

from *Stories of the Southern Sea*, by Lawrence Winkler

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*Fara Way*  
Rotuma

“Their bodies were curiously marked with the figures of men, dogs, fishes and birds upon every part of them; so that every man was a moving landscape.”

George Hamilton, *Pandora's* surgeon, 1791

The whole scene was a moving landscape, directly under us, just over two hundred years after Captain Edwards had arrived on the *HMS Pandora*. He had been looking for the *Bounty*. We would find another.

The pilot of our Britten-Norman banked off the huge cloud he had found over six hundred kilometers north of the rest of Fiji, and sliced down into it sideways, like he was cutting a grey soufflé. Nothing could have prepared us for the magnificence that opened up below, with the dispersal of the last gasping mists.

A fringing reef, barely holding back the eternal explosions of rabid frothing foam and every blue in the reflected cosmos, encircled every green in nature. On the edge of both creations were the most spectacular beaches in the Southern Sea. Captain Edwards had called it *Grenville Island*. Two hundred years earlier, it was named *Tuamoco* by de Quiros, before he went on to establish his doomed *New Jerusalem* in Vanuatu.

But that was less important for the moment. We had reestablished level flight, and were lining up on the dumbbell-shaped island's only rectangular open space, a long undulating patch of grass, between the mountains and the ocean. Hardly more than a lawn bowling pitch anywhere else,

here it was the airstrip, beside which a tiny remote paradise was waving all its arms.

Our journey had started in the dark cold depths of our Vancouver Island winter. I was looking for a small diversion, on our annual southern migration to New Zealand. There was a need to be practical, because any excursion off the cheaper routes would carry penalty, in money, or time, or both. But this one looked to be the prize- an incredibly remote Polynesian Island in a Melanesian ocean, serviced by a new once weekly flight from Nandi, without too many hiccoughs or other gaseous threats to existence.

I went online. There was no accommodation. In order to visit, one needed an invitation from a local family, with whom one would stay. I went deeper, and looked up whom I might be able to contact to arrange such an indulgence. Somehow, in the deepest recesses of my desktop, I found a man who had originally come from there, and had actually settled here. I looked him up in my local directory. *Sosefo Avaiki*. I dialed his number.

“Hello.” Said the voice.

“Hello.” I said back, and introduced myself, and told him that I wanted to visit his island. Long pause.

“Why?” He asked.

“I hear it’s a special place.” I said. Longer pause.

“When do you want to go?” He asked. I told him.

“That’s during Fara.” He said.

“Fara?” I asked.

“Fara.” He said. “No sleep.” He said he’d get back to me. A month later he called, and told me it was all set. The family would meet us at the airstrip, and the flights had been approved.

“No sleep.” He added.

Six months later, Robyn and I approached the Sunflower Airlines desk in Nandi, and were issued boarding passes for the once weekly flight to paradise. The plane was double-booked, which meant that half the king-sized Polynesians in the transit lounge would not be getting home for Christmas- at least not on this flight, despite being in possession of a valid ticket. The only other way was the once a month boat

from Suva, a two day voyage that departed from the other side of Viti Levu. Robyn and I were lucky, perhaps we weighed less than others, on the scales they suspended us on, before issuing our cards.

From the air was the remnant of a massive volcano with many smaller cones, eight miles long and less than three wide, sixteen square miles of a larger eastern part, connected to a western peninsula by the low narrow Motusa isthmus, a few hundred feet across. The legend of its formation had come with Raho, who brought two baskets of earth from Samoa, and marked his creation with a coconut leaf, tied around a *fesi* tree. His rival's arrival came in the form of a Samoan chief named Tokainiua, who tied a drier coconut leaf around the same tree, claiming that he had been there first because his leaf was more dehydrated. Raho became so angry that he tore up chunks of the island, creating the smaller islands of Hafliua, Hatana, and Uea. Its original inhabitants had actually come from either Melanesia or Micronesia, followed by Samoan and Tongan invasions just after de Quiros went by. The colonization is called the 'Westward Polynesian Backwash,' but there were also stories about a Chinese Junk that had also left a cargo of DNA in its wake, the Tikopians, who plundered the place, and the Niueans, who tried to introduce cannibalism, but were rebuffed.

We landed where the trees weren't, braking clumsily as we passed all the waving arms.

"Welcome to Rotuma." Said the big frizzy-haired Fijian stewardess. And we were. In spades.

Down the stairs and just beyond the stone tiki and the long variegated croton hedge and the coconut palms, was a single white Nissen pickup, a ponytail, and the biggest smile in the Southern Sea. She wore a blue shirt and a floral lava-lava, and nothing on her feet.

"Are you Robyn and Wink?" She asked. The odds were rhetorical.

"Are you Julie?" Robyn asked. She beamed.

"These are my three daughters." She said. And everyone felt like it was a homecoming, for the first time. We all piled in the back of the pickup, and the driver, a friend of the family, took

off ahead of us. We bounced along the soft white coral sand road, in and out of potholes, towards Motusa village, near the narrow isthmus. There were seven districts on Rotuma, and Motusa was in Itu'ti'u. We came through another croton hedge, to a simple concrete house with an iron roof, and a full clothesline that went on forever, under the flame trees and coconut palms and breadfruit.

Julie's husband, John, was smiling as well, as he had laid out two big sharks out front, and was preparing to filet them, for our dinner. The flies were everywhere, and crazy. I didn't realize until later, that it wasn't just the sharks. Most of the biomass of Rotuma was flies.

Julie and her family had constructed two new tiny white shacks, with white vinyl siding and powder blue doors. She opened one, and invited us to put our packs inside. There was a sponge mattress on a linoleum floor. In a corner was a box covered with a lava-lava, on which sat a big yellow bouquet of flowers. On the only shelf was a bird of paradise. A pair of bare wires projected through the concrete, above the treated New Zealand pine paneling. Julie handed us two cold green coconuts. It was ecstasy.

We asked if we could go for a walk down the beach. I thought it was a polite formality, and it never occurred to me that, in an island culture so remote and isolated, the idea of separating awhile from your family, real or adopted, might ever be interpreted as antisocial behavior. But, for a brief moment, I saw a sag in Julie's smile, before it came on again, twice as bright.

