

## **Accompanying Compact Disc**

**Compact Disc...All songs performed by Stevie Mack**

**(Socan) All songs written by S. McCann**

**Dinsdale Mixed and engineered by J.D.**

**The following songs roughly correspond to the chapters on the right. CDs should not be mishandled unless of course one enjoys mishandling them.**

**Caribbean Nights..... Penguins & Guadeloupe**  
**Sweet Esmeralda..... The Glades**  
**Junkanoo Girl..... Junkanoo Girl**  
**Polynesian Rhapsody..... Jack and Joanne & The Not so Virgin Islands**  
**& The Too Wise Men**  
**Welcome to my Paradise**  
**& Queen of the Night ..... Will come to my Paradise**  
**& Carnival**  
**& Sunday in Barbados**  
**The Wide Sargasso Sea**  
**& Mango Tango Man ..... Taxing Events**  
**Guacamole..... Playa del Carmen**

**A Streetcar Named Desire.... Martinique &  
Tour Guide  
Sea of the Moon..... Two Wise Men**

**These selections are taken from the following  
CDs by Stevie Mack:**

**'A Penguin in Heat'  
'The Wide Sargasso Sea'  
'Creole Jumbo'  
(Not found in fine stores anywhere)**



## **FOURWORDS:**

### **Snowbirds**

**This book is for all of us that have forsaken the snowy barrens for lush vegetation, sparkling blue waters, and the sweet sultry breezes of the Caribbean.**

### **Cruise Ships**

**This book is intended for all of us that realize cruising is not just about aerobics, shepherded shore excursions, or any sort of regimentation whatsoever but is the ultimate vacation.**

### **Adventure**

**This book is for all of us that have enjoyed hiking through sweltering rainforests in search of waterfalls, snorkeling on mysterious reefs, and immersing ourselves in the divers history and cuisine of the tropics.**

### **Penguins**

**This book is about all the zany characters whose lives have intertwined in some mysterious fashion under the**

**tropical sun. We are all penguins in the  
heat.**

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**All music written by S. McCann (SOCAN)  
All music performed by Stevie Mack  
CD engineered and mixed by J.D. Dinsdale**

**Illustrations by Stevie Mack**

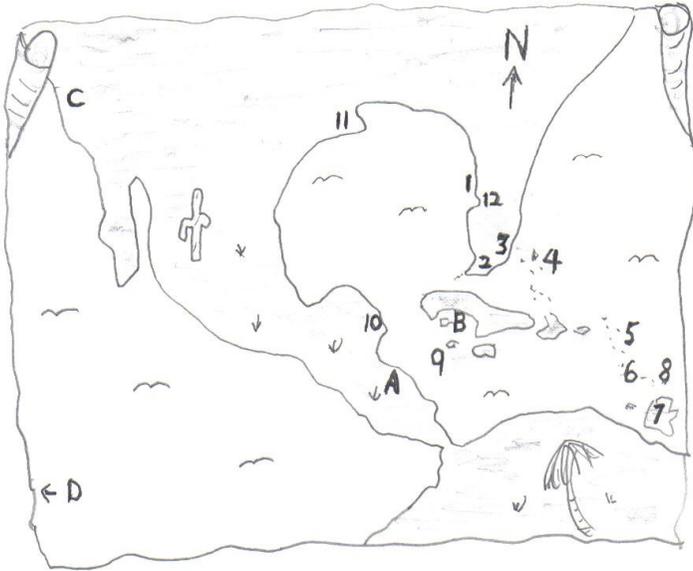
**For more on Stevie Mack see the website:  
[www.mashmccanns.com](http://www.mashmccanns.com)**

**A RUN SUN PRODUCTION AND PUBLICATION**

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## A PENGUIN IN THE HEAT



1 - DUNEDIN

2 - THE GLADES

3 - MIAMI

BEACH

4 - NASSAU

5 - THE VIRGIN ISLES

6 - GUADELOUPE

7 - TRINIDAD

8 - BARBADOS

9 - CAYMAN ISLES

10 - PLAYA DEL CARMEN

11 - NEW ORLEANS

12 - TAMPA

A - GUATEMALA

B - BAY OF PIGS

C - LAGUNA

D - HUAHINE

## **Penguins**

### **“Set Sail for the Southern Skies”**

Let me first state that there are no penguins in Canada. Other than the odd gaggle or flock that might inhabit a local zoo, I will once again state unequivocally that there are no penguins in Canada. There might be a chance that some demented collector of the Antarctic species might be harbouring a fugitive bird, but this is the exception to the rule. Canadians do not keep penguins as pets. Furthermore, although we have farms for emus and turkeys, I will boldly predict that a platter of penguin will never adorn a dining table in this country. We Canadians are penguinless and for the sake of political correctness “sans penguin”.

Snowbird, not penguin, is the title bestowed upon northerners who attempt the yearly migration to southern climes. There is

a veritable diaspora of snowbirds in the state of Florida that is readily distinguishable from the local flamingos and pelicans. The Sunshine State is famous for its orange juice and theme parks but not for its diaspora of penguins. In fact, I am unaware of the presence of a solitary penguin living freely in the whole of the U.S.A. As a rule, penguins are rarely found anywhere in the Northern Hemisphere. However, I have known a few in the Galapagos Islands that were lured across the equator by the promise of an easier life. Most have returned south disillusioned in their quest for an aquatic Shangri-La.

