the solitary presence of his staunch First Mate. For almost ten years he and Huamanava have sailed together, gotten drunk together, and shared women together, but as Stump puffs on a diminishing cigar, he acknowledges he knows nothing more about the man on this night than he knew when Huamanava first signed on to the Picayune as a seaman.

Beneath a midnight sky, the converted LSD is cruising under Huamanava's eye at eighteen knots through the pass between Mataiva and Tikehau, en route to the Marquesas. The Picayune will make its usual calls at five of the fifteen islands in the Marquesas group, one of which is Hiva Oa, to offload small shipments of food and household supplies, diesel oil and gasoline, spare parts for vehicles, and other sundry goods ordered during the previous weeks by way of wireless operators on each island. Stump will be able to dock the Picayune alongside quays at Nuku Hiva and Ua Pou, but the other ports of call in the Marquesas will require the use of one or both of the landing craft in the Picayune's well deck to transfer cargo back and forth between beaches and the ship; the landing craft being, Stump acknowledges for what must be the thousandth time, the manifestation of his life's one stroke of entrepreneurial genius.

Stump exits the bridge, walks to the starboard side of the deck and stares at the star-filled sky. His is not the life of which he dreamed as a boy or even a life he might have imagined before The War changed everything. Disillusioned by the emotional beating meted out by the Depression, at thirty-five and a few days past the day his President declared would be "a date which will live in infamy," Stump enlisted in the U.S. Army. After boot camp and specialist training, he was assigned to the Quartermaster Corp in Hawaii, where he worked in warehouse operations. Through hard work and effective groveling, he was promoted to Master Sergeant in early 1944, with responsibilities that allowed him to shunt into the Black Market a tiny portion

of the thousands of tons of food and supplies that passed through Honolulu.

His relative success in this endeavor had depended upon cultivating greedy accomplices, and he soon discovered he had a bloodhound's nose for finding them. The cultivation had, of course, involved bribes and kickbacks, but through trial and error, he had learned the nuanced ways of stimulating others' appetites for wealth without spending too much of his own: a feigned reluctance on his part to participate in clandestine plans; convincing protestations of his unwillingness to involve others in risks attached to unpalatable consequences; the lie of his inclination to risk his own loss as testimony to comradeship. By exploiting those susceptible to his feints and cash, he had created an illicit machine that accumulated a sizeable trove of ill-gotten gains by the time signatories on the deck of the USS Missouri had ended the Pacific War.

Stump had not been isolated in Hawaii during his stint in the Quartermaster Corp. His increasing responsibilities required that he personally inspect the storage facilities of the supply chain as the American military island-hopped its way toward Japan, and always looking for new opportunities for his illegitimate enterprises—especially opportunities likely to present themselves after the inevitable end of the war—he noted that the Japanese Imperial Navy had never gotten around to invading most of the islands that were informally referred to in 1956 as French Polynesia.

It was clear to Stump that while the infrastructure of this economic backwater was outdated, it had not been impacted by

bombs and artillery shells, and more importantly, the population had been largely ignored. They would welcome, he believed, mercantile services that the world would not be quick to provide to isolated and distant islands as it transitioned from ubiquitous war to a hungry and economically voracious peacetime.

Having made Black Market connections from Honolulu to Auckland, he began to envision manageable machinations of a business model, but despite his accumulating wealth—he was something of a miser and proud of it—the balance of capital he required to embark on his new enterprise had been wired, without warning, to the Honolulu American Express office, where for nearly two months, it had been waiting for his return, along with a cable explaining that Stump was the sole heir of his mother's very wealthy, bachelor brother. The sizeable inheritance, when combined with what he had accumulated from the Black Market, had allowed him to purchase a surplus LSD that had been placed on the scrap list at Naval Station Pearl Harbor.

His private purchase had been unprecedented, but wheels had been greased thanks to a favor granted by a rear admiral eager to avoid revelations of his participation in Stump's illicit wartime escapades. For the nine years after having been rechristened the *Picayune*, the LSD has been making regular voyages between Pape'ete and Honolulu with scheduled stops in the Marquesas and the Line Islands to deliver supplies in exchange for the cash crop of copra. Given the success of the *Picayune's* landing craft in transferring goods back and forth between the ship and the sandy beaches of islands without

portside quays, he is determined to accumulate enough capital to purchase a larger and less maintenance-dependent replacement for the aging ship.

It is this want on Stump's part that has encouraged his willingness to partner with Carlyle in the Englishman's scheme, something Stump affirms to himself as he takes a final drag on his cigar. He pitches the stub of the cigar into the waves and mutters, "The only problem is what that slimy, limey bastard is up to. There's no way he can be putting this together on his own."

Stump closes his eyes and takes a deep breath to wash the residue of cigar smoke from his lungs. Opening his eyes, he stares into the black-blue, moonless night across which are scattered an infinity of stars. He knows some of them, recognizing them from afar like the sight of old friends. On such nights as this, his mind is usually not as turbulent as are the trade-wind-driven swells through which the Picayune is sailing, swells that have been disturbed by their being funneled between Mataiva and Tikehau, but tonight his mind is in turmoil as it turns, over and over, images of a young American woman, images both remembered and imagined, the latter lurid and unsolicited. Despite the differences between imagining having the young American woman in compromising situations and imagining a newer, larger Picayune, there is one common theme: he is confident he will possess them both.

"Patience, Captain; patience," he mutters with the waves as witnesses, and then he throws back his head and roars out joyous insolence at his friends sparkling above.

* * *

Bambi yawns and looks at Bill who is sleeping soundly next to her. She checks the brass clock mounted to the forward bulkhead of the aft cabin: a bit past seven o'clock in the morning.

"Billy," she says, and when he does not respond, she pokes him.

He opens one eye and says, "What?"

"Don't 'what' me, Buster. We agreed we were going to go with Carlyle and meet this woman with the house on Hiva Oa. This morning, after we go to the market."

Bill grimaces, and declares, "God, my head hurts."

"Too much of the Sterling's rum. I warned you."

"I feel like I'm going to puke," he says as he rolls toward the edge of the bed.

Bambi jumps from the bed and commands, "Not down here you're not, Buster. Come on! Up! Up!"

With Bambi's help, Bill manages to crawl up the companionway to the deck, where he stumbles to the stern pulpit and hurls the foul contents of his stomach into the harbor. Bambi rubs his back and says the kinds of soothing things that his mother, an experienced nurse, might have said were she there.

Again, and again, his stomach heaves, but Bambi does not leave his side until it appears the worst of the spasms have passed. She goes below into the forward cabin and returns with a mug of water, a damp cloth, and a towel, which Bill uses to regain some semblance of well-being as the two of them lean back against the starboard lifelines.

“Lesson learned?” Bambi asks like a mother.

“I didn’t know what drinking too much meant until this morning.”

“Pretty obvious to me you were trying to get plastered.”

“So, what?” Bill replies.

“So, it was pretty obvious you were more interested in that than in saying goodbye to Mary and Marty.”

“Good riddance.”

“Billy!”

“What?”

“Let it go, okay?” she responds, her voice rising; “I didn’t leave with *them*, did I? I’m here with you. With *you!*”

Bill looks off toward Mou’a ‘Orohena, which is uncloded by the usual clouds and with the volcanic spires facing the sun a purple-grey in the bright morning light. When he turns back to Bambi, she angrily wipes a tear from her cheek and looks away.

The sight of Bambi crying is something Bill has found to be unbearable. It’s probably why I agreed to take the boat and run away with her, those goddamned tears, he thinks, and not for the first time. But it’s unbearable now, he knows, because of this overwhelming emotion that is rising in him, tingling his skin, causing his heart to race and his mind to fear the loss of her.

“Hey,” Bill says in a soft but pleading tone as he puts his arm around her; “I’m glad you’re here with me. I guess I’m just feeling lousy. Sorry.”

He gives Bambi a squeeze. She glances up at him and tries not to smile, but a slight smile appears.

“So, what’re we going to do?” Bill asks.

“Don’t you remember?”

“Remember what?”

Bambi looks sideways at him and says, “You were *that* loaded?”

Bill shrugs, his expression sheepish, and says “I don’t know. What *should* I have remembered?”

“Mary and Marty finally came around to thinking that there wouldn’t be any harm in us just meeting this woman, and I agreed, and so did you. I *thought!*” Bambi declares and punctuates her declaration with a poke in Bill’s ribs.

“Mahana was going to meet us at eleven o’clock on the Promenade,” he says.

Bambi kisses Bill’s cheek, stands, extends her hand to him and helps him to his feet.

“If we hurry,” she says, “we can get to Le Marché, get some food, bring it back here, and still be able to meet him by eleven. This could actually be interesting, you know, meeting real Tahitians?”

Bill is surprised that he actually feels that way as well and says so, after which Bambi takes his hand and leads him below to the aft cabin so they can ready themselves for yet another adventure.

* * *

Bambi is wearing her new dress; her hair, now long enough, is combed back into a ponytail tied with a length of pretty ribbon she had bought for a few francs at Le Marché. She sits in the bow of the dinghy and absorbs the sights and sounds of Pape’ete harbor and the town as Bill pulls on the oars.

She had learned from one of the two customs and immigration officers who had boarded and inspected Serenity and their passports shortly after their arrival, that the omnipresent sweetness in the air was from sacks of copra stored in and around the metal-roofed warehouse along the quay. She had pretended she knew what copra was, but she had remained unenlightened until her conversation with the American captain. She takes a deep draught of the air, which triggers the memory of the officers in their starched white uniforms, and the memory of her conversation with the Captain. The former memory is a pleasant one; the latter, not at all.