"Of course." She said. "My daughters will go with you." And six brown feet led the way, six white soles spraying six small plumes of whiter sand in front of us, as we bolted for the water.

We didn't get very far. The girls watched Robyn and I wade into the lagoon, but they wouldn't swim themselves. Apparently they didn't know how. In it or on it, the Rotumans had long since turned their backs on the sea. Most of the fish they ate was out of a tin because, outside the thin reef were hundreds of miles of raging water, and only two or three

seaworthy boats, whose outboards could consume a week's wage in petrol in less than an hour.

We rejoined the girls and continued towards the smoke. Young boys were eating mangos and throwing a rugby ball around, in the water. Beside them, some older ones played vollyball. But the smoke was a bit further, on the far side of the plaited-palm thatched roof, that appeared to be an outdoor kitchen.

"Picnic." Said one of the girls. "For Av mane'a."

"What's Av mane'a?" Robyn asked.

"Time to play." She said, explaining that *Av mane'a* was the hybrid traditional Rotuman and Christian harvest festival, the hottest season of the year, beginning in December and ending in mid-January. Time is spent on picnics, harvest festivals, kava drinking, playing cards, chatting, and going Fara. "Nobody works hard now, they take it easy."

Everyone in the picnic scene we entered was definitely taking it easy, especially the biggest ones, lounging half asleep on pandanus mats in the shade. The only movement in the heat was that of the food, which migrated to us, in huge portions of tuna and *poat kau* corned beef, cooked noodles and rice and *a'ana* taro, and watermelon and mangos. The flies were having their own festival on top of everything.

"Picnic." Was all one large Pickwickian Polynesian could muster, between puffs on a cigarette. Between the heat and the flies and the scenery, we didn't have much of an appetite, but it would have been impolite to refuse. We stayed long enough to show our interest and gratitude, and returned to Julie's, in time for dinner. The inside of the house had Western furniture, but it was cooler on the pandanus mats. Julie brought out the shark and the palusami (my favorite) and the fekei coconut milk and tapioca and taro pudding, while the girls used their pandanus fans to cool our heads, and keep away the flies. At sundown, there was a change of guard, when the mosquitoes took over. We had a quick shower, before the water supply was cut off, as it was every night, to allow the reserves to refill. Robyn and I felt momentarily refreshed, until we emerged from the shower, to as much heat and humidity as there would be every day. Except perhaps for that golden

half an hour, just before sunrise, when it cooled off just enough to allow your sweat glands reserves to refill.

We said goodnight to Julie and the rest of our new family, and retired to the confined comfort of our tiny square shack. We lasted on the sponge mattress for less than five minutes, before rolling onto the only slighter cooler linoleum. The atmosphere was only marginally more breathable than that on Venus, and there would be no chance for Venus, in this atmosphere.

“Robyn?” It was Julie.

“Yes, Julie?” Said Robyn.

“Would you like a fan?” I watched the tension fall away from Robyn’s grim perspiring face, replaced with the ecstatic delight she was anticipating, in having some moving air. I looked up at the two bare wires, protruding from the concrete, and thanked whoever had put them there.

“That would be wonderful.” She said. And Julie, true to her word, handed Robyn a fan. A spade-shaped, tightly woven pandanus fan. I watched her face drop, as she thanked Julie, and began the repetitive wrist motion that would accompany her through the next week, even when she was asleep. I would watch, transfixed, as Robyn became Rotuman, able to fan herself continuously, while comatose. In the ultimate paradise of heat and flies, it was a primary habitat adaptation but an essential survival skill.

“Robyn?” It was Julie again.

“Yes Julie?” Said Robyn.

“You know tonight is the first night of Fara.” She said.

“Fara?” Robyn Asked.

“Fara.” Said Julie. “So much fun.” And she was gone. And then, for an hour or so, so were we.

My eyes were just beginning to wobble, and then I heard it, just once.

*Strummummmummmummmummm.*

\* \* \*

“Untie the dove cord; when it is free it sings”  
Rotuman Proverb (applied to any girl who goes Fara)

“Was that a ukulele?” Asked Robyn, from under her fan.  
“I think so.” I said. But I was wrong.  
It was five ukuleles, two guitars, a drum, and thirty voices,  
which cracked open the still softness of the tropical night, with  
a thunderous chorus of slow rhythmic clapping, and three-  
part harmony.

‘Aus noa’ia , ‘Aus noa’ia gagaj ne hanue te‘ Noa’ia  
‘E garue maha ma re se kiu ‘a’ana  
‘Urtoa’ het ne ‘a e na se ‘on la’ lam lama Hea’sé‘ ka siriag ‘e av ta ‘e av ta  
‘Ua motu lei lei sega talofa Rotuma.

*Greetings to you, greetings to you chiefly owner of the house  
Thank you for your hard work in preparing a thousand of taro  
The spear that you threw flew so high that I wish it broke history’s record  
An island so good, Greetings Rotuma.*

There was a knock on the window.  
“Robyn? Wink?” It was Julie. “It’s Fara time.”  
We threw on our clothes quickly, and opened our powder blue  
door onto a landscape of faces, illuminated with hurricane  
lamps and flashlights. Sitting and swaying on a sea of  
pandanus mats, was an entire village from the other side of  
the island, shoes on the grass around them. The women had  
flower garlands in their hair and *te fui* around their necks, and  
waved their fans and rolled their torsos in time to the music.  
The singing sounded Hawaiian, if the Hawaiian had been  
crossed with Finnish and Tongan, pushed back into their  
throats, and projected out in lyrical explosions. The

enthusiasm of the younger children would roar into hollers or shouts. I saw Julie and the girls, moving stooped among the musicians, sprinkling them on the heads and shoulders with *nau te* perfume, or talcum powder, or both. At other houses we would get stick deodorant or Vaseline. Villagers of all ages got up to dance around the main body of minstrels. Men asked a woman to dance with a bug-eyed warrior stance, bending their knees and throwing an occasional leg sideways into the air. The women asked a man to dance more modestly, by bowing their heads and throwing their arms forward in supplication, or running a discrete hand up his back. And the men postured and the women undulated, and it was all very sexual and innocent and ridiculously romantic at the same time, and everyone was laughing and smiling and clapping, and rapturously happy, in tempo and in tune with the full moon, and the rest of the night sky and the crashing ocean just beyond. Everybody smiled like Julie smiled, and Robyn and I were exhilarated by all the excitement. We felt alive.