I have been attracted to the tropics since I was a kid. I had watched Disney's 'Swiss Family Robinson' with envy, seeing Moochie slide down the natural waterfall into a pond at the foot of an endless beach. The realities of snakes, scorpions and spiders did nothing to quell my appetite for this idyllic paradise. It was my mother who put an end to this fantasy

when she ended my nightly ritual of sliding down the shower curtain into the bathtub. Nevertheless the lure of palmed-fringed white sand beaches continued when the musical 'South Pacific' and later the California surfing movies further enticed my landlocked Canadian soul to seek out these warm tropical seas. I had to make do with a small creek that ran through the ravine behind our house. On my makeshift surfboard I'm sure I looked more like Huck Finn than Gidget and still had hell to pay when I got home soaked and muddy.

I was still a teenager when I ventured south for the first time. My friend Bolesy and I had taken a bus to Jacksonville and hitchhiked down the east coast of Florida. In the Sixties hitchhiking was supposed to be relatively safe, though I did have some nervous moments in Memphis and Chicago on my return thumb. Those were the days of

**'crashing' with anyone who had a floor, porch or a picnic table in their back lawn, and we were already masters of this art from bygone summers at our own beach towns in Canada. However, one night my boyish charm failed me and I had to make do with a sewer pipe on a construction site by the beach in Fort Lauderdale. I remember feeling rather sheepish when I emerged rumpled and hung over the next morning to find myself surrounded by curious hard hats. Regardless of our meager budget, I was hooked on palms and endless beaches, the tropical breezes and strange constellations at night, and vowed to move here some day.**

**Having just endured the summer from heaven with the red tape from hell, I had finally sold my business but the closing date kept getting put off due to one unforeseen incompetence after another. It had taken over two years to sell my pub so I decided to savour this summer whose weather was a godsend.**

Camping, fishing, and canoeing balanced my cholesterol with seemingly endless barbeques. It was a bumper crop for rhubarb, perhaps my favourite food after beer. Friends would come into the pub and bestow bag after bag of their 'homegrown' on me and I would soon be in my own little culinary world processing it into jams and chutneys. Most people drown their rhubarb in sugar, which is a mortal sin in my opinion, so I prefer to use a secret ingredient, cinnamon (Oh no! Now everybody knows) or mix in some strawberries for natural sweetness without destroying the tartness of the rhubarb. Mangoes also work well, but a good mango is as rare as a penguin in Canada.

Finally the deal closed and I was free - except for an audit from the Ministry of Finance. I had already served a sentence of sixteen years behind the bar of my Irish pub, and not wanting to spend time behind a different type of bar, I decided to leave

matters up to my accountant and head for the border toot sweet. Having made the mistake of feeding my daughters so that they grew up and removed themselves to some distant corner of the country for more book learning, I was not prepared to spend another winter alone in the frozen tundra. So with my canoe strapped to the roof of my minivan, I had set off toward Buffalo looking more like an armadillo than a migrating snowbird.

U.S. Customs thought it was pretty funny that I was taking a canoe down to the Gulf of Mexico. I replied honestly that I had nothing to declare. Other than a jar of rhubarb, why would anyone want to smuggle anything from Canada to the U.S. when everything is so much cheaper in the States? Having crossed the border and still having the best weather I could remember for any fall, I decided to take my time and camp my way down the eastern seaboard. Why rush to Florida in hurricane season?

The stress of the last few weeks had taken its toll on me not with an ulcer but with an abscess tooth that had been plaguing me for some time now. I had the same problem some six years earlier when I drove down the eastern seaboard with my girls at spring break and that resulted in an extraction. There is an old Irish saying that states that it is better to lose one's teeth than one's memory. Or maybe it was Confusious...I can't remember, but I was sure I was about to lose another tooth on this trip.

My first night I camped by the Delaware River and woke up in the middle of the night to find my campsite illuminated by some mysterious harvest moon that shone down through the Carolingian canopy like some extra-terrestrial searchlight. The way moonlight can play through a forest is so ethereal that one feels that they are witnessing a surreal event. It is tantamount to

the stage lighting in most productions I've seen of 'A Midsummer's Nights Dream'. One almost feels that Puck or some flying newt is flickering around out there perhaps trying to communicate with your primal senses. I've often experienced this in the pines of the northlands and most recently on a remote island in Palau when I camped on the site of an ancient village. I've come to label these phenomena "Moon Marae Rhapsody", (The Polynesians built their maraes or sacred sights usually in a location surrounded by spectacular nature) and have been truly blessed with these moongates in much the same way that one would thrill at the sight of a double rainbow.

The next morning I was not so blessed as I ran my canoe aground in the middle of the Delaware River. I tried to control my embarrassment as the people on the shore pointed at the crazy Canuck carrying his canoe back to shore. "Someone must have

**drained the river”, I shouted at them and then proceeded to get my minivan stuck in the mud and had to be ignominiously towed. My tooth was really throbbing now as I took leave of the Poconos and headed toward the garden state of New Jersey.**

**I found a campsite at PT Barnum State Park, adjacent to an air force base and home of the local motocross event. Although it had some wonderful hiking trails, it was by far the noisiest place I had ever slept. Through necessity, I have been in some campgrounds where cramped quarters resulted in a chorus of snoring neighbours somewhat disturbing to one’s nocturnal serenity. At PT Barnum there was a ban on campfires that night so I snuggled up early only to be awakened regularly by hovering helicopters reminiscent of ‘Apocalypse Now’. There was no smell of napalm in the morning, but my tooth felt that it had been napalmed during the night. As I broke camp at PT Barnum a**

squadron of F-16's swooped down in a farewell salute.