But the unpleasantness of Stump evaporates in the warm breeze, the scent of copra, the bustle of the colorful populace strolling along the harbor promenade, and the lush greenery in and beyond the town. The vegetation climbs far up the volcanic spines in the distance, elevations that are not more impressive than the Olympics near her home, which cover a much greater area than the entire island of Tahiti, but what lies stretching out before her are impressive, nonetheless. At this moment, Bambi decides that she and Bill may, in fact, have found paradise.

“There’s Mahana,” she reports when she sees him walking along the beach.

“He is dependable, isn’t he?” Bill asks.

“Like clockwork,” she replies and returns the wave Mahana is sending to her.

Carlyle’s man had been waiting for them when they had arrived at the beach earlier that morning and had completed what

he had not been able to complete the previous day: haggling the vendors for good prices for the best produce.

As they had explored Le Marché, Bambi and Mahana had maintained a running commentary on the many novelties of such a place, which was unlike anything Bambi had ever experienced in Port Townsend. Bill had maintained his usual reticence, not out of pique but out of his usual manner of listening, learning from and enjoying the sometimes-playful banter between his companions.

Mahana had purchased juice for the three of them, and while they drank from rinsed but communal cups, Bambi brought up the plans for the later excursion.

“Are we walking or taking a car?” she had asked.

“Ah, we could walk, but it would take us hours. It’s twenty kilometers to Papeno’o,” Mahana had replied.

“Is this Papeno’o the woman we’re going to meet?” Bambi had asked.

Mahana had laughed and answered, “No, no, Miss Bambi. The person you are going to meet for sure—there will be others, of course—this person is Oliana Terierooiterai, the niece of one of the most important Tahitians there ever was, but he died a few years ago, God rest his soul. A very great man.”

“Why is she here if her home is at this Atuona place?” Bill had asked.

Mahana had swallowed what remained of the juice in his cup and answered, “She’s staying with her nephew, who is the Chief in Papeno’o.”

“There are chiefs?” Bill had asked; “I thought the French ran this place.”

“They do, they do,” Mahana had replied, “but they depend upon the chiefs to, how shall I say this, be like a mayor in a town. There used to be seventeen, and Oliana’s brother had been the head chief, I guess you could say.”

“You know,” Bambi had said to Mahana, “we were thinking of not going.”

Mahana’s eyes had opened wide as if shocked by this possibility, and he had protested, “Oh please God, dear God, you must come. You must. If for nothing else, do it for me, please.”

“Carlyle put you up to making sure we’d show?” Bill had asked with a glance at Bambi.

“Yes, of course. He would be very angry with me if you, as you say it, did not ‘show.’ Very angry.”

“Well, we can’t have that, can we?” Bambi had asked with a squeeze of Mahana’s hand.

They had loaded up the dinghy, off-loaded the goods on the Serenity, washed up and changed clothes, and here they are nearly to the beach where the faithful Mahana waits.

“I’ve been thinking about how upset Mahana got when I told him we were thinking of renegeing on the trip to...what is it?” Bambi asks.

“Papeno’o,” Bill replies.

“Papeno’o...anyway, I’m thinking that we’re way more valuable to Carlyle than we imagine.”

“I’ve been thinking the same thing,” Bill adds.

“We’ve got to be careful with him.”

“I gotta agree...and here we are,” Bill notes as the rubber bottom of the dinghy grounds on the pulverized coral of the beach.

* * *

They had found Carlyle waiting for them, leaning against a robin’s-egg-blue Renault parked curbside on the boulevard. The Renault was a well-preserved rendition of what looked like a miniaturized, American station wagon;¹⁴ a rack, the kind that could corral several suitcases behind an eight-inch-high rail, was mounted on the roof, and the body had a sheen that bespoke pride of ownership.

That owner, a renegade from Aix-en-Provence named Pierre, had been seated behind the wheel, and having been hired by Carlyle to transport the Englishman and two Americans to Papeno’o, he had cast a judgmental eye at Bill and Bambi as they approached the car under the supervision of Mahana. What Pierre saw, at least what he had seen when he cast that eye on Bambi, had prompted him to exit the car and bow in deference to her.

“Mademoiselle, je ne savais pas qu’un de mes passagers serait si beau,” (*I didn’t know that one of my passengers would be so beautiful*) Pierre had said directly to Bambi, and then noticing her wedding ring, he had continued somewhat abashed, “S’il vous plaît, pardonnez-moi madame, je vois que vous êtes marié. Je

¹⁴ A Renault Juvaquatre Dauphinoise.

m'appelle Pierre.” *(Please forgive me ma'am, I see that you are married; my name is Pierre.)*

“I hate to tell you this Pierre, but elle ne parle pas français,” *(...she doesn't speak French)* Carlyle had offered with a chuckle.

“I am so apologizing,” Pierre had said with another slight bow toward Bambi, who had responded with a laugh and, “Je vais bien et comprend un peu, ah comprends assez.” *(I am all right and understand a little, ah, understand enough.)*

Bill had watched the interplay with interest, his already considerable admiration for Bambi growing by the second. She had introduced Bill and Mahana to Pierre, had suggested they get a move on, and had answered with good humor, Pierre's question, “Je ne sais pas, c'est quoi, 'muv un'?” *(I do not know, what is this 'muv un'?)*

Mahana had taken his leave with the understanding that he would commandeer the dinghy, row out to the Serenity, and stay aboard until such time as Bill and Bambi returned. Preceded by a wave from Mahana, Pierre pulled the Renault away from the curb into the busy boulevard traffic and headed in the direction of Papeno'o. Pierre, in broken English, had maintained an intermittent commentary for the benefit of his American passengers, not unlike that of a tour guide as he drove through the town. From time to time, Carlyle had interjected an observation, Bill had remained at ease with his usual reticence, and Bambi had played the enthusiastic tourist to Pierre's role of guide.

She had commented on the number of carts along the streets where vendors sold all manner of things, wondered why they

didn't ply their trade at Le Marché, and observed that most of the small shops they passed appeared to be owned by merchants who were Chinese. She had found curious the bamboo cinema they had passed and had observed it was interesting that the rows of humble wooden bungalows with metal roofs seemed to belong to "natives" and not Europeans.

The Renault is now traveling slowly because of the poor condition of the roadway along a narrow stretch of lowland bordered by coconut palms and immense breadfruit trees. Pierre points out that interspersed among and beneath the bigger trees were all manner of fruit trees, including mangos, oranges, lemons, and papayas, as well as small huts. At one point, Pierre has to brake the car when a large pig lumbers across the road, and a minute later he pulls over to provide room for an open bus to rattle by in the opposite direction carrying a diverse cargo of bananas, chickens, goats and people.

Conversation in the Renault subsides. Bill, sitting on the seaward side of the car, amuses himself by looking for the ocean through the trees; Bambi, on the opposite side, stares into the forest, which clings to the hillsides that climb steeply toward the mountainous interior.

"Voici, Papeno'o," Pierre says when the Renault enters an area where the trees are diminished in number and the number and proximity of huts, one to another, suggests a settlement.

Pierre turns the Renault onto a small lane a hundred yards before where the road ends at the bank of the la Rivière Papeno'o, a spot a few hundred yards from where the placid river empties into the Pacific. Despite the continual roar of

unimpeded Pacific breakers that crash on the beach due to the absence of a protective coral reef, the rattling of the Renault on the rutted lane has alerted the occupants of a large, bamboo-walled, thatch-roofed house elevated a half dozen feet above the ground, unlike the other homes in Papeno'o that are situated directly on the ground. Also, unlike the other more modest homes in the community, the larger home has a broad front porch and appears to have a few satellite outbuildings.

Pierre stops the car a few yards from the front steps of the elevated house. Two imposing figures stand at the top of the stairs, a man and a woman, both tall and broad in stature.

Pierre turns around in the seat, and with a note of seriousness he has yet to show, he says, "Dis house was once belonged to, ah, a man très important, his name, Teriieroo a Teriierooiterai...you are much d'honneur d'être ici. (*...you are much of honor to be here.*)

Pierre is quite right," Carlyle chimes in; "De Gaulle himself gave Teriieroo the Légion d'Honneur,¹⁵ and you're about to meet Teriieroo's sister and his son, so best show our most sterling behavior, right? Right. Just follow my lead."

When Carlyle exits the car, the sister of the great man and his son begin to descend the six steps from the porch to the ground

¹⁵ The Legion of Honour (full name: National Order of the Legion of Honour; is the highest French order of merit for military and civil merits, established in 1802 by Napoleon Bonaparte and retained by all the divergent governments and regimes later holding power in France, up to the present. Wikipedia.

and break into broad smiles when their youthful-looking and alert eyes meet Carlyle's.

The man appears to be in his sixties; the woman is perhaps older, Bambi thinks. Bare-chested, the son wears a vibrant red pareo from the waist down, covered with something akin to four bands of Marquesan-like geometric patterns in white. His aunt's pareo is a multicolored floral design that is tucked above her breasts and hangs to just below her knees. The large and sturdy feet of the Teriierooiterais are bare, their skin is dark, their hair thick, curly and silver with age, although the aunt's is longer, wound about her head, and surrounded by a garland of fresh flowers.