Between songs, the dancers, which would often make up almost half the travelling roundtrip Fara troupe, would sit down again, before the next ukulele strum and single voice would begin a new round of celebration. The songs were all about love and religion, unattainable or impossible, alone or in combination. Later in our stay, we would come to know why.

Kepoi ka 'a e 'ofa se gou ma gou la holi se 'a e  
La 'itarua la rotuag 'esea  
Ka 'a e la na ea gou la maomaetou  
La famori se ra ea 'a e ma gou.  
Ma gou la leuof 'e kis se 'a ea ko le' ha n te'  
La 'itarua la rotuag 'esea.

*If you love me, I will be converted to you  
So that we will be in the same religion  
You will hide me so that I will be hard to find,  
And that people will not see the two of us.  
When will I come to you my lady?  
So that we will be in the same religion living together.*



They partied for almost half an hour, before the dancers sat down among the rest of the band, and Julie and her daughters, and her husband, brought out refreshments, of watermelon and bananas and pineapples and biscuits, and more sprinkling of powder and perfume. As the days went by, Robyn and I learned to recognize when this particular Fara group was about to leave, by the *Noa'ia noa'ia* song they would sing last, as a thank you to the hosts whose sleep they had interrupted.

Noa'ia, noa'ia, noa'ia 'e 'es kefkef pene'isi' ma lol pene'isi ma 'amis  
ta e la la'atomis... Fu'omus.  
Noa'ia, noa'ia Kaunohoag gagaj  
Kepoi ka teet re 'e 'otomis fara,  
Ro t 'a k fu'omusa ka 'a m la 'utuof se mua.  
Gagaja la hanisi a' roan 'os ma uri  
Rere ta tera nit la po la 'is la haipoag hoi'a ki.

*Thank you Thank you Thank you for giving us sweet smelling powder  
And fragrant oil and we are leaving ... Farewell  
Thank you, thank you Chiefly household  
If there's anything wrong in our 'fara'  
Do forgive us and we are moving on  
Let us hope that the lord will lengthen the days of our lives  
So that one day we will meet again.*

But this wouldn't be the end of the formalities. The Fara troupe leader would express his thanks for the gifts.

Noa'ia ko gagaj 'e 'es lol pene'isi  
Ma kef kef pene'isi ma vaselin pene'isi  
Ma sa n pene'isi, ma 'a mis ta e la la'atomis  
Fu'omus.

*Thank you oh nobles for having oil, nice smelling  
And powder, nice smelling and vaseline, nice smelling  
And perfume, nice smelling and we will be leaving  
Goodbye.*

And Julie's family would thank them back.

Ma rie, ma rie, ma rie, mak lelei.

*Thanks, thanks, thanks, for the good songs dances.*

After a few more personal exchanges and jokes, the Fara group went off to the next house on their itinerary, Robyn and I thanked Julie and the family for the wonderful entertainment, and went back to our linoleum slumber.

Or so we thought. In our dreams.

My eyes were beginning to wobble, and then I heard it, just once.

*Strummummmummmummmummm.*

A hurricane lamp flickered into life outside our window, faster than we did inside.

“Robyn? Wink?” It was Julie. “Fara time.” It was still hot and muggy and my muscles ached from the dancing and the fatigue, but I told myself that this was, after all, why we had come, and roused Robyn, to tell her the same.

It was an even larger group this time. The word was out. All over Rotuma, at different houses each night, every night for a month, impromptu singing and dancing celebrations would burst into flame. The only difference for us was that, because we were extra special guests, it would happen at the same house every night. *No sleep*. The foreboding words of Sefo rang in my ear. But then the entire night rang into melodious song and smiles, and it didn't matter at all. We were only in Rotuma for week. Compared to other things we survived that long, *Fara fatigue* would still be more fun.

The tradition had evolved from the *manea' hune'ele* beach parties of old, where young people would picnic at the beach from late afternoon through the night, singing and dancing and courting. Here they could spend time with prospective partners, away from the suffocating tight knit social regulation of the strong Rotuman family and community pressures of collective conformity.

But then came the missionaries and the powerful church doctrine they represented. *Manea' hune'ele* was decreed to be immoral and licentious, and the escapades and potential loss of virginity that might occur, unacceptable. But a compromise was needed, so as to still allow some form of courtship to occur. The Methodists found a method to combine flirting with

supervision, and the custom of 'going Fara' superseded the past trysts on the beach that had occurred before Jesus arrived, and spoiled all their fun. The fun was given a more precise purpose. The flirting was now the search for a life partner. The young boys were told not to 'play for nothing.' If unsuccessful they were mocked as someone who 'compresses horse manure,' *a'pat finak ne has*, accomplishing nothing by riding up and down, except spreading horseshit on the roads, until it was packed down, or *a'pat finak ne ha s' kat ma f'ia ra*, returning from a fruitless fishing trip without any fish. The boys would sometimes orchestrate having their own Fara troupe taken hostage at the house where the girl they were enamored with lived, so as to increase their chances of success. Fara literally means 'to ask,' in Rotuman. For most islanders, all they asked was that it still be just more of a fun social event, more frolic than flirting.

As the nights followed the Fara way, Robyn and I began to follow the troupes to other houses as well. We would fall into unconsciousness, like cats in the heat of the day, whether we wanted to or not. Inevitably, inexorably, we were worn down. I had reached my limit, and I asked Julie, if we could be excused from that night's festivities, just to catch up on some sleep.

