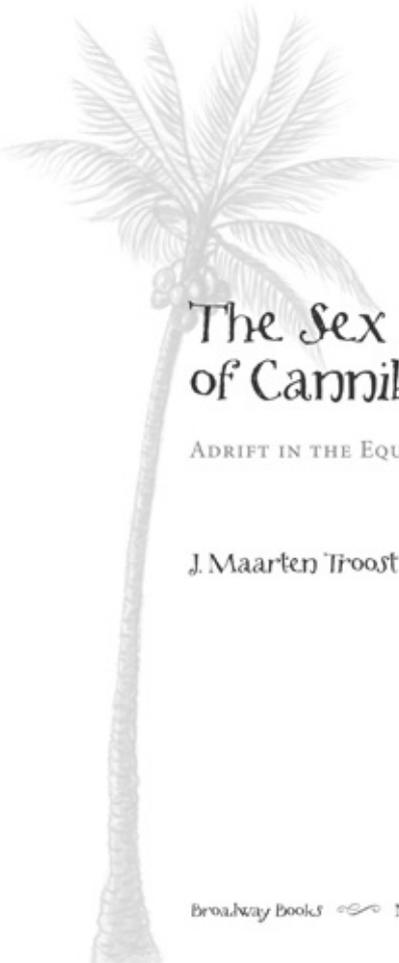


THE SEX
LIVES OF
CANNIBALS

Adrift in the Equatorial Pacific

J. MAARTEN
TROOST



The Sex Lives of Cannibals

ADRIFT IN THE EQUATORIAL PACIFIC

J. Maarten Troost

Broadway Books  New York



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For Sylvia and Lukas

DISCLAIMER

This book recounts the experiences of the author while he lived in Kiribati. A few names have been changed, either because the author, who is very bad with names, couldn't remember what they were or to protect their privacy. Also, since we're disclaiming here, the author wishes to acknowledge that in a few incidents recounted herein, he has played a little fast and loose with the space-time continuum. He has done this for you, the reader.

CHAPTER 1

In which the Author expresses some Dissatisfaction with the State of his Life, ponders briefly prior Adventures and Misfortunes, and with the aid of his Beguiling Girlfriend, decides to Quit the Life that is known to him and make forth with all Due Haste for Parts Unknown

One day, I moved with my girlfriend Sylvia to an atoll in the Equatorial Pacific. The atoll was called Tarawa, and should a devout believer in a flat earth ever alight upon its meager shore, he (or she) would have to accept that he (or she) had reached the end of the world. Even cartographers relegated Tarawa either to the abyss of the crease or to the far periphery of the map, assigning to the island a kindly dot that still manages to greatly exaggerate its size. At the time, I could think of no better destination than this heat-blasted sliver of coral. Tarawa was the end of the world, and for two years it became the center of mine.

It is the nature of books such as these—the travel, adventure, humor, memoir kind of book—to offer some reason, some driving force, an irreproachable motivation, for undertaking the odd journey. One reads, *I had long been fascinated by the Red-Arsed Llama, presumed extinct since 1742, and determined to find one*; or *I only feel alive when I am nearly dead, and so the challenge of climbing K2, alone, without oxygen, or gloves, and snowboarding down, at night, looked promising*; or *A long career (two and a half years) spent leveraging brands in the pursuit of optimal network solutions made me rich as Croesus, and yet I felt strangely uneasy, possibly because I now own 37 (hardworking) kids in Sri Lanka, which is why I decided to move to a quaint corner of Europe, where I would learn from the peasants and grow olive wine*. And typically, the writer emerges a little wiser, a little kinder, more spiritual, with a greater appreciation for the interconnectivity of all things.

Let me say at the top here that I didn't have a particularly good reason for moving to Tarawa. There was nothing Quaker-ish, Thoreau-ish, Gauguin-ish (as you wish) about my taking a little leave from Western civilization, which I thought was fine mostly, particularly as manifested in certain parts of Italy. True, I had worries. News You Can Use, the peculiar link between consumption and identity, professional athletes who strike, Cokie Roberts, the Lazarus-like resuscitations of Geraldo Rivera's career, and the demise of the Washington Redskins as a team to be reckoned with all gave me pause and even some anxiety regarding the general course of Western society. However, these issues seemed insufficient to justify a renunciation of continental comfort. I was simply restless, quite likely because

of a dissatisfaction with the recent trajectory of my life, and if there is a better, more compelling reason for dropping everything and moving to the end of the world, I know not what it is.

It was the summer of 1996 and I had just finished graduate school in Washington, D.C., which where I'd met my girlfriend, Sylvia. Both of us had studied international relations. I focused on Eastern Europe (think triumph of good over evil), and Sylvia concentrated on Western Europe (think agricultural subsidies), for which she has been teased mercilessly. While Sylvia passed her semester with determined ambition, I drifted through, racking up modest grades, until finally there was not an exam left to be taken, not a paper to be turned in, and I was discharged. Job offers were not forthcoming, most likely because I didn't apply to any jobs. Nor was I particularly adept at what is called networking, which is highly encouraged among job seekers, but perhaps not entirely useful for reticent souls utterly flummoxed by what career to pursue.

Instead of getting a job I went to Cuba, which as expected was interesting, and this delayed for ten more days my entry into the ranks of the employed. I traveled there impulsively, deciding one day that Havana was where I really wanted to be, and within a week I found myself on the Malecon, the seaside avenue, saying yes to cigars and no really, I didn't want to meet their sister. In Havana, I danced in the salsa manner. I rode in a Studebaker. I had long rambling conversations with handsome, middle-aged women about the troubles in Cuba and I learned from them where on the black market in Habana Vieja I could find a chicken. I smoked a marijuana cigarette with Havana's bad element. I learned that *CL* is ubiquitous in Cuba, and that for most Cubans he is something more than a fashion statement. I learned much else besides, and I didn't even speak Spanish, dredging up instead a hybrid patois composed of schoolboy Latin tossed with French spoken in the accent of Ricardo Montalban.