I decided to detour and visit some friends I had met in the Galapagos that lived near Camden and who I was sure would be practiced in the dental arts. I was right on the money there as these masters of anesthesia plied me with enough alcohol that the next morning my toothache was gone. However, my cheek was the size of softball as I had developed cellulitis. Having drunk my friends out of house and home, I opted to do an all-nighter to the Sunshine State and find a dentist before my cheek exploded.

After the inevitable extraction, my new Floridian dentist informed me that my tooth would have to be bagged and sent to some toxic disposal sight. I envisioned it in a display case beside pro-magnum man at some restricted 'Area 54' or some such thing. In spite of my pleadings, there would be no tooth fairy for me. Feeling remarkably better,

it was time for a prolonged visit with my mom and dad who lived in Dunedin. Probably my unconscious intention was to sponge off them for the winter. I took to sponging like a penguin to water, procrastinating with all my chores. Eaves troughs could not be cleaned for several days until the wind velocity and direction were just right. Rooms could not be painted for weeks because of the humidity and susceptibility of latex paint to ultraviolet rays. I was very patient in explaining these scientific phenomena to my parents while I ate them out of house and home.

Dunedin is one of those picture postcard towns. Disney would be envious of the main street with its quaint shops and manicured parks. It is also the home of spring training for the Toronto Blue Jays. However, since I was there in the off-season, I contented myself on the bike paths and beaches that were relatively deserted at that time of year. I

also attempted to learn about the local fauna and flora and spent a lot of time trying to identify the various species of fish that I caught. I categorized them as ugly, uglier and ugliest until one of the local fishermen informed me that they were grouper and tasted mighty fine on the grill. Canoeing expeditions around the various bays and inlets taught me the difference between mangroves and manatees. After obtaining a Florida driving license and a Winn-Dixie card, I was feeling less like a snowbird and more like a real Floridian.

However, I did not exactly fit in with many of the snowbirds. Many were born when Roosevelt was President (Teddy not Franklin Delano) and were outright hostile to my innovations such as permitting body checking during shuffleboard games. Xenophobia was rampant when the greatest odyssey in most of their lives was navigating the interstates to Florida and back again.

**"You're lucky to be alive", they would say as I related a recent adventure I had in Africa. "Our neighbour Gertrude went there and never returned you know". Of course it turned out that Gertrude was ninety-three and had been bungee jumping at Victoria Falls. The salty dogs were the exception to this rule and a cold Bud could always wrench a hair-raising tale out of them. Two or three Buds would raise the hair higher than a launch from the Kennedy Space Center.**

**What we all shared was a loathing of inclement weather, particularly the kind that froze your pipes up and solidified one's bloodstream. The rising costs of utilities returned this blood to boiling proportions. We all agreed that for climatic and economic purposes we were in paradise. There was also a consensus that Canada should acquire some island on the Tropic of Cancer we would not be at the mercy of declining exchange rates. We reasoned that this would depopulate the**

country for six months of the year except for hockey players and skiing enthusiasts. Besides, the island might be plagued with parasitic penguins from which there was no known antidote.

I was happily plying a salty dog in our driveway one morning when the call came in. It was from an agent named Sharpy who I had fired several times but had always bounced back with an offer I couldn't refuse. Five star resorts in the Muskokas had turned out to be logging camps in Northern Quebec. Syndicated television appearances had deteriorated into cablecast telethons for his daughter's soccer team. I was skeptical until he told me that he had already faxed the contracts. News spread quickly around the neighbourhood that I was to be co-starring in a Hollywood musical with Robert DeNiro and Elizabeth Taylor about some murdering penguins in Patagonia.

Snowbirds and penguins were the farthest things from my mind as I sped down I-75 on a sunny February morning. I had just left my parents' home in Dunedin and had three days to do the six-hour haul to the Port of Miami. There I was to be employed as a musician on one of the shiny new cruise ships doing the grand circle of the Caribbean, graciously denying assistance from Bob and Liz. I had rented a minivan rather than drive my own vehicle, because the ship's itinerary ended in Tampa. This way I could deposit the rental in Miami and not have to return there at the end of the cruise to retrieve my vehicle and a costly parking bill.

Although I had driven this route many times before, I wanted a few days to poke around and explore the Everglades. If time had permitted, I would have poked around the whole west coast of the Sunshine State that would entail a lot of poking, but I was on a mission. Like many others, I had pretty much

confined myself to the white sand beaches around Clearwater as well as the myriad theme parks. I knew that there was a hidden Florida beyond the condos that was begging to be explored at some later time.

My guide was to be a wiry old fellow by the name of Carlos who ran a camping and canoeing outfit southwest of Miami. I had found his name on the Internet and considered this choice to be less touristy than the others. I had camped in dozen of countries but had never camped in my adopted state. Canada is perhaps the most spectacular country for campers but has a relatively short season unless one relishes frostbite. I had done some fantastic trips in the Serengeti and Palau, as well as many others, so KOA in Florida was just not going to do it for me.