I thought it was a polite formality, and it never occurred to me that, in an island culture so remote and isolated, the idea of separating awhile from your family, real or adopted, might ever be interpreted as antisocial behavior. But, for a brief moment, I saw a sag in Julie's smile. She agreed not to wake us.

And so it was that Robyn and I looked forward to the arms of Morpheus, even though it was far too hot to look forward to the arms of each other. We settled into our linoleum lethargy, and set a course for coma.

My eyes were beginning to wobble, and then I heard it, just once.

*Strummummmummmummmummm.*

I swore out loud, and then hoped that no one in the Fara troupe that had congregated outside our window had heard it. And then I swore again. Robyn just looked at me, waving her

fan.

“There’s no point.” I said, realizing the futility of resisting the social pressure to participate. “We’re still the ambassadors of something here.” And we got up, and opened the powder blue door, and joined the singing and clapping and perfume in the dark. The moon was full, and the stars were bright, and I danced with the old women and the little girls, looking away all the time they danced, until I could dance no more. After each they said ‘Fa ieksia,’ *thank you*, and I said the same. And that, I had decided, was that. But it wasn’t, was it.

An electric ripple rolled up my back, from bottom to top. I turned into a radiant reflection of where it had all started centuries ago, in songs of colliding souls swept in with the tide to the shore.

She was intoxicating, sweeter than her caramel skin, than the coconut oil in her hair, than the perfumed flowers of her *tefui* garland, than the captivating one behind her ear. She moved like the story of what had been sacrificed for us to have met here, in the gracefulness of *Mak Samoa*, the Samoan way, first with her feet together, with a subtle shuffling in-and-out in time to the music, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, then with her arms, silk ribbons flowing fluent in elegant motifs from her fingertips, like slow breezes, then, from behind and within her *titi* skirt of long leaves, hips and loins pulsating, whirling ever more exuberant, and then, and only then, with her eyes, rolling and wandering, before finally fixing on both her hands, reaching out to me.

OK, I thought. Just one more.

“tall and pleasant, well-built, and full of gaiety, with eyes large and full of fire, noses a little flattened, white teeth, ear lobes pierced with a sweet-smelling flower, and almost naked.”

La Coquille, 1824

“...as well or better cultivated and its inhabitants more numerous for its size than any of the islands we have hitherto seen.”

Captain Edwards, *Pandora*, 1791

“Wink? Robyn?” It was Julie, and daylight too soon.

“I think these people are zombies.” I whispered to Robyn. “They don’t seem to need any sleep.” On the mats in Julie’s house at breakfast, she explained that Av mane’a was more than going Fara.

“Today we’re going to Manea’ ‘on fa ma haina.” She said, dishing out additional vowels with the sliced papaya and pineapple. The girls fanned the flies and the Fahrenheit from our faces.

“What’s that, Julie?” Robyn asked.

“The harvest festival.” She said. Our family walked to Motusa, past some big Mother Hubbard women carrying large rolled woven mats into the village church. I looked up at what had been carved in a curve, above the door. *Mt Sinai*. Moses and the rushes. It was allegory. *And Mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the LORD descended upon it fire.* But the smoke was ahead of us, at the far end of an large expanse of lawn and a magnificent giant flame tree, under which were several open shelters, with tin roofs and pandanus mat floors, connected by upright wooden poles, each one wrapped with plaited palm fronds. Long horizontal cloth banners of red and white hibiscus flowers hung below the rooflines. Fluorescent lights were suspended from the ceilings. We were at play, in the field of the Lord’s Hawaiian carports.

The playground was a fairground, an agricultural exhibition farmshow, of big yams with big pink tags, big dances by the biggest people, and big watermelon filling up the big faces of little girls.

The yam farmers who couldn't win a prize would have to give away their harvest, and go home empty-handed, but the women weavers could bring home the mats they hadn't sold. They sat sidesaddle, purses slung over their big Mother Hubbard shoulders, waving their fans, and waiting for the feasting and the dancing to begin.

The old men were already drinking kava, at head tables covered with fine petit point linen tablecloths, punctuated at intervals with bouquets of flowers and brass salt cellars, pasted with Fijian money notes. Before the arrival of the missionaries, kava had been prepared by virgin girls with limestone-caked hair, who chewed and spat it into a slurry, before it was mixed with water by the older women. Since the arrival of the missionaries, the elders had begun blending in a little additional liquid from their hip flasks, which further muddied the waters, and hastened the collapse of their livers.

The smoke from the *Koua* earth oven, that wafted through the celebration, suddenly thickened, a sign that the sand was being raked off the leaves covering the old mats, that had been placed on the banana and *papai* swamp taro leaves, on top of the hot stones that had been carefully distributed over the food, with tongs made from the midribs of coconut leaves.

This *koua* had started with a large circular hole in the ground, lined with coconut tree trunks, and filled with kindling and a mound of parallel firewood, over which had been placed the lava stones, big ones on the bottom, smaller ones on top. A shredded coconut sheath had been lit to ignite the kindling, and the men had gone off to scrape breadfruit and taro and other root crops, and to kill the hogs. The pigs were turned on the heated stones to singe off their hair, and scraped with seashells or knives. Their throats had been slit, their alimentary canals tied off at both ends, so their guts, including the gall bladders, could be cautiously removed from their sliced-open abdomens. The male pigs had their penises tied, to prevent any urine from contaminating the meat. Everything to be baked had been washed in seawater. The large hot stones were spread over the bottom of the *Koua* with long poles, and any unburned firewood removed. The smaller ones were placed inside the pigs' carcasses, together with their livers and

breadfruit leaves, to keep the steam inside. The men, using the same long poles, slung the swine, belly down, onto the base of hot large stones, now covered with taro scrapings and banana leaf ribs, to regulate the temperature. The breadfruit and the root crops had been placed along the margins of the pit, because they hadn't required as much heat to bake them. When the smoke finally cleared, out of the *Koua*, came roast pork and roasted chicken and corned beef, and breadfruit and cassava and taro, and 'al'ikou packages of taro leaves filled with coconut milk and onion, and taro *fekei* pudding. The food was hoisted with large pandanus baskets on poles, and placed beside the watermelon and pineapple and mango and pawpaw and sugar cane and jams. Some young girls fanned the food tables constantly, to keep off the flies, while others filled the closely woven *tauga* flat-bottomed coconut leaf baskets with food, to carry to the chiefs at the head table, most of which would have been too paralyzed by this time, to have fended for themselves, even if they had to. Everyone filed by the tables, filling their plates if they had one or, if not, supporting their overflowing *fono* basket in one hand, while the other held up the front edge, in a desperate race against gravity and gluttony. The feast was substantial, and superb.