The man opens his arms and exclaims, "Carlyle, mon cher ami, comment vas-tu?" (*Carlyle, my dear friend, how are you?*)

To both Bill and Bambi, it seems that Carlyle tolerates and submits to the custom of cheek kissing and hand shaking with the two hosts rather than welcoming it, and it is but a moment before the son turns to the Americans, and accompanied by what may be the kindest eyes Bambi thinks she has ever seen, asks, "Et qui sont ces deux beaux jeunes?" (*And who are these two beautiful young people?*)

"This," Carlyle says in the way of an English gentleman as he gestures toward Bambi, "is Brittany Alistair Benton...and as a favor to her, although she can speak and understand some French, it would be a kindness if we spoke English."

"Of *course*," the nephew replies enthusiastically, "and I must say, I am absolutely charmed by your lovely face, Brittany. Allow

me to introduce myself,” he continues with a slight bow, “I am Charles Terrierooiterai, at your service.”

He gently grasps Bambi’s elbows, draws her to him, and they kiss each other’s cheeks before turning Bambi to his aunt who is smiling so intensely that her eyes are mere slits; he says, “This beautiful young woman is my Auntie, my dearest Aunt Oliana.”

“Your only Aunt Oliana,” Oliana laughs, and she and Bambi exchange kisses and handshakes. “My nephew can be such a fool sometimes,” declares the older woman, “and obviously, he’s just proven it.”

Oliana laughs again, takes Bambi’s hand, turns her toward Bill, and says in an exaggerated way, “And is this young god your husband?”

Bambi, having been taken a bit aback by the Terrierooiterais’ mastery of English, and seeing Bill’s eyes as large as saucers at being referred to as a god, she laughs out loud.

“I’m sorry,” she giggles, “he’s no god, I can assure you, but he is my wonderful Billy. Oliana, Billy, Billy, Oliana.”

Bambi cannot resist chuckling at her love’s bemused expression as he—a fast learner—and Oliana exchange kisses.

Right, Carlyle thinks, this is going well.

“Charles, my dear friend, there is much to talk about. Shall we?” Carlyle asks with a gesture toward the stairs into the house.

“Ah, Teddy, have you already forgotten that we eat first, then we talk? Perhaps a light snack?” Charles says with a smile and with his own gesture toward the stairs, adds, “Après toi, mon ami.” (*After you, my friend.*)

Oliana clasps a hand of each of her American visitors and restrains them while Charles and Carlyle mount the stairs and enter the house.

Bill and Bambi will come to learn over the following months that the smile they see on Oliana's face is nearly omnipresent. There is something deeply maternal that exudes from the old woman that feels both irresistible and welcoming to the youthful, self-exiled Americans. Oliana lowers her voice as though she is about to share a secret but instead begins with a first lesson about life in the islands.

“What you’ve heard my cousin remind his friend is something you should remember always. Eating is very important to us, almost a sacred thing, and we do not wish to distract others from the magic of the taste of the foods we eat, so we eat quietly and wait until everyone is finished before we begin to talk, and then, oh my, can we *talk*,” she declares with a chuckle.

“Some other things to remember. Always wash your hands before you eat...I will show you what to use and how...and don't be surprised to find there will be no tableware where you sit. Edward and I were sent to Paris by Uncle Teriieroo as youngsters to receive an education, and we even spent time in London with him, so we do know how to use silverware. It's just that we believe...no, that's not right...we *know* that putting metal into our mouths affects the flavors of the food. The way to eat your food is to pick up food between two fingertips and your thumb, like so,” she says as she mimes the technique.

Oliana looks at Bambi to ascertain if she's making sense to her, and then she and Bambi both look at Bill whose face conveys such panic that both of the women laugh out loud.

"Oh, Billy," Bambi suggests with a smile, "When in Rome..."

Oliana puts an arm around Bill and says, "Just watch me and do what I do, okay Billy? May I call you Billy?"

Bill looks at her for a beat until Bambi intercedes with a laugh and says, "Of course you can. *I* do," and then with the excitement of a small child she asks, "Oliana, can we please, please go inside? I can't wait to see what it's like in there."

* * *

Father John Benvenuto kneels in front of the rail at the edge of the stone altar of his chapel in Atuona, clasps his hands, and leans his forearms against the rail. He bows his balding head, closes his eyes, and feels the cooling effect of the Pacific-born breeze that flows through his roofed but wall-less sanctuary. After some seconds, he raises his head, eyes still closed, and with one hand, he unbuttons his clerical collar from his white shirt, a shirt which appears translucent due to the perspiration that has soaked it through.

He positions the collar over the rail and lets it rest there, opens his eyes, looks at the large crucifix above the altar, and as he crosses himself, he recites in a whisper, "In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. (*In the name of the Father and of the Son, and Holy Spirit.*) Amen."

His congregation—in his mind, a desultory mix of humans—is not present. He assumes they are taking their leisure somewhere at the moment, with little thought to what should be, he thinks, their obligatory obeisance to God, a thought which causes a slight shiver to run down his spine. He crosses himself again and stares at the wounded man on the cross who, when Father John kneels where he is kneeling, seems to be staring at him. What is in Jesus’ eyes, the priest wonders? Accusation? Disappointment? Fatigue?

More than likely the latter, John thinks, as a weight of responsibility settles with significant heft just above his own eyes, a weight that closes them and causes him to press his hands together in prayer. After some seconds, he opens his eyes and stares at a crack in one of the rocks that form the floor of the altar.

In a low, flat monotone he begins, “Domine Iesu, dimitte nobis debita nostra, salva nos ab igne inferiori...” (*Jesus, forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell...*)

There is movement to his left. He looks in that direction and sees a young woman walking slowly up a hill and away from his tiny rectory; he does not take his eyes from the woman and continues with the prayer ... “perduc in caelum omnes animas...” (*...lead all souls to heaven...*)

The young woman, for whom the introduction to womanhood has been a recent experience, turns and stares at the man kneeling at the altar; perhaps appropriate, he thinks, that she is framed by the convent and orphanage the Father arranged to have constructed a year after his arrival, and perhaps she will be

inspired by him to join the small but growing community of young women who live there.

“Praesertim eas, quae misericordiae tuae maxime indigent,” (*especially those in most need of your mercy*) he whispers as he watches the young woman turn her eyes and then her body toward the forest that climbs the hill above the church.

The shudders return, enhanced by the wind-caused chilling of his skin but born of a strange mix of desire and guilt. John turns his eyes back toward the Savior on the cross and decides that what is in Jesus’ eyes is affirmation of the justice of his exile, this punishment to a place with no chance for rehabilitation or for restoration to a world where he, a priest of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Mary and Jesus, might someday feel the sinful joy of recognition. He, once again, concludes that he is certain to die here and decides that the most constructive thing he might do for the rest of the afternoon is to get drunk.

* * *

Bambi has had her wish fulfilled and then some. She had learned that the airy, bamboo-walled and palm-thatch-roofed house had recently replaced a hot and stuffy, European-inspired, wood and corrugated iron bungalow. Doing so had been a part of an ad hoc process of restoration of island traditions that had been begun after the war by a few wealthy European expats who wanted to experience what they imagined a pre-European paradise was like. Charles had the means to be a part of the restoration movement, and his new but traditional home was the result.

The interior of the house was entirely open save where a few strategically hung draperies could be used to delineate what Bambi was told were sleeping areas, a design application that honored the European-influenced recognition of privacy. Given the wish to impress their guests, Oliana and Charles had arranged for a traditional banquet to be served on the broad veranda at the front of the house, but as Charles had promised to Carlyle, there were a few things to eat before they talked: delicious mango, breadfruit, and prawns intended to tide the guests over until the dinner feast was ready.

Not far from the house was a tin-roofed, open-sided shed about fifteen-feet-square under which was a rock-lined pit Oliana called an umu, which she explained was a traditional earth oven that families or villages used to cook large quantities of food. The pig and chicken that were to be served explained the mouth-watering aromas Bambi and Bill had smelled when they arrived. The floor of the veranda had been covered with platted mats of palm leaves on which fresh banana leaves had been placed in the manner of a tablecloth, and in turn, garlands of fern leaves and white tiare flowers had been placed on the vibrant green of the banana leaves.

With a few hours left before the umu was to be opened, Oliana had suggested to her two American guests that they should accompany her on a tour of the grounds. As they had begun their walk, Oliana had explained that several of their neighbors would be joining them for the meal, not only because it was customary but because the neighbors had foraged for much of what they would all be enjoying.

Eventually, Oliana and her new, young friends found their way to the mouth of the la Rivière Papeno'o where it flows around a blocking sandbar into the Pacific. On the other side of the bar from where the trio is now standing shoeless in the sand of the upper beach, and along an adjoining beach, swells born by the trade winds are crashing. They stare at the mesmerizing rise and fall of the surf as the regularity of the sound of water moving up the beach and then down the slope to meet the next breaker provides a soothing background.

"It's so beautiful," Bambi remarks as she stares out at the Pacific.

"It is, child," Oliana responds, "and I never tire of it, which is a good thing for someone who lives on islands, don't you think?"

Oliana smiles even more than usual when the two women turn and look into each other's eyes.

"And you, Billy, what do you think?" Oliana asks.

"I love the sea," he replies more to the Pacific than to Oliana.

"Ah, Brittany," Oliana laughs. "It seems your man has a mistress."

Bill blushes and opens his mouth to reply but says nothing; instead, he smiles and shrugs his shoulders.

