

10 TO THE ISLAND

From the deck of the mission steamer the coast was a tangle of green that halted against the command of the black, volcanic sand beach. The snaring fingers of mangrove roots curled out, grasping for purchase. Further out to sea volcanic islets and islands rose from the waters of Huon Gulf. New Britain was over the horizon. We coasted along the flank of New Guinea, dodging rain squalls that marched towards us, watching the thunderheads build and the lightning-flicked horizon where storms rumbled and snarled.

There was another deck passenger on the mission boat from Madang to Lae – a young woman, a teacher from Melbourne. A pleasant-faced woman with soft brown eyes. She and I shared meals of rice and tinned tuna and red-hot chillies and sat side by side as we drifted through lagoons and atolls. Our hands touched. We looked at one another and smiled.

We talked. I can't remember now what I said, but I do remember how we lay down together on a deck bunk – the stars wheeling above us – and she looked searchingly into my face and then began to talk about the man in her street.

He was a retired teacher and he now lived as a woman. He'd not had anything done. He went about his daily routine in skirts and dresses. He wore a long wig and make-up. Everyone knew him and everyone was comfortable with him and accepted him.

I remember the way her eyes searched me as she spoke. What had she seen? Why was she telling me this? Two people on a Lutheran mission boat. The diesel's throb beneath the steel plates of the deck. The soft laughter of islands women in bright blue and red sarongs, their fuzzed hair in black halos above them as they suckled babies and toddlers. The men lounging arrogantly along the rail. Thin and anxious missionaries en route to their postings. The cluck of chickens and grunting of pigs.

Perhaps I had shown her the hermaphroditic Sepik River mask I had purchased in Madang market? The leering face with the big penis and breasts and, beneath the penis, a the real possibility of joy excerpt

slit? When we reached Lae I threw it in a ditch by the side of the road. Then I went back and retrieved it and buried it in the bottom of my rucksack. To throw it out seemed to invite retribution from the gods I could sense all around me – Island gods, Mountain gods; gods of Volcano and Reef and Jungle.

The harder I pushed myself on this journey – the more risks I took, the more kilometres I put in with my twenty-five kilo rucksack, the more mountains I climbed, trucks I rode in on goats-track mountain roads with their drivers stoned on betel-nut, coral reefs I dived on – the more I wanted, needed to feel the touch of chiffon and silk.

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Three weeks earlier I had set out from Adelaide to New Guinea to retrace the journey of my birth. My first stop was Sydney. In an eerie echo of my father's trip to New Guinea by ship in 1932, my plane had been delayed there for a week because of air traffic controller strikes – in 1932 Dad had lost two weeks because of stevedore strikes on the waterfront. I flew on from Sydney up the east coast of Australia to Port Moresby in southern New Guinea. From Port Moresby I crossed the mountains and landed in the north coast port of Lae. The equator was just over the horizon. The town steamed.

Where my father's coconut plantation had been was now the Botanical Gardens. I walked among the old coconut trees and touched the machine-gun bullet holes in their trunks. I saw the rusting war machinery in the snaking jungle. I drank in the beauty of the orchids and, in the evening, walked spellbound among the shimmering fireflies as they flickered over Diddyman's Creek. I tried to reconcile the calm serenity, the ordered beauty of the gardens, with the faded black and white photos I knew of immediate postwar Lae. The dumps of leaking bitumen drums. The sagging barrels of abandoned tanks. The wrecks of military aircraft. The stories of decaying bodies in cockpits, in foxholes – Japanese, American, Australian. The bomb craters in which I and my cousins had played as toddlers.

The old family home was now part of the Lae Club, on the site of the Gardens. I was refused entry as I was 'not suitably dressed'. I wore shorts and a T-shirt. White men in the tropics had standards to maintain.

I remembered the photos of the five metre long python Dad had shot in the rafters of the house when I had been a baby lying in my mosquito-curtain-covered crib. I remembered my fascination with – my empathy for – snakes.

I caught a cab back to my cousin's house near the airfield. I was alone, for he and his wife were in Australia and had lent me the keys. The night steamed. I lay naked on the bed, louvred windows open to suck in any stray breeze. I lay there and, for the first time since I had married Diana, I felt that dreadful and powerful and aching beautiful and repellent need steal over me.

I needed to be a woman.

I pushed it away. It sat there, like some kind of Gothic monster, squatting on the edge of the bed, watching me with its malignant eyes. I turned away from it and summoned up images of masculine heroism that would surely keep it at bay. Images of the great explorers and their journeys into the jungle.

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A traveller had told me how to get to a beautiful bird of paradise sanctuary near Mount Hagen and I set out with my rucksack, walking into the fading light.

I was soon lost. I was in country where women wore nothing but beads entwined about their glistening, black bodies, enhancing their almost hairless pubises. Their men had glazed, betel nut-stoned eyes, wore thin strips of cloth and carried long-handled axes.

At the same time young men cruised in a Toyota pickup, wearing Nike T-shirts and black Raybans.

I was soon surrounded. The axe-men screamed in my face, red froth at their lips. The Rayban-wrapped youths waited silently at the crowd's edge. The sun was setting. I

knew I was about to die.