But it was time to dance. Not the Fara way dancing of the night migrations, but the traditional *tautoga* rectangular rows and columns of the *hafa*, half of the group on one side men, the other half on the other side women. They wore powder blue *hā' fāli* lava-lavas, red and white collared shirts and blouses, red and white and yellow pandanus fruit garlands, and tropicbird tailfeathers. The accompaniment behind them beat a pile of old mats with large sticks, to keep time. The men jumped from side to side, or in circles, or scanned the horizon back and forth, with a raised flat hand blocking the sun from their eyes, feet apart, clowning and clapping and yelping and grunting 'hui'i, hui'i, hui'i, hui'i,' in syncopated exhalations. The women were constrained to graceful subtle motion, feet together and hands clasped, until they weren't and the story-telling motifs began. They sang the third and fifth above the notes of the men, some breathing while others vocalized, spinning the music into a continuous hypnotic thread of verse.

After each set, the dancers in the front would drop back, allowing the row behind them to come forward, and begin the rhythms of their ancestors all over again.

“Is your harvest festival like this in Canada, Wink?” Julie asked. I conjured up a mental image of our country fair.

“Not quite like this, Julie.” I said. “Not quite.”

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‘On the Thursday flight (17 December) Dr. Lawrence Winkler and his wife Robyn arrived. They are from Nanaimo B.C., on Vancouver Island (where several Rotuman families live). They stayed at Motusa in new huts--accommodations recommended by Sunflower Airlines. The Hospital Board of Visitors had a Working Bee/Breakup Day on Friday, 18 December, so we invited them for lunch, and we all met the couple. Robyn originally came from New Zealand. In the afternoon I took them to the Bennett's at Itu'muta and met up with another couple from New Zealand, Samo's son and wife with their two children. We toured around the island, calling into places and ending up at Rocky Point for cold beer.’

Archived News, *Rotuma Community Bulletin Board*

The day before we ended up at Rocky Point for a cold beer, two days after the Hospital Board of Visitors decided to invite Robyn and I for lunch, the day after the harvest festival, right after our third night of Faracidal insomnia, I rolled over next to the sponge mattress, and shook Robyn awake. Her fanning didn't break Farastride.

“Do you realize that we are sleeping next to some of the most beautiful beaches on the planet, and almost halfway through our time on Rotuma, we've only seen the seashore once?” I asked. For a Kiwi, this was an unconscionable source of shame.

“Today.” She said. We dressed and closed the powder blue door to our cabin, jaws grimly set to overwhelm Julie's sense of family togetherness, and escape to an isolated beach on our own. But we had no idea that, here in the most remote Polynesian paradise, this was not just impolite, or impolitic. It was treason.



Rotumans are a gentle people, culturally conservative and strongly socialized, with an emphasis on collective responsibility enforced by a sensitivity to shaming. No one did anything without everyone else's participation, except perhaps, in a rare free dove cord moment, making other Rotumans. And Julie was the perfect Polynesian Pollyanna, far too happy and in love with everything, which she believed rightly, in Motusa village at least, to derive from, and return back to, the family. She was the living Nash Equilibrium embodiment of Southern Sea survival. How could it be possible that we, in our most evil manifestation of individualistic inconsideration, even think of abandoning our adopted village, for a single day of selfish gratification? The easy answer was, of course, was that it was necessary. Robyn and I had never been creatures of collective conformity. We were mavericks, nabobs of narcissism, which is why we fell in love in the first place, and made a life together, based on not belonging. When we had first arrived on Vancouver Island, I was approached to join the local Rotary Club.

"You're not a joiner." Robyn had said. And the Rotarians were condemned to do without.

"Julie?" I asked, a mouthful of morning pawpaw in my mouth.

"Yes, Wink." She said.

"Robyn and I were thinking of hiking across the isthmus, to Vai'oa Beach." I said.

"Lovely, Wink." She said. "What time should we go?" Then it got hard.

"Well, that's what I wanted to ask you about." I said. "We thought that, for just today only, we just might go alone, to give you and the girls some time to yourselves." I looked across the floor mat, into eyes that couldn't decide whether to be hurt, or offended. I thought it was a polite formality, and it never occurred to me that, in an island culture so remote and isolated, the idea of separating awhile from your family, real or adopted, might ever be interpreted as antisocial behavior. But, for a brief movement, I saw a sag in Julie's smile. Meltdown.

"Are you sure?" She asked. I nodded.

"OK." She said. "Enjoy yourselves."

Robyn and I were gone, before anyone could reconsider. We didn't really know the way, but Julie had guided us to the soft coral path across the isthmus along Maka bay, and onto Raho's western basket of earth that had formed the Itu'muta peninsula. We came to what appeared to be an enormous Zen *sansui* garden of raked white sand, out of which colossal black lava stones protruded. It was a Rotuman cemetery. A tall structure, about twelve feet high, consisting of four inward-leaning wooden poles with streams of red and yellow and purple cloth hanging from the close-tied cross pieces, had been recently erected to commemorate a new ancestral addition to the community. From there the trail climbed into rainforest, interspersed with plantations. A Rotuman myzomela, with its black upper plumage and bright scarlet belly, announced our entrance to one farmer's yam patch. He provisioned us with mangos, and further directions through the bush. Exhilarated, walking alone together, the salt air of the most beautiful beach in the world's last Eden, danced on our noses, where the light finally split the jungle. We broke through the canopy, to a breathtaking long scimitar of white sand below, fringed with towering palms, and *niu* and *hifau* trees, framed by purple green volcanic mountains, on a cerulean-spattered watercolor bay. Large schools of fish ran in every direction, but we only ran in one, over a rock bridge and along the caster sugar crescent, to the horizontal limbs of a massive fig tree in the middle, and shade. We rolled out our towels, and lay down together, together in the faint relief of an offshore breeze, and Fara ' nuff away from the constant attention of 'Pear ta ma 'on maf,' *This Land Has Eyes*. Or so I thought.