As I turned east and proceeded across the Tamiami Trail, I was treated to the sight of

several reptilian predators basking in the ditches at the sides of the road. There are no alligators in Canada either. Sabal palmettos dotted the landscape as I searched for some tropical music on the radio. About an hour later I pulled off at a dusty fruit stand and decided to ask for directions. My excitement rose as an old Seminole woman pointed towards a dubious looking dirt road that disappeared into the marshes.

“Tell Carlos that Sally sent you,” she said with a smile that seemed to evoke distant memories. After this curious meeting, I set out on my last leg of that day’s journey trying hard not to think about penguins.

## **Sweet Esmeralda**

**“There’s a girl who lives across the bay”**

**“Her eyes shone like stars on the ocean”, Carlos repeated to himself as another shell exploded perilously close to him. “What am I doing here? I must get back to her. We have been betrayed. There is no air cover. Where did the boats go?” The events of the last two days had become a blur. He had just witnessed his uncle Manuel shot apart not ten yards from where he lay. The air was filled with the smell of powder and the cries of those wounded and dying. Some had sought refuge in the swamps. One group had seized a sailboat and was pushing out to sea. Carlos recognized some of the men in the boat but could not get anywhere close to them. “Like stars on the ocean” he repeated.**

**It had began in the summer of 1960 with all the counter-revolutionary slogans that came from the rum talk of ex-patriots all over**

**Miami. At first Carlos didn't care. He had just turned seventeen, graduated from high school, and was content to work as a lifeguard and part-time labourer at the botanical gardens. He had met Esmeralda that summer and was totally infatuated with her smile and sparkling eyes. Together they cruised the beaches from Hollywood to Dania and up to Lauderdale in his shiny new convertible. Liberating an island he barely remembered was the farthest thing from his mind.**

**He had come to Miami as a young boy after his mother died. His father had been intent on starting a new life as a doctor in a medical clinic in Coral Gables. Politics and the problems of Cuba were never discussed at home.**

**"You are an American, Carlos," his father would say, "and here you can be whoever you want to be". Carlos knew only that he wanted to be with Esmeralda.**

**Life in Miami had been wonderful for Carlos. From an early age, he had worked with his father in the gardens around their modest home. His father had taught him the medicinal and nutritional uses of many plants so that by the time he reached high school, Carlos could amaze his new employers at the botanical gardens by identifying many species in English, Latin and Spanish. His father had secretly hoped that if Carlos did not follow in his own shoes in medicine, he would at least pursue a career in botany. At that time, neither knew that this knowledge would one day save Carlos' life.**

**Baseball and beaches became the favourite pastimes for Carlos in high school. Again it was his father who nurtured his love for the game as most Sundays they would sit by the television with Uncle Manuel and discuss strategies and statistics. If one of their favourite Latin ballplayers got called out on strikes, the umpire in question would become**

the subject of a discussion on another conspiracy theory. In his first year of high school, Carlos became an indispensable player at his position of shortstop.

It was on the swim team that Carlos really shone. At the beach one day, he had not failed to notice that the lifeguards attracted more attention from the girls than any of the star players on his baseball team. Carlos became determine to occupy one of those lifeguard stations some day and applied himself wholeheartedly to swimming and lifesaving. Nicknamed 'The Minnow', Carlos soon became the fastest swimmer on the high school squad and his father built him a trophy case for all the medallions that Carlos brought home. In later years, friends would joke about his nickname because it was the name of the boat that foundered on some deserted island in the television series called 'Gilligan's Island'. The nickname would become portentous.

In his last year of high school, Carlos brought home his lifesaving certificate, which his father proudly framed.

“Now we are compadres of sorts”, his father beamed as he hugged Carlos. Early that summer as Carlos sat in his long sought-after lifeguard’s chair he met Esmeralda. With her flashing eyes and long, dark hair, Carlos knew that another quest had begun.

Like Carlos, Esmeralda lived alone with her mother but that is where the similarity ended. They shared a small apartment where her mother worked as a cleaning lady. There were many uncles coming by that gave Esmeralda change for the movies or bus fare to go to the beach.

Although she was a year younger than Carlos, she acted much older and had a penchant for flirting with the college boys at the beach, which made Carlos more determined than ever to impress her.

The seeds of discontent had been sown late that fall when she began chiding him about his lack of interest in the freedom movement. He had seen her on occasion with Roberto, one of the fast-talking conscription agents, and had jealously confronted her.

“Carlos, you are still a beach boy who plays with plants,” she said derisively. “These men are doing noble deeds.” Carlos was so stung, that he failed to notice the smell of rum on her breath. He was determined to redeem himself in her eyes.

At Christmas he implored his uncle Manuel to enlist him with his freedom fighters. Manuel had escaped from Cuba earlier that year and unlike Carlos’ father, was hell-bent on removing Castro. Thus began the most arduous journey in his life. First came the secret night journey to Fort Myers in the back of a truck full of strangers. Next he was herded into the back of a cargo plane for a perilous flight to Guatemala. There ensued

two months of hardship in the mountains, training for the invasion he secretly hoped would never come. Now, for two days he had been stranded on this beach in a place called Bay of Pigs. There were no tourists with shiny bodies lying on beach blankets and sipping pina coladas here.

