May 2017

THE ARCHIPELAGO OF PEACE

A Memoir of Micronesia

*(Part Three of an, as yet, unpublished memoir.
Serialized exclusively for this newsletter.)*

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Part Three

It is seven miles from the relative sophistication of downtown Moen to the village of Sapuk, and several centuries. We climb into the taxi beds in groups of five, twenty of us, with our somewhat embarrassing piles of leather, chrome, and vinyl luggage, and leave Moen along the same route Jack and I took the evening before on our run. Not far beyond the point where we saw the bloated sow, the road narrows and turns rougher. We bounce like bronco riders in the bed, holding onto the hot roof, the fenders, someone else's sweating suitcase. As they did on the previous evening, children pour out from the trees and sprint along beside us, close enough to touch. Tremendous smiles, tremendous coal-black eyes, thin-muscled cinnamon bodies, and that same shouted salutation: *"Kopwayfayya!"*

Here and there on the hillside, adults stand in front of plywood houses, caught in the listless posture of the tropics. They are cooking at open fires, or mending clothes in the shade. Some of them smile and call out *"Pees Kor"* in a way that makes us feel like the second wave of a conquering army. But a few of them stare blankly, almost angrily, as if we are not the particular army they had in mind. They are angry at their own poverty, I think in my foolishness. Precisely what I have come to change. It does not occur to me that, for centuries, other conquerors from other nations - Dutch, Portuguese, British, French, Spanish, German - arrived in Truk in much the same way that we are arriving, and to much the same reception, carrying what seemed to them the finest of intentions. They set eyes on half-naked, barefoot islanders - not so different from these twentieth-century men and women - and clothed and shod them in every manner of imported presumption. How poor these people are, those early soldiers of progress must have thought: poor, beautiful, ignorant, simple, kind, savage. They want to trade, they want salvation, they want a better life, a truer life, our kind of life. A few might even have been able to look at the natives and think - They are like us, like me. But, in order to do that, the visitors would have had to possess the wisdom of a downtown-Moen waitress who sat with us at breakfast as she was taking our orders - human to human - and that is a rare wisdom indeed, in any place, any age.

These days the whole equation has been reduced to one neat solution: the arrogance of white, Christian, European colonialism. There is enough truth in that - enough in the way of white, Christian, European sins - to make such an answer digestible. But, in Micronesia at least, nothing is that simple. You have to look back through the history of these islands only about sixty years before coming upon the Japanese - neither white, European, nor, for the most part, Christian - who planted in Micronesia, between 1914 and 1944, the seeds of a karma at least as ugly as any Dutchman, German, or American ever did.

Unfortunately, too, for those with a taste for easy truths, there is more to the story than noble islanders being corrupted by technologically advanced, arrogant outsiders. Even now, you do not have to search very long on Truk to find men and women eager to trade away their "purity" for a flush toilet, a Datsun pickup, a house with screens and a refrigerator.

And who are we to judge them for that? To cage them in their quaint simplicity because it sounds in us a sweet nostalgic note?

The islands wreck all assumptions on their reefs. They wreck visitors' hubris in all its forms - the pride of the conquistador, the pride of the missionary, and the pride of the anthropologically correct as well. Those of us who like to talk about the pure, unadulterated life - we walk to the sink and lift a stainless steel handle one inch for our water. What judgement can we safely venture about people who hope to stop lugging heavy buckets from a brackish well every time they want to wash something; or who must sometimes wait weeks, in the dry season, for rain to fill a barrel so they'll have water to drink?

Still, it is probably the case that an outsider cannot help gluing his own perceptions over the reality of these islands, one way or another. A two-day veteran of Micronesian life, I am no different in this respect. My version of the truth is packed neatly in my bags along with cans of shaving cream, deodorant, tubes of toothpaste, bottles of aspirin. What I do not yet understand is that the truth in Truk, if it can be found beneath alternating layers of the ancient and the modern, the pure and the corrupt, the innocent and the wicked, is uncooked, unseasoned truth, harsh going down.

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On this humid afternoon, however, the other soldiers and I aren't really concerned with such moral complexities. Our version of things is simple and upbeat, and we are blinded, as human beings are always blinded, by the dense certainty of our own beliefs. A burst of rain comes and goes. When it is over, everything steams and drips, and I am steaming and dripping myself, riding in the back of a new Datsun pickup with a group of my fellow idealists: a farmgirl from Nebraska whose shirt has been plastered against her chest by the downpour and who is passing on to us something her grandmother used to say about hardship building character; and a fraternity boy from Oregon who will, in the coming weeks, embark on a clandestine affair with the sixty-year-old mother of his host; a slightly daffy, kindly surfer from San Diego; a woman who does her best to insert Jesus into every conversation, and who smiles a great deal, and who will not last here two months; and a decent, likable fellow from somewhere in Texas, who objected vehemently to the visualization exercise we'd done one afternoon during the training on Guam: "It's dangerous, taking yourself out of reality that way."