One may wonder how an unemployed ex-graduate student with no means whatsoever was able to afford a trip to Cuba. The truth of the matter was that I couldn't afford it. However, in an act of colossal misjudgment, American Express had agreed to give me a credit card. American Express, of course, was not accepted in Cuba itself. This is because Cubans are Communists and we are not allowed to trade with Communists, unless they are Chinese Communists. American Express, however, was very helpful in obtaining the full-fare economy-class Washington-Newark-Mexico City-Havana round-trip ticket on AeroMexico, as well as one night's accommodation at an airport hotel in Mexico City, after my last twenty dollars were used to pay an unexpected departure tax in Havana. ("Mais c'est une mise dans la guido por visitor, no departure tax.") Since I was resoundingly broke at the time, the cash I did have came from defying the tenets of my lease and subletting my one-room apartment to a former intern contributing his time to restoring values in America, which apparently lost them, probably in the sixties. He lived in my apartment for one month (cleanliness, apparently, was not a value worth returning to). Since I spent only ten days in Cuba, this left three weeks of unresolved residence needs that needed addressing, which led to an interesting conversation.

"Hi, Mom."

"Uh-oh."

"I'm going to Cuba tomorrow."

Pause.

“I’ll be back in ten days, provided that Castro doesn’t arrest me and the INS lets me back in. Ha ha.”

Pause.

A whispered aside. “. . . he’s going to Cuba tomorrow.” The family dog, a beagle, howled.

Bob, my stepfather, got on the line. “Maaaaarten,” he said, which he does whenever I’m doing something unreasonable, something that will upset my mother. “You know your mother doesn’t like Communists. But listen, since you’re going, let me call my friends at the Agency. You could do some freelance work for them.”

Offline, my mother’s voice, plaintive. “Bob!”

It was Bob’s method of diplomatic, benevolent stepparenting, suggesting something more outrageous than what I had devised, so that in comparison, my own reckless irresponsibility seemed suddenly like a moderate course of action. I was grateful for this. I promised my mother that I would not act on Bob’s suggestion. It would be foolhardy, I said, to spy for the CIA. I assured her that I would refrain from engaging in any activities that could lead to my spending the rest of my days withering away in a Cuban gulag. In return, I received three weeks of accommodation in suburban Washington, meals included, which worked out well, I thought.

Alas, I soon discovered that a daily wake-up call from a collection agency is a remarkably unpleasant way to begin one’s day. These are not warm, friendly voices delicately reminding you that your account is just a trifle overdue, but intimidating snarls threatening personal ruin, and while they didn’t precisely say that they were sending Vinnie over and that I might soon have some mobility issues, it was implied. Also, these calls didn’t impress Sylvia much. And so I made another phone call.

“Hi, Dad.”

“Uh-oh.”

“Well, it’s like this—”

“No.”

“It appears that this particular situation might have certain ramifications regarding—”

“I believe at this point you owe me \$180,000.”

A gross exaggeration, but effective. It was time, at last, to do something about my income stream, such as, for instance, obtaining one. Like many highly educated people, I didn’t have much in the way of actual skills, with the notable exception of forklift operator, at which I did not excel. My lack of excellence in forklift operations, however, did not prevent the manager of the produce market–plant nursery emporium where I labored after high school from sending me forth onto Rockville Pike, one of the main arteries linking Washington, D.C., with the Maryland suburbs, where technically, forklifts should not be—as I soon learned—because when forklifts take a corner a wee bit too fast they tend

tip, which can lead to hundreds of watermelons rolling across the intersection with Montrose Road followed by said watermelons being chased by a very embarrassed forklift operator wondering whether this, finally, would be the last straw before he was fired. Other skills included housepainting, which I could no longer continue on account of an accident that had made climbing a ladder an experience too terrifying to contemplate; and waiting tables, which I had done at numerous establishments along the Eastern Seaboard, for numerous years, and I just felt that I could no longer serve the numerous assholes that frequent restaurants in a courteous, efficient, nonhomicidal manner.

While it is true that my grasp of the situation in Macedonia and my familiarity with the Czech Republic's privatization program could, potentially, have led to a professional job, perhaps even a good professional job, I chose not to pursue employment in the field for which I had spent many years acquiring knowledge because . . . because, well, I didn't really have a good reason. It just didn't seem like the right thing to do, possibly because to obtain a professional job requires much letter writing and phone calling and boot licking, which comes suspiciously close to being a real job in itself and this I was in no mood for. Instead, beset by fiscal realities, I turned to Jenny and Debbie, kind yet firm managers of a temporary employment agency. They interviewed me, quickly discerned that I was not quite bereft of brains ("Put the following states in alphabetical order: Utah, Arkansas, Idaho, and Nebraska"), that my knowledge of software programs was scant ("But it says on your resume that you are proficient in Word, WordPerfect and Excel"), and that despite three typing tests I could never exceed twenty-nine words a minute, which was most unfortunate because the temp agency determined wages based on typing speed. And so after six years of exceedingly expensive, private school tertiary education combined with the amassment of some interesting and potentially job-relevant experience elsewhere in the world, I became a minimum-wage temp, an experience that need not be recounted with much detail, though I will note that to be a temp is to have all the illusions and conceits of youth shattered, which was useful and necessary though disagreeable.

My temporary job assignments varied, taking me from law firm to trade association and around again, and always I would be led to the ominous file room and told with the patient civility reserved for the learning impaired that I was to make some order of the files. In the few assignments that lasted longer than a week I was offered the opportunity to enhance my skills and I would be taught how to answer the phone while others were on their lunch break, and even how to order office supplies, which I should note is usually very complicated indeed. Occasionally, I lamented my poor typing skills, but I refused Jenny and Debbie's well-meaning offers to take the typing tutorial offered by the agency, fearing that such a move would lead me inexorably toward a career that depended on my typing speed. Instead, I found myself quietly stagnating, slowly approaching the pathos of self-pity—pathos because I was twenty-six, in the full blossom of youth—until one morning I meandered away from the day job, entered a café in Georgetown, ordered a large coffee, freshly squeezed orange juice, a poppy seed bagel, toasted, with lox and cream cheese, and read a newspaper with the mirth of one who has time to linger over the Home and Garden section. Jenny and Debbie were not pleased. "Not showing up for an assignment makes us look bad," said Debbie. "I'm afraid we're going to have to let you go."