Guatemala had provided Carlos with an education he didn't expect to receive. Guerilla warfare was first on the curriculum, and Carlos who was young and fit, was one of the best students in the Brigade. But it was not soldiering that interested Carlos, but rather the fascinating study of those around him. Everyone seemed to be from a different walk of life but all were united by this cause. There was Pepe, the musician, who taught Carlos how to play the guitar so he could serenade Esmeralda on his return. "There's a girl who lives across the bay," Pepe would sing and then howl as he rhymed off some obscene phrase. And then there was Ernesto, the

priest, who discussed the Bible and Shakespeare with equal enthusiasm. He was one of the few who were skeptical of the Americans' support, suggesting that Judas was not a traitor but a diplomat. As we boarded the boats for the invasion, it was Ernesto who prayed, "So to the moist star our future is tossed; so influenced by Neptune's empire's loss." Carlos always would remember these words but could never find them in either the Old or New Testaments.

Here on the beach he had witnessed the boats foundering on the reef, the ships strafed by planes, the men in the water, oil burning, and then the sharks. The landings had been a disaster, and although they were hopelessly outnumbered, they fought courageously until the end. "And this is the end" Carlos thought, for he was out of communication with the rest of the brigade and now he was out of ammunition as well. His thoughts strayed once more to those sparkling eyes, and then

he tore off his scarf and ran to the ocean to swim for his life.

Maybe it was his youth that saved him. A young boy, shirtless and barefoot with a fishing pole on the beach, was not likely to arouse suspicions among the patrols. Certainly it was his life guarding skills that kept him afloat past the enemy lines. But more than anything, it was his knowledge of plants that kept him fed during his month long odyssey over the mountains.

Reaching Florida was another matter. Swimming the seventy-five odd miles was out of the question, even for Carlos. It was only through luck that he came upon a group of refugees setting off in a large rowboat one night. They had no choice but to take Carlos. He was young and still strong enough to man the oars, and they were conscious that he might compromise their escape if they left him behind.

It was the following day when safely past the patrol boats, the small group realized the peril that Carlos had placed them in. While endeavouring to erect a makeshift sail, Carlos had produced from his pocket his shirt with the insignia 2506 emblazoned on it. Had the patrols captured them, they could have been shot on sight.

For almost a week this small group struggled across the Straights of Florida, finally sighting land on the seventh day. Starving and exhausted they dragged themselves ashore in front of the astounded sunbathers on the beach and inquired if they were in America.

“Islamorada”, came the reply in Spanish. The similarity of this name to the one Carlos yearned for was music to his ears.

That night as he was driving with his father back to Miami, Carlos recounted the stories of bravery and courage he had

witnessed. His father cried when he heard the story of Manuel's death.

“All for nothing my son” he sobbed and then confessed to Carlos, “In spite of this exercise in futility, I am proud that both you and Manuel followed your convictions. If I had been stronger, I might have helped... another doctor might have...” and then he broke down.

“Conviction” Carlos pondered. It was now clear to him that he had done this out of love for Esmeralda and not for Cuba. He was determined to go to her in order to find some meaning for the last six months of his life. He was convinced he would find the answer in her eyes.

Fed and washed, Carlos fell into unconsciousness for twenty-two hours. Awakening in comfortable surroundings, he was cognizant that his nightmare was finally over. He grabbed a coffee and then phoned Esmeralda. He was surprised to find that her

number was no longer in service. He decided to treat himself to a bus ride over to her place...he had done enough walking for now.

His father had sold Carlos' beloved sports car in order to help pay the ransom for the twelve hundred or so prisoners still in Havana. Carlos did not regret this, for he could have been one of those unfortunates, and he had made many friends during his apprenticeship in Guatemala. Pepe, with his wild sense of humour, had taught Carlos how to play the guitar. Ernesto, the priest, had inspired Carlos with the philosophy of free will and manifest destiny.

Arriving at Esmeralda's apartment, he was greeted with a hero's welcome by the neighbours and their ubiquitous children. They informed Carlos that Esmeralda had moved to a trailer park in Homestead and then proceeded to pepper him with questions about their loved ones in the Brigade. Carlos patiently retold his story but omitted the parts

of those he had seen dying. Because of his isolation for so long, Carlos was still uninformed as to the fate of those captured and those who escaped.

Mr. Sanchez, the landlord, graciously offered to drive Carlos to Homestead. It was no secret that he had a relationship of some convenience with Esmeralda's mother while they were living under his roof. Arriving at the trailer, Esmeralda's mother greeted Mr. Sanchez royally, but her face clouded when she saw Carlos.

"She is living down there," she said as she pointed to a grubby looking trailer on a lot overgrown with weeds.

"Thank you, and don't wait for me Mr. Sanchez" Carlos shouted and strode toward the trailer with his heart beating in anticipation. It had been almost half a year since he last saw her. After the warm reception he had received at the Sanchez

apartments, Carlos was sure that Esmeralda would be proud of him.

As the door opened, Carlos was shocked to see Roberto standing there in his undershirt and smoking a cigar.

“Essie, I think it’s for you” he called, and then after giving Carlos a disdainful look, disappeared back into the gloomy trailer. Carlos watched in horror as Esmeralda staggered to the door still clutching a half-empty bottle of rum.

“Carsloss” she slurred, “it’s been a long time”.

She muttered something about Roberto being on the repatriation committee but Carlos was not listening. He had survived against all odds for this? Disheveled and drunk, she continued to rant while Carlos sought to look into her eyes. As she entered the sunlight he could see that they were swollen and bloodshot.