"I can see why you like this one," Oliana says to Bambi as she puts her arm around Bill and gives him a firm squeeze.

"Oh, to be young again," Oliana ventures as she releases Bill and turns her attention back to the sea.

Becoming more serious, she looks at both of her guests in turn with piercing yet kind eyes and asks, “And you are *young*, aren’t you?”

Bambi nods and says, “We are.”

“And yet you were willing to forsake everything you knew that was home, your family and friends, to come here on this, I would say, adventure, no? I often wonder at the courage of the first to come here, our ancestors, centuries ago, and when I was little, I remember thinking how brave they must have been, heading out to sea with no known destination, but as I grew older, I began to wonder why it was they left. What if it wasn’t for the adventure? What if they left their homes because they had to, because something had driven them away?”

“And you’re wondering what it is that might’ve driven us from our home,” Bill responds, softly, without defensiveness, his eyes still staring out to sea.

Oliana, perhaps surprised that this young man, who until that moment has seemed shy and restrained, has realized the intent of her question and has acknowledged it.

Bambi’s expression begins to dissolve into a mask of sorrow as she looks first at Bill and then at Oliana, who embraces her, and with a gentle hand, shifts the younger woman’s head onto her welcoming shoulder. Oliana looks a question at Bill who looks back at her with a steady gaze that tells her he felt Bambi was the one to answer Oliana’s question.

Oliana releases Bambi, who is silently crying, and with the command, “Come, children,” Oliana leads the young Americans

several steps into the shade beneath a few tall coconut palms and gestures for them to join her on the cool sand beneath the trees.

Bambi lies down and places her head on Oliana's welcoming lap, and Oliana sees surprise in Bill's eyes at Bambi acting in such a familiar way.

"I think you would like Brittany to tell your story," Oliana says to Bill, "but I want to hear you tell it, Billy. Please. Tell me."

Bill, who is leaning back against the trunk of one of the big palms, glances at Bambi lying on her side as Oliana strokes her hair like a mother might do, sighs, and stares out at the Pacific. As he stares, another vision of the Pacific, or rather an extension of it—the Strait of Juan de Fuca—floods into his mind. He closes his eyes, and from close by the stern of the *Serenity*, he watches it drive through horizontal rain and steep, gale-driven seas, the spray exploding at the bow and carrying all the way to the stern where a man he knows—where a man he knew—stands next to the stern rail, his left hand holding onto the mizzen mast's starboard, split backstay, his clothing drenched from the spray. A two-foot-long Stillson wrench is bound to the man's chest by friction tape that wraps around his torso, and a silver-plated revolver is in the man's right hand.

Once again, Bill sees in his mind's eye what the evidence suggests had happened. The man presses the revolver's muzzle against his right temple; there is a flash of light, but the sound is drowned out by the roar of the storm. His left hand falls from the backstay, the revolver drops to the deck and ricochets into the sea, and the man's slumping form follows.

"Billy?" Oliana gently prompts.

“It’s a long story, Oliana.”

“Time is an ample treasure for the young to spend, dear boy, no matter how poor we are, no? And there is plenty of it before they open the umu. Tell me then, when did you start thinking about this adventure?”

“You mean, when did I start thinking about running away?”

“If that is what this adventure is, then yes.”

“I never had a father,” Bill begins hesitantly. “Of course, I *had* a father that I never knew.”

“Because?” Oliana prods.

“My mother told me he was killed in the war.”

“I am so sorry, dear boy.”

“No need to be sorry; you weren’t the one who lied.”

Oliana stops stroking Bambi’s hair and glances at Bill, who continues to stare out at the ocean.

“Go on, then,” Oliana says.

Bill takes a deep breath and places a gentle hand on Bambi’s right foot. Lying, as she has been, on her side with her knees slightly bent, she rolls onto her back and extends her legs so that her feet rest upon Bill’s left thigh. Oliana watches as Bill, almost without thinking, begins to slowly massage Bambi’s feet and toes as if doing so was a long-practiced habit. Perhaps it is, she thinks, as she glances down at the closed eyes of the beautiful young woman whose head is resting on her lap. She resumes the slow, rhythmic stroking of Bambi’s hair.

“Last October, Karl shows up...my dead *father* shows up...in Port Townsend.”

Bill shakes his head, takes yet another deep breath, and continues, “I don’t need to go into all the gory details; it’s just that when he shows up, my mother had been married to this other guy, George, for a couple years, a guy I had come to accept as my step-father.”

“You liked this man, no?”

“I did. Very much. He taught me to sail and navigate, and we took cruises up into the San Juans.”

“These are islands?” Oliana asks.

“They are.”

“You liked him?”

“He was a good man.”

“But you left him.”

Bill glances at Oliana and sensing that she can see anger rising in his face, he turns his gaze back to the Pacific and continues, “He left *me*. When my real father showed up, my mother went with Karl, and George committed suicide.”

A slight gasp escapes Oliana, who recovers and asks, “This Karl is your father, no?”

As Bill nods affirmation, it occurs to him that this is the first time he has talked with someone other than Bambi about George’s apparent suicide. The last he knew was that George’s body had not been recovered from the waters of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, and that suicide had been presumed from but not proven by circumstantial evidence. What is it, he wonders, about this woman, he wonders, who has been able to entice his thoughts about George and his parents into the open?

“So, this is troubling to you, I can see that. And you must’ve been angry with your mother and this Karl.”

“*Still* angry with her. Don’t know that I can blame him for anything other than showing up. He didn’t have a clue that I existed.”

“And this anger is what told you to leave?”

“We’re not here because of Billy,” Bambi interjects with a sigh, “we’re here because of me.”

Oliana and Bill exchange a glance as they anticipate Bambi has more to say, and she does.

“I thought I was pregnant,” Bambi says as she looks up at Oliana to gauge how she responds to this news.

“Which means you were wrong, no?”

“I was, but I was so scared of what people would say that I was desperate to find an escape.”

“And you, Billy, you felt the same?” Oliana asks.

Bill blushes, casts his eyes down, and says, “I wasn’t the guy...”

Bambi interjects, “Maybe that’s a tale for another time.”

“Then how...” Oliana begins.

“Everything happened so fast. Everyone in town knew in less than a day that George had disappeared, and I knew Billy not only had access to the boat, I knew he could sail her anywhere.”

“And you were friends,” Oliana decides.

“We hardly knew each other,” Bambi says and notices that Bill has stopped massaging her feet.

She and Bill look into each other’s eyes as Bambi takes a deep breath before continuing, “I took advantage of his good nature,

Oliana. I sensed he was unhappy, knew the stories going around town about his mother and George and Karl, and I had this feeling...this hope...that if maybe I was nice to him, he might be the kind of person who would want to help me.”

Oliana turns to Bill and asks, “And this is true? You agreed to sail her away from her troubles?”

Realizing that Bambi has finally expressed what he has always known, that he was a victim of her manipulation, he finds he does not resent her admission that she has taken advantage of him. In fact, he feels relieved that she has acknowledged her deceit.

Bill smiles a slight smile, shrugs his shoulders, and says, “I guess I’m just a sucker for a pretty face.”

“And I think a passionate heart,” Oliana adds. “I suspect that you found out very quickly the joy that two people can find in each other’s arms. I am certain *you* are,” Oliana says to Bambi, “but has *he* turned out to be a good lover?”

Bambi directs a coy smile at Bill and says, “Actually, he’s quite good at it.”

Bill blushes so brightly that Oliana laughs out loud, and Bambi giggles.

When the laughter ends, Oliana’s face takes on a wistful cast, and she asks, “Then you found out you were not pregnant early in your journey, no?”

“We did,” Bill answers and resumes massaging Bambi’s feet.

“So, it turns out the reason why you both left your homes and your families no longer existed. Why didn’t you turn around

and go home? Pardon me for calling it this, but running away would be something easily forgiven, no?”

“I guess,” Bill answers, “but there was something else that kept us going.” He looks at Bambi and asks, “Was it the freedom, the excitement of the adventure?”

“Maybe,” Bambi ventures.

“Forgive my cheek, but it is who I am, and you must know already that I am falling in love with both of you like you are my own grown children. I am thinking you made love that first night of your escape, no?”

Bill and Bambi reply with sheepish grins in response to which Oliana smiles and continues, “As I thought, so maybe it was not just freedom and adventure, maybe it was that your hearts were joined in a way that would not be possible in your town, and then as your journey continued, there were hardships you had to overcome together and other experiences that you shared, which drew you even closer. I can see that all these things would keep driving you forward, just as the Ancestors were driven to find new homes.”

Oliana looks out at the few clouds streaming toward them over the aqua blue of the Pacific before offering in a more serious vein, “You know, Billy, if you had both been older, you would have made different choices, but the two of you have chosen a child’s way, and I don’t mean to insult you by saying this because as I’ve said, I already I feel my heart wrapping around both of you and cannot imagine hurting either of you for the world. A child may choose to run away from the pain of reproach and condemnation over the coming of a child, a pain I did not

understand until I lived in England and discovered that for some reason, the English, and I suppose you Americans too, do not see a child as a gift to everyone, no matter how it came to be.”

Oliana pauses, looks intently at Bill, and asks, “You do love this beautiful woman, no?”

Bill blushes yet again, takes a deep breath, looks into Oliana’s eyes, and replies in a quavering voice, “I do.”

“And you child,” Oliana says to Bambi, who looks up into the older woman’s eyes, “you do love this beautiful man, no?”

