

BEHIND THE BOOK - LEAVING LOSAPAS

Leaving Losapas tells the story of a Vietnam veteran who chooses to live in the Pacific islands after his tour ends, rather than coming home.

As many of you know, I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Micronesia in 1978. I went there with high and altruistic hopes, and ended up on a tiny atoll you could walk around in fifteen minutes. You could see one other small island, way off in the distance; the rest was ocean and sky.

There were no other volunteers on my island, and no other Americans - which wasn't a problem for me. But there was absolutely nothing to do, which was a big problem. I hadn't gone into the Peace Corps to have an adventure; I'd gone to help people. It turned out that the people on this island needed very little help, and the kind of help they needed - medical care, mostly - I wasn't equipped to provide (though I did help save the leg of a young man who'd cut himself to the bone with an accidental swipe of the machete). So I spearfished for hours every day, made circuits of the island as if it were a running track, started to carve a chess set, did battle with the coconut rats that invaded my rooms at night, contracted intestinal worms and terrible ear and prostate infections, but otherwise just sat around in the tropical heat for hours on end. I am not good at doing nothing, especially in tropical heat and humidity.

A field-trip ship came every couple of months with mail and medicine, but there were long stretches between those visits and eventually the boredom and the sense that I was wasting my life became too much for me. I gave away my snorkeling gear, took one of these ships to the main island, refused the Peace Corps' offer for reassignment to another country, and flew home.

I moved in with Amanda - we've been married for 35 years - in a ratty apartment in Allston, Massachusetts, a part of Boston. I did various things to make money - drove a cab, loaded trucks, did temp work, made phone calls for St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital. And in my spare time I went to the Allston Public Library and wrote with a Bic ballpoint and a yellow legal pad.

I had carried a lot of health problems home from paradise. I had no health insurance, very little money, and I was disappointed in myself - ashamed, really -- for having quit the thing I'd been dreaming about doing for a long time. Writing, and the dream of one day publishing a book, was an anchor that kept me from floating out into Boston Harbor on a tide of discouragement. I spent hours and hours and hours in that library - a very noisy place! - trying to write about the amazing things I'd seen in Micronesia, trying to describe a world that was all but untouched by human 'development'.

A year or so later, in the fall of 1979, just before we got married, we moved to Martha's Vineyard so Amanda could take a job teaching Spanish at the high school there. I found work with a carpenter - but only three days a week, so I would have time to write. After one difficult school year, and one bleak island winter, we decided Martha's Vineyard wasn't for us and we moved up to Williamstown, Massachusetts, where I coached the Williams College men's freshman crew team (for no money!) and Amanda found work first as a waitress, then as a bartender, and finally as a photographer at the Clark Art Institute. I started my own handyman business, which was so unsuccessful at first that I had plenty of time to write - in the Williams

College Library this time, or in our cold apartment wearing my down jacket . At one point I was so discouraged, and still so sick, physically, that I took the 400 pages I'd written since coming back from the islands, carried them around to the dumpster behind our humble, unfurnished, and freezing apartment, and threw them away. Do I regret doing that? YES!

But through carpentry I met a wonderful man named Michael Miller. Michael had been in the Marines and had never gone to college, but he was - and is - one of the best-read people I've ever known. While doing a small job on the house where he lived with his wife and infant son, I told him I was trying to write, something I revealed to almost no one in those days. He offered to read what I was writing - mostly poetry and essays then. One night a week for several years we went out for a beer or a meal and talked about books. He read and marked up my pages, and he was nothing if not honest: He'd X out whole pages and scribble "BULLSHIT!" at the top. Or he'd circle a paragraph and write, "You have a great gift!" He recommended books and films, and kept telling me that, even though I was in my thirties, I wasn't too old to make a career of writing. Lots of writers hadn't published their first book until middle age or older.

He was, in other words, a kind of angel, an incredibly generous and wise man who taught me about writing and about life. (You might like his new book of poetry, *Lifelines*, published by Pinyon). As, error by error, I learned the trade, my one-man carpentry business became more successful. Amanda was hired at the Clark. We bought a four-room house, two miles down a dirt road in nearby Pownal, Vermont. I'd come home after a day banging nails, have dinner, wash the dishes, then go down into a corner of our unfinished basement and write until I was too tired to go on. We had a dog we loved, a house of our own; we were putting money away, but I was pretty much obsessed by the idea, that impossible dream, of making a living as a writer. After one of our beers - at the Williams Inn - Michael said to me, "You should write a novel."

"Michael," I told him, "I can't get a story or a poem published. I can't even get a ten-line "tip" published in a carpentry magazine to earn twenty-five bucks, and you're telling me to write a novel!"

"Well, some people are sprinters and some people are long-distance runners," he said. "Maybe you're a long-distance runner."