It is an unfortunate reality for innate idlers that our modern world requires one to hold a job to maintain a sustainable existence. Idling, I find, is immensely underrated, even vilified by some who see inactivity as the gateway for the Evil One. Personally, I regard idling as a virtue, but civilized society holds otherwise and the fact remained that I still had to get a job. And so I soon found myself

involved in the exciting world of publishing. I was an associate editor for a small publishing firm in Washington, where I worked on a reference book that detailed the work of lobbyists. The first half of the book, which was essentially a Yellow Pages for influence peddlers, was comprised of listings of companies and countries and who they retained to purchase favors from the guardians of democracy at the heart of the free world. The second half of the book listed all lobbying firms and lobbyists and their clients, as well as the “government relations” staff of corporations that saw the need to maintain offices in Washington. The job consisted of sending out questionnaires, following up with phone calls confirming lobbying data at the Justice Department, and plugging in the results into a computer database that crashed twice daily. I amused myself by matching the names of the Washington representatives of the Bosnian Serbs, the Mobutu regime, various Somali warlords, and Nike with the guest list of state dinners at the White House. Remarkably, however, there were some who did not take kindly to having their lobbying activities made public, which led to some coarse language directed my way over the telephone, and I would like to say here that I wish the “government relations” staff (*Deleted by Legal Department*) nothing but ill will, and that I have it on good authority that the ingredients of a (*Deleted by Legal Department*) include canine fecal matter.

While this job included health insurance as a little perk to compensate for its serf-like wages, there was no disguising the fact that I was still treading water in the river of life. I had some notion of wanting to write, though little inclination to actually write, which sometimes led me to believe that I should develop other notions. An obscure literary journal had just published a five-thousand-word essay I had written, and while I was pleased to have something published, the \$50 and two free issues in compensation for three months of evening work seemed, somehow, inadequate. I kept sending essays, trifles, queries to national magazines, and while often the editors would respond with a kind of encouraging note, even a phone call, they still, sadly, continued to publish the petty ruminations of windbags long past their prime instead of fresh new voices with interesting things to say. (Not that I’m bitter.)

It was often suggested to me by concerned family members that I should get my foot in the door with a midsized newspaper. I rejected this out of hand. I was familiar enough with journalism to know that were I to cover a news-type event I would rapidly lose all my journalistic-like composure, discard all my faculties of reason, and descend into a stifling murk of uncertainty and fear. I knew this because when I lived in Prague I had been an actual journalist. An English-language weekly newspaper had generously agreed to assign me to real stories based on the masterpiece that was my analysis of the Saudi oil industry, a twenty-page, richly textured, subtly nuanced, carefully crafted display of plagiarism, which earned me a B+ during my junior year of college. These, obviously, were the glory years of the whole westerners-in-Prague era, shortly after the demise of that little experiment in social engineering known as communism, when hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Americans, Canadians, Australians, and other purveyors of Western ways descended upon the most beautiful city in the world and pretty much did anything they wanted to do. It was great.

My mother is Czech and as a consequence I like to think that I was not merely a seeker of the transcendently hip when I lived in Prague. I was born in the Netherlands and as a child I often traveled to Czechoslovakia to visit my grandfather, who lived in an apartment in Prague overlooking the Vltava River. The faint whiff of burning coal is enough to bring back the indolent river swans, the salty bread and sweet yogurt, the smoke-drenched rooms, my grandfather’s beer glass, and the lon-

wanderings through soot-stained passageways in a city that for a time spoke to me only of the deeds of kings. When I was seven, just after my parents divorced, my mother had my younger sister and me baptized in a small church in South Bohemia. Seven, of course, is the age when the brain is at its most fecund, when every image and experience offers portent, and so when Prague's many statues of beheaded saints, detongued martyrs, and gargoyles were all helpfully brought to my attention as being relevant in some way to my life and death, I pretty much stopped sleeping for a year, fearing the nightly intrusion of alarming images, particularly of a slender bearded man being put to death in a highly creative and terrifying fashion just so I could go to heaven one day. To further the potency of my imagination, Prague in the 1970s was experiencing what was quaintly called Normalization, which is Soviet-speak for the dread that occurs when the babicka next door is an informer, which leads to a somber and fearful state of being that is far more efficient in quelling deviation from the right and true path than the intimidation offered by Soviet soldiers.

That world, of course, was happily discarded, and with Vaclav Havel installed as a kind of philosopher-king in the great, looming castle above Prague, I moved to the city shortly after college and was fortunately no longer palpitating at the sight of saintly relics, but aware that this city of spires and pubs had a way of getting inside you. There was something ephemeral about Prague in the early 1990s, and it is the only city I have known to truly have a spirit. I began writing for *The Prague Post*, but rather they used my name above articles that bore no semblance to the prose I submitted for their consideration. "A story is like a car trip," tutored my editor. "You, the writer, are the car that takes readers from point A to B to C without leaving the road." As careful readers may have already surmised, I favor the ditches of digression.

During my foray into journalism, I never really felt I knew enough about a particular newsworthy event to provide written coverage of the newsworthy event. The written word presented in a journalistic fashion is regarded by most as the indisputable truth and this just left me dumbfounded with a fear of being wrong. I am a big believer in the Law of Unintended Consequences and I imagined that my failure to capture every nuance and subtlety of a newsworthy event would lead to the collapse of governments, economic crises, and lots of hardship for the people of Eastern and Central Europe. Never mind that my stories usually appeared on page C8, and that they were written in a language few people in the region understood, and that my readership probably never exceeded four people and that those four people were, presumably, the four people I interviewed, via a translator, who would suggest—not unkindly—the questions I should be asking. Fortunately, I was both keenly interested in events in the region—march of history and all that—as well as highly opinionated, and I began writing for the newspaper's opinion page, providing comment on the European Union's policies toward their Eastern brethren, the historical roots of the severing of Czechoslovakia, the West's dithering over Bosnia, Havel's conception of democracy, and other topics I was not remotely qualified to comment upon. This I found to my liking. It is a remarkably easy thing to do, pointing out the faults of others and suggesting remedies or courses of action in an argumentative and pedantic sort of way, and I am still amazed that there are many people in the American media who are paid very big money to do this.