Bambi nods and replies, “I think I do.”

“I *know* you do, child, which is all I need to know,” Oliana says as she smiles at Bambi. “And there is something else I think I know. You will come to know me very well in the months to come, I think, and when you do, you will find that I sometimes have a strange sense of things, and I must tell you both that I sense there may be a child growing inside you now. I’m sure I feel its energy, but of course only time will tell if I am right, and if there is a child, it is good that it was brought about by love, and if she is born on Hiva Oa, she will be welcomed in love by all the people you will come to know as your neighbors.”

Oliana turns her eyes to Bill as she helps Bambi to sit up, “And your telling me your story is important because the three of us must come to trust each other like we are the closest of family. I know Carlyle and my brother are making plans that include you, Billy. I know they hope you will agree to join me on Hiva Oa, which is why I said what I said about the people of Hiva Oa. I know them like they are family. Charles and Carlyle want me to share my home with you at Puama’u until your

bungalow can be restored, and knowing what I now know, I want to welcome you with all my heart. We will be family, the three of us, because that is what we must be, no?”

Bill and Bambi agree, and together they help Oliana to stand.

“I’m getting to be an old woman if I need children to help me to my feet,” Oliana laughs. “So, now we can go back to the house and be done with the story-telling for a while. I can smell that the *ummu* has done it’s work.”

The trio take a few steps when Oliana grasps Bill’s hand and stops him, which causes Bambi to stop as well.

Oliana looks into the eyes of each with a seriousness neither has yet seen and warns, “I must caution you. I’m thinking yours is a story that you do not need to share with Charles or Carlyle. Let them know what they need to know in order to do their business. Let the personal stay personal among the three of us. You only need one other person to know all there is to know, and that is me. It is important that you two are not alone with a secret burning in your mouths. A secret must be shared with someone you trust, or it will not be a secret for long. You understand, no?”

When Bill and Bambi nod that they do, Oliana’s smile returns, she claps her hands and with a broad smile declares, “It is time for us to eat!”

Oliana turns in the direction of the house. Bill and Bambi follow, but after a few steps, Oliana stops and faces them.

“You have told me of a mother and father, no?” Oliana asks as her eyes bore into Bill’s.

When Bill nods, Oliana turns to Bambi and says, “But you have said nothing about family...you have hinted at it. Tell me.”

Bambi looks with earnest eyes into Oliana’s eyes as if trying to understand the reason for her asking.

“Well, my dear child?”

“My mother left us when I was a small child; my father is the captain of a fishing boat.”

“So, you both have parents waiting for you in this Port Townsend, no?”

“I don’t know if they’re waiting,” Bill scoffs.

“They are waiting, dear boy,” Oliana responds with a conviction the two Americans have yet to see. “Do they know you are here?”

Bambi looks down at her feet; Bill gazes beyond the palms to the ocean, but neither say anything.

“They do not even know if you are alive?” Oliana asks.

“They know we’re alive,” Bill says. “I sent my father a letter from Maui telling him we’d made it there.”

“But nothing more? Certainly, you told them of your plans to sail here, no?”

Again, Bill and Bambi avoid Oliana’s eyes, and she commands, “Look at me children,” and they do. She raises a finger and declares firmly, “That is something you must fix.”

* * *

Charles’ declaration has proven to be true. After everyone on the veranda had gorged themselves with roasted bush pig and chicken, and all manner of fruits from the forest, which have

been washed down with the contents of bottles of white Bordeaux that Charles has offered to his guests with singular pride, the conversation had commenced. Two hours after it had begun, the neighbors have drifted away, and only Bill and Bambi, the Terrierooiterais, and Carlyle remain.

The Englishman appears to be in a jollier state of mind than usual, perhaps because of the amount of Bordeaux he has poured down his throat, but he is not alone. Each of the others are oozing goodwill as they tease each other about how much each has eaten and other banalities such as the discovery of Brittany's nickname, Bambi.

Finally, Carlyle raises his nearly empty glass and toasts, "To an absolutely superlative feast as can only be found in two places, here and in Heaven!"

The others raise their glasses with appropriate, happy mumblings, and begin to get up with both groans and concurrent laughter coming from the elder three.

Carlyle puts his arm around Bill's shoulders as the two step toward the doorway into the house and says, "Bill, my boy, Charles and I need to talk some specifics about your joining our little venture, right Charlie?"

"True, true," Charles replies with a broad, wine-enhanced smile.

Bill stops, takes a step back from Carlyle and says, "Bambi and I are a team, sir, and I want her to be part of anything that's discussed."

Carlyle looks at Charles, whose expression is one of amused surprise, but before Carlyle can respond, Bambi touches Bill's

elbow and says, “You know what, Billy? Why don’t you have that conversation. You don’t need me because we’ve already talked about this, and I trust you.”

She kisses Bill quickly on the lips, puts her arms around him and whispers into his ear, “fifteen percent,” which is followed by a raised eyebrow and a knowing stare directed into Bill’s eyes.

“And while you men are talking business,” Oliana interjects, “If she’ll come, I’d like to show Bambi my favorite waterfall. Bambi?”

“I’d love to see it!”

“But it’s a three-mile walk!” Charles protests.

“Pierre will take us to the creek, and you, dear brother,” says Oliana with a sisterly pinch to Charles’ side, “can bring Billy to us in your car when you’re finished, no?”

“We’re going to have to get back to Pape’ete before it gets too late,” Carlyle says.

“I would like the children to stay with us tonight,” Oliana insists. “Charles will drive them to town tomorrow. Charles? Do you agree?”

“Absolument!” Charles responds with a laugh, “Je ne peux rien te refuser!” (*I cannot refuse you anything!*)

“Then we will be off so you three can have your talk, but first I have to get a few things from inside,” Oliana says to the men.

She extends her hand to Carlyle who stands to grasp and shake it, after which he and Oliana exchange farewell kisses. With what Bill thinks is a somewhat strained smile, she nods at Carlyle, and then she turns to Bambi and gestures for her to come with her into the house.

After the two women enter the house, Charles says, “That woman, gentlemen, my aunt, has a mighty will that I learned years ago not to cross! Now that the ladies have their plan, let’s the three of us go to one of my favorite places to discuss our business.”

* * *

Oliana and Bambi have been walking for fifteen minutes along a trail that runs beside a small creek, which flows through the dense forest that covers the steep sides of the Faarumai Valley. It is over an hour before sunset, but the shade of mountains to the west and the overarching canopy of the forest has diminished the light. Despite the absence of direct sunlight, the air is still quite warm and humid. The pair has already passed an impressive waterfall, but Oliana has promised Bambi, who is carrying a tote bag, that the cascade just around the bend is very special.

“Can you hear it?” Oliana asks.

“I can,” is the reply.

Oliana is walking over the rough gravel of the path in sandals, and she has shared another pair with Bambi. It is not all that Oliana has shared: Bambi is wearing a dark blue pareo with a white, floral design, and Oliana has placed a tiare blossom behind Bambi’s left ear. Oliana had admired the effect and had proclaimed to Bambi’s amusement that the pareo and tiare flower, when combined with Bambi’s dark hair and very dark tan, would have even Tahitians thinking she was one of them.

It is not long before the two women are standing in front of a circular, aquamarine pool one-hundred-feet in diameter into

which the Vaimahuta Cascade is pouring. The cascade skims down three hundred feet of a bare rock formation that is bracketed by ferns and mosses that appear luminescent in the shade.

After several seconds, Bambi whispers, “This may be the most beautiful place I have ever seen.”

“C’est beau, n’est ce pas?” (*It is beautiful, isn’t it?*)

“It is. It truly is.”

“But it is not just for looking, ma chère fille (*my dear girl*). Come,” Oliana commands as she drops her pareo, flips off her sandals and gingerly steps into the pool. “Come,” she says again as she laughs and gestures to Bambi to follow her. “You are Tahitian now. Put your American modesty aside and join me.”

Bambi smiles broadly, drops her pareo, loses her sandals and follows Oliana into the pool. The water feels cool against Bambi’s skin but refreshing, given the heat and humidity that lingers in the air.

“This is paradise,” Bambi says as she treads water next to the older woman who seems to be floating effortlessly.

“It is paradise, but we cannot live here every minute of every day, can we? So, we must enjoy it while we can, no?”

Bambi answers with a smile, tips forward, and gracefully dives beneath the surface of the water. The blossom that had been behind her ear floats on the surface marking the point of her descent. She remains submerged for several seconds and emerges laughing.

“God, I wish Billy was here,” Bambi says.

“He will be. I hope those two old goats aren’t taking advantage of him.”

“Would Charles do that?” Bambi asks.

“Charles is anything but evil, but he is a shrewd investor and will not give away a franc if he does not have to. It’s the other one I would worry about?”

“The Englishman?”

“Of course, the Englishman. He seems to me to be a slimy eel, no?”

Bambi laughs and agrees, “I don’t really trust him, but then, I think we’re in a position where, I don’t know...”

“Les mendiants ne peuvent pas choisir? Comprenez vous?”

(Beggars cannot choose? Do you understand?)

“Je comprends,” *(I understand)* Bambi replies.

“Truth be told, you may be less the beggars than you think.”

“What do you mean?”

“Carlyle seems very eager to do business with you, no?”

Oliana asks.

“He does, doesn’t he?”

“You have something he needs, I think.”

“That’s what Billy and I were talking about this morning,”

Bambi offers.

