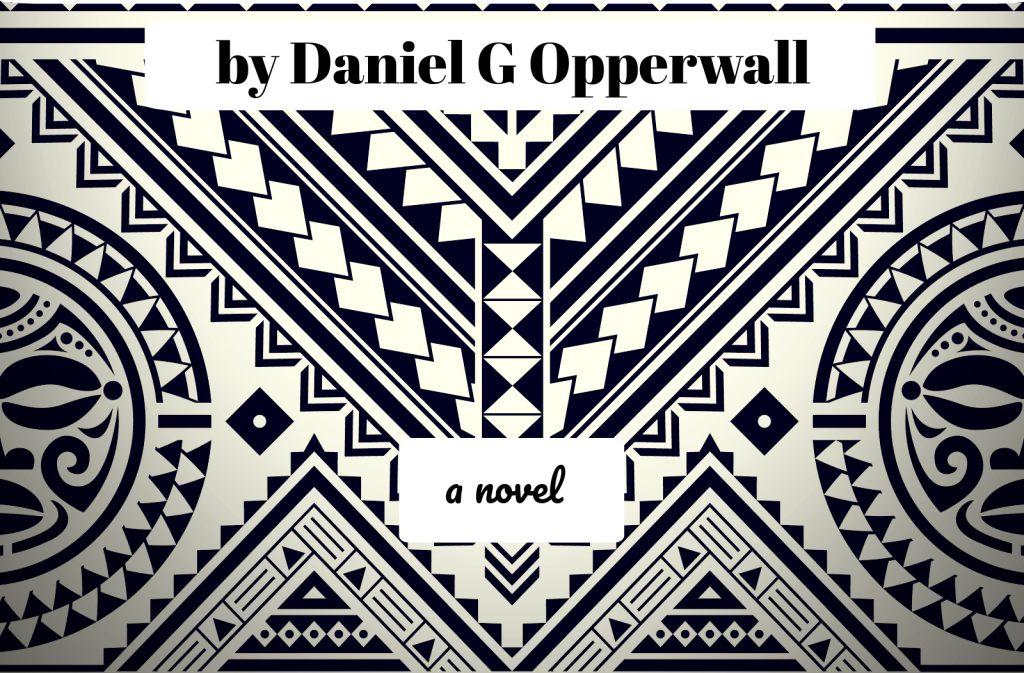




# **The God of the Cucumber Vine**

**by Daniel G Opperwall**

*a novel*



## The God of the Cucumber Vine



# THE GOD OF THE CUCUMBER VINE

Daniel G Opperwall

Later on Sunday Press  
Hamilton, Ontario

*The God of the Cucumber Vine*

Copyright © 2022 by Daniel G Oppewall

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner without the prior written permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews.

This is a work of fiction. The island of Milau and all the characters and events depicted here are solely the products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to real persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

ISBN (ebook): 978-0-9948160-3-0

ISBN (soft cover): 978-0-9948160-2-3

Cover design by Daniel G Oppewall, base cover image courtesy of Shutterstock.

[dgopperwall.com](http://dgopperwall.com)

*In memory of Dom James Deschenes,  
who always encouraged me.*



# AUTHOR'S PREFACE

Here I share a novel that I wrote nearly ten years ago, and which has been sitting in my (digital) trunk ever since. The novel is titled *The God of the Cucumber Vine* and takes place on a fictional Pacific island called Milau. It is not really a finished book, not in the fullest sense anyway. It is a complete story from beginning to end, but it never went through the process that any truly completed book must, which is to say it has not been fully rewritten and no editor has touched it. All real books are created several times by at least two people—usually more—who take an author's draft and craft it into something complete. Not so with this one. *Cucumber Vine* is also a very green book written by a man not yet thirty who even ten years on knows very little about writing.

*Cucumber Vine* is, fundamentally, about God the Father and His presence in the economy of salvation, which is something deeply mysterious indeed. Especially when one considers death. That, by the way, is the other thing this book is about: death. And the symbols of water, the night, the little girl, and many others mingle around the question of death and the Father's place in it (to put it thus) throughout the story. It is a work of theology in fiction, then, but as you will see it is not explicitly religious, barring at most a short flourish near the end. And the book is meant to be funny, which makes for a little bit of an odd combination.

I have left many stories, poems, and novels behind over the years as any writer does. There is no need to finish or publish everything. But there is something at the heart of *Cucumber Vine* that haunts me even ten years later in spite of it being green, and flawed, and incomplete. There is an idea at the centre of it—that idea about God the Father—that I still think matters. It feels like the time has come to take the Doc's advice from the



very end of the novel and just let things be what they are, let them float out into the darkness of the ocean night with no expectation of building (or writing) something important, but rather as a sign of just being here, reflecting and wondering.

I hope, then, that you'll enjoy this novel simply for what it is, and pass it along to anyone else who might appreciate it the same way. May it be a solace, somehow, to know that however terrifying it may be to recognize God's literally infinite depths, by faith in His love (faith which is never quite certainty) we are steadfast in our hope that we will reach Him and the life for which we have been created.

Daniel G Opperwall, Hamilton, 2022

# 1

Somebody once told me to memorize a passage from Seneca—in Latin, no less. Referring to death, Seneca says “*Scopulum esse illum putamus dementissimi; portus est...*” and that, very loosely translated, means, “we, like lunatics, imagine death to be a barren atoll; but it is a harbor...” It’s from *Epistle 70*, and I want to say right off that I’m pretty sure it’s complete bullshit. But, after everything, I find myself dutifully repeating it in the mirror now and then. So, it seems like a good beginning. Maybe a decent end, too.

What I know is that every single soul on the island but three went out into the water, and that I am the last living person to have set eyes on them save possibly one. What I do not know is what they found out there—harbor, atoll, or something else.

I have my guesses. But so did Seneca. And I expect you don’t need my thoughts on that, even if you believe me in the first place.

---

I found out about Milau at a brief meeting three years ago in January. It was a moment vivid, awkward and confusing. As you know, I was working in supply-chain for Saf-T-Set Foods, keeping tabs on facilities producing things like “Catsup” (as we continued to call it in the South-East), hamburger buns, pasta in a can, and that sort of thing. I had a little

windowless office at headquarters on the second floor, which was a bit of a big deal when I first got it. I'd been working there for about five years—it was my first real job out of college. Which, again, you already know.

The meeting itself happened on one of those mid-winter days in Grand Rapids when the snow has gone crystalline and vacant, and everything is empty gray light; people lower their eyes and try not to exist until they're inside, only to find out they don't feel like existing there either. As I was heading to my office, Doug Bacon poked his head around a corner like he had been waiting there listening for my footsteps. Doug was just about the only person on our floor who was near my age (I'm 33 now), and therefore the only thing close to a friend I had in the company, though I didn't know him all that well. He had a good enough sense of humor, though, so we had lunch together once a week or so. He liked to wear flannel shirts to work, which was both anachronistic and against the dress code. But he had been doing it with so much exuberant frequency, and for so long, that no one actually seemed to care. Doug was a properly trained architect, and worked on any projects where we constructed a new plant or tore something down. We had actually been doing a fair bit of building around that time since we were the type of company that does well when the economy's bad.

"Hey," he said when he saw me, "you heard about the thing, right? The meeting? We should get up there now."

"No..." I said slowly, heading towards my office door where I could put my bag down, "I just got in. What's up?"

"Oh!" said Doug with a little too much surprise in his voice, "you didn't see the e-mail, then? They want you and me up in the big conference room...to talk to John Feilsma." Feilsma was the company's CEO and grandson of the founder.

“What?” I said, opening my door and starting to take off my coat, “about what?”

“No idea,” said Doug, “Must be something big. I’ve never even met the guy before, have you? And I heard around the office that there were some feds around today looking like they didn’t know where to stand.”

“What do you mean ‘feds?’ Like...government agents?”

“Yeah...something—I don’t know. We’re supposed to be there in five minutes.”

“Shit...” I said, opening up my bag quickly and grabbing a notebook. “Do I look okay for that?”

“No,” said Doug with a smirk, “you look like you need a cup of coffee.” I told him that that was true and we headed for the elevator.

“Did you have a good vacation?” Doug asked as we stood there. I said yes in that automatic way you do when you don’t mean it. “You were out of town, right?” he asked.

“Yeah, I was down in Phoenix visiting my parents. They just moved there for good.”

“Did you take Melissa with you?” he asked. Melissa was my girlfriend of about a year and a half—my wife now.

“No,” I said, “she wanted to stay up here with her family. I don’t blame her. Phoenix basically makes me want to kill myself.” Doug laughed and I looked down somberly at the bagel crumbs on the carpet. The elevator showed up. We got on and hit “36”—all the way to the top. A loose door panel rattled at every floor as we went.

When we emerged, a secretary with one of those headsets was standing right there waiting for us. She was holding a clip-board with that bitter shifty arrogance that only a sycophantic underling is capable of cultivat-

ing. “Are you Doug and Edward?” she asked, using my full name awkwardly. We nodded. “Come this way.”

She walked ahead of us down a hall to a big wooden door and opened it. Out from the conference room poured the scent of cherry-wood and velvet drapery—the odor of a bygone concept of high style and power decorating. The room was huge. The light of the sun, breaking through a weak spot in the overcast sky, streamed helpfully through the window so that the big corporate logo (it’s a picture of a safety pin twisted into the letter “S”) cast its shadow down over everything. The secretary left us as we stepped in, and the door closed with that loud-soft thud that only lots of money can buy.

There were four people in the room, sitting as far away from the door as possible. Three men in suits, and one woman smartly dressed. I didn’t recognize any of them. “Welcome, gentleman,” said the heavy man in the most central chair. He was red-faced and looked like he had had a few Bloody Maries to start the day. Still, he spoke fairly clearly. His voice was low and booming. “Have a seat, please.” Doug and I looked at each other a little awkwardly. “Please,” he said again, signaling once more. We sat.