For the first five minutes of our intimacy, Vai'oa Beach was deserted. We were in heaven.

"I think I'll go for a swim." I said to Robyn and, collecting my snorkeling gear, began to cover the short distance to the water's edge. I didn't make it.

I had just put on my mask and was adjusting my snorkel, when I realized that there were now a few other human clusters that had magically appeared on the beach, one of

which was moving quickly in my direction. Two young boys got to me first.

“You can’t swim yet.” One said.

“Huh?” I said. “Why?”

“You need to wait.” Said the other one. I looked out at the clearest bluest water in the Southern Sea, at the underwater coral forests, at the blazing schools of colored fish, at the only cool reprieve in sight.

“For what?” I asked.

“For the fishermen.” Said the first one.

“I need to wait for the fishermen, before I can go for a swim?” I asked.

“Yes.” The both said at the same time. It was about then that my inner renegade just about got the best of me. This is ludicrous, I thought. The heat was becoming ridiculous, the snorkeling looked brilliant, and some superstitious local custom required me to avoid the entire Pacific Ocean because it might affect the fate of a few fishermen who were nowhere to be seen. I turned around. *Robyn just looked at me, waving her fan.* “There’s no point.” I said, realizing the futility of resisting the social pressure to participate. “We’re still the ambassadors of something here.”

“How long will they be?” I asked. They shrugged. I was beaten. *The land has teeth and knows the truth.* There were now whole other villages coming out of the jungle, and spreading their pandanus mats under the palms.

Burning feet dragged my snorkeling gear and broken spirit, back to the towel beside Robyn.

“What was that all about?” She asked.

“We have to wait.” I said.

“For what?” She asked.

“For the fishermen.” I said. She asked me why. I had no answer.

Over the next two hours, we watched our deserted delight fill up with rotund Rotumans. Smoke rose from the far end of the beach. Finally, the sound of an outboard grew louder from Fara way in the lagoon, until we could make out from which direction it was coming. Within a few more minutes, a small open boat had beached up in front of us, and its crew warmly

welcomed, as they offloaded their catch. I thought my waiting was over but, as I got up to collect my snorkeling gear, a corrective glance disabused me of the notion. Not yet.

Eventually, after another half hour, one of the young boys kneeled next to my towel.

“You can go in now.” He said. I grabbed my mask and snorkel, and made for the lagoon, before anyone could reconsider. I didn’t make it.

At the water’s edge, I was met by a big Rotuman, eating big fish and big taro and a dozen other big things, off a big banana leaf.

“Lunch is ready.” He said. I was beaten.

Burning feet dragged my snorkeling gear and broken spirit, back to the towel beside Robyn.

“What was that all about?” She asked.

“Lunch is ready.” I said.

\* \* \*



\* \* \*

“Don't want to hear from and cheerful Pollyannas,  
Who tell me love will find a way, it's all bananas.”

George Gershwin, *But Not For Me*

The way back from Vai'oa Beach was shorter. A small red Citroën 2CV pulled over to give us a ride.

“You must be Robyn and Wink.” Said the driver, a finely spoken thin gracefulness, with Nefertiti's face and air of nobility. She wore her hair piled in a bun, high towards the back of her head, and drove like she was in Paris. If Julie was the Pollyanna of Polynesia, Sanimeli Maraf was the Rotuman Eleanor of Aquitaine; they were both goddesses in their own way, one chalk and one cheese. Talcum and Tomme de Savoie. “Call me Sani.” She said.

“How was the beach?” Julie asked, on our return. I swallowed the word I was thinking.

“Very friendly.” I said. Her smile came on twice as bright, until Sani got out of the car. It was the first time on Rotuma I felt anything like a chill.

“This is Sanimeli.” I said, not believing, on reflection, that they wouldn't have previously met. Sani told Julie that the Hospital Board had arranged a luncheon for us for the following day, and what time she would pick us up. But, for a brief moment, I saw a sag in Julie's smile. And then I got it. Sani was about to introduce us to the rules. Julie had already introduced us to their transcendence.

The Hospital Board was ready for us on the lawn next morning. There were tables with tablecloths, with lemonade and little sandwiches with the crusts cut off, and the lone

physician. Sani introduced us to him and the three other women board members, and they talked to Robyn, and I talked to the doctor. He was younger than I was, and there was fatigue in his eyes, and a weight on his broad Polynesian shoulders. We spoke of the frustration he experienced at watching people die, for lack of a reliable air ambulance evacuation service. He was an Old Testament minor deity and, for all his frailties and faults and failings, the people loved him all the same, for he was still a much better chance, than they used to have. We discussed the high incidence of diabetes and heart disease, in a population with thrifty genes, and pork fat as intermediary metabolites. There was a lot of premature death from heart attacks. I was surprised to learn that he didn't have a defibrillator, shocked even.

"What do you do if their heart stops?" I asked.

"Have a funeral." He said. I promised him I would find him a defibrillator, as soon as I got back to Canada.

Sani drove us on the Bennett's at Itu'muta, and introduced us to Samo and his wife and two children, Rotumans home from New Zealand, for Fara. We drank lemonade and green coconut on their veranda, and promised, as travelers always do, to keep in touch.

On our tour around the rest of the island, it was along the southern coast, entering the districts of Juju and Pepjei, that things got a little strange. As we entered the village of Upu, blowing up like Notre Dame in Paris, was the Marist Catholic church of St. Michaels.

"Do you know about the wars?" Asked Sani.

"The wars?" I asked.