Those words made a huge difference in my life, though I kept sending out essays and poems and "tips" and getting back nothing but rejections. In January of 1984, I had a funny little essay published in the "My Turn" column of *Newsweek*. I was paid \$1,000 for that piece - a spoof on the number of television replays during a football game - which was more than I made in a month of building decks and hanging doors. That bit of success and Michael's advice encouraged me to start the book that would become *Leaving Losapas*. I set it in Micronesia, on an island very much like the one where I'd served, but I didn't want to have the main character be a Peace Corps volunteer.

In February of that year, using some of the thousand bucks (Amanda and I used another part of it to take a vacation in Puerto Vallarta; plane flights were cheaper then.) I made a trip to Chico, California, to see a Peace Corps friend, Russ Hammer. While I was there (helping him out at his streetside flower stand during the busy Valentine's Day rush) I read a very small article in the

local paper about Vietnam veterans who were living up in the Sierras. Probably because of what they'd been through in Southeast Asia, these men wanted nothing to do with society, but chose to live in a way not so different from the way the Micronesians live: they hunted and fished and grew food. I'd had two cousins who fought in Vietnam; the plight of returning vets had a special emotional resonance for me. And so I decided that would be the reason why my main character, Leo Markin, was living on a tiny atoll in the Central Pacific.

In 1986, having ruptured a disc in my lower back, and working in constant pain (Anyone ever had sciatica? Anyone ever tried to do carpentry for eight months while having sciatica? Fun!), I decided to try something crazy and convinced Amanda to go along. I sold my truck, she took a leave of absence from the Clark, I took out every penny I had in the bank and we went to live in Mexico for three months so I could finish the novel and let the back heal (I did, it didn't). We lived in five-dollar-a-night fleabag hotels, were a bit hungry at times, but she kept busy taking photos, and I kept busy pounding out the last part of the first draft of my book on a manual typewriter we'd bought there. We spent a month each in Merida, San Luis Potosi, and Mazatlan, had a few adventures, met some nice people, and came home broke. But I had a finished book.

Back surgery in 1987 effectively ended my carpentry career and I will always be grateful to my friend, Peter Grudin - someone I also met through carpentry - who lent me his only computer during my recuperation, and taught me how to use it. He's been a supporter of my writing for almost thirty years now. I'm grateful, also, to another carpenter/writer, the novelist Dean Crawford, who offered to introduce me to his agent, Susan Lescher.

At that point - early 1987 - I was called back to work on USIA exhibits in the former USSR. Amanda left her job and joined me on that thirteen-month adventure, and, hoping that Susan would agree to take me on, I worked on polishing the book in my few off hours. We were still over there, behind the Iron Curtain, when she took me on as a client. When we returned home-it was the fall of 1988 by this point, and I'd been working on *Losapas* for four years, from Mazatlan to Moscow - we moved to the house where we currently live, on a paved road in the hills of Western Massachusetts. One fine Friday afternoon Susan called to say that an editor at Houghton Mifflin had read the first half of the book and loved it. He promised to read the rest over the weekend and let us know on Monday. On Monday she called with the bad news that the editor didn't like the second part very much and wasn't going to make an offer. That was probably the most disappointing phone call of my life. "But," Susan said, "and this is unusual, he liked the first part enough to say he'd be happy to talk about the second half with you if you want to give him a call. I know you're disappointed, but I think you should take him up on that."

It took me a full day to recover and to build up the courage, but then I called the editor - John Sterling - and he mounted a very convincing argument as to why the second half of my novel didn't work. He said he'd be willing to consider it again if I rewrote it. So I did. It was a huge, difficult, and complicated rewrite, that took six months and every ounce of self-belief I had. When I finished, I naively carried the manuscript to the Houghton Mifflin office on Park Street and handed it over in person - to a secretary who, sensibly enough, wouldn't let me go upstairs.

Four months later, John Sterling invited me to Boston and made a very low offer on the book (\$7500), but it felt like five hundred thousand to me. He introduced me to the woman who would

edit it, Janet Silver. I left the offices and floated around the city on a cloud. Janet did a wonderful job, as did the publicist, Lorie Glazer. The book came out in 1991, had great reviews all over the country, an embarrassingly nice blurb from one of my literary heroes, Robert Stone, but it sold modestly, only about 6,000 copies in hardcover.

I'd always thought I'd be "all set" once I had a book published, that I could, as the saying goes, quit my day job. That wasn't the case. But I'd worked on that book for six and a half years, at times holding to the thinnest filament of dream. Amanda had been amazingly supportive - as she still is - during that time, and, though I wouldn't be able to 'quit my day job' for another ten years, that day was the start of something. I always mark that date - June 29th - with a dose of gratitude and a bit of pride, and remind myself of Churchill's famous dictum: Never, ever, ever surrender.

Well, that's the truncated version of a much longer tale. I hope it's of some interest - maybe to the writers among you.