“My name is John Feilsma—I don’t believe we’ve met.” We both shook our heads. “That is my grandfather there.” He motioned to a massive painting on the wall across from the window. It was a portrait of a slightly cross-eyed old man in a Louis-the-Fifteenth pose. We looked up in feigned admiration. Feilsma looked up, too, with a little twinkle in his eye. Then he took a deep breath as if to start in on a significant speech. “Gentlemen,” he began, “my grandfather founded this company one hot summer eighty years ago when he first began selling deli salads in a tent on the banks of the Grand River. He was just a simple Dutch immigrant with a wealthy family and a dream. From that first day in the heat, he knew what he desired: to grow that dream. And he did—summer after summer, year after year—into an international conglomerate. He grew it

not just from dressing and diced ham, and not just from stock and capital, but from determination and opportunism. Today my grandfather would be proud that we carry on his legacy. I lay awake at night just imagining the look on his face if he were to see our annual revenue. Revenue, gentlemen, the blood that circulates in the very veins of an American company, sustaining it—making it live and breathe!” he looked up dreamily for a long moment at the portrait. “But it’s not about the money, gentlemen. No, it’s about the mission. We feed a nation for less—it’s a great responsibility.” We both nodded our heads like we meant it.

“Why, when this company was founded,” he went on, “Grand Rapids was just a backwater town. Now look at us! Here we sit on the top floor of the tallest building in all West Michigan, looking down on everyone like...like soaring buzzards...our wings nobly akimbo. And the people below are looking up—dreaming of one day sitting where we sit—of being what we are: a symbol of everything that hard work and plenty of seed money can achieve! You should be proud to work here, gentlemen. Proud indeed.” He seemed completely serious, so we nodded again. Feilsma opened his mouth and took a deep breath like he was actually planning to continue, but just then the man sitting next to him, like an angel called suddenly to the panicked work of our salvation, interrupted him.

“Good morning,” he said, “my name is Josh Plank, and I am director of overseas operations.” His voice was thin and nasally so that we could barely hear it from all the way across the room. “We’ve asked to meet with you about an issue with one of our plants. Are you gentlemen familiar with our popular brand of pickles...North Pacific pickles? We sell them in US regions one and two” (that means the Midwest) “and across Canada. A navy blue label with an island on it—block writing in a sans font, if I recall. Yes? Number five brand of pickles in the United States, and number one right here in Michigan!” Doug and I confirmed that we knew what he was talking about.

“Good,” said Plank, straightening himself up. Then he haltingly pronounced the sentence that molded our meeting into that uncomfortably memorable creature that occupies my mind to this day. “Well,” said Plank, “North Pacific pickles are made exclusively on an island...in the...in the North Pacific...I mean, the North Pacific ocean...it’s very remote...very exotic...and we’re proud to call it home for the brand.” Here he paused, cleared his throat, and looked up at us as if we should speak. Instead, there was silence. I remember the moment as one of slow confusion—the kind you experience when someone has told you something that doesn’t even make enough sense to be absurd. Doug gave me a look of questioning confusion, which I only met with a vacant stare as we both waited for Plank to continue.

“Uh...yes, that’s right,” he finally went on. “It’s quite a small island, and it is known as Milau—a territory of the United States and also a completely independent republic. It’s located exactly on the tropic of Cancer—I mean, like, exactly on it...which is odd. Anyway, it’s a bit hard to get to, even with the Air Force base, but it’s absolutely beautiful. And the plant is a cornerstone of our long-term North American plan—we really cannot maximize our presence in the pickle market without it. That is why we are very concerned that, as of about eight months ago, it has stopped delivering shipments.” He stopped again, this time his eyes practically begging us to respond. It took us a good long moment, though.

“So...” said Doug, finally breaking the ice, “you want us to...help fix the problem?”

“Yes!” exclaimed Plank. He stuck his finger awkwardly in the air for emphasis.

“Okay...” Doug said, looking like he was still shaking off confusion, “can I ask a couple of questions then?” Plank nodded. “First, why do we have a pickle factory in...in the middle of the Pacific? I mean...do they grow cucumbers or something? It seems like a logistical nightmare.”

“Right!” said Plank smiling gently, “no, we opened the plant in exchange for some tax breaks and a big grant. The governments of the US and Milau wanted to create some industry there...to help build a future for the people beyond just getting enough to eat and enjoying life in the sun. So, they contacted us. It didn’t really make sense from a shipping point of view, but we worked with the two administrations to make it worth everyone’s while.” He stopped and chuckled to himself, but wisely did not elaborate.

“I see...” said Doug, fixing his posture. “Alright...so, what have our people on the island said about the shipments, then?”

“Oh!” said Plank, “I forgot to mention all that! No, we haven’t had any contact with the island for about the same amount of time as the shipments have been stopped. We’ve tried to call, and apparently the phones are down. In fact, I was just meeting with some people from the State Department this morning to discuss what could be going on. I guess there was a pretty big storm out there about ten months ago, and we’re worried—well, mainly the folks from the government are worried—that that has damaged their infrastructure. Milau is very vulnerable to storms, apparently, because it’s particularly low down. I think it might even be below sea level...can an island be below sea level? Anyway, there have also been some complications with local politics that I guess we need to keep an eye on. But, at the moment, the shipments are the big concern.”

“Okay,” I said after a pause, Doug having proved stubbornly mute this time, “so, how were we getting product off the island before, then. I mean, before the stoppage?”

“Well,” said Plank, “everything would basically just show up at port in Toledo. Our people on the island had just been taking care of things for us, and that was working fine. The Milauans are very diligent—very trustworthy. We used to have a rep go out there every year or two, just to touch base. I even went out myself once to finalize a new hire. But it’s been three years now without anyone visiting, and, like I said, the phones



are down.” Plank stopped and started laughing to himself, “I was just thinking this morning that maybe the plant has up and vanished or something like that. Wouldn’t that be something? But, no...can’t be...right?” Plank went a little bit flush, like the evaporation of our major facilities was a secret worry of his. We all sat quietly for another long time.

“So, basically...” the heretofore silent woman next to Plank finally said, “we need some people to get out to the island and get some information on the stopped shipments. We also need you to return with some schematics of the plant as well as the necessary information on what would be required for a tear-down and operations transfer from the island, should that become necessary. We’re hoping the solution is simple out there, but everything is on the table. I’m Lisa Dykstra, by the way. Director of operations for Saf-T-Set Pacific.”

“Yes,” said Plank happily. “You’ll fly to Honolulu first, and then you’ll get on a little plane that can take you to Milau. Three weeks there, and then you fly home. It’s practically a vacation for you guys—all expenses paid, too.”

We both paused again. “Oh,” said Doug, “So...you were assuming it would be us...specifically, then? Going out there? Not just coordinating...?”

“You’re absolutely right!” Feilsma suddenly butted in, speaking as if we had accused him of a hidden emotional weakness, “you’re not sending out lackey interns on this one! Don’t even think about it!” His head wobbled slightly and he went a little green as he tried to glare at us. He must have been drunker than I had thought.

“Yes,” came the woman’s voice again, “we figured we should have you both there in person, especially since it’s going to be so hard to communicate. And you’ll really like it on the island. I’ve been, and it’s lovely.”

Plank nodded with a weak smile, glancing over at Feilsma with a touch of worry. “So, that’s the situation. Do you have any more questions?”

Doug and I looked at each other for a moment. “Well, when do we depart?” Doug asked finally with an awkward smile.

“On Wednesday. You’re flying out of Detroit, then via San Fran,” Plank responded. “Oh, you’ll need your passports. Also, we’ve got briefing folders for both of you. We’ll have them sent down. If there’s any confusion after you look through them, you can just get in touch with my secretary, whom I believe you met.”

After a brief moment, Feilsma (who seemed to have gotten control of himself again) said, “It was a pleasure to meet you, gentlemen,” in a meeting-is-over sort of way. The two of us got up and went out the door. The air in the little coat room now tasted like chocolate and acid. In a moment we were back in the hallway. The secretary was gone.

We headed to the elevator. “What the hell was that?” Doug asked as soon as we were out of all possible ear-shot, laughing under his breath. “I mean, Feilsma, and three top-level people at a meeting just to tell us about a plant visit? They could have written that up in an e-mail like the usually do—even if it is in the middle of nowhere.”

“I know...” I said, in a perplexed murmur. My brain still felt like it was full of foam pellets, and I shook my head like I was honestly trying to get them out. “Something’s really off. I mean, do we seriously have a plant on a Pacific island in the first place? I’m not sure I actually even believe that...no government grant could possibly be big enough. Any idea what the profit margin is on a jar of pickles?”

“Yeah, bizarre,” said Doug, taking my questions as rhetorical, “but what can we do? Hey,” he continued after a moment, “hadn’t you heard of this place? You sounded like you didn’t know about it.”

“No,” I said as the elevator arrived and we stepped in, “I’ve run into that

brand, but as far as I knew, all those pickles were coming from somewhere around here. But...yeah...I guess we could be putting them on a boat and sending through the Panama Canal or something. That's not the kind of thing I'd really know...or want to know..."

"Well, why not all the way around Cape Horn while they're at it, right? And they could put them in canoes just to make it exciting." Neither of us actually laughed. "Well, look," he went on after a moment, "this place sounds beautiful, and there's definitely a whole lot of something they're not telling us. Maybe this'll be fun, for once." He was starting to really rope me in. One thing about Doug was his sweeping enthusiasm. I stood there nodding gently as the elevator descended.

"Yeah," I said when we hit the second floor, "I guess we might as well look at it that way."

Doug laughed and nodded as he walked away toward his office. "I'm playing hookey tomorrow, no doubt about that," he said. "You know what? I'm leaving right now! Can't fire me two days ahead of something like this. I'll come in and grab those forms tonight, maybe. See you Wednesday!" And he was out of sight down the hall already. I headed back to my office and shut the door. I was still shaking my head to myself as I sat down at my desk. I don't remember getting much done for the rest of the day.

# 2

I was sitting at home with my girlfriend.

“This place is in the middle of absolutely nowhere,” she said, staring at the computer screen in my living room that night. “I mean—just totally out in the middle of the Pacific. Closest place is Midway, but it’s not that close. What if you get stuck out there or something?”