**“Like stars on the ocean” he said in disgust, and turned around to make another long walk home.**

## **The Glades**

**“So influenced by Neptune’s empire’s loss”**

**I arrived at Carlos’ place around sunset wishing I had upgraded to a SUV from my mini van. The road to the camp traversed a sea of sawgrass that disintegrated into a footpath after I crossed the Timiami Trail, the first road to be constructed across the Everglades back in 1928. Carlos looked to be about sixty, wiry and not very talkative. He showed me where to park and where to set up my tent, then after a few stern warnings about disturbing the ecology, he disappeared for the night.**

**The next day I was given a chart, a compass, a kayak, some flares and a cell phone. I wasn’t about to argue but I hoped that with all my experience, I would not have the humiliating experience of employing the last two items. He warned me about the poisonwood trees that grew on some of the hammocks, or tree islands, and I tried to joke**

about being past my tree-hugging days. He was not amused.

So I had brought my canoe twelve hundred miles and now had to rent one. With the rental car situation, there was no other way but to leave my canoe in Dunedin as sort of a rustic lawn ornament. I had plenty of experience with kayaks, but felt a lot safer in my own watercraft when faced with the possibility of confrontation from scaly predators.

I had been fishing a lot around Dunedin and was hoping to do the same here, but the kayak that Carlos gave me was just too small and awkward to practice my new skills. Learning to differentiate between a sheep's head and a sheep's hank was easy although it took a little experimentation with sauces and spices to make the former taste better than the latter. On the upside, the shrimp I bought for bait could be used in my stir fry later that night.

My first day in the glades was uneventful. Like most first-timers, I expected to see waters churning with raw appetites with toothsome reptilians lining the shores like I had seen in National Geographic specials. In my head I tried to review sections of my Red Cross basic rescuer but couldn't recall any chapters pertaining to alligators. I did see lots of gators but it was a day for the birds as I sighted egrets, herons and the occasional osprey. I didn't know most of the birds I saw but was content to just soak up the sunshine while I drifted through a sea of tall grass. It was winter and I was floating through the land of Leon's youth fountains.

Returning to camp early that night, I had decided to treat myself to some Pad Thai with some shrimp that were becoming unfrozen. I was unfazed when Carlos joined me at my campfire. I was preparing myself for the "I see the gringo-Canuck made it back safely" speech when he surprised me by

saying, “So you’re a cook and a musician too”. He explained that he had surfed my web site on the Internet and had enjoyed the musical samples he had found there. I had made lots of food so I handed him a plate for his approval. “So this is what you make in your Irish pub in Canada?” he asked. I explained to him that besides traveling all over the world, I had taken a lot of ethnic cooking courses and then offered him a beer.

As Carlos began to relax, I peppered him with questions about the various birds I had seen that day. I was still a stranger in a strange land and was determined to learn as much as possible from this amazing man. As the conversation turned to snakes, Carlos became very animated on the subject of invasive species.

“ You see these pet owners dumping their snakes out here because they’ve become too large to keep any longer. The worst are the pythons, which can grow quite large and

begin to decimate populations of the indigenous species farther down the food chain. Just look at what happened in Guam.” I already knew the story of the brown tree snake that had devoured most of the bird population on that island.

I mentioned that we had problems in Canada as well and explained to him how the zebra mussel had become a nuisance in the last decade. I went on to explain that a lot of invasive plants such as purple loosestrife and periwinkle were actually introduced a century ago and had become a nuisance as well. Carlos said that the same thing had happened here with the introduction of the Brazilian pepper plant, certain vines and Mimosa, as well as the Australian Pine.

He asked me if I had ever been to Cuba and when I answered yes, he had a flow of questions about when, where and how, since Americans were not allowed to visit that country because of some gentlemen named

Helms and Burton. As the conversation shifted towards his life, I found out that aside from wrestling alligators for tourists, he had conducted survival courses for Navy Seals. When I asked him how he learned so much about survival techniques he simply answered “From necessity”. I amused him with stories of my hunter-gatherer friends in Canada who could cook their own boots in a fix but would not venture anywhere close to mine. Before Carlos departed for the night, he promised to accompany me the next day and show me the uncharted delights of the Everglades.

The following morning we set out through the misty marsh and after an hour’s paddle turned into a hidden channel that opened up into an endless sea of mangroves. They looked like a crowd of Rastafarians sporting green hats. I reminisced about Coconut Joe, a Rasta I met in St. Kitts, who was into herbal medicines but sold a little ganja on the side. He would have loved this place as

wild orchids and bromeliads greeted us wherever the mangroves had not yet taken hold. I was also fascinated by the chickees, or platforms where campers could pitch a tent.

It was late morning when we finally saw them. Carlos beamed and shouted something in Spanish as half dozen dolphins surrounded our canoe. I sat amazed as these wonderful mammals replied in Dolphinish while Carlos fed them from his cooler full of fish.

“This is something one should never do”. He explained, “but these are my old friends”. I felt as though I was witnessing something a lot deeper than friendship seeing the look of joy on Carlos’ face.

Later that afternoon I spotted a grove of Cypress on what looked to be fairly solid land.

“Nature calls”, I told Carlos and paddled to shore. As I ventured into the trees to relieve myself, I smugly thought how shriveled the Cypress were compared to the great Canadian pine forests I had trekked through. Content

with this observation, I was about to attend to my business when I noticed that only ten feet from me lay a panther. Only Carlos and a few others had ever seen one before. I had confronted disinterested bears in Alberta, fought off vicious monkeys in Borneo, and had been pestered by a one tusk warthog in Botswana...now I was faced with one big kitty whose countenance seemed to ask "You got a light?" I no longer felt the need to relieve myself and backtracked ever so slowly to the canoe.

