

## A Sense of Place: Barbara Caldicott

The engine's hum decelerates as the Boeing Constellation starts to descend from the Pacific sky. Tyres screeching the plane lands, then a gentle stop.

From the tiny windows I see elegant swaying palm trees. I see a fringe of pale sand defining the aqua lagoon, blue ocean beyond. As the door opens hot tropical air greets with its warmth. I walk across the tarmac, excitement fulfilling my dream of this place.

My family is waiting for me. Smiles everywhere. A foreign land in the tropics, the culture, its language and customs create a new world that embraces me. Uncle drives along the coastal road, passing through villages of bures, market stalls, local people walking with loaded baskets on their heads. Children laughing, running, happy. Timber bridges traverse rivers and creeks. Sugar plantations yellowish against dark green volcanic mountain peaks.

Arriving in Suva, the car climbs the hill to the white colonial mansion squatting on a jungled ledge overlooking the coral lagoon and beyond, the ocean. As my uncle was in government, he and aunt were invited to cocktail parties at Government House. I was included.

A dashing young assistant to the Governor was assigned to entertain me. We attended dinners at the Grand Pacific Hotel, conversation concentrated on trade and the future of the tourism industry. We were always the last to leave as the lights switched on and off.

Sitting around the dinner table with my cousins, cool breezes wafting, we exchange stories, so many questions, so much laughing. We are served by the house girls, who also do the washing up! What heaven! Nor do I have to make my bed, or wash my clothes. Wow!

I met Robert, Uncle's nephew. We warm to each other immediately. Robert drives me to his copra plantation, I discover more of the island. I discover 'screwdrivers'. I drive a tractor. After six weeks it was time for my departure home. Robert and I had spent much time together and with his young friends. Uncle took me aside one day to discuss my future. He wanted me to stay in Fiji, become part of the family, maybe marry

Robert. I had been introduced to a privileged life, a wondrous teenage debut into a new adult world.

What would I do, what decision could I make. Tempting. Stay, or go home. Where is my place?