“I don’t know,” I said, “I guess they would have to come rescue us.”

“There’s barely even anything online about it. I guess the whole island has a population of fifty thousand. Can that even be right? It’s a coral atoll...with a lagoon. It says here there’s a little resort up on the northern tip of the island. That’s it—that’s the whole place.”

“Wow,” I said as she glanced up at me pleadingly for a moment. “Anything else there?”

She looked back at the computer. “Oh Lord,” she said, “They have a parliament that meets in a tent by the beach three times a year.” She shook her head and muttered over a few more lines of the article. “Elected president....they somehow had a university there twenty years ago, but now it’s closed. It says that they have a language called Milauan, but basically the whole population speaks English. But...this is odd...it’s...not

a Polynesian language? It says that the Milauans aren't ethnic Polynesians."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I don't know..." she said, "there's just a note here that says that the Milauan language and culture aren't related to anything else."

"Does it say anything about an Air Force base?" I asked, recalling Plank's brief mention of one.

"No, nothing about that. This article is like two paragraphs long. Where the hell are you going, Ed?"

"You just told me everything I know about it," I was trying to tease her, but she wasn't having any of it. "I guess I'll have to find the rest out once I'm there."

She frowned. "I don't see why you don't just quit or get somebody else to do it."

"They were pretty emphatic," I said, "but it's not even that. It's just that I think this might actually be kinda...fun. And it's only three weeks, Melissa."

She nodded. "I know. It just sounds so stupid."

"Of course it's stupid," I said, "it's mind-boggling, in fact. Having a plant on a Pacific island in the first place.... But, that's why it'll be interesting."

Melissa sighed, and stood up from the computer. "Alright," she said, "Don't get into any trouble over there."

---

Two days later I was yanking my bag from the back of a black airport limo at about 6:00 in the morning with the crepuscular light just begin-

ning to stir my blood. I had slept most of the drive. The driver was a Mexican guy and wore one of those little limo hats that everyone likes. I tipped him handsomely, and then proceeded to worry whether that seemed patronizing. He was happy enough, though. Security was pretty quick heading in, even with a pat-down. I always get a pat-down, by the way—I hate those naked picture machines. I mean, if you need to get up-close and personal with my every nook and cranny then you’re going to have to do it for real; none of this cowering in a dark room. After security I spotted Doug staring at a monitor, looking for our gate.

“Hey, Doug!” I said, heading towards him.

“Hey, Hill,” he said, waving me over, “we each got our own limo, huh? Didn’t expect that.”

“No, me neither,” I said, “still cheaper than the extra flight from Grand Rapids, I’ll bet. How was your ride over?”

“Fine, just fine. Too early, but whatever. Hey, looks like we get to take the little red monorail thing to gate A77!” Doug was honestly excited about the little red monorail thing. Well, there are worse ways to start a trip to a pickle factory on a Pacific island. After our ride, we had a cup of coffee and each read a newspaper waiting to board. I called my parents to give them a last update on my itinerary. It was a short conversation.

The flight to Honolulu (there was a transfer in San Fran like Plank had said) was long and boring. On both legs we were in the very last row of the plane, back where you can’t recline your seat at all on those older jets. Our flight attendants were, as usual, overly friendly and underly attractive. As one of them on the second leg swiped my card to the tune of eight dollars for a Gin and Tonic, I wondered where the old stereotype about foxy stewardesses comes from. Must have been a pre-union thing, back before giving people peanuts on a plane turned into a real job. Not that it shouldn’t be. I mean, I think it should.

“So what are we supposed to do when we get to Honolulu?” I asked Doug at some point over the Pacific, just as he was tossing back a whole bag of peanuts at once.

“Um,” he said, trying to chew them down quickly, “there’s going to be someone there holding up one of those little signs for us.” He finished chewing and swallowed...stopped, held up his hand, took a swig of his drink (Jack and Coke), shook his head in a shivering sort of way, swallowed again, and took a deep breath. “Sorry about that,” he said in a now clear voice. “Yeah, someone is going to meet us, and then I guess we leave the main terminal and head over to the little private plane section, and there will be a prop or something there to take us out to Milau. Then we’re supposed to just find the one hotel on the island and get ourselves a room. We might be booked, but they couldn’t confirm that because, you know, no phones or anything right now. They gave me a bunch of Yen—said it would be hard to get cash there.”

“Like—Japanese Yen?” I said. Doug said yes. “Odd...” I shook my head.

“I guess they just never stopped using the stuff after the Japanese occupation in the 30s. And they’re way too small a country to print a currency of their own or anything.”

“Yeah,” I said, mulling it over. “Makes as much sense as anything, I guess. So, what are we actually supposed to do when we get there?”

“Oh, yeah,” said Doug, “they gave me a big packet of stuff here.” I hadn’t actually received anything myself, and had made the strategic decision not to go inquiring after further information. Come to think of it, that was a pretty big risk since Doug could very well have done exactly the same thing. Anyway, it worked out. Doug leaned over and rummaged around in his bag, eventually taking out a thick manila folder. “There’s a bunch of paper work, maps of the island, spreadsheets—all sorts of stuff. I’ve got it all in .pdf on my computer, too...hopefully they’ve got elec-

tricity there at least. Anyway, we're supposed to meet a contact person when we arrive on the island. She should be waiting for us when we get there. Her name is Martha Tok. Says she's some kind of manager for us. Makes it sound like she'll just be standing there when we land, basically—so, I'm not really sure how to find her if we have to go looking. Cross our fingers, I guess."

"How does she know we're coming?" I asked.

"It sorta sounds like they do have mail service still," said Doug, "though it takes a really long time. So, maybe they just sent her the information through the mail a while back? That would mean they've been planning this for a good month at least and decided to just lay it on us a couple of days ago."

"Sounds like Saf-T-Set," I said.

"Definitely. Anyway, if she's not there to meet us we're going to be wandering around like idiots for a little while. It's a small island, though. Regardless, after we make contact with her, we're supposed to tour the plant and get settled in, meet some of the management, figure out why the shipments have stopped, and then basically just get to work setting up all the paperwork for a plant shutdown. That's regardless of what the actual problem is, by the way—the stuff they gave me says they want a shut-down report either way, even if we can fix the problem there."

"Well, pretty run of the mill, then," I said, "albeit in the Pacific ocean."

"Yeah, basically," Doug said. "Three weeks is probably way too much time—but that's good. We'll have some days to just relax and enjoy the beach or whatever."

"So, why are they even sending you—all that stuff is usually on me."

"Oh, yeah," said Doug, "I forgot to mention that. There's some kind of glitch with the plant architecture. See, they say that if they have to move



operations over, they would want to rebuild the new place on the exact same layout as the one on the island. They're being really hyperactive about not wanting any changes to the way the product is made—like, which hallways it goes down and when. They kept talking about the 'salty sea air' and how it affects the pickles and stuff like that. Gotta protect that brand! Anyway, that's not so strange except that the architectural side turns out to be a complete nightmare. Evidently we have absolutely no record of the plant design that I could access. So, I've got to dig up a schematic on the island, and failing that I have to actually go out there and *draft* this damn thing again *from scratch*—unbelievable! But it'll give me something to do." He smirked and sat back in his seat.

"Great..." I said with a sigh. I paused for a while. "Hey, so how long will the ride from Hawaii out to Milau be?"

"Depends on how fast the plane is, but I would think a couple of hours. Pee before we go!" he grinned at me to emphasize this piece of advice, then he wiped the peanut residue from his hands, filed the documents back away and pulled his book out from the seat-back in front of him. He was reading *Jane Eyre*, which I thought was extremely bold. But, then again, if he was going to read a romance novel, at least a Victorian one showed class. Anyway, I don't like to read on planes, and I declined to purchase a headset for three dollars, and no, I hadn't brought my own, so I was forced to watch *Bananas*, the old Woody Allen movie, without any sound. Where they got a copy of *Bananas* I don't know. Anyway, it's always interesting to see how much of a movie plot you can gather without the dialogue.

When we got to Honolulu, at about 2:00, I think, we located our sign-bearer and began following her. She walked briskly, apparently annoyed with our existence. We snaked our way through the main terminal, through some strange back entry-way that circumvented security somehow, out of the terminal, back into the terminal (skipping security again), and finally over to a little corner office in a distant back hallway of the

airport with a little blue banner that said “Lightface Charters and Aerial Rescue.” She unlocked the frosted glass door and let us in. Then she turned around and left, still without saying a word, and we stood in silence alone.

Inside the office there was a single small desk with no one attending it, a rack filled with a collection of National Geographic magazines so old they had probably become valuable again, a coffee vending machine, and a unisex bathroom. Doug repeated his advice from the plane and headed straight for this most important amenity.

An hour and a half, four cups of coffee and several more visits to the can later, someone finally came in. We had been talking for a while about what we ought to do if nobody showed up, and had determined that calling Saf-T-Set would only be a waste of time. Anyone we might easily reach was certain not to have the slightest idea who we were, or what our project was, and probably wouldn’t even have much sense of the basic business model or geographical catchment of Saf-T-Set itself. In short, we were at the mercy of whatever distant god or secretary had built the machine of our current arrangements. We had gotten to the point of doing some of the cross-word puzzles in the NatGeos, and Doug was just starting to read a few of the racier articles, when, like I said, somebody finally came in.

Tom (the pilot) was more or less a walking stereotype. He had on a leather jacket and, I kid you not, aviator sunglasses with a little Top Gun hairdo along with a mustache that covered about half his mouth. Really! He removed the jacket and sunglasses (these he basically ripped off his face like he was proving a point about his masculinity), hung the jacket up on a rack just behind the desk, and offered his hand to both of us.

“You must be the fellas from Saf-T-Set, right...what’d they say, Doug and Edward?” He had a drawl which seemed oddly placed in Hawaii.

We smiled and shook his hand. “Everyone calls me ‘Hill,’ or maybe

‘Ed,’” I said, “only my great-grandmother and my first girlfriend ever called me Edward.”