And I am all puffed up with the idea that the women and men standing near the plywood houses on the hillside need people like us to show them how to live better (!).

The road bends sharply right - west - and makes a lazy U around an inlet. The gnarled, looping knuckles of mangrove plants in the shallows; the crowns of royal palms fifty feet over our heads; women in flowered dresses by the road; the wet saucy breath of the jungle - for me, it is a wonderful ride, an hour-long, seven-mile trip across whole continents of mind.

For the driver, though, it is just another ride to Sapuk, fifty cents per passenger. Mile after rough mile he moves on. One by one the other trainees are let off at the houses of the families that will give them shelter and feed them for the next six weeks. We are well into the village of Sapuk by now, and I am the last to be delivered. Beside me in the bed of the truck are my bags and Dino, a volunteer from Michigan who has been here a year and a half and seems happy. During training, Dino told us a long, funny story about how, suffering from intestinal parasites, he'd once accidentally let his bowels loose in his pants in the main room of his host family's house. The story seemed designed to comfort us.

"Your family lives near what we call the Japanese Dock," he tells me. "It's some of the best snorkeling on the island."

Another stretch of flat road - painfully bright with sunlight reflecting off the lagoon - then the taxi struggles up a steep, stony, eroded section, crests the hill, rolls on another hundred yards, and skids to a stop in the dirt.

"This is you," Dino says, and jumps confidently over the side like a deep-sea diver stepping into the ocean, wearing on his back some intricate apparatus that will enable him to breathe and function just as well here in this alien medium as he functions in his own. I jump confidently after him.

In fact, the atmosphere is so wet at this hour, and our skin so slick with rain and sweat, that what presses up against our bodies feels as much like water as like air. The pickup-truck taxi makes a three-point turn, spits gravel, and starts back in the direction of Moen. In two seconds we are at the damp center of something. There are more people in the little clearing than I can possibly greet, though, with the exception of one bizarre meeting with a Moen bureaucrat, I have not yet encountered a formal introduction on Truk. This is not handshake and eye-contact country. Too far west for that. And too far east for bows. And too much surrounded by an immeasurable sea and sky for the pronunciation of names to fill in the great shy emptiness of first meeting.

Around Dino and me whirls a ragged parade of clucking hens, dogs slinking a circular distance, a gang of small kids and curious adults, brown skin, intent eyes, women in bright cloth and men in tattered old shorts. A fellow at the far end of middle age, five feet tall and built like a bantamweight boxer, carries away my bags. A boy, thirteen or fourteen, with hair to his shoulders and wearing only a loose pair of shorts held up by a rope belt, dodges away from the crowd and toward a lonely palm tree that stands on a patch of sand in front of the house. Everyone turns to watch.

Three feet short of the tree he stops, plants one bare sole square on its flared base, reaches out his hands and takes hold of the trunk as if leading a slender dance partner at arm's length. In the next moment he is halfway up to the leafy crown, his feet and left hand finding notches cut in the trunk (not totemic symbols, then, as I thought earlier, not measurements), his right hand holding a machete by its wooden handle, blade glinting in the sun.

He drives the machete into the trunk of the tree as high above his head as he can reach, clambers up another few footholds, pulls the machete out, drives it in again higher up. Soon he is thirty feet above us and stepping about in the shaggy mane of fronds, almost hidden. We hear the sound of the blade striking something solid, the fronds rustling. Three green coconuts thump heavily to the ground, and the boy scampers down. Tossing one of the coconuts up two inches and spinning it in his left hand - *chop* ... *chop* - he shaves off pieces of one end of the shell. These chips are lime-colored, with straw-colored underbellies, and they fall around him in the grass as if at the feet of a master sculptor. When the top of the nut is bald, he feels around there and twists the tip of the long curved blade into softer spots. He opens one channel for air and one for liquid, then carries the coconut over to me held upright in his palm like an offering. Having presented this gift - there is nothing symbolic about it, no artificial reproduction of ancient island tradition - the teenager looks up at me as if I am some tribal uncle come back to decide whether or not to live with the family for the rest of time.

Hope in his eyes, awe, an adolescent's flimsy armor of disdain, a degree of expectation I cannot possibly fulfill. I use one of the six Trukese words I know, *kinisou* - thank you - and drink the sweet milk down.

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(To be continued in next month's newsletter.)