Carlos was astounded by my discovery, but was correct in saying that returning to the site with my camera would be fruitless. Carlos turned out to be an ardent conservationist and peppered me with questions about the parks in Canada. He was delighted to hear that parcels of land were constantly being designated for new national and provincial parks. He also questioned me about mercury

poisoning, acid rain and other forms of pollution that were contaminating the planet.

When I told him that I had supported Greenpeace and the World Wildlife Foundation he seemed delighted but ominously warned me about getting involved in causes for the wrong reasons. I was sure this had something to do with his past but he continued, “Remember a few years ago when they found that girl floating face-up in a lagoon near Tahiti? She had been involved with some cause trying to stop the testing of nukes near her home. Well as you know, the testing stopped but not before a lot of protests and embarrassing questions were put to the French government about her death.” I replied that they had also been responsible for the sinking of the Rainbow Warrior in Auckland as well as other violent acts against conservationists. Carlos then mused, “God knows what this place would be like today if

they hadn't designated it a national park back in forty seven."

That night Carlos offered to cook his specialty...Crawdad Cubano. With the help of some hot sauce and a few beers, it turned out to be a veritable feast. It turned out that Carlos played guitar as well, so the two of us spent a wonderful night by the campfire, singing songs and exchanging stories. He told me he had once spent a month sleeping in trees like some modern-day Mowgli, while living off bush food. I told him that I had slept under an overpass one Christmas Eve at the Texas-Oklahoma border. My friend Sonny and I had been hitchhiking back from California during the Sixties and had got stuck for a ride that night and thus opted for some shuteye until dawn. While I slept, Sonny decided to wrangle up some army field rations and proceeded to set ablaze a good portion of a field on the Texan side of the overpass. After a hearty stomp, we saved the Lone Star State from a

Christmas conflagration and continued on our way haggard and smoky.

I somehow mustered the courage to ask him about Sally. I had unwittingly fallen into his trap. He had read one of my stories on the net regarding an incident in New Orleans involving a woman named Sally and had instructed the Seminole women at their highway stand to say “Tell Carlos that Sally sent you.” He did have a sense of humour after all.

I begged Carlos to let me explain the night I spent in Texas so I could try and tell a story backwards. What were two wannabe hippies doing with army field rations? Well both of us were wannabe musicians in the Elgin Regiment Band and had taken basic training the summer before our California trip. Being blind in one eye, I was the scourge of the rifle range and after local farmers protested to the base about their wounded crops and livestock, I was made chauffeur to

the colonel. In this position I was able to be a 'Klinger' of sorts and ended up scoring a lot a field rations for backpacking trips. (I don't know what else to call them but it was before the days of backpacks. We carted around duffle bags). I think that I was a more potent weapon as a one-valve trumpet player in my tight tartan pants. The commanders could envision a terrified enemy leaping of cliffs at the sound of my approach.

So why had I decided to join a military marching band? Well it was the time of Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band and I wanted to join a marching band. I first approached the Salvation Army but was told that I would have to attend Sunday school. To me a brush cut beats religion any day and besides, in spite of being underage, we could drink beer in the regimental mess.

Carlos then proceeded to relate a hair-raising story about tracking his father's murderer through the swamps with the help

of the Seminoles. His late father, who was a doctor in Miami, had discovered that a man named Roberto was expropriating funds that were supposed to be used for the release of Cuban prisoners. Carlos had arrived home one night to find his father dead and his house in flames. The police were ineffective in making an arrest and categorized the affair as some Latin vendetta.

As he told his story his whole countenance changed. As the campfire illuminated his face, I could see the fire in his eyes was not merely a reflection of the flames but burned with the passion of one who has felt a terrible loss.

“So what did happen to Roberto?” I quietly asked. Carlos came out of his trance and smiled at me.

“The instigator met with an alligator,” and then we both started laughing.

However, I was still convinced that behind the facade, there was something sad

and unfulfilled about Carlos. Some men wander into the bush for adventure and recreation. Others never return. I could only guess about Carlos.

It was Sunday morning, and I was setting out early for my first day at work and to fight the Miami traffic. Sporting a new t-shirt, a gift from Carlos, I hoped to have a quick stroll through Fairchild Gardens before driving to the port. I said my goodbyes to Carlos who promised to visit me in the summer so we could explore the great parks of northern Ontario in my canoe.

Here nature was in total contrast to the Everglades. It was like a zoo for plants and trees. Every type of palm imaginable was strategically placed around the grounds. The flowers were the envy of any northern gardener as a cornucopia of colour enveloped me on every path. An enormous alligator lay basking in the sun beside one of the ponds. I wondered if it missed his cousins in the

swamp, or like someone I had just befriended, preferred its solitude.

It was still morning when I reached the port and had the hassle of getting everything on board and returning the rental car. The ship looked like some gigantic ivory behemoth as I surveyed her from the dock.

“Smoothie mister?“, a voice asked behind me. As I turned a huge tattooed woman, who seemed to be missing a few teeth, greeted me.

“Sure” I replied as I surveyed her cart. ‘Esmeralda’s Smoothies’ was emblazoned in colourful letters on her sign.

“You just come from de glades?” she asked looking at my t-shirt. When I nodded she replied, “Dis one’s on me” and with a quickness unrelated to her size, pedaled away mysteriously.