“Well, I’m Tom, and I’m going to be getting the two of y’all out to Milau t’day. Now we’re gonna have a real safe flight, but I want y’all to know that we’re headin’ out over a whole mess ‘a water—I mean, it’s a lotta water, the Pacific ocean is—biggest ocean in the world, did y’all know that? I just found that out this week. Anyway, if we go down into that much water, we’re gonna be in for a real ‘good mornin’ and how’d ya do’ sorta situation, if you know what I mean. Now don’t panic ‘cause the water ain’t too cold and the sharks ain’t too hungry around these parts, not like where y’all are comin’ down from, so don’t worry.” Doug and I gave each other worried looks—not necessarily about the sharks.

Tom explained that we would be flying on what turned out to be a four-seater single-engine float plane—the kind that can land on the water, I mean. The flight was going to take four and a half hours, though Tom noted that we would get two more hours back from the time change so as to be there in time for dinner. Dinner would be happening the next day, though, because we were crossing the international date-line. Just look at a map if that doesn’t make sense. Actually, Tom mentioned something about a kerfuffle during the cold-war regarding which side of the line Milau should be on; evidently some Americans thought it was unacceptably communist for the islanders to want to be in their natural time-zone. Anyway, Tom had done the flight two times before, both eight years previous, “back when the airport was still open over there,” he noted. “You used to be able catch a commercial flight on Milauan Airways, but when your company called me I went an’ checked on the internet an’ there ain’t no more flight! How ‘bout that?” He then gave us a specific run-down of the various safety procedures on the plane, and I’ll spare you that. The basic gist was that if we went in the water, we should wear our life-jackets, and that way we would die of exposure floating on the surface rather than drown.

Tom whisked us through a back door into a corridor that led to the runway. The plane was parked a few steps away. It was a little red number painted with a pin-up style figure of a woman reclining across one of the pontoons, a carnation firmly in her mouth and a look of “here we go again” sublimely illuminating her face. The expression looked like it had been meant to connote sexuality, but the artist hadn’t been quite skilled enough for something so subtle. Just above the woman, in a white script tailing off into a little cloud design, were the words “Jet Red Sadie,” which, presumably, was the name of the plane.

“This here’s the Sadie,” said Tom, who had somehow gotten a lit cigarette into his mouth in the time it took me to glance at the plane. “She’s a good plane—engine runs nearly always, and I ain’t never crashed her beyond repair. She’s fast, too—souped her up a bit so she’ll clear four hundred the whole damn way in a head-wind if we need ‘er to. She blows a little smoke when she does, ‘course. I mean she gets awful hot runnin’ like that, but it don’t seem to hurt nothin’. Yep—she’ll do us just fine. She’s my favorite plane, I think.”

Tom showed us where to put our bags and shuffled them around a bit to get the weight just right. Then he sat us down in the cockpit with me in the front seat first, whereupon he switched us so that Doug was riding shotgun. I’m not sure which one of us was fatter than he looked. Tom put on his headset, lit his fifth cigarette without asking if it was alright, and started pushing buttons and talking in jargon to someone in a tower somewhere. This was followed by about ten minutes of sitting in silence before some more jargon was spewed, some more buttons were pushed, and the plane’s engine flipped on, lurching us forward to a distant tarmac at the other end of the airport. It took us about ten minutes to get there.

“Alright boys,” Tom shouted over the engine roar when we were settled in to place, “this here’s the fun part—up an’ away! Milau here we come!” He let out a sudden, gleeful cowboy shout and tilted his head back, unsettling his headset slightly. Cigarette still firmly in mouth, he

pushed up the throttle shouting “balls to the wall, boys, balls to the wall!” and in a few moments we were off the ground watching the runway shrink behind us. I took a last deep breath of low altitude oxygen as the world gave in to its more gentle nature and the engine hum filled the air with a cacophonous silence. It’s always free in those spaces between—it gives you the sense that you haven’t really opened your eyes before, or at least not in a long time. Palm trees and resort hotels and ocean, ocean, ocean, and we were gone.

---

We didn’t talk very much on the flight over, mostly because it was so loud in the plane. Absolutely everything rattled in some way, giving us a lot of uncomfortable insight into the science of mechanical gerontology. Tom was right about the smoke, which you could see streaming by us most of the time, though we were going so fast that it didn’t seem to really get into the cabin at all. He tried to chat a little bit about the Tigers (the baseball team), figuring correctly that that was our “club,” as he called it. When Doug turned out to know anything at all about baseball, Tom got rambling about more shortstops and middle relievers than I knew existed anywhere in God’s creation. Doug kept nodding like he neither understood, nor wished to become better informed, though that was no deterrence to Tom. Then we asked him a few questions about Milau.

“What’s it like there?” Doug said.

“Oh, it’s beautiful,” said Tom, looking away from the wind-shield for much too long, “yep—just gorgeous. They’ve got this pritty lagoon—you should see it! I mean...you’re gonna see it, so I guess I don’t need to say that. Uh, anyway, the women are beautiful too, and so are the beaches, and the trees’re also beautiful. There’s some places t’ skin-dive ’round there, and those’re beautiful. There used t’ be a resort up on the top ‘a the island, and that was just beautiful. And they’ve got all these birds that land there—some special type that only ever come

there, y'know, called Striped-Footed Boobies, I think, and they're beautiful, let me tell ya. And the women are beautiful. . . I guess I already said that. They wear these flowin' dresses a lot—look a little like kimonos or something—all white, sometimes with flower patterns, and those are just beautiful. Between you fellas an' me, the men are beautiful too—I'm just saying, y'know, just an observation—I can appreciate when a man's got good looks. Yeah, I guess I'd just say it's beautiful, pritty much.” Doug and I nodded, which Tom was able to notice because he still wasn't looking in front of him.

“So, you'll be coming back for us after the three weeks are up?” Doug asked.

“Yessir—I'll be there right on the dot. That won't be any problem. Me getting' home is a bit more complicated, though. I've only got enough in the tank to get out there, so I'll need to scrounge up some gas on the island which—gets a little tricky 'cause they don't have a regular station or nothin'. Gotta go door-t'-door, and haggle for a good price. I've got plenty 'a Yen, but whatever I don't spend on gas I git to spend on drinks, so I like to negotiate. Sometimes gotta wait some people out for a day or two, so I might be around for a while—maybe a week even. Yeah, and that reminds me, there's only one bar, and all they got's a liquor they make over there from bread-fruit and pineapple. Tastes like rubbin' alcohol, they call it Aijee, that's short for Island Gin. They mix the stuff with pickle juice and a little sea water, and, you know somethin', it doesn't taste half bad—at least not after the first couple. Gets you movin' fast, if you know what I mean. Anyway, when I've sobered up I'll be back to Hawaii and then back out to get you boys.”

“Oh—will you have to do that again when you come back—I mean, the asking around for gas?” Doug asked with a worried look.

“Nope—I'll bring my own fuel on the way to git ya. Won't have you boys to carry, so I can fill up the plane with jerry cans. I love the smell when the plane's all full like that—makes the trip go awfully fast, if

you know what I mean. I just shut my eyes for a minute or two and I'm there—like a baby nappin' in the car, ain't that right?" He laughed from his gut and turned around to look at me while I tried to take a deep breath and smile. We hit a patch of turbulence and the plane shuddered hard while the stall horn screamed. "Giddyup, boys!" shouted Tom, "it's gonna be a bull ride the whole way, I'll betcha!" Doug smiled like that was good news, and I lay my head back. Maybe it was the thin air, or maybe the slowly growing sense that this really might be my last flight ever, but before too long I actually fell asleep. I don't know how long I was out, just that I was awoken again by the sunlight suddenly hitting me square in the eyes through the still rattling window.

# 3

The plane was descending in long wide loops over a crescent-shaped atoll curving around a blue lagoon. I rubbed my eyes a bit and peered out the rattling window. The island was outlined by a strip of white beach surrounding several elongated patches of green brush, one of which, to the south, was quite substantial. There were maybe a dozen boats of various shapes and sizes out on the lagoon. You could see a little town near the center and just to the north a cleared out grassy area jutting out on the ocean side of the island that looked like some kind of landing strip. On the other side of the town sat a big gray box—our factory—with a couple of exhaust chimneys flipping us the bird as we circled past. This was surrounded by an astounding number of brining vats (it's eight hundred, to be precise, not that I was counting on the flight) that seemed to stretch along about half the outside coast. Not far from the plant on the lagoon was a pretty hefty mass of concrete that looked like an old shipping port of some kind, in serious disrepair. On the far north end of the island we could see a sprawling complex which, even from the air, was quite obviously a resort hotel—or had been, at some point.

Tom was beaming all over the place, but flew in silence, ever lower, in broad circles. He apparently wanted to flirt with the tops of some of the palm trees as we got ready to land. His grin gave the impression that there was some kind of game he was playing inside his mind with its



own set of rules about how to best tempt death. With one last loop over the trees, he let out a barely audible prayer—yes, a prayer—and with a sudden look of deep seriousness he closed his eyes completely. Bracing the controls with his knee, he put his hands carefully on his lap. With a deep breath and a look of placid sublimity, he nodded as though listening to some silent voice, and we hit the water with a silken touch, easily the smoothest plane landing I’ve ever witnessed. Doug turned back to me and we widened our eyes at each other. He mouthed the words “who is this guy?” and I shook my head in erstwhile terrified disbelief. Tom suddenly sprang up from his transcendent silence.

“Here we are, boys!” he said with a smile, looking over at us like nothing was the slightest bit out of place. “Welcome to Milau—hope you brought your passports. Ha...I’m only kidding, they don’t check for passports here. You can just stroll right in.” He winked at us.

We were now afloat on the lagoon in the middle of the island, and Tom piloted us toward a small wooden dock jutting out from the beach close to what appeared to be the town. “The hotel’s just up on the main road there,” he pointed behind a row of palm trees at the only two story building that we could see, “right there—can’t miss it. The bar’s next door, and you can get some food there or at the hotel most every day. Other than fish and everything, they eat a lot ‘a goat—consider it a big treat, in fact. I like it barbequed myself.” We nodded in a “sounds delicious” sort of way.