Headlights split the scene. The roar of a motor. A Toyota Land Cruiser. The passenger's door thrown open and I was dragged inside.

The axes shattered tail lights. The driver put his foot down and gunned it for an open space. He looked at me. He was a black man with a halo of black hair. He shook his head and swore.

'You crazy fuck!' he said.

I could only nod weakly in acknowledgment.

'What are you doing out here?'

'Writing a book about the country.'

He laughed.

'Well, now you know what it's like', he said.

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I wrote it all down in guesthouse rooms. But when I lay down to sleep the Otherness was there. A feeling that my body was being invaded by an entity; taken over by something that seemed to echo the sorcery of the land in which I travelled. As if the mask I had secreted at the bottom of my rucksack was working its power over me. I dreamed of great snakes sliding through the jungle. I dreamed of the woman I had seen festooned in beads, her pubis gleaming. I dreamed of myself wearing a dress and woke up sweating and afraid.

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I sat in the bar at the Airport Hilton on the edge of Port Moresby's Jackson Field Airport. The power supply was erratic and the lights glimmered and glowed and the air conditioning gave up the ghost. The other waiting travellers were mining engineers, gem traders, administration officials. American, Chinese, German, Australian. Nearly all men. Any woman in the bar was a wife, a consort. I tried not to meet any eyes. I hunched into a
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corner with my scotch.

I knew that this was a seminal moment in my life. I felt how much my father's adventuring spirit had penetrated me. I was steeped in the lore of the explorer, the prospector, the hard man of the frontier. But I knew I could never be such a man. I had this fatal inner weakness. I had begun to see that the men of my father's generation – and perhaps the men all around me right now – were hiding from themselves. But they had the gift of not being able to see themselves clearly. I saw myself too clearly, and so could not fool myself. They projected their turmoil out onto the world around them. They colonised islands rather than colonise themselves.

I wanted so much to be like them and I knew I never could.

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When I arrived back, Diana met me at Sydney airport. I hardly recognised her. Her red hair was blonde. She wore skin-tight Capri pants, black stilettos, and a tight, leopard-print top that only just covered her breasts. She had lost even more weight and was frighteningly thin. She wore a musky scent. We kissed amongst the luggage and she rubbed her nipples against me. People were looking. I kissed her uncertainly back.

In the cab on the way to our motel, she asked me how the trip had gone. I told her it had been easy because of my father's reputation as a 'hard man'. That had opened doors for me.

'I hope some of it's rubbed off', she purred and slid her hand along my inner thigh. 'I've been missing you.'

But what she was feeling for was not how she hoped to find it. Her fingers teased. I shifted my weight and turned away from her.

'Are you all right?' she whispered.

'It was a long flight; a lot of thunderstorms and turbulence.'

'You'll be fine once you've had a shower and stretched out. I've really missed you.'

I unpacked and took a shower and, when I came out, she was stretched on the bed – naked, skinny and inviting. Wispy red hair about her pubis. Big red nipples on her small breasts. She watched me closely as I towelled dry. I knew what she was looking for and I knew it wasn't there. I came to sit beside her. I saw the desire leave her face. She sat up, frowning uncertainly.

'Don't you want me?'

'I've only just got back. It's been ... I need time.'

'Did you have an affair while you were gone? Is that why you didn't write?'

'I was travelling! Have you any idea what postal services are like up there? If I'd written the day I arrived the letter would only now be reaching you.'

'Who was she?'

'Who? What? What are you talking about?'

'I can sense it. There's a woman, isn't there?'

'There's ... there is no woman.'

'Oh, come on! I can see it in your face! Have the decency not to lie to me.'

'Okay', I said. I got up and went to my rucksack and emptied it onto the hotel room floor. She watched me intently. I held up the bubble foam-wrapped artefact and then ripped the wrapping aside. I held the mask in my hand and then put it over my face. My nose was a penis, my mouth a vertical slit.

She gasped.

I took it down.

She was backing away from me. Her face was whiter than white. I held it out to her and she turned her head away.

Anger surged in me. It came up from down, down, so deep. I felt it like the anger that would burst from my father in his blackness. He'd kicked a man and the man had died. I fought to control the anger. I found my voice.

'This is a Sepik River mask', I said, tight, controlled. 'I bought it because it shows how I feel inside about myself.'

I put it on the bed beside her. She looked at it. I touched the penis, the breasts, the slit.

'There are places in the world,' I said, 'that understand that we're each of us more than one person, that we contain different energies, not just the same ... not just the same sex all the time.'

I stopped. I'd said it at last.

'John, I don't understand. What are you saying?'

I sat down beside her.

'I don't know', I said. 'There's something wrong inside me. There are times when I feel more ... more like a woman than a man.'

I stared at her.

'Are you saying you're homosexual?'

I lay back on the bed. I'd opened a concrete bunker door and suddenly something let go inside me and I felt whatever energy it was – this thing. It came up through my belly and into my cock and it began to grow.

'Hullo', she said. 'What's this?'

Her hand found it and then her mouth. And then she mounted me.

'We can work this out', she whispered.