Churning out 750 words on what American policy toward Slovakia should be rarely takes more than an afternoon, and so I spent a lot of time falling in love and traveling and living the life I wanted to live. I saw things that both pleased and horrified me, and in comparison America seemed a sedate and

frivolous place. I traveled wherever my meager funds allowed and saw history unfold. On a trip to Poland I had the train connection from hell—arrive at Frankfurt an der Oder at 1:30 A.M., depart for Warsaw at 5:45 A.M.—and while curled asleep on the train platform I was suddenly awakened by the Russian Army. Thousands of Russian soldiers passed through the station on their way from Eastern Germany, which was once again one with Western Germany, on their way back to Russia, which I thought was just the niftiest piece of history I had ever seen. A few months later, I too boarded a train for Russia, where I had a very exciting encounter with a bear on a bridge in St. Petersburg, and where I discovered that everything one has read about vodka consumption in that part of the world is true, and now that I think about it, the bear on the bridge was probably the only sober creature I encountered during my three weeks in Russia. I took a ferry to Dubrovnik, on the stunningly beautiful Dalmatian coast, where my friends and I were accosted by a Croatian soldier who charged out of a bar upon our passing, exclaimed “Tourists!” and when we nodded, said “You are the first since the war,” and then hustled us into the bar, where we spent the hours after curfew descending into a sublime melancholy on a verandah overlooking the shell-scarred old town while listening to the staccato crackling of gunfire. In Turkey, I slipped while rock climbing above a waterfall and fractured three vertebrae, which really hurt, though I did find great happiness when, lying crumpled in a gorge, I told my toes to move and they did. I also went to Bosnia-Herzegovina. I obtained press credentials through *The Prague Post* and soon found myself in Mostar, where I was deeply, deeply in over my head and utterly dependent upon the kindness of English mercenaries, and I learned there that the distance between civilization and savagery is exceedingly small and this has scared me ever since.

The point of this little excursion into events and happenings that have nothing whatsoever to do with the South Pacific is simply that I had grown accustomed to life being interesting and adventurous. Ridden and, rather childishly, I refused to believe that this must necessarily come to an end and that the rest of my life should be a sort of penance for all the reckless, irresponsible, and immensely foolish things I’d done before. Being a data-entry clerk, even though I was very, very good, just didn’t compare to being an incompetent war correspondent. In Washington, I never quite knew what my ambitions were. I sensed that I should move on from waiting tables and housepainting and temping and clerking, but the idea of working in an office and doing office-type work in a committed fashion seemed like a quiet little death to me. Fortunately, with no prodding from me, Sylvia was also inclined to make a few changes. She had begun working for a nongovernmental organization that focused on international development. Suffice it to say that the Washington end of such work can be a mildly dispiriting and Sylvia soon began to yearn for the field, which is international development—speak for the Third World hellhole. And so we both began applying for jobs in the most miserable places on Earth.

I should perhaps pause here for a moment and mention something of my courtship with Sylvia. It was a night of possibility. The air was redolent of wheat, hops, and barley. A kindly gentleman, his dreadlocks flowing, made polite introductions. I suavely filled her plastic cup with Budweiser. Her eyes sparkled. Soon, a few dates, some soulful conversation, several well-timed romantic gestures, a stirring hike in the Appalachian Mountains, up where eagles soared, and we moved in together, sharing a charming apartment with an enormous deck shaded by an ancient elm, on a narrow street illuminated by gaslights in Washington’s hip, predominately gay neighborhood of Dupont Circle. We were smitten. We pledged to follow each other to the ends of the Earth. (“*Pphhhttt*,” said Sylvia, upon reading, over my shoulder. “What drivell.”)

Sylvia got the first potentially interesting, exciting, possibly dangerous job nibble. Sarajevo beckoned. She was being considered for a position as a program officer with a refugee agency. She had a phone interview and I watched, standing in our living room, silently cheering *yes, good answer* but, in a loss for Bosnia, she was passed over for lack of experience. Then I got the call. Tanzania the time. I was being considered for a position as a press liaison for a refugee agency that operated a camp for 500,000 Rwandan refugees. I am pretty good at compartmentalizing and I figured that I could balance the wretchedness of the camps, and the dismal fact that they contained the Hutu perpetrators of genocide, with safari-type excursions and remain sane. But the guy who had the job decided that one year of liaising between the Rwandan refugees and the world press was not quite enough and so he decided to stay for another year, which upon reflection was probably just as well. And then nothing but just a few letters thanking us for our interest in the program coordinator position in Sudan, or Angola or Cambodia, but unfortunately, et cetera, et cetera. A change of strategy was called for. If no one was going to send us to an exotic locale then we would just go ourselves and make the best of it.

We decided to move to Hanoi. We would do this by moving out of our apartment and into the basement of my mother's house, where we would live for three months and save enough money to go going in Vietnam. My mother, inexplicably, was not opposed to this and we were about to give notice to our landlord when Sylvia called me at work and asked if I would be inclined to move to a small atoll in the Equatorial Pacific and whether I would be able to do so in about three weeks' time. She had been offered a position as country director for the Foundation for the Peoples of the South Pacific–Kiribati Office. Five seconds later I quit my job. Then I called Sylvia back.

“Kiri-what?”

CHAPTER 2

In which the Author reveals the Fruit of his Research into the Strange Island Nation he has declared his new Home (which leaves much unknown), compensates for his Ignorance with his Lively Imagination (which is inadequate, very much so), and Packs (inappropriately).