I looked around from island level at our surroundings. The lagoon was that bright kind of pale blue, almost sky-like and streaked with moments of emerald and white. The palm trees swayed a little in the breeze while soft waves lapped up on the white sand shore. Some boats and people were visible along the beach, fishing or swimming, mostly smiling all over. It was, in sum, a big tropical idyll—as much as you could ask for. As we floated into the dock, a deep sense of peace settled over me—one

of the only times I was ever glad that I had come. If the trip was going to be a headache, then at least it was a headache in paradise.

We bumped up against the dock, and two young men in bathing trunks without shirts suddenly appeared, climbing up a little ladder from the water. They started tossing lines about to tie us off. Tom gave them a wave, then killed the engine, unbuckled himself and hopped out onto one of the pontoons, nimbly working his way around to the dock itself. Doug and I waited until the plane seemed settled before we opened our doors and stepped out. A couple of old fishermen were smoking cigarettes and sitting on a beaten-up motor boat tied off near the plane. They each gave us a casual little wave like seeing people arrive on the island this way was pretty routine, or had been at one time in the past.

“Well, there you are, boys,” said Tom with an already half-smoked cigarette dangling off his lips. “It’s been a real pleasure flying with you. Like I said, I’ll be around for a bit, so if you need me before I leave, just ask over at the Conch and Dodo. That’s the name of the bar, did I mention that? Anyway, if I’m not there, they’ll know where I am. Otherwise, I’ll see you boys in about three weeks.” He had unloaded our bags from the back hold while he was talking, and we picked them up. “Thanks fellas,” he said to the two young men, handing them a few coins each. They stuffed these into their pockets and immediately dove back into the water, laughing and splashing at one another as they had evidently been doing before we arrived.

By the time I turned around from straightening out the handle on my duffel, Tom was half-way down the dock already, and a figure in a flowing white dress was approaching us from the shore. The tropical air circled around the light fabric she was wearing—apparently one of the flowing dresses Tom had mentioned—sending it up in billows. She walked with a slowness and confidence, carrying a small stack of papers in her left hand. She was on the short side, about thirty, with big round eyes, quite an inviting face, really, though she held on it a serious and professional

look that seemed more genuine than affected. Her beauty struck me as a simple fact of no particular consequence. Not so for Doug. He was staring at her with his mouth literally ajar, like a retriever on the wrong side of the IQ curve.

When she had made it to us, she extended her hand to me. “Martha Tok,” she said in perfect English, with a very slight and difficult to place accent. “Corporate Liaison for Saf-T-Set Milau. Welcome to our island.” I shook her hand and introduced myself. Doug just stood there like an idiot. She didn’t seem to notice, though she also didn’t try to shake his hand. “I am quite happy that your plane arrived as planned,” she said, “I had been worried there might be a delay. Let me take you over to your accommodations,” said Martha, turning around. “You can get settled in there, and then I will return and take you both for dinner where we can discuss business.”

We followed her up the dock to the beach, through a row of palm trees, and onto a dirt road with occasional patches of pavement so broken and isolated that they probably would have destroyed an average car suspension. Turning down the road, we passed through a neat row of clean white buildings. They all looked like they had been built on the cheap in one go—just flat boxes each of the same shape and size. They were all painted white, and as such they made the place feel somehow both Spanish colonial and post-apocalyptic. The only exception was a large building near the middle of town bearing a sign which proudly declared “City View Hotel” in green letters. This building, like I’ve already mentioned, had two stories, with two little balconies visible up on the second floor. Next to it there was a simple looking convenience and grocery market, evidently closed, and finally there was the bar, the Conch and Dodo, which had an elaborate neon sign, switched off in the waning daylight. The other buildings in the town appeared to be houses. On the door of one such house, just across from the hotel, there was taped a piece of yellowing newspaper with the word “Bank” written on it in thick black marker. And that was that: the commercial district of downtown Milau.

Just next to town, such as it was, a long and really beautiful stretch of beach ran as far as the eye could see down the lagoon. Behind the hotel you could see a church steeple with a little bell in it, and the roofs of a good number of houses spilled out on a disorganized series of side streets. Near the beach there was a single lonely flagpole flying a flag with a purple field and a very small dot of slightly darker purple in the center. That's the flag of Milau, which I'm told represents the island itself and its surroundings (the ocean) and makes a veiled reference to the eventuality of the island's destruction by the sea.

Martha led us into the hotel. There was a young woman sitting behind a tall old-fashioned desk, the kind with the little key boxes behind it. Martha said something to her in Milauan, and she smiled and handed over two sets of keys without putting down her book. Evidently we were checked in. We walked up the stairs to the second floor where Martha politely opened up the doors to our two rooms and gestured to show us in. Our eyes popped, or at least mine did (Doug might still have been staring at Martha). The rooms were spacious, with big king beds, decorated in lavish blues, reds and golds, tapestries and ebony carvings on the walls, fine wicker furniture, small comfortable ensuite bathrooms and each with a balcony and a spectacular view of the beach and lagoon. Everything was clean but with a warm and inviting aroma. I blinked my eyes before I set my bags down. I had been expecting a dingy hole in the ground.

"They will have breakfast in the restaurant downstairs every morning at eight, except Sunday," said Martha, "the islanders tend to eat caviar—well, it is a local fish roe more technically, from flying fish—very simple, but if you would prefer grilled goat and eggs, that can also be arranged."

"Uh," I said, looking back at her from where my eyes were fixed on the brilliant water, "uh, caviar is fine..." I trailed off. Doug had disappeared

into his room, and Martha stepped over to give him the same information.

"Please take your time to settle in," she said when she returned. "I will be back in half an hour and escort you to dinner." With that, she was gone. I took a deep breath and slid open the door to the little terrace. The gentle salt air curled up through my nostrils.

"Holy crap!" Doug exclaimed, charging into my room, "Look at this place! I can't believe it! I mean, this has got to be one of the nicest rooms I've ever stayed in. And in this little nothing city—what the hell?" he stopped and pushed his hand through his hair, "and if the rest of the women are anything like Martha..."

I nodded, "Very pretty," I said.

"You ain't kiddin'!" Doug practically shouted. "Man...well, I'm gonna take a shower then, and freshen up a bit. This is gonna be great!" and he was gone.

I sat down on the bed and slowly started to unpack my things, my eyes trying to stay glued to the view of the lagoon while I worked. The sun was setting right over it, like somebody had done up the scene for one of those tourist brochure photos, lacking only the requisite sexy thirty-something leaning against a palm-tree with her back to the camera. Even without her it was pretty magnificent. After unpacking, I decided I had time for a quick shower, so I took one. I was sitting out on the terrace watching the last purple shades from the sun dissipate into black when a knock came on the door. Martha opened without waiting for me, and signaled that I should follow her. She disappeared and I heard her knock on Doug's door. After a couple of minutes waiting silently for him to emerge, we were off.

Martha walked quickly ahead of us down the stairs and through a small door beside the front desk. The girl behind the counter was still there,

and smiled at us over her book as we passed. Beyond the door was a lovely little restaurant, with dark wood tables and furniture in good repair. Martha sat us down at a round table in the corner. The room was lit up in a welcoming orange emanating both from the tasteful sconces on the walls and the last bits of sunset tumbling through the windows. The only other thing really notable about the place was a tall wood statue standing in the corner. It was a male figure with long legs, reaching up into the sky and making a face like he had just bitten into something both bitter and sour.

“It is from the old religion of our people,” said Martha when she saw me looking at it, “a god which our ancestors worshiped. This was the god of the shore of the lagoon. Now it is only a statue...decoration.” She didn’t seem interested in talking about it, so I didn’t press her for more information. A waiter with a white apron approached us, with a pad in hand, but no menus.

“Three tall glasses of Aijee,” Martha said without asking, “and three glasses of water.” She turned to us, “since you have just arrived, it is the custom for us to eat an elegant meal. You may order your goat how you prefer. I will have it traditional, please,” she said, turning to the waiter again.

“Me too!” Doug nodded eagerly, then asked Martha, “what’s traditional mean?”

“Oh,” said Martha, not expecting the question, “yes. It is first boiled in vinegar, then encrusted in salt, and it is served with oyster sauce. Very chewy and delicious.”

“Uh,” I said slowly, remembering Tom’s recommendation, “barbequed please.” The waiter nodded again and was gone. In a few moments he returned with six glasses, three a pale green color, the other three filled with clear water. He also had a tray full of pickles in about eight different cuts. Gerkins, sandwich slices, ridged, sweet, some kind of waffle-cut

pickles I had never seen before, and I think a few others. He set everything down and disappeared again. Doug fell to on the waffle-cut pickles and I sipped my Aijee. My lips puckered up, but there was a sweet floral aroma to it that made it pretty drinkable despite the barbaric level of salt.

Martha placed her stack of papers on the table and opened up a folder. Doug paused for a long moment before straightening up and clearing his throat, at which point he took out his own papers and tried to look like he was interested in the business of why we had come.

“I have received a package of materials pertaining to your visit by post, gentlemen,” she began, “and I understand the situation as well as possible given the information that I have. I will let the plant and operations manager discuss most of the specifics with you tomorrow. Forgive me, I should have mentioned it...I will bring you for a tour of the pickle facility after breakfast. After that, you will have complete access to it, and any information there that you might need to fulfill your duties. All records for Saf-T-Set pertaining to operations on the island are housed there.” We smiled and nodded.

She went on. “I am also sorry that we have not been able to communicate with you more easily on these matters. As you know, the phones have been down for quite some time. That is because of a cyclonic storm—a hurricane—which passed over Milau some months ago. The necessary repairs have not yet been made. You, however, should be made aware of the reason for that.” She paused ominously and gave me a very serious stare-down kind of look. “There has been a great deal of confusion on Milau of late—a lot of distraction which has kept us from attending to simple pieces of business like the phone lines. Our political situation...is bad, gentlemen...it is, at present, extremely volatile. There are serious concerns—I will spare you any details now—about the ecological and economic condition of our country. At the present time, we are exactly ten days from a major election. It appears that the opposition party is likely to capture the presidency and may well capture most of the seats

in parliament as well. And, gentlemen, I am afraid to report that that may have consequences even for your work here.” She trailed off quietly.