"Between the English Wesleyans and the French Catholics." She said. I told her I had heard about them but not much. I knew that Rotuma had experienced the usual ravages and interbreeding from the whalers and ships deserters, including the only blackbirders that hit the place on the *Velocity*, all 40 sailors from which are now represented in the gene pool. I knew that the, and other *fafisi* off the Unites States Exploring Expedition in 1840 brought grog and measles and influenza and dysentery and venereal disease. But I didn't know that

most of the death and destruction was brought by the God's door to door salesmen.

"The missionaries came forth to Christianize the savages." Sani said. "But it wasn't as if the savages weren't dangerous enough already." She told us of the Great Malhaha War of 1845, when two *sau* chiefs, Riamku and Sani's husband's ancestor Maraf, from the same village of Noa'tau, each installed different *sau*s of their choosing in our village of Motusa. The conflict killed all the young men on both sides with many villages entirely depopulated. Maraf thought he finally had the strategic advantage, when he acquired a cannon from one of the whalers but, at the battle that followed, after a few shots the falconet failed, and Riamkau's men rallied, killing Maraf and a hundred of his men. He was buried with the faulty gun serving as his headstone, and a great number of pigs were paid in indemnity.

"A year later the Catholic Marist missionaries arrived." She said." There were already few Wesleyan missionaries from Tonga, landed by John Williams in 1839." Gradually, the southern and south-eastern part of the island, and Riamkau, became converted to Catholicism, and the rest of the island, Maraf's heirs, to Wesleyan dogma. When William Fletcher established his mission in 1865, he noted that his flock had chosen to adopt a more western appearance

'The contrast between the skins and garments, stained with turmeric and the clean shirts and dresses, was too marked to be overlooked. The young men of the district appeared in a sort of uniform, clean white shirts, and clean cloth wrapped about them in place of trousers. The idea was their own: the effect was good... As I reached the houses of the heathen part of the village, the difference was very marked. Everything was dirty, Turmeric was on all sides... (It was hard) to tell a Papist from a professed heathen by his outward gait and demeanour. There is the same unkempt head of long hair, the same daubing with turmeric; indeed, the same wild, and unpolished, and unwholesome appearance.'

Tumeric was the talcum powder of the traditional, of tolerance. But tolerance wasn't on tap in the pulpits of the mission churches at the end of the 1860s.

The Wesleyans were complaining about the heretical Papist ‘scarlet whores’ impeding their civilizing progress, and ruining the commodity accounting balance sheet of converts per unit cost. They were making the world more like Britain, measurable as much in housing and clothing as in baptisms. The Catholics, for their part, were preaching the narrative of martyrdom, in the values of ‘faith, baptism, confession, and communion,’ while living among their flock in ‘poverty, celibacy, and obedience.’

But differences between the two agendas were only foreground and background; what for one group was underlined, for the other was subtext, and for all their vows of poverty, the Catholics were definitely playing the money game.

‘At Rotumah I was struck by the ingenious method the Roman Catholic priests have adopted for paying the natives for their labour. They, the priests, are all poor men, having as a rule barely sufficient means to support themselves except in a native fashion, and consequently they have no money to expend in wages. They have therefore adopted a system of fines, which when enforced are usually found to exceed in amount the sum due for service. Absence from church is fined; smoking on Sunday, or even walking out, is against the law. Women are fined for not wearing bonnets when attending mass, kava drinking ensures a heavy penalty, and fishing on holy days is strictly forbidden. The chief source of revenue comes from absence from church, as service goes on two or three times a day, and most probably just when the poor people are fishing or cultivating the ground.’

Boddam-Whetham, JW, *Pearls of the Pacific*, 1876

Other influences stoked the fires and brimstones. European traders provided guns and ammunition, French ship captains drew up treaties and made threats, British colonial officials in Fiji hovered just beyond the horizon, and Rotuman chiefs became anxious to exercise their vested interests, kinship alliances and grievances.

“But when push finally came to shove,” Said Sani, “it was the Rotumans who did the fighting.”

“When was that?” I asked.

“The Motusa War of 1871.” She said.

“You mean our village?” I asked.



“The very same.” She said. “It was a strange mix of Rotuman custom and missionary innovation.”

Wars were conducted in a ceremonial, if not celebratory fashion, in a one-day encounter only, like a sporting event. Chiefs sent challenges announcing a particular time and place for combat. The day before the scheduled conflict, each side held a feast, featuring *ki* chants and war dances. Battles were conducted on flat stretches of beach, to preclude ambushes. Prior to engagement, each side danced menacingly and tauntingly, sang verses proclaiming their ferocity, and then chanted to solicit the support of their gods. Warriors dressed in their best clothing, to make any unanticipated funerary preparations easier. They tied up their hair in topknots and wore *milomilo* conical or *suru* crescent-shaped basket hats, decorated with tapa and feathers. Round their necks they wore charms, and their bodies were smeared with coconut oil mixed with turmeric. The main weapons were spears, clubs and stones, thrown both at distant and close quarters. The goal was to kill the leading chief of the other team. When this had been accomplished, the supporters of that chief would withdraw, and the fighting would end.

There were no great advantages to be gained from the war by the winning side. The villages of the vanquished might be sacked, but they were seldom burnt; their plantations might be overrun, but there was little willful destruction. All pigs were, of course, regarded as legitimate spoil. The vanquished would perhaps promise to pay to the conquerors so many baskets of provisions or so many mats and canoes, a promise which was always faithfully and speedily performed, even though they might accompany the last part of the payment with a fresh declaration of war. The victorious side obtained no territorial aggrandisement, as it was to the common interest of all to maintain the integrity of the land, and the victors might on some future occasion be themselves in the position of the vanquished... Some of the large and high *fuag ri* house foundations were built by labour from defeated districts, suggesting the possibility of labour as a form of tribute... Nominally first-fruits were claimed by the victors from the chief of the vanquished, or perhaps the victors might depose the conquered chiefs, and put nominees in their places... Such a course had, however, relatively little permanence... There was not such thing as indiscriminate slaughter or debauchery of the women after a fight.’