The word *Kiribati*, pronounced *kir-ee-bas* on account of the missionaries being stingy with the letters they used to transcribe the local language, is derived from the word *Gilberts*, which is the name of one of the three island groups that comprise this improbable nation. Located just a notch above the equator and five thousand miles from anywhere, Tarawa is the capital of this country of thirty-three atolls scattered over an ocean area as large as the continental United States. The total landmass of the islands is about three hundred square miles, roughly the size of the greater Baltimore metropolitan area, though I believe it halves at high tide. Most of Kiribati's landmass is found on Kiritimati Island (Christmas Island), several thousand miles away from Tarawa. What remains is not much.

To picture Kiribati, imagine that the continental U.S. were to conveniently disappear leaving only Baltimore and a vast swath of very blue ocean in its place. Now chop up Baltimore into thirty-three pieces, place a neighborhood where Maine used to be, another where California once was, and so on until you have thirty-three pieces of Baltimore dispersed in such a way so as to ensure that 32/33 of the Baltimoreans will never attend an Orioles game again. Now take away electricity, running water, toilets, television, restaurants, buildings, and airplanes (except for two very old prop planes, tended by a few people who have no word for "maintenance"). Replace with thatch. Flatten all land into a uniform two feet above sea level. Toy with islands by melting polar ice caps. Add palm trees. Sprinkle with hepatitis A, B, and C. Stir in dengue fever and intestinal parasites. Take away doctors. Isolate and bake at a constant temperature of 100 degrees Fahrenheit. The result is the Republic of Kiribati.

Of course, I didn't know all this at the time. Despite insinuations otherwise ("Imagine a littered, stinking sandbar in the middle of nowhere," relayed a prior visitor to the island, "That's Tarawa"), I knew, just knew, that distant Tarawa would be the proverbial tropical paradise, where the natives were kind and noble, and the setting, undoubtedly lush and languid, would prove inspirational for ambitious endeavors of an artistic and edifying nature. I knew this because I had little else to go on, and when

unaware I tend to be buoyantly optimistic. There is only so much research one can do on a place like Kiribati. It appears that for some reason no one goes there. Not even Paul Theroux bothered stopping by on his journey through the Pacific, which he wrote about in *The Happy Isles of Oceania*. When one considers how much territory Theroux, Bruce Chatwin, Jan Morris, and the other superstars of the travel-writing genre have covered, there really isn't much left for others to scribble about, except maybe Kiribati and Buffalo, New York. I've been to Buffalo, but I will graciously leave the commentary for someone else and instead present a few interesting tidbits about Kiribati. Henceforth the facts, as gleaned from the Internet, the Central Intelligence Agency, and random sources:

Population (1996)—79, 386

Life Expectancy (male)—52.56 years

Life Expectancy (female)—55.78 years

Infant Mortality Rate—9.84%

Religions—Roman Catholic, Protestant, Seventh-Day Adventist, Baha'i, Church of God of North Carolina, Mormon

Number of Islands—33

Number of Inhabited Islands—21

Ratio of Sea to Land—4000:1

Natural Resources—Phosphate (production halted in 1979)

Independence—July 12, 1979 (from the United Kingdom)

Foreign Missions—Australia, New Zealand, the People's Republic of China

Arable Land—0%

Terrain—Low-lying coral atolls with extensive reefs

Currency—Australian dollar

Per Capita GDP—A \$800 (US \$450 approx.)

Underemployment Rate—70%

Exports—Copra, fish, shark fins

Radio—AM 1, FM 0, Shortwave 0

Television—None

Military—None

From this I discerned that if I wanted to live for longer than 52.56 years I'd best get my shots; that solid bowel movements might become worthy of some celebration; that there is something about the Church of God of North Carolina that gives me the creeps (ditto the Mormon church); that the end of phosphate production and the beginning of independence is perhaps not entirely coincidental; that China is probably up to no good in Kiribati; that with 70 percent of the country underemployed would fit in just fine, professionally speaking; that shark fin exports suggest the presence of sharks and that despite some snobbishness vis-à-vis my relationship to American pop culture, I might, just might, start yearning for *The Simpsons* and televised professional football games.

In those frantic three weeks, I learned little else about Kiribati and so I relied upon my imagination which was no longer boyishly unformed, but conditioned by experience. I knew that Tarawa was a tropical island and that it curved around an expansive lagoon and since I had never actually been on a tropical island with a lagoon I visualized something very like Cape Cod, which technically is not an island, nor is a bay a lagoon, but that's neither here nor there. Naturally, I began to assume that we would live in a wood shingle house with white window frames just beyond sand dunes with tall grass and that the natives would be drawn toward plaid and complaints about summer people. I also knew that there were villages on Tarawa. Islands with villages conjure up the Mediterranean for me and so I imagined that there would be village squares with charming little cafés occupied by people looking fabulous in Armani and passionately arguing about coconut varieties, revealing that despite years of multicultural awareness training I still remained an ethnocentric dunderhead.

Regarding the South Pacific generally, I had seen pictures of Bora Bora and the like and knew that the South Pacific was deemed pretty and that the words *tropical paradise* were often tossed about in reference to islands in the South Pacific. I knew that the Brando kids had not thrived in Tahiti. I knew that while I was exceptionally literate in matters of geography, I had never heard of Niue, Tuvalu, or Vanuatu. I knew that periodically an island was nuked. I knew that Pacific Islanders were either Polynesian, Melanesian, or Micronesian and that I had a pretty good idea which was which. I knew that James Michener's *South Pacific* didn't tell me much about the South Pacific, but lots about the mores and predilections of Americans in the 1940s and '50s. I knew that the islands were both good and bad for Paul Gauguin. I knew that Robert Louis Stevenson had spent some time in the region and that Amelia Earhart didn't quite make it out. (And neither did RLS, which I did not know then.) I knew the significance of Pitcairn Island and suspected that there were many bars in the South Pacific called The Bounty. I knew that the South Pacific was where anthropologists went to prove that Pacific Islanders were somehow *different*, in a fundamental violent way, only to be refuted later, though the cannibalism thing kind of lingers. I knew that the first westerner to touch upon many of the islands was Capt. James Cook. I knew that during World War II battles in the Pacific were inevitably described as "bloody," and if I had to choose, I would rather land on the beaches of Normandy in 1944 than on Tarawa in 1943. I did not know anything else.