“Oh?” I asked, prompting her.

“Yes,” she continued, looking back up at us. “The opposition...is quite unfriendly to the American government, and strongly opposes the presence of Saf-T-Set here on the island. They have opposed the company from the very beginning, in fact, though they were a small minority at that time. Now, however, they seem to have gained the support of most Milauans. What is more, they are becoming increasingly open about their ties to a small group of...” she stopped for a moment and looked around at the empty restaurant to see that no one could hear her, “a small group of activists on the island who have been accused of...terrorism...by the current party in power.” Doug’s eyes got pretty big as he looked over at me. “I don’t know what else to tell you about the situation, gentlemen,” she said sadly, “but your visit comes at a difficult time.” We were silent.

“Still,” she said eventually, “you should be able to compile the necessary reports in regards to the plant, and I am very happy to carry out my duties assisting you in that capacity. With some good fortune, you will not encounter any problems. However, it seems to me that you might do well to meet with the American ambassador on the island at some point—at least to make him aware that you are here. I believe he is expecting you, in fact. The ambassador is a pleasant man, I am sure he will be happy to help in any way he can.”

“Great,” said Doug, as though everything were straightforward, “Sounds like we’ve got a plan. Talk to the plant manager, talk to the ambassador. Easy!”

Martha smiled brightly at Doug’s reaction to what she had said. “Good, then,” she replied, “then we will simply proceed tomorrow.”

About then our food arrived, along with a new tray of pickles (Doug had



polished off all the waffle-cut ones and requested some more of those) and another round of Aijee, which was starting to taste pretty good. I cut into my barbequed goat and ate it. It tasted about like you'd imagine—the sauce was basically Kansas City style, but zipped up with some pineapple. Doug and Martha began chewing on their goat-meat, Doug doing so quite loudly while Martha managed to make it look elegant, even while opening her mouth really wide as if she were trying to reveal its contents. Martha started looking up at Doug periodically with an elusive smile. I got the impression that she liked something about both his optimism and his chewing skills, but I don't know for sure which was more important.

I ate pretty quickly, but it took the two of them about forty-five minutes to finish their dinner. I ended up having five glasses of Aijee, and was feeling pretty comfortable with the ambient sounds of teeth-gnashing and lack of conversation by the time they were done. For dessert the waiter brought out a tray of sweet gerkins rolled in powdered sugar. With all the booze in my stomach, I recall them tasting pretty good. Doug ate them with the élan of a person chowing down on a piece of his mom's famous apple pie for the first time in years. Martha politely took one and left the rest to us. After dinner, Martha paid the bill, explaining that everything was being covered by the company. She wished us a pleasant evening and confirmed that we knew our way back upstairs. Then she departed with a bow followed by handshakes for each of us. Doug sat back in his chair in satisfaction.

"Sounds like things are a bit crazy here, huh?" he said. "At least the food and weather are good. And, it probably won't matter for us. We're doing our own thing, right? We've got lots of time to take it nice and slow. No stress."

"Yeah," I said, "sounds about right, I hope. Seems a little funny to be meeting with an ambassador—but, I guess it's a pretty small place. Still...disconcerting."

“It’ll be fine,” said Doug with a wave of his hand, “she’s just being thorough, I’m sure. It’ll be fun, too. I’ve never met an ambassador before.”

We both took the last swig of our drinks. With nothing else to do, we looked at the wall for a few minutes before picking ourselves up to go get some sleep. I gave a hazy wave to the girl behind the counter, still reading, and in a moment I was lying in bed. I didn’t even manage to turn off the light before I slipped from consciousness.

# 4

In the morning I got up, took a shower, and headed down for breakfast. I had expected to be feeling pretty hung over after going through so much alcohol and salt water on top of a few hours' jet-lag, but whether it was the island air or something else, not only did I not feel awful, but on the whole everything seemed better than average. I grabbed a table in the restaurant near the window and ate the roe and toast that they brought me. They made a good cup of coffee there, too—really good, in fact. The waiter mentioned that they grew the stuff on the island, but islanders basically never drank it. It had a nice rich flavor, no bitterness. Doug came in just before nine looking like complete crap. He sat down across from me, eyes boggling around the room.

“Ugh,” he said, “what the hell, man? Aren’t you feeling...I mean...you’re, like, fine...”

“Yeah, I feel great,” I said, “Slept better than I have in years. Hey, flag the waiter over—this breakfast is top notch.” The waiter brought out Doug’s food. “Eat up,” I said, “fish eggs are good for a hang-over.” He screwed up his courage (I guess he had never had the stuff before), downed some on a piece of toast, and seemed to perk up a bit.

A few minutes later, Martha came in wearing a pant suit with the same stack of papers in her hand. She pulled up a chair and sat down next to

us. “How is your breakfast?” I complimented the meal profusely. Doug just rubbed his head a little and had some more coffee. “As soon as you are finished, we can go up for the tour of the plant.”

“Are you feeling up to it?” I asked Doug.

“Yeah,” he said, not really sounding like he meant it, “I’ll be fine...eventually.”

I finished my last swig of coffee, and we all got up to go. Martha led us back out of the hotel, past the girl at the desk, who was midway through a new volume, and out into town. The whole place was filled with the sound of birds—the Striped-Footed Boobies, I guess. Martha mentioned that it was their breeding season, and apologized that they were so loud. I told her I rather liked the sound of birds in the morning, and she gave a crooked smile.

“I took care of one of them as a little girl,” she said, gazing off, “from a nest the mother had abandoned. It would eat from my hand. They are silly creatures, and not very pretty. But they are good...they leap about in a dance when they start to learn to fly—they do the same dance when they are looking for a mate. Funny things. It liked watching it fly away.” She turned to me and smiled.

She led us up the main road toward the dock and then veered off on a little path through a patch of trees. It ran through a few palms back into the clear where the ugly gray box of the plant greeted us. We entered through a small door. Inside, the place was loud and hallow. A handful of workers swished back and forth like the last swig of beer in a bottle. Well, what can I say?—it smelled like pickles and metal. We were in a big open room that they apparently used for cleaning and cutting cucumbers. In the middle of the room, looking right at us and sitting on a small cheap-looking desk chair (without a desk, mind you), was a short man with a long nose and tiny circle-rimmed glasses. He stood up when he saw us.

“Good morning, sirs,” he said in a heavier accent than Martha, “it is a pleasure to meet you here today.”

Martha motioned to him as he extended his hand. “This is Baya Vin, the plant and operations manager. He has been working for the company since its very first day on the island.”

“Very pleased to meet you, sirs,” he said as we greeted him, “and very glad that you have come here to examine the facility. It has been quite some time since we have had any communication or written contact with headquarters. We are very pleased to welcome you for the inspection and report. I am sure you will find everything up to speed and in working order as it should be. And entirely according to protocol! I am a believer in protocol, sirs. I very much stand by it. I am known throughout the island as the grand Babu of company policy, if you know what I mean.” We, of course, had no idea what he meant, “Please, please, come this way and let me show you around.”

He started in on a short tour. The plant was basically one spacious room with a bunch of cutting and cleaning machines for prepping the cucumbers, a room with all the jarring machines, and a storage space. It was all a pretty standard design, acceptably efficient, nothing miraculous, nothing odd. “These are the vats,” Baya indicated, drawing us over to a window to take a look. The vats were set up in rows outside, as usual for this kind of place, and, as I think I’ve said, there were an exceptionally large number of them. That made sense, though, since we were evidently sourcing all of our North Pacific pickles from the facility. Baya continued, “they are all state of the art technology, the most up-to-date vats available, which we have kept in excellent repair and in fine condition since the founding of the plant those many years ago. Yes, very clean, but not soapy—it would be very much against the protocol to have soap in the pickling vats, as I am sure you are well aware. But clean, of course, unless there are pickles in them in which case they are quite pickley. And through here is the jarring line where we fill the jars and put the pickles

into the jars. It is also quite clean and sanitary, everything up to protocol. There you can see the jars moving around on their little line. Ah—they are not running at this very moment, but you can see where they would be running. I like to think of them as ants all marching—marching to pick up the pickles and then marching away from the colony. I always feel like a queen ant, sirs, as I am sure you can understand, for I have no children of my own. It would be nice to be a queen ant, would it not, sirs?” We nodded, and Doug seemed like he actually meant it. “And here is where the pickles are stored once they have been placed in their jars and where the jars are kept once they have pickles in them. They just stay there in storage, not moving, until they are sent out.”

“About that,” I interjected, “how do they actually get from here to the United States anyway?”

“Oh, I am not at all certain, sir, precisely how they get all the way to the United States. I have never been to the United States, and I do not know correctly how far away it is. It is a sizable distance I believe, is it not? I suspect that the jars cannot just be floated there, is that correct sir?”

“Uh...” I said, “you mean, just floated out across the ocean...likes logs down a river or something?”

“Yes, that is what I meant, but as I said, I should suspect that they cannot be floated in such a way at any point in the journey, though the jars do float, sir, it would not be a problem with their being floatable, but most probably it would be impossible due to distance, yes? So I suppose that that is not how they arrive in the United States. Is there perhaps a large port somewhere in the United States at which they could arrive on boat? I am uncertain, sir, I am afraid I am not an expert in these matters.”

“Okay...” I said very slowly, “where do the pickle jars go from here.”

“Oh!” he said with sudden understanding. “From here we would...I mean, we have in the past...and are...still taking them now, are we?” He

seemed really confused here about what was going on, “to the large concrete dock...to be loaded onto...freight ships. From there, I believe, they are taken to another island or perhaps all the way to the United States, as I was saying? Of this I am not certain, for once the pickles have left this factory they are no longer under my control and are no longer any of my concern. I do not know who is responsible for all these various and diverse activities after they are loaded onto the freighters, but it has been working this way since the plant was built.”