“It is the boat, no?”

“It’s the boat; yes, definitely.”

“There used to be a handful of schooners, some not much bigger than what I understand your boat is...yes, Charles has told me about your boat...schooners that have carried copra to Tahiti.”

“There’s a mill in Pape’ete that uses copra. Mahana pointed it out,” Bambi says.

“It makes a special oil called monoï oil that has tiare fragrance; we use it to soften our skin and hair. You know it, no?”

“I don’t.”

“Ah, you will, ma chère fille, if you are to be living with me,” Oliana says.

“So, that’s what has me confused. Why sail the copra from the Tuamotus to the Marquesas instead of to here?”

“Your instincts are good. I’ve asked Charles the same thing.”

“And what’d he say?”

“That there is a copra market in Honolulu that will pay more money than the mill in Pape’ete, and the Marquesas are on the way to Honolulu.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Bambi says, “but still, that copra has to go a couple thousand miles by freighter instead of the couple of hundred miles to here.”

“Ah, here he is,” Oliana observes.

Bambi, who has been facing the waterfall, spins toward the path and sees Billy approaching. She waves, and he returns it with a smile until he spies the pareos and sandals lying on the grass. The two women laugh at the change in his expression.

“What’re you laughing at?” Bill asks subconsciously.

“You, silly,” Bambi replies, “come join us.”

“I can’t do that!” Bill says.

Oliana laughs again and declares, “Oh yes you can, Billy. You are Tahitian now. There is a time and a place for everything, dear boy, and this is not the time or place to be bashful.”

It is Bambi’s turn to laugh and tease: “Come on, Buster. You’ve got nothing to be ashamed of, and I bet you aren’t the first man Oliana has seen naked.”

“That doesn’t help,” Bill says as he begins to unbutton his shirt.

Bill turns his back to the voyeurs in the pool and strips. When he turns around, his expression is so pained that again Bambi and Oliana laugh. Bill extends his hands in a way, along with his expression, that suggests he is unwittingly submitting his body to their review, and in response, the women giggle and clap. He steps into the pool, stretches his body into the water, and in a few strokes, Bill is treading water next to Bambi. He pecks her lips in greeting as Oliana smiles.

“Well, how’d it go?” Bambi asks.

“Fifteen percent,” he replies proudly.

Bambi gleefully dunks him and follows him below the surface. In seconds, they emerge smiling and laughing.

“I’m so *proud* of you!” Bambi says. “I knew you could do it.”

“I wasn’t so sure, but I did what you said. I started at twenty. Carlyle was pissed, I know, and he didn’t want to budge from five, but Charles eventually persuaded him.”

Bill turns to Oliana and asks, “He’s a good man, isn’t he, your nephew?”

“He is, but I was just telling this one,” Oliana responds with a nod at Bambi, “that he is tight-fisted. I think he still has the

first franc he ever earned, so, it says to me that he has come to think you are someone they can depend upon.”

“They can,” Bambi agrees with evident pride.

Bill appears to want to respond, but whatever it is appears to be locked in his throat.

“Oh, Billy, you are way too modest,” Bambi says before she wraps her arms around him and kisses him in earnest.

Oliana shakes her head and smiles as the couple, in their embrace, slowly sink below the surface. When they emerge, they separate and gasp for air through their laughter.

“You two should enjoy this a bit longer since Billy has just arrived,” Oliana suggests with a smile, “but I am going to get out. Stay as long as you like. Please.”

The youngsters grin at one another, and then watch Oliana perform an effortless breaststroke that takes her toward the edge of the pool.

Bambi turns to Bill with a mischievous glint in her eye and challenges, “Race you to the waterfall.”

Before Bill can respond, Bambi dunks him and uses a strong freestyle stroke toward where the cascade is falling into the pool. They swim beneath the torrent of the waterfall and discover a moss-covered ledge behind—and a few feet removed from—where the water enters the pond. The roar of the water and the curtain it provides shuts out the rest of the world as the couple sit on the ledge. Bambi leans into Bill and kisses him, and he returns the kiss in kind. As the seconds pass, the chilled air captured behind the cascade begins to have an effect, and Bambi shivers

“You’re cold,” Bill observes.

“I am. We should go back. It’s getting dark.”

Bill glances down and then with a straight face says, “I’m not sure I’m ready for public view.”

Bambi laughs and says, “After a few seconds in the water, you’ll be back to normal. Of course, normal for you means never being ready for public view.”

She laughs, gives Bill a gentle shove, and dives into the water. Bill follows suit, and after what appear to be effortless strokes across the pool, both emerge from the water into the embrace of the shameless and delighted eyes of Olliana. Bambi pulls a towel from the tote bag and dries herself before tossing the towel to Bill. She wraps the pareo around her that Olliana has given her, reaches into the tote, pulls another pareo from it, and hands it to Bill. She shows him how to position and tie it, and then spins him around for Olliana’s laughing, clapping approval.

* * *

Father John sits on his desk chair in his tiny lair where a single, flickering, candle flame struggles to chase away the darkness of this early evening. If one were to appear suddenly and magically in this den of low golden light and shadows, it would seem that the Father was sitting in silence because of the absence of human-generated sounds, but that initial perception would be overwhelmed quickly by the loud cacophony that is Atuona’s nighttime symphony.

The foundation of the town’s opus is the near constant rush of the trades as the wind pushes through the leaves and branches

of the surrounding forest canopy, punctuated by the distance-muffled yet powerful, rhythmic pounding of crashing surf against the island's cliffs. Shrill chirps, staccato cheeps, pigeon coos, the irregular and distant crowing of confused roosters, and the short, loud scratch of hard chalk on a chalkboard that is the call of a visiting Pacific reef-egret are virtuoso performances joined in loud dissonance above the underlayment of wind and surf.

The padre has pulled the chair away from his desk and is looking upward as though he is staring at something far beyond the tin roof of the modest, clapboard rectory. He raises a tumbler half-filled with some of the last of the scotch left him by the captain of the *Picayune*, and then he quaffs down most of what is in the glass.

"That, Father," John says, again looking heavenward, "is one hell of a fine scotch, so I thank you, as the Maker of all things, for making *this*."

Father John leans toward his desk, which is close by on his left, places the tumbler on it, and pours the last of his scotch into the glass.

"And to you, Captain Stump," he says, raising his glass to the absent captain, "let us pray to the Lord that when you return you will have seen fit to bring me more scotch, at least enough to last me until your next visit. In nomine patris, etcetera, etcetera."

He takes a sip of scotch, which he savors, and stares out the open window opposite him. The door behind him is open, and a breeze, or perhaps it would be best described as a draft, cools the sweat that moistens his lightweight, linen cassock beneath

which, as has become his habit in this tropical climate, he wears nothing. He closes his eyes, is conscious of the air cooling his skin, sips the scotch, and smiles at the rising buzz it is causing.

Two quick raps on the open front door followed by two more raps cause the priest to glance at the clock on his desk: nine-thirty-seven. He turns his attention to the window, sips his scotch and waits. In seconds, above the Atuona concert carrying on outside, he hears the soft pad of bare feet shuffling across the wood floor of the rectory's anteroom. Seconds more, and he hears the soft breathing of someone standing directly behind him.

The hands of the someone, strong yet soothing hands, begin to massage Father John's shoulders. He takes another sip of scotch, lets it linger in his mouth for a beat as he closes his eyes, and leans his head back against the bosom of a young Marquesan. He feels her lips place a kiss on his baldpate, which elicits a sigh from each of them. After several seconds more, he finishes the scotch and reaches across his body with his right hand, which is holding the tumbler, and places the empty glass on his desk. With the same hand, he clasps the right hand of his visitor, which is resting on his right shoulder. Gently, he pulls on the hand, and the visitor complies by slowly moving from behind him until she is standing directly in front of him.

She is not empirically beautiful, this native Marquesan girl who is barely sixteen, but there is an allure in her dark eyes that has the capacity to communicate many things more effectively than the spoken word, including bodily want. She levels those eyes on Father John, and he feels submission clamoring in his

groin. He has forgotten how long ago it was that he had first imagined her in his bed, but when the time came that she found herself there, she had not resisted him. In fact, she had welcomed his advances as had the others who had brought joy into his lonely world over the years of his banishment. Or so he has imagined.

His brain is beginning to swirl from the scotch as the girl lifts her cotton dress up and over her head. She watches as his drunken eyes wash over her candlelit body on which the thousands of fine, miniscule hairs that cover her smooth, caramel-brown skin shimmer in the candlelight. Father John reaches out and places a hand on her swollen belly, testimony to the baby she is carrying inside her. When the hand lifts to lightly touch a breast, he looks into her eyes, and she smiles coyly at him.

Placing her hands on his cassock-covered knees to assist her, she kneels on the floor in front of him. He raises the hem of the cassock, splays his legs, leans back and closes his eyes. As he accepts the sins of the flesh that are being bestowed upon him, he whispers once again, “Domine Iesu, dimitte nobis debita nostra, salva nos ab igne inferiori...” (*Jesus, forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell...*)

* * *

“The birds are so *loud*,” Bambi exclaims, which elicits laughter from the hosts.

Oliana, who is seated next to Bambi on a woven mat that matches the one Bambi is sitting on, pats Bambi’s hand and nods

in agreement. Charles and Bill sit on similar mats to the women's left. Each is attired in a pareo, and Bill is the only one in the quartet who does wear a light shawl draped over his shoulders in response to the ever-present breeze. All seem lost in thought as they stare at the crackling fire one of Charles' neighbors has laid for them.