We began packing. It was like a high stakes game of *If you were stuck on a deserted island . . .* Our only guidance was Kate, the woman Sylvia was being sent out to replace. Her advice was to bring nothing we valued. Everything will rot, she said. Nothing of value was easy enough. More difficult was my inability to imagine equatorial heat. “I don’t think you’re going to need those,” Sylvia said, observing the wool sweaters I was packing.

“I’m sure it will be a little cool in the evenings,” I replied. “Particularly in the winter.”

“I see. I think, perhaps, you might be having a little conceptual trouble with the idea of living on the equator.”

This was true. I’d spent my formative years in Canada. I was hard-wired for seasons. We discussed what Kate had said about the weather on Tarawa.

“Hotter than Washington in August?” I inquired.

“Hotter. *Searing* was her word.”

“It’s not the heat, you know. It’s the humidity.”

“Like a wet blanket,” she said.

I decided that this was wrong, inaccurate, an exaggeration. It is well known that the stultifying weather conditions predominant in Washington, D.C., in August are the result of unique topographic and climatic conditions having to do with the jet stream and the gulf stream and the pollen situation and that it is unique to the MidAtlantic region and could not possibly be worse anywhere else on Earth.

I packed a sweater. “And I’m taking my jeans too,” I said, defiantly.

The last few days were spent saying goodbye to friends and family. Do try to visit, we told everyone. Yes, we’ll try, they said, but when they envisioned the trip we could sense the skepticism. Finally, there was only one thing left to do. I proposed to Sylvia. The proposition was accepted. And then we left, in the darkness of night, beginning the long, long journey—as such journeys should be—to Paradise.

CHAPTER 3

In which the Author and his aforementioned Beguiling Girlfriend depart the Continental World, alight briefly upon Fabled Hawaii, escape from the Dreaded Johnston Atoll, and fall into Despair upon arriving in the Marshall Islands.

Like many air travelers, I am aware that airplanes fly aided by capricious fairies and invisible strings. Typically, this causes me some concern. And so, typically, I am not shy about accepting those little bottles of wine kindly proffered by flight attendants, gratis, on international flights. However, I no longer drink when flying, having learned that being both jet-lagged and alcohol-bloated makes you feel like crap and basically establishes a poor beginning to any trip. Despite the lack of alcohol, I have been doing just fine since leaving Washington, occasionally repeating like a mantra that no one dies from a little turbulence, and if a bump combined with a mechanical groan warranted it, Sylvia would take my hand and calmly coo about the rigors of the FAA airplane certification process. Indeed, after three days of flying, I was beginning to feel abnormally at ease on an airplane. The sky was blue. The water also. I was bored senseless. Clearly, we had traveled far.

The thing about flying from a place like Washington, D.C., to an island like Tarawa is that, despite the interminable tedium of the journey, there really isn't sufficient time to make a smooth transition. And I am a transition person. I need those interludes of adjustment. I need coffee, a transition mechanism, to help me adjust from the comatose to, if nothing more, consciousness. I need Pennsylvania, a transition state, to adjust from the Mid-Atlantic to New England. But flying from the heart of the free world to the end of the world offers no satisfying transitional process. There is no spring or fall in long-distance air travel. It's straight winter to summer. One predawn moment we were inside a terminal seething with ambitious people, business travelers tramping up to New York and Boston for very important meetings, where we stood at a counter under the curious gaze of a counter person, who noted that our tickets read Washington–Newark–San Francisco–Honolulu–Johnston Atoll–Majuro–Tarawa and that they were one-way tickets, causing the counter person to exclaim, "Gosh," and then after many long hours spent in a magic tube, punctuated by semilucid gate-to-gate wanderings, we found ourselves in Waikiki Beach, where we strolled among shops offering the latest from Givenchy, Chanel, and the Japanese porn industry, until we reached the actual strand—surfer bobbing, Diamond Head looming, a sun descending in crimson grandeur—and we began to laugh.

because life can be funny sometimes.

Soon, too soon, it was time to leave Nippon . . . er, Hawaii, and we returned to the airport, where we strolled past the gates where flights to Osaka and Los Angeles drew their passengers, and walked on to the gate where Air Micronesia awaited. Again we were flying, not to the continents straddling the Pacific Ocean, but to another, more distant island. The trip was beginning to feel like an act of willful disappearance. No one who claims this to be a small world has ever flown across the Pacific. Tick-tock, tick-tock, the hours, the days, passed with excruciating monotony. It was very blue. Celestial blue merged with aquatic blue, and it just went on and on and on, the blue did, and also the time, and then a descent began and it was still blue, and quickly now we were very near the Pacific Ocean. I felt as if I could touch the water. I saw ripples carving ocean swells. I sensed sharks lurking. There were ominous shadows, twenty-footers at least. And then fingers of coral whooshed by and we landed with a hard whomp, and then we stopped. We were on Johnston Atoll and here, very briefly, we shall pause.

Johnston Atoll is the vilest place on Earth. In the 1960s the United States used the island for atmospheric nuclear tests, which is a definite no-no in most neighborhoods. Not content to merely nuke the atoll, the U.S. then decided to poison it. This is where America stores and disposes of such wonders from the laboratory as the nerve gas Sarin and other clever agents for delivering disease and death. There are two bleak processing plants and they sit at either end of the runway, steadily burning canister after canister of poison. Between the plants are military barracks with satellite dishes protruding from their roofs, receiving signals from a world that seems very far away. There is nothing else on Johnston Atoll. Now and then, there are little accidents, leakages, small *oopsies*, and the hapless soldiers assigned here don their gas masks.