“Alright, then.” I paused and mulled over how to ask the next question. “So,” I decided to go for the sidle-up approach, “have the pickles been getting shipped out...as usual lately? I mean, have there been any disruptions at all?”

Baya’s eyes got large and he sighed like he was letting out a breath he had been holding for the past hour. “Uh...” he said slowly, scratching his neck, “uh, yes...yes, there have been some disruptions...with the main shipping company...yes. That is why you are here, of course and indeed. Yes, there is one primary company...a fairly small company that we rely on for most of the island’s supplies...and...one of their boats...is in need of repair...it has shut them down temporarily, and so we have been simply storing...the product...for now. Nothing at the fault of the plant—everything is running exactly to protocol, yes! The shipping...company...it is their responsibility from that point, and they have been dragging their heels. I have been putting pressure on them for some time, but to no avail.”

“Okay...how long has that been going on—the problem with the shipping company?”

“Well...” he said, “let me see...I suppose perhaps nine months now—perhaps a little less.”

“I see,” I said, “well that explains where the shipments have disappeared. We haven’t gotten one in the United States for eight months now.”

“Yes, I am very glad we have solved the mystery!” He was suspiciously excited here. “This is most certainly the problem you have been having...with the boat! Now that we are aware of the problem, I will speak with the shipping company further. Yes, it has become unacceptable, the situation! Do not trouble over this, I will be certain to deal with it tomorrow, and have it fixed right away. And we would indeed have contacted you about it, but as you know it is very difficult—the phone disruptions, as you know...from the storm.”

“Yes, Martha mentioned that to us,” I looked over at her. She looked at me nervously. “So, how have you been receiving supplies here, then?”

“Right this way!” said Baya, still nervously. He led me over to a loading bay door and barked an order at a passing employee who opened it up. “Right through here, sir, everything comes in here and is placed in this holding area until we are ready to use it.”

“Yes...” I said, trying to remain patient, “but I mean, how do you get your supplies here on the island? The same company, or someone else?”

“Oh!” he said, “yes...we do receive supplies...from the same company, I believe. That would explain why we have been short on supplies of late. We will soon have to slow production, I believe, and stop storing our products, perhaps.”

“Alright,” I said turning to Doug, “So, I guess it’s the shipping company that is creating the problem here. Probably why most companies don’t build these things in the middle of the ocean—but what do I know?” Doug smirked.

“As I said,” Baya interjected, “I will speak with the shipping company tomorrow.”

“Okay,” I said. “And what’s the name of the company? Do they have an office on the island or anything—is there a way to get a hold of them?”



“Uh...” said Baya, his eyes getting wide with apparent anxiety, “I do not even recall the name, I am sorry sir. I am sure our records at the plant will show. I do believe that they have a representative on the island...or an office, yes—for me to speak with. I do believe so. Please, check the records, sir, and you will perhaps be able to make some progress that way.”

“Alright,” I said slowly, beginning to wonder about Baya’s continually strange responses to everything I said, “that was my next question. Can you show us where you keep records and all that?”

“Yes!” exclaimed Baya happily, apparently eager to change the subject, “Yes, let me show you into the plant office where you may examine the various records and documents pertaining to all of our operations. I am sure you will need this in order to compile your report and find the information you need.” He walked us quickly through a set of two small doors and into a little office with a desk, several filing cabinets, and an old computer terminal with a green and black screen and the words “Nort Pacific Plc” burned into the face of the monitor like you used to see sometimes. On a shelf in the corner there was an intricate little wood carving of what looked like a chubby baby somehow trapped inside an egg, confusion and perplexity on her face. Baya noticed me looking at it. “Yes, that is an old carving from our ancestors,” he said, “it is a god they once worshiped. This was the goddess of the seeds of the grass. It is a very beautiful carving.”

“Definitely,” I said, “I take it these things are common around here? We saw one in the hotel.”

“Oh?” he asked somewhat proudly, “yes, we have kept many of them—tokens of our past—decorative, now. We are proud of the artists who made them. Anyway, sirs, this is the office, and all our records and documents are here—you may examine whatever you like. This cabinet contains the data since the last inspection, so you will most probably

wish to focus on this cabinet—oh, but I am not trying to give you any undue instructions, oh, no, no! That is not my place, sirs!”

“Thanks, Baya...” said Doug, “this is great.”

“Very good, sirs,” he went on, “and please do not hesitate to approach me should you require any assistance with the documents or any other matter regarding the plant. You may inspect any of the facilities at your leisure, at any time. Please take this ring of keys,” he handed Doug a thick rattling hoop of about fifty keys, “which will allow you into any door in the facility, and will open any of the locks as well, though I might request that you not unlock the drainage tubes on the pickle vats without letting me know—though you are well within your rights to do so! You may drain all the pickles completely if you choose! You will hear no complaints from me or any of the workers here if you do!”

“We won’t do that,” said Doug, “thanks for the heads-up.”

“Very good, sirs, whatever you like,” said Baya, “if you will excuse me, I do need to return to my work—always very busy as I am sure you would assume. Always making sure everything is up to protocol. And everything is, sirs, I can assure you—please believe me. As I said, I will speak with the shipping company right away. Consider the problem solved!”

“Thanks, Baya,” I said, “you’ve been very helpful. We’ll come find you if we need anything else.” He bowed deeply and left the room.

“May I be of any further service at the moment, gentlemen?” asked Martha deferentially.

“Uh,” I said slowly, “no...I don’t think so.” Doug seemed like he was trying to think up a reason for her to stay, but came up short, and just shrugged his shoulders in agreement.

“Very good, then,” she said, “I will leave you to your work.”

“Oh!” said Doug, “where would we...find you, if we need you?”

“Yes,” said Martha, “my office is located in my home, which is very easy to find from the hotel. It is simply up the road which runs along the north wall, leading past the church.” She explained in detail where it was. We proved ourselves by repeating her directions back like a couple of teenagers studying for a driver’s test with their dad. Then she headed out the door and was gone.

“What in the hell is going on here?” Doug asked after the door shut, “that song and dance from Baya was just...what was that?”

“Yeah,” I said, sitting down. “I don’t know. How could he think we wouldn’t know about the stoppage in deliveries?”

“Exactly. Could he possibly not have known why we’re here?”

“No,” I said, “he must have known. He was sitting here waiting for us. Something is going on.”

“Well,” said Doug, “not that I’m eager to get to work or anything, but maybe we should look through some of these files. I’m hoping there might be a blue-print in here somewhere anyway.”

“Yeah,” I said, “and I think I’d like to see if I can figure out who the shipping company is that he was talking about and maybe track them down. I mean, first he insists that he’ll take care of that right away and everything is as good as fixed, and then says he doesn’t even remember their name? Fishy as hell.” Doug agreed.

So, we started looking through some of the filing cabinets to see what we could find. I think you’ve already seen most of the important documents. If you haven’t, you should take a look on your own time. I couldn’t tell you very much about them from memory. But, I guess there are a couple of general things that I should say here. To begin with, there were four filing cabinets in the office that were completely empty, which

seemed odd. However, the documents that we did find in the other cabinets were in decent shape. We had numbers dating back for ten years on everything going in and going out, budgets and ledgers, legal documents (which didn't have much bearing on me), employee and payroll logs and records—the works, as far as we could tell. But, and this is important, we *only* had numbers going back ten years. There was nothing—not a scrap of paper that I could find that first day—referencing anything to do with the previous decade of the plant's existence (I think I've mentioned, and you already know, that the plant was twenty years old). So, there was a big gap. And despite that very important anomaly, there was one more thing that was even more strange about what I found. The basic figures in terms of the plant's operations, I mean the ones I was interested in regarding the actual production of the pickles, while diligently recorded, didn't make the slightest bit of sense.

So, most people know that most commercially marketed pickles are basically made out of cucumbers and vinegar with some salt and a handful of run-of-the-mill food-safe chemicals, plus, for the sweet ones, some kind of sugar or corn syrup or whatever. Now, given our location in the Pacific ocean, all of those ingredients had to get shipped in from somewhere. And the ledgers, indeed, showed they were. But there were a whole lot of red flags.

So, salt and vinegar for instance. According to the logs, the plant was really only taking in enough of those ingredients for maybe a few thousand jars of pickles a year, absolute tops, and that meant that the theoretical maximum output of the plant (which should have been about fifty million pounds a year) was several thousand times what the salt and vinegar could have supported. After noticing that, I started looking at the rest of our ingredients. Cucumbers and corn-syrup matched again for a total maximum output of almost nothing. That, in itself, struck me as good news because it seemed to indicate that I was simply misreading something or missing some other stack of records. But it became clear that something else was afoot when I noticed what was going on with the

supply of polysorbate 80 and yellow 5. According to a couple of rough sums I did, the plant was signing for as much yellow five by weight as it was for cucumbers, and it was doing so at astronomical prices—hundreds of thousands of dollars of food coloring every month. You could have turned the whole lagoon bright piss yellow ten times over if you wanted, and you still would have had plenty left over for the plant while running at its *actual* full capacity, which, again, it could not have been doing given the supply of other ingredients. Same story with the polysorbate 80, though I haven't a clue what it would do to the lagoon if you dumped that in there.

So, basically what we appeared to have on our hands was a pickle factory that provided all of North America with its entire stockpile of a top-five brand of pickles, and which did so while only making enough pickles to supply no more than three or four grocery stores for about three weeks. Either the company had Jesus on a receiving dock in Toledo working a loaves-and-fishes miracle to the benefit of Saf-T-Set's bottom line, or something was terribly wrong. Mind you, North Pacific pickles really do get produced. They exist—they're on supermarket shelves. And while I recall briefly considering the possibility that no one *ever* bought our brand, and so all those shelves were just stocked with the one original shipment that ever made it to the US, I quickly concluded that that was probably even more absurd than the Jesus hypothesis. So...there you go.

Okay, like I said, you ought to just take a look at the numbers yourself if you want more detail.