Charles emerges from his contemplation and asks of Bill, "Do you know the ways of...I think you Americans call them campfires?"

"I *suppose* I do," Bill responds with a hint of hesitation.

"Then you shall be in charge. You see there the pile of sticks and the like that Gui has left for us," Charles says with a nod in the direction of the fuel. "If you don't mind then, my boy, we'll rely on you to keep it going."

Bill directs a conflicted glance at Bambi to which she responds with a nascent smile she manages to restrain.

"Have you discussed our proposition with your pretty wife?" Charles asks.

"Charles," Oliana protests, "it's too lovely an evening to ruin it with talking about business, no?"

Charles laughs and says, "Tata, (*Auntie*) I cannot think of anything more delightful than to talk of business on such a beautiful evening."

"You are hopeless," Oliana chuckles.

"That may be, but," Charles says as he looks at Bambi, "it is important to me that this young woman knows what may be in store for her and her husband."

Bambi and Bill exchange a glance before Bambi says, “It seems there are so many details that I haven’t heard ‘word one’ about.”

“Such as, my pet?” Charles prods.

“Here’s a few: When do we need to be at Hiva Oa? Will we need to purchase furnishings? What’s this bungalow like at Puama’u? Where is it exactly in relation to...Atuona, isn’t it? What’s that town like? I know there’s a medical officer on the island, but what do we do about a doctor if we need one? What about...”

Charles laughs, holds up his hands, and responds, “I think I understand, dear girl, but it seems to me that you are worrying about details that are not likely to dissuade your husband from the arrangement.”

Bambi looks at Bill and sees that he seems at a loss as to what to say, *again*, she thinks. She turns her eyes to the fire and bites at her lower lip. Presaged by a second but more thoughtful look at Bill, which is followed by a similar gape at Charles, Bambi says, “I am ready to do this, I guess. I mean, we’ve jumped off a lot of bridges over the past months, and we’ve survived. I just don’t want to be blind-sided; you know?”

“I’m not sure I do,” Charles replies.

“Oh, Charles, sometimes I think your brain is not as nimble as it once was,” Oliana declares. “The dear girl does not want to be surprised with unexpected challenges. She wants to prepare herself as best she can for what may lie ahead, no?”

Oliana turns to Bambi, grasps her hand and asks, “No?”

“That’s it exactly,” Bambi replies.

“Well...” Charles begins with a stroke of his chin and a gape into the fire, “let’s begin with when it might be a good time to leave for Hiva Oa.”

“The sooner the better for me,” Bill interjects as he goes to the fire to add some sticks.

“And I feel the same, Neveu,” (*Nephe*) Oliana says to Charles. “I’ve been away for too long, and I’m missing my home.”

“Isn’t this your home?” Charles protests.

“Yes and no, Charles; yes and no. While I love coming here to visit with you and to awaken memories of my father, I’m like Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz*—yes, children, I have seen it—and just like her, I think ‘there’s no place like home,’ and for me, that place is my little bungalow at Puama’u.”

Bambi has been watching Bill and extends her hand to him as he returns from the fire. When he clasps it, she demands in a gentle tone, “Sit with me.”

Charles and Oliana exchange glances and sly smiles as they watch Bambi lean against her man after Bill has complied with her wish. With her head resting on his shoulder, Bambi stares into the fire, takes a deep breath and says, “I think I could stay here forever, but I know it’s not possible, that we have to find a way to live, and this thing, this arrangement on Hiva Oa, transporting the copra, is the way that’s being offered. No need to wait to begin.”

“Bill, my boy, I want to reiterate what Carlyle and I said we would do for you...his last words to me this evening before he returned to Pape’ete were that he and Mahana would, as we three

had discussed, arrange for your Serenity...I believe that is her name, lovely name...Isn't that a lovely name, sister?"

"Quite so," the ever-smiling Oliana replies.

"Quite," Charles agrees. "Tis a lovely name indeed. Teddy will arrange for her to be docked at my cousin's marina where she will be pulled and painted and checked, from stem to stern, I believe you sailors might say, with all expenses paid for by our little enterprise, as you had, dare I say it, demanded?"

Charles smiles at Bill, and Bambi pinches Bill's arm. When he looks at her in response, he sees an expression of surprise and pride at what he has apparently insisted upon.

Blushing, Bill manages to say, "I really appreciate it."

"Not a gift, my boy, just simple common sense. We can't have you out there transporting our copra in a boat that's not shipshape and seaworthy."

"How long will all that take?" Bambi asks.

"I'll drive you into town tomorrow, and we'll speak with my cousin," Charles replies. "He will tell us how long. But in the meantime, let's enjoy this evening. Perhaps a taste of Cognac children?"

"Why not," Bambi replies.

Oliana makes to get up but Charles says, "Let me get it, Tata. You stay and enjoy the fire."

After Charles has disappeared inside the house, Oliana ventures to the couple, "I have arranged for some lovely French stationery...and stamps...to be placed in the bungalow. Perhaps before you go to sleep tonight you will want to write letters to your parents, no?"

“Yes,” Bambi replies, “We should do it. I don’t know why we haven’t before.”

“Perhaps,” Oliana suggests, “vous avez été gêné?” (*...you’ve been embarrassed?*)

Bill looks at Bambi for an explanation but receives a tempering hand on his forearm instead as she answers Oliana: “Perhaps.”

Heia—the woman who appears to serve as a housekeeper for Charles—follows him down the stairs from the house. She carries a silver tray on which are four small, crystal glasses containing Cognac. With no other ceremony than a smile and lowered lashes, Heia distributes the glasses and quickly departs. The quartet downs the Cognac, after which Charles says his goodnights to the other three with kisses offered and received in the Tahitian way.

He looks at the starlit night, extends his hands as if in prayer, and says, “What a blessing it is to have lived such a day. Goodnight children...Tata,” and walks toward the house.

“I will walk you to your bungalow,” Oliana says and leads the way.

As they near the small residence that often serves as quest quarters, Bill points in the direction of the privy and says, “I’m going to, ah...”

“You know the way, dear boy,” Oliana says as she takes Bambi’s hand. “I’ll keep this one company until you return.”

After a few leisurely steps toward the bungalow, Oliana, who is still holding Bambi’s hand, comments, “Je pense qu’il y a quelque chose de plus que l’embarras qui vous empêche d’écrire,

non?” (*I'm thinking there is something more than embarrassment that is keeping you from writing, no?*)

“Deux jours avant notre départ de Maui, son père avait envoyé un colis à la poste.” (*Two days before we left Maui, there was a package at the Post Office from his father.*)

“Et?” (*And?*)

“And I never told Billy.”

“Où est ce paquet? Vous l'avez ouvert, non?” (*Where is this package? You've opened it, no?*)

“I haven't opened it. I stowed it in a locker.”

“I am...I am surprised at this, this what? This secrecy, no? He will find this package and then what? Why not just throw it in the harbor if you are afraid of it?”

“I just couldn't,” Bambi says.

“But you *could* keep this package from him, no? It was addressed to him, était-ce pas?” (*...was it not?*)

“It was.”

“You must make this right, dear girl. It was a package, you say, and not a letter?”

“A package. Maybe the size of a small book. It felt like a book.”

“A book. You must tell him tonight about this package. The longer you wait, the more difficult this is going to be. But help me understand why you would do this?”

The two women stop at the door of the tiny, tin-roofed, clapboarded dwelling and turn toward one another.

Bambi looks into Oliana's eyes as if to make a final determination that the person with whom she speaks is someone who may become a friend likely to last a lifetime.

"He's still very much a boy in so many ways," Bambi says.

"Que voulez-vous dire?" (*What do you mean?*)

"He's inexperienced in the ways of the world."

"And you are not, dear girl?" Oliana scoffs. "What are you afraid of... cela peut être dans ce paquet?" (*...that may be in this package?*)

"Un appel pour nous de revenir." (*A plea for us to return.*)

"Vous pensez qu'il reviendrait si vous ne le vouliez pas?" (*You think he would return if you did not want to?*)

"I don't know," Bambi says as she lowers her eyes and then bites her lower lip.

"Child," Oliana says as she gently lifts Bambi's chin until their eyes meet. "I *do* know that he is so in love with you that he would never do anything to disappoint you."

"Come," the older woman commands as she opens her arms and enfolds the younger in a motherly embrace.

"Charles is also still a boy in so many ways, dear one," Bambi hears whispered into her ear as she sinks into the softness of Oliana's body, while the scent of gardenia from the monoï oil that Oliana favors encircles them. "Most men are, despite the manly airs they put on, which means it is up to us women to find ways to influence them so that the world does not become completely cold and...effrayant?" (*...frightening?*)

Oliana releases Bambi, gently pushes her away, and places a soft kiss on Bambi's forehead.

“I think...no, I know...je sais je t'aime déjà. (*I know I love you already.*) And I know you will do the right thing about this package. Trust in his love, dear girl. He will not fail you.”

They hear Bill approaching in the darkness and whisper “bonne nuit” (*good evening*) to one another before exchanging kisses. Bambi stands in the open doorway of the bungalow, watches Oliana and Bill kiss, and grasping his hand, they watch Oliana walk off into the darkness of the Tahitian night. She is thinking about Oliana’s last words to her. She knows Oliana is correct: Bill will not fail her. As she leads Bill inside, she cannot help asking herself, will I end up failing him?