It is tempting to dash off a page or two and expound upon the philosophical implications of Johnston Atoll. The physical manifestations of humanity's capacity for great evil reside here, and for writers more ambitious than I this would be like catnip. However, sitting in an airplane watching one passenger, a civilian who had made a peculiar career choice, disembark, I was not struck by any profound ruminations. My thoughts were more along the lines of *Could someone please close the fucking door before we all turn into mutants?* Armed soldiers guarded the airplane and I just knew that they were sporting fish gills, and while I felt deeply sorry for them and their offspring, I just wished that someone would close the door and let us breathe airplane air again, which is only slightly less toxic, but still. And then someone did just that, and we were back in the air, scanning the water closely, searching for signs of Godzilla.

So maybe I'm wrong. Perhaps Johnston Atoll is the transitory island in the Pacific. The illusion buster. The island that announces to travelers that they should cast aside their naivete, their gloss, their presumptions, and realize that the Pacific is a big place, a big empty place, and that some may find that emptiness useful. True, Johnston Atoll is just a rock, barren and about as distant from settlement as one can be, and so if one must nuke an island, and gas it too, Johnston Atoll does all right, never mind the fishies. Not so the Marshall Islands. Here, after ever more hours spent hurtling across the Pacific we arrived, exhausted and crabby, accustomed to movement, and not at all prepared, after all that flying, to find ourselves in a spookily familiar place, as though we were inside a forgotten episode of *The Twilight Zone*, the one where *Dr. Strangelove* descends upon the set of *South Pacific*. We were on Majuro, the capital atoll of the Marshall Islands, a grim island group deemed useful by the United States. It is, frankly, not so good to be found useful by a superpower, particularly one interested in

exploring the nuances of the hydrogen bomb.

It was in the Marshall Islands where scientists finally discovered what, in fact, constitutes a coral atoll. A coral atoll is the crest of a dying volcano. Like many explanations this one derives from Charles Darwin, building upon the work of previous naturalists. Coral only thrives until about 150 feet below the surface, but rather than assume that the coral is steadily rising atop an expanding underwater volcano, which was the belief at the time, Darwin theorized that coral replenishes itself by matching the rate of a sea volcano's dissolution. As the land far below the water surface steadily recedes into the depths, coral polyps grow from its slopes, seeking the sun, rising first to become a barrier reef, and then, as the volcano continues to disintegrate, slowly inching toward its base, an atoll is formed, the living crest balanced atop layers of dead coral and far below, the volcano itself.

Of course, it took some time to prove this theory, since one had to dig awfully deep to find the volcano below. Attempts were made, but it was not until 1952, more than a hundred years after Darwin first proposed his theory, when a drill bit was pushed 4,610 feet into Eneewetak Atoll in the Marshall Islands and struck volcanic rock, that Darwin's theory was proved correct. It was incidental, however, to the purpose of the drilling. Eneewetak was being canvassed as a sight for testing the hydrogen bomb and the drilling indicated that the atoll was suitable for obliteration. Shortly after dawn on November 1, 1952, a bomb called Mike was detonated, and an island, a home, an ecosystem was blown up, irradiated, and poisoned, leading many to wonder what is the point of having Nevada.

This was hardly the only apocalyptic event in the Marshalls. I just happen to enjoy the weird symbiosis between discovering the nature of an atoll and blowing it up. Dozens of tests occurred in the 1940s and '50s and '60s and one would think that nuking the Marshall Islands over and over again would be enough punishment to inflict on the country for one epoch, but the U.S. Department of Defense thinks otherwise. Every year, the United States targets the Marshall Islands with its intercontinental ballistic missiles. These weapons are fired from California, using missiles randomly selected to ensure that if the green light for Armageddon is ever given, what follows will go smoothly. The ICBMs are aimed at Kwajalein Atoll, the catcher's mitt, where research is also conducted on several missile defense systems, including for some years the Strategic Defense Initiative, and more recently, a humbler defense system (THAAD—Theater High Altitude Defense) that requires missiles to be fired from two other atolls in the Marshalls. Access to two-thirds of Kwajalein is restricted to American soldiers and those who supply them with their weaponry, which in addition to the five islands already poisoned by radiation—Bikini, Eneewetak, Rongelap, and Utrik—results in five islands lost to the U.S. defense industry. With the Bush (II) administration's decision to discard the ABM Treaty, even more testing will be conducted in the Marshall Islands. For a country with a total area of less than 120 square miles, the loss of five islands is not insignificant. And so payments must be made.

The Marshall Islands had received \$800 million of American "aid" over the previous ten years, which amounted to \$14,300 for every man, woman, and child in the country. The vast majority of that money was sent directly to the government of the Marshall Islands, which, of course, is the best possible way to instill corruption, inefficiency, and a dependency mentality in Third World governments everywhere. Not only did all this aid fail to significantly improve the health and welfare of the Marshallese, it introduced new afflictions. Hypertension, diabetes, and high blood pressure are now serious problems as a result of the local diet being supplanted by food imported from the United

States. Alcoholism and suicide, particularly among the young, have taken root in a society no longer held together by traditional bonds. And Majuro, an atoll not more than two hundred yards wide, besieged by traffic jams, mountains of garbage, aimless youth fashionable in their East L.A. ghetto wear, and a population as a whole that has already moved beyond despair and settled into a glazed ennui. It is a miserable place where coconut palm trees have disappeared, replaced by concrete and tin.

And there are cockroaches. Enormous cockroaches. I began to wonder. What precisely had caused the cockroaches on Majuro to become so enormous? They trolled like sinister remnants of the Pleistocene era, when everything was bigger, meaner, and just generally more voracious (or was that the Cambrian era?), and because I was fairly well informed about the activities of a certain superpower on these islands I immediately began to think about radioactive fallout and where, exactly, did it all go? Which way was the wind blowing in the 1940s, and the 1950s, and the 1960s, because there are some scary cockroaches on Majuro. In the back of a taxi, they scurried across our feet. They emerged from every nook and cranny in our hotel room. In a restaurant, they rushed across the table and asked, really, if we were going to eat that.