That first day at the plant, I basically just did a quick mental audit of those numbers. Doug rifled around trying to find a schematic. He even tapped on the little computer for a while, though it quickly became obvious that that was pointless. In fact, the thing was so loud when he turned it on that we were honestly concerned it might blow, and after all the noise starting up, it didn't actually do anything except proudly display the same misspelled message already burned into the monitor. Anyway,

despite going through files for several hours that day while I was doing the same, Doug never did find any kind of plan for the plant. After I had gotten a decent grip on the “situation,” if you could even call it that, I set my papers down and explained to a still vaguely hopeful Doug what was going on with my end of things.

“So there’s no way this plant is producing what the company says it’s producing?” he asked after I gave him the numbers.

“No, no way. The plant isn’t claiming that it *is*, in fact, which is the strangest thing about it.” That reminds me, I ended up noticing that the output numbers matched the low input numbers. “So, our pickles have to be getting made somewhere else, I guess.”

“Well, maybe they do make a lot of them back home, then,” said Doug, “maybe Plank just didn’t know that. I mean, he believed you when you made up a distribution center after all.”

“Could be,” I said, hoping to death that that was it. “And if that’s the case, then this whole situation is pretty straightforward. We just shut down operations. A capacity loss of a few thousand jars would never even be noticed—it’s probably less than what we lose to theft.”

“Well, great!” said Doug, “let’s assume that’s the deal, then.”

“It would be nice to be able to communicate with the company somehow to confirm that, though. But, nothing can be easy, can it?” Doug laughed at me.

“Look,” he said after a few more minutes, “I’ve done about all I care to do here today. I’m not going to find any damn plans, and this place is stuffy as hell.” I’m not sure if I mentioned that, but it was indeed stuffy as hell in there. “Why don’t we knock off for the afternoon and head over to the Conch and Dodo for a drink or two, and then maybe check out the beach up the way or something.”

I agreed to the plan and we picked up three or four folders that I really did want to look at in some detail, and headed out the office door. And that was when one last unusual and suspicious thing happened. When we got out from the office into the main cleaning and cutting room, everything was completely dark and utterly silent. Not a soul was there, including the supposedly busy and hard-working Baya—at least not as far as we could tell.

“Looks like we’re not the only ones quitting for the day,” Doug said, looking around in the little bit of light soaking its way around the exterior door and through the small windows.

“What the hell?” I murmured, looking around. “What time is it?”

“Looks like it’s about three,” said Doug, looking at his watch. “I switched this to island time while we were riding through that turbulence with Tom. Maybe they just quit early here—I mean, how much work can there be to do anyway? Don’t the pickles just need to sit there for a while?”

“I don’t know,” I said, shaking my head, “let’s just go. I don’t want to think about it right now.” We stepped towards the door on echoes, the kind that ring with particular cold clarity in the dark. The sunlight outside was a bit dazzling for a moment until our eyes adjusted to the blue-white glitter of the sky, a sight which, once we could really bear to take it in, made us feel like we were main-lining the essence of a more peaceful reality. I took a deep breath and tried to let everything just go. Maybe I really did.

“To the Shell and Bird!” said Doug, merrily christening the bar to which we had so far never been with its natural cockney nickname. We headed over there, back through the patch of trees and along the beach.

When we arrived the place was empty. A little bell rang as we came though the door. The joint was pretty brightly lit, and had formica table

tops and red vinyl seats. It basically looked like a fifties style diner or some place like that. Behind the bar stood a slightly bored looking bartender staring out the window (which had no ocean view, just the little main street and the row of houses across the way). When he saw us he smiled in a genuinely friendly way, and without saying anything headed for a rack of glasses behind him and started in to mixing two drinks.

“You’re the Americans,” he said without looking back as we sat down on a couple of stools right in front of him. We said we were. “I don’t take an order—you understand?” he turned with an inquiring expression. “No orders—all the same.” We told him Aijee would be fine.

I was watching him mix our drinks when I noticed another one of the statues that now seemed to be everywhere on Milau, a small one standing on the shelf near the glasses. It was a male figure, extremely fat to the point that he was almost completely spherical. He had a look of maniacal laughter on his face.

“Which god is that?” I asked the bartender, pointing.

“Oh!” he said, looking up with a smile, “the god of alcohol, what else?” He turned to me and winked. I smiled back as he kept working on the drinks.

“Quiet afternoon in town, huh?” Doug asked when the two pale green glasses were slid our way.

“Yes,” said the bartender, “yes, very quiet today.” He enunciated pretty hard, but, like basically everybody we met, his English was close to perfect. “You two...are the first visitors in a long long time. You two are very welcome here, to our island.” He smiled broadly and warmly. He was one of those guys who seems to have a genuine calling to tending bar.

“So, everybody knocked off early up at the plant today,” Doug said, in a making-conversation kind of tone. “Is it a holiday or something?”



“Oh no,” said the bar tender, “The holiday is coming up, but not today.”

“So,” I said, “does everybody just quit at three around here?”

“Not sure,” the bar tender shook his head, starting to wipe the bar. “Barely anybody working at the plant at all anyway. Just a few, nothing like years go. Ten people, maybe. Baya Vin goes up—a couple others. Only busy day there is Monday when everyone from the island...they go up to buy pickles there.”

“You mean to say just ten people are working there?” I asked.

“About,” he said with a shrug.

“Do they actually make pickles at all, then?”

“Not sure,” he said again, “they sell ’em, for sure. That’s all I know.” We fell silent. After a moment he smiled and stepped back through a little door into the kitchen.

“Well, shit,” said Doug to me, “it’s even worse than you thought, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” I said shaking my head and taking a big sip of my drink.

“Sorry, man,” Doug said, in a genuinely sympathetic tone. “Look, don’t worry about it anymore for right now. We’ll just have to track down Martha tomorrow, and probably Baya, too...and...see what they have to say. Nothing to do about it here.” I agreed.

About that time, Tom the pilot showed up and sat down next to us, giving me a slap on the back as he did. The bar tender, who had reemerged from the kitchen, greeted him by name and started mixing up a drink for him, too.

“How you boys doin’?” Tom asked us jovially. We lied and said that we were fine and enjoying our time so far hanging around on the island.

“Yeah, looks like you two got a good sense of how t’ organize your day ’round here. Three PM’s about right for getting over to the Conch, ain’t that right?”

“Have you rounded up any fuel yet?” asked Doug.

“Yeah!” Tom nearly shouted, “got it all in one shot, can you believe it? Ran right into a fella I met over here last time I was on the island. He actually remembered me, aint’ that somethin’? Anyway, he’s got some connections or somethin’ like that, because, I’ll tell ya, he had a stock-pile ‘a gasoline likes a’ which I ain’t never seen. Couple ‘a barrels of the stuff tucked away in a little hut on the north side ‘a town up there. Other types ‘a fuel, too, he said—anything that burns, practically, ha! Anyway, sold it to me for next to nothin’, so I’m all set up here to just hang around for a few days an’ live the good life a bit—maybe a week. Fella’s name is Dominic Vin, if you boys happen to need ‘im for somethin’.”

“That was Baya’s last name, wasn’t it, Hill?” Doug asked.

“Yeah,” Tom jumped in, “that’s his brother, I think. Mentioned that he works for your plant or somethin’ a’ that sort, is that right?” We explained that we had met Baya earlier in the day. “Well, it really is a small world out here, that’s for sure,” Tom noted happily, “everybody is everybody’s brother or cousin or somethin’. You boys met any nice island girls yet?”

“No,” I said, while Doug was in the middle of nodding his head, “haven’t really been looking.”

“Oh, you should!” said Tom, “they’re just the sweetest things. They’ll fall in love with ya as soon as look at ya, most of ’em! You wouldn’t regret it—but suit yourselves.” Doug seemed really pleased.

After an hour or two the place had a decent pack of customers in it. We chatted it up with Tom pretty well, especially after several more rounds (he really must have gotten his fuel for cheap because he insisted on buy-

ing all our drinks) and had a generally good time. Once we got sick of hanging around there with him, we headed out in the darkening evening to explore a little bit of the island. That was the first night that the island darkness started to sink in a little. It's not just that there's no light, you know—it's a darkness that's real, I guess—a black liquidy thing that has a kind of presence that it brings like it's just sitting there next to you, not talking but aware of you. Anyway, it's probably only the coolness of the air there right on the ocean, but maybe you know what I mean. Doug and I roamed about in the moonlight, looked up at the stars, and just sat in the sand for a while. Aimless stuff, basically, but it was nice.

"Hey Hill," he said at one point late in the evening. He was pretty well drunk, but not obnoxiously so. "I'm glad you came out here...with me, I mean."

"Yeah," I said, "no problem."

"No really," he said. "I'm glad it's you. I mean—look at all this—this white moonlight everywhere. Look at it! Just stars and air and water. Most people wouldn't be sitting here. I don't know. I've been thinking for a while—I've been feeling holed up back at home. But it's not stuffy out here, do you know what I mean? I think maybe I'm growing crooked where I am."

"Yeah," I said, "I know how that can feel."

"But you don't mind it, do you?" he asked.

"Grand Rapids?" I said, "no. I like it fine. But I can understand."

"It's not that I don't like it," he responded, "I do. I just want to feel like I am where I am—not like I just woke up there confused. I forget what cold water tastes like, sometimes. Sitting out like this you remember." He paused a good while, then continued. "Maybe *that's* my problem—I should be *more* dead to it. I don't know...I just come out here and see everything all over like crazy, and then I just want more of that, I guess."

“Like some kind of beauty addict?” I chuckled almost under my breath.

“Yeah, man,” he said, “exactly like that. It’s not like I’d want it another way, but still—it can make you crazy, that’s all. Then I worry, though—that everywhere becomes dead if you stay long enough. You can’t run forever. But maybe it’s all just me, huh? Maybe I’ve just got to look around better. But I just want to see it all, you know—get it digested. Then you can look back on it and remember. You filter things out that way. They’re locked in. But, they’re not alive either, are they?”

“I suppose not,” I said, not sure if I was really following him.

“I’m sorry,” Doug said, turning away, “it’s all just the booze. Anyway, I just wanted to say I’m glad you came. That was all.” I nodded with a smile and we fell silent, just looking up at the moon for a long time.