In the Motusa War, Communion and Christian prayers took the place of chants. Late into the previous night, Father Joseph Trouillet had baptised recently converted Catholics, sanctifying them for the expected battle. The new dress code for warriors required black dress suits, frock coats, and starched, stiffly-ironed shirts, collars and ties, although the basketware head-gear, bravely trimmed with feathers and red cloth, like an Indian head-dress put on backwards, was still considered *de rigueur*. Spears, clubs and stones had been replaced with firearms. The battle was fought on the isthmus, and the Wesleyans won, with a final score of 12 to 2. The Treaty of Hamelin was signed, and relative peace prevailed, save for the odd French warship, mediating and fomenting dissent. When the anti-Catholic Reverend Thomas Moore made landfall in 1877, the situation took a turn, and when Riamkau stole a pig and was shot in the back, he died a Catholic martyr. The war of 1878 lasted over two months, resulting in a letter to the Governor of Fiji, requesting cession to Great Britain. They got their wish.

“We call it Rotuma Day.” Said Sani. “It brought us peace.” And Jehovah Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, Mormons, and Assembly of God on Rotuma members, and an unreasonable number and variety of their churches, spread all across the island she drove us around.

Thankfully, also, it brought them cold beer, which is where we ended up late afternoon, at Rocky Point.

For our final destination, before returning to Julie and the rest of our family in Motusa, Sani took us to her home in Nao'tau, to meet her husband. He was a big solid middle-aged Polynesian, with receding grey wavy hair, a big square jaw, and a nose so wide and flat, it made you wonder how it could be an instrument of respiration. He wore his lava-lava like he had been born in it.

“Gagaj Maraf Solomone.” He said, introducing himself. Which is about all he said. He was a man of few words. But he didn't appear to need many. We knew her was married to a very regal presence. We knew that he was a direct descendent of Maraf. We knew that he was also a chief, not a *sau* anymore, as the office had been terminated in the 1860's, but a chief

nonetheless. We didn't know that he was a member of the Fijian parliament, or how he would slurp his soup at dinner. We asked him questions about traditional and changing Rotuman society, and he always took a very long time, before answering in as few words as were necessary, to answer the question without giving anything else away.

In the old days, when a chief died, and the day came for laying his *halaf* foundation stone, each of the five districts had to bring a healthy pretty young girl to the ceremony. At the appointed time, they were struck once on the head with a stout club, for their deaths were required to be instantaneous. If one cried out, she would have been carried away and another girl from the same district would be sacrificed in her place. They were buried, one at each of the four corners in the cemetery, and one right in the centre, their bodies resembling the five stars of the 'atarou Southern Cross constellation, where the spirit of the kings would go.

I asked him what would happen, if someone committed a serious crime.

"It is rare in Rotuma." He said.

I pushed him for a response.

"He would make restitution to the community." He said.

I asked him what would happen if his restitution had been inadequate.

"He would go fishing." He said. Southern Cross power.

A man like this one, I thought, would have had that kind of foundation stone.

"The main island far exceeds in populousness and fertility all that we have seen in this sea...the evidently superior fertility of the island, and the seeming cheerful and friendly disposition of the natives, makes this, in our opinion, the most eligible place for ships coming from the eastward, wanting refreshments, to touch at; and with regard to missionary views...there can hardly be a place where they settle with greater advantage, as there is food in abundance; and the island, lying remote from others, can never be engaged in wars..."

William Wilson, missionary ship *Duff*, 1797

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“They came off in a fleet of canoes, rested on their paddles, and gave the war whoop at stated periods. They were all armed with clubs, and meant to attack us, but the magnitude and novelty of such an object as a man of war, struck them with a mixture of wonder and fear.”

George Hamilton, *Pandora's* surgeon, 1791

We spent the last magical days on Rotuma with Julie and the family on the whitest and most peaceful Motusa beach, and the nights in a Fara way kind of narcosis. Robyn had her own pandanus mat by now, and her perpetual motion fan continued to perform its double duty, keeping her cool, and the flies off her face and the watermelon.

“It’s a curse and a blessing.” Said Julie. She saw my puzzled look.

“The isolation.” She said. “But even when the plane breaks down, and the boat doesn’t come, when the shops run out of basics, we still have this, and our love. Fia’ama.” *So What.*

So what if they lived to eat, and the insects and heat were as thick as each other. They had more than most of us.

“That’s why the ones that came and stayed, stayed.” She said. And she was right.

Our final evening, Julie’s daughters danced for us, in elegant red and white layered dresses, and combed Robyn’s hair, and anointed her with coconut oil, and initiated us both with lei. And then Robyn danced for us as well, and very well. We ate my favorite palusami, and cucumber and crayfish, and steaming octopus with *tahroro* fermented coconut sauce, and

pork, and a variety of stodgy fekei coconut desserts that Robyn adores.

The next morning, before the plane left, we hid along the soft sand roads of Rotuma, secretly hoping that no one would find us in time to take us to the airport. But nothing is secret on Rotuma. The land has eyes. *The islanders, passing with light footfalls and low voices in the sand of the road, lingered to observe us, unseen...*

We found ourselves on the tarmac, walking toward the Britten-Norman Islander that brung us, and Robyn dissolved into tears. And Julie dissolved into tears. And it wasn't that long before the pilot sliced up back up into the huge cloud he had that he had found a week earlier, over six hundred kilometers north of the rest of Fiji, sideways, like he was cutting a grey soufflé. It wasn't that many kilometers Fara way from Julie, when our plane almost stalled. For a moment, my heart stopped, with no defibrillator on board. And then, like some nocturnal protective ghost from below, it cranked over.

*Strummummmummmummmummm.*

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13 May 1999- 'We, the members of the Rotuma Hospital Board of Visitors, are thankful for all the help and donations we received. May God bless you all. My thanks also go to Doctor Winkler and Robyn, who visited the island from Nanaimo, Canada, in December 1998 and our relatives over there. Many thanks for your kind donation of the defibrillator. We look forward to receiving it soon.'

*Archived News, Rotuma Community Bulletin Board*

Postscript: They did get our defibrillator. But unfortunately, they didn't realize that the power had already been

transformed to accommodate Rotuman electricity. Smoke rose from the far end of the beach. It was allegory.

*And Mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the LORD descended upon it fire.*

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