This did not please Sylvia. She's good with spiders, indifferent to snakes, and unmoved by mice. But cockroaches? They are, in her word, *eeuuwh*.

Surely, we thought, there must be something else to see on Majuro besides the impressive road and population. We were staying at the Robert Riemer Hotel, a modest haven for consultants, and the woman mentioned to the stout woman more or less attending to us that we fancied a walk, and since this was our only day on Majuro could she recommend a destination. Someplace interesting, worth seeing. Touristy is fine.

"You want to walk?" she said. She seemed aghast. She heaved in her flower-print dress. "There's nothing to see." A cockroach scurried across the counter.

Eeeuuwh.

We walked out and turned left, which we discovered was one of only two directional options on an atoll, but after some time wandering we were forced to concede that she was, indeed, correct. There was nothing you would want to see on Majuro. There is a filthy fringe of beach that recedes into sopping mud before disappearing into a lifeless lagoon. On the ocean side of the atoll there is a gray and barren reef shelf stained with what from a distance look like large, whitish-brownish polyps that on close inspection turn out to be used diapers, resting there under the high sun while awaiting an outgoing tide. On dry land, there are decrepit two-story apartment blocks and garish prefab houses. The road was one long traffic jam and alongside it were the fattest people I had ever seen, wan and listless, munching through family-sized packets of Cheetos. As we passed, nodding our greetings, they offered in return quiet contempt, and it was not long before I became sympathetic to the spleenish air of the Marshallese. This ghetto/island has none of the romantic sense of dissolution found elsewhere in tropical urban areas succumbing to age and wear. Majuro wasn't built to slowly, grandly crumble. It was built with the ambition of a strip mall, a place for America to traffic trifles to a people who in one generation exchanged three thousand years of history and culture for spangled rubbish and lite beer. New pickup trucks passed by. Every government minister had a chauffeur-driven Lexus. A store offered the latest in washing machines. A video shop displayed the most recent features from Steve

Seagal and Jean Claude Van Damme. Teenagers loitered in \$100 sneakers and trendy baggy shorts. There was money on Majuro, but the overwhelming sense was one of immense poverty.

We were not happy. Pretty close to despair, actually. Tarawa was supposed to be similar, but poorer. It occurred to us that this might not be such a good idea after all, that moving to an atoll at the end of the world is really nothing more than an act of romantic delusion, and it was tempting to succumb to negativity, but we resisted, and instead yielded to a simmering anger, anger at the United States for obliterating a nation, just for practice, and anger at the Marshallese for behaving like debased junkies willing to do anything for another infusion of the almighty dollar. This included removing the population of one island so that a Korean resort and casino could operate unhindered by the sight of poor, dark-skinned people who presumably dampen the tourist's gambling instinct, and allowing an American firm the use of an uninhabited island to store the radioactive waste generated by reactors in Japan and South Korea. For a country already so traumatized and polluted by radiation, encouraging the importation of more radioactive waste can only be called pathological.

But for us things did get more negative. In our room, which was not a bad room, I spent much of the night like a taunted monkey in a cage, lurching from wall to wall flinging my sandals at the insidious creatures, and when my tally reached five dead cockroaches (five!), I thought it safe to attempt sleep. And then I felt it. It was scrambling up my back, a sharp pitter-patter with razor fur burning my skin. I knew that very soon I would have a cockroach in my ear. Instinct took over. I emitted a primal scream and bounced out of the bed. Sylvia did likewise. She does not like to be woken up suddenly. I calmly explained the situation and she was thoughtful enough to summon with some urgency several higher power characters in Christian theology. We found the cockroach lurking behind the headboard and so we shoved the bed hard against the wall and there it remained, and it is probably still there today, emitting a soft green glow.

CHAPTER 4

In which the Author finally sets foot on Distant Tarawa, where he is led by the Evil Kate, who seeks to Convince him that Tarawa is not what it seems; and, Conceding that it is indeed Very Hot on the Equator, he Bravely overcomes his Fear of Sharks and encounters something Much, Much Worse.

We were to have awoken at 5:30 A.M., courtesy of the wake-up call thoughtfully provided by the staff of the Robert Riemer Hotel, but their subservience to the American Way was not yet so complete as to follow through on the promise of a wake-up call, and so we arose at 6:10 A.M., ten minutes after the minibus that was to take us to the airport was scheduled to depart. This left us a trifle ill-tempered. We scrambled out of the hotel, bent double like hungry coolies underneath the weight of all our possessions, and boarded the lingering minibus, which contained a gaunt blond Australian man. “About bloody well time,” he said in a voice that suggested his larynx was not what it should be. He acknowledged Sylvia’s look and resolved to quit smoking sometime very soon and then we both gave him piercing dagger eyes. He was wearing shiny white shoes.

We were expected to arrive at the airport two hours before our flight, which seemed inexplicable to me. It isn’t as if Majuro International Airport receives a lot of air traffic requiring complex organizational procedures to ensure that passengers and baggage arrive and depart as intended. It has one runway built upon a reef. It has one single-story dilapidated building that contains customs and immigration and a hole in the wall for baggage to be tossed through. The waiting area is the curb outside. Here, during the one hour and fifty-seven minutes that remained after we checked in for our flight on Air Marshall, we met a friendly Marshallese woman who commented on the amount of luggage we were lugging. We explained that we were moving to Tarawa.

“Tarawa is like Majuro was thirty years ago. There’s nothing there,” she said, betraying in her voice a distinct air of superiority, as if any island not yet awash in the detritus of Americana must be very primitive indeed. Finally on this journey we felt something like elation, a sense of hope that on Tarawa we would find, if not an Edenic paradise, at least an island not yet so distant from the Fall—a optimism that was dampened only a little bit by the plane we would fly, a plane that didn’t allow you to stand up straight, a plane where the pilot rearranged the passengers because of weight and balance.

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