* * *

Bill has a small, brown-paper-and-tape-covered package tucked under his arm as he walks with purpose along the quay that fronts Pape’ete harbor. He had known something was amiss when he returned to the bungalow the previous evening, but Bambi had claimed he was imagining things, that she was just tired from such a long and novel day, and he thought nothing more about it until mere minutes before this moment. It had been then, after she had poured him a cup of coffee, that she had told him about the package.

She had apologized, even cried, but he had wondered—is still wondering—about the sincerity behind those tears, about the sincerity of almost everything of significance that has transpired between the two of them over the previous months. Random memories are snapping into his mind, her words in those memories as vivid as if she was standing in front of him,

saying them at that very instant with a sincerity that he wants to believe, but can he? Is this the proverbial last straw, he asks himself?

There have been many times when he has tamped down his worries about her lying, lying that has managed to keep them out of trouble or has allowed them to forge ahead on their journey, because he has not wanted to entertain the possibility that some, or maybe even all of what has passed between them, including her protestations of love and admiration, have been nothing but deceptions offered as sweet rewards to keep him obedient, compliant, submissive, a willing pawn in whatever grand scheme she has had in mind since before she first spoke with him on the Serenity, which had been tied moored along a floating dock in the Port Townsend Boat Haven.

This is not the first time in the past months that he has been angry at this girl who seems to tell everyone—or at least does not refute the idea—that they are married. As he thinks this, he realizes his anger is born of hurt from what feels like disregard for his feelings. If she cares about him, why didn't she tell him about the package, which she had picked up at the post office along with their passports two days before they had left Maui? If Oliana had not intervened, he wonders, would he have ever known about the package?

“Goddamn her and all her lies,” Bill curses, and then he stops in his tracks when he realizes, despite the anger its discovery has caused, he has yet to open the package.

An empty bench presents itself to Bill as he scans the sidewalk ahead. He sits on the bench, takes the package from

beneath his arm, and stares at the mailing and return addresses. “Hold for William Benton and/or Brittany Macey” heads the address; “K. Myers, 1124 Van Ness Street, Port Townsend, Washington,” is printed in his father’s hand in the upper left-hand corner of the front of the package.

Bill knows 1124 Van Ness is Mirabelle’s address and assumes Karl and his mother are still living with her, a possibility that increases his curiosity. He tears the wrapping off of what he is not surprised to discover is a book, an old book by the looks of it, with a vivid blue cover on which “Ultima Thule” is printed in gold near the top. “Henry Wadsworth Longfellow” is printed across the bottom of the cover in gold as well, as is something resembling a round medallion the size of a half dollar, which depicts a sailboat anchored just offshore from a tropical island.

Bill opens the book and discovers a folded letter between the cover and the title page; the latter indicates the book was published in 1880. A strange thing to be sent by a father he hardly knows, Bill thinks. He turns a page and sees that Longfellow has dedicated the book to a George Washington Greene; opposite the dedication and beneath the title “To G. W. G.,” Bill sees a four-stanza poem, which he silently reads:

With favoring winds, o'er sunlit seas,
 We sailed for the Hesperides,
 The land where golden apples grow;
 But that, ah! that was long ago.

How far, since then, the ocean streams
 Have swept us from that land of dreams,

That land of fiction and of truth,
The lost Atlantis of our youth!

Whither, ah, whither? Are not these
The tempest-haunted Orcades,
Where sea-gulls scream, and breakers roar,
And wreck and sea-weed line the shore?

Ultima Thule! Utmost Isle!
Here in thy harbors for a while
We lower our sails; a while we rest
From the unending, endless quest.

Bill closes the book and places it next to him on the bench. Slowly, as if it were an ancient parchment liable to crumble at his touch, he unfolds the letter and reads the words Karl has written in blue ink, likely with the fountain pen his mother had selected as a Christmas present from him to his father. The letter begins “Dear Son,” but Bill feels uncertain about being so referenced by this man who had appeared out of nowhere two months before he and Bambi had gone to sea. Certainly conflicted, he decides, as he looks out at a French frigate that is slowly entering the harbor. He pushes competing thoughts from his mind and focuses on the letter...

Dear Son,

*We've been hoping to hear from you, but perhaps it's
too much to hope for, I don't know. Just a father's worry,
I suppose, wondering where in the wide world you've gone.
Or perhaps you're still in Maui.*

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Life in your hometown is progressing as life does everywhere, I guess. In fits and starts with surprises and disappointments. There is much to tell you, and I am audacious enough to think that you and your beautiful girl will want to know about the news.

First, let me say that I hope you and Bambi are well. If things have progressed as they should have, I suppose it is possible that she has had or is about to have the baby. I've lost track of time. I hope wherever you two vagabonds are, you can or have taken advantage of a good doctor. Speaking of babies, Mirabelle is pregnant with Reggie's child, and it seems the whole town is excited for her. She and I see this baby as a blessing that may help us both better cope with Reggie's death. A couple things that follow are not like the good news of a new baby.

After all the heartache that my appearance caused after so many years of your thinking that I had died in the war, I cannot help but think the following news will not sit well with you: your mother has ended our relationship for good and after almost 18 years has returned to Baltimore and to the bosom of her family, the Bentoglios, which, if you do not know, is her and your true family name—her father changed it to Benton so his children and their children might be more welcome in Baltimore society. She and I did not part well, I'm afraid. You may want to write to her to let her know you're OK—here's her address—233 S High Street, Baltimore, Md.

As for me, I'm still living with Mirabelle, which you probably figured out from the return address. The town has offered me a permanent job teaching English at the high school. I'm honored, of course, but I'm also sure it has more to do with my willingness to take a job that has no other takers than it has to do with my competence, but I am finding the work rewarding and the kids are great. And before I forget, Chief Shepherd has asked me to send his best regards to you both.

I know I've been putting off what follows. I probably should have written about it first, but it is not good news. Just this week, Bambi's dad was sentenced to life in prison for second-degree murder. Growler was very drunk and went crazy when he read Bambi's note that said Kevin had taken advantage of her and gotten her pregnant. Growler shot Kevin the night you two sailed out of town. I know this is my chance to offer some fatherly wisdom, but I'm at a loss as to how you should break this news to Bambi. I'm sure she could not have imagined that Growler would do what he did, and what he did is on him, not on her.

I'll close now. I hope this package finds you both healthy and happy. I also hope you know that there are people back here in Port Townsend who miss you and care about you. In fact, you might be surprised to know that instead of thinking ill of you two, a lot of folks have come around to respecting the courage you two have exhibited in running off to sea. I suspect small town folks have always

had a little envy for those who have the courage to leave what they see as the comfort and support of a town for an adventure like you two are on.

With all the love a man can muster with pen and ink, please know I am wishing you both the very best, and if you get a moment, we'd love to hear from you—just know that whatever you may write is liable to be read by more than just Mirabelle and me!

Karl

PS: About the book—my father, your grandfather, who died when I was 2, was a literature professor at Johns Hopkins, and he had a remarkable collection of over 1000 books that I sold before I left Pennsylvania to come out to Port Townsend. There were a number of first editions in the collection, including this one. I saved 5 of my favorite books from the sale, but a guy who bought some of my furniture found this one in a drawer and returned it to me—he might not have if he knew how much \$\$ he could have gotten for it. Anyway, I just wanted you to have a piece of your personal history, something that belonged to your grandpa, and something that means a lot to me. The dedication reminds me of you and Bambi, albeit you haven't yet reached the end of your journey, but when you do, hopefully decades down the road, you'll think of your lives as Longfellow has described his and his friend's in the poem.

Tears had begun to well up in Bill's eyes before he was halfway through the letter, and as he glances at his mother's address before he refolds the letter, a sob escapes his throat. With a deep breath that tamps down others that might otherwise follow, he wipes his eyes, places the letter in the book, and looks out across the harbor. He knows that this man, this father, has loved him from the moment he first saw him, but until this letter, Bill realizes he himself has been in denial, that in denial he has freed himself from the emotional entanglements and responsibilities he might otherwise have felt toward his father.

"I've been such a fucking idiot," he whispers, "but there's no going back now, is there?"

He opens the book and reads the dedication again. There is something powerful in the words because, although written from the perspective of an old poet who has voyaged through a long, challenging life, he sees himself through that man's lens of memory. He and Bambi did embark on a voyage for an imagined land "where golden apples grow," and someday he may live long enough to see what they've done is to search for and to have missed that island "of fiction and of truth," a false destination that only exists in the naïveté of those as young as him and Bambi. And where are we now, he asks himself? Are we going to find ourselves in the next weeks thrown ashore on some "tempest-haunted Orcades"?

He reads the poem again, this time hearing his father's voice in his head saying the words, creating the sense that what he is reading is not a poet's history, but a poetic prophesy of what is feeling more of an "unending, endless quest," than it is the

adventure Karl has identified in his letter. Ultima Thule! Will he ever reach such a place of rest, Bill asks himself? Before he can begin to imagine such a place, the news his father shared about Bambi's father, Growler, forces its way into his thoughts. When she finds out, will she want to return to Port Townsend, he worries? And the recognition that the possibility is, indeed, a worry, awakens his consciousness to a reality about this voyage they are on: "I can't go back there...I don't *want* to go back there...How can I tell her what she's *done*, what her damned *note* has done, what our running *away* has done?"

Bill leans forward, places his forehead against the book, and in the supposed privacy of the shielding book, he weeps.

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