## **Junkanoo Girl**

**“Eats callaloo how do you do”**

**Monday morning we docked in Nassau just as the sun was climbing over Paradise Island. The previous night had been an early one for most of the cruisers who had flown in from the north. Some had endured a long wintry drive in the middle of Saturday night to catch a cramped charter plane, followed by transfers to the ship and lineups for embarkation. This was followed by the compulsory lifeboat drill, which although a nuisance, always turned out to be a social event. Then the upper decks came alive with the sounds of the steel drum band surrounded by a sea of Hawaiian shirts. Trays of Mai Tais and Mojitos were magically produced while the ship’s horn grunted its goodbyes to the Port of Miami.**

**One rarely feels the roll of the sea on these big new mega ships. It took a while to**

realize that we were moving and not the ship tied up beside us. The sheer size of these modern Leviathans and the advances in stabilization has provided comfort for some, but removed an element of adventure for others. I reflected that it was probably a good thing, having seen more than my share of human effluence in past voyages, which soured my sense of adventure as well as my appetite.

This ship was over a thousand feet long, had fifteen decks, and carried over two thousand passengers when full, as well as the crew. It had at least a dozen lounges, a movie theater, cabaret and a skating rink among other amenities and distractions. They had even developed a self-leveling pool table. At over a hundred tons, it still managed to make over twenty-three knots. Tennis and basketball courts littered the decks with hot tubs and pools. I knew my music was not going to be the main attraction here. Maybe

my shadow bunnies would wow them if I set myself on fire.

On the port side (left for you landlubbers) we passed the deserted location of Chalks Airways that operated those fabulous seaplanes we used to see on Miami Vice. I fondly remembered taking one to Bimini when I was going through my 'finding the ghosts of Hemingway' stages. As we reached the Atlantic it was first dinner call and I began to get ready for my first set of the evening.

My early show was a breeze as couples flooded the dance floor in their tropical attire. I had taken the precaution of adding a lot of Caribbean standards to augment my repertoire of original material. This proved to be a good idea as couples in their eighties smoothed to 'Island in the Sun' while young singles gyrated to 'Lovin la Coco Loco', a parody I snuck in. There were a few families there as well. I have long thought that the

educational value of traveling through tropical countries produced a metamorphosis of cosmopolitan skills and...hell, we just wanted to get out of the cold.

We were greeted on the dock in Nassau by yet another steel drum band chanting “jump off de boat” while a young girl in a Junkanoo costume thrashed around them. Junkanoo is much like Carnival but takes place before New Year’s Day rather than before Ash Wednesday. For some, like this dancing girl, it is a way of life. From the starboard deck (right for you landlubbers) we could see the Junkanoo Museum that was closed at this early hour. While we were not technically in the Caribbean, the culture had been totally influenced by the West Indies.

Groups in organized tours were the first to jump off de boat while the majority enjoyed our breakfast buffet on deck. Nassau had been the sight of the first American military enterprise in a foreign land. During

the War of Independence, the Navy had landed here, and after drinking the locals out of house and home, departed after two weeks. During Prohibition, Nassau became the biggest rum warehouse in the world. I trusted that Bahamians would be well prepared for us.

Having been to Nassau several times before, I opted for a leisurely stroll around the town while I reminisced. The last time I was here, my girlfriend Jewel and I had taken a tour to the Blue Lagoon to swim with the stingrays. (I considered there to be as many Blue Lagoons in the tropics as there are Trout Lakes in Canada). I was informed that stingrays fewer than five feet in length are usually quite placid but the large ones can insert a six-inch poisonous barb into an unsuspecting swimmer, causing excruciating pain. Being reassured that I had a greater chance of being bit by a shark than stung by a ray, I nevertheless made a point of sizing

them up before getting in the water. One of the rays had taken a liking to sucking on Jewel's upper thigh, which left a hickey that had to be perused by every male on the tour much to my displeasure.

The Bahamian government takes ecology seriously. They have set aside at least a dozen protected areas with over two hundred thousand acres for national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. I had thought it would be a good idea on this voyage to try and gauge the sort of ecological yardstick that the various societies adhere to. For instance, the Australian Pine had been introduced here to help impede erosion of the dunes, but had impeded the growth of endemic plants. Carlos had told me of the disastrous efforts by engineers to control the flow of water into the Everglades. Are we really lending nature a helping hand or should we leave well enough alone?

As I made my way through Rawson Square and turned on East Bay Street, I noticed that the Junkanoo girl was now dancing on the sidewalk behind me. She had an uncanny resemblance to Jewel. Was I being followed? Market Street reminded me of the time I had been here with Pudge. We had strolled down the beach from Atlantis past the golf course where I dove into the channel to retrieve a conch shell. Much to our surprise, the conch shell began walking down the beach...there was a crab inside. Feeling like the great white hunter, we had returned to our hotel where the cook served it up for us in front of a barroom full of envious patrons.

Conch is to the Bahamas as jerk is to Jamaica. The crab had served as a mere hors d'oeuvre as we decided to head down to the conch shacks near Coral World. Here we indulged in the world's best strawberry banana daiquiris until the bartender informed us that there was not another

strawberry to be found in the entire archipelago. Totally whackeried we staggered over to Goldie's for a cornucopia of conch. A small mountain of conch shells provided the décor as the mollusk was mauled into conch fritters, cracked conch, conch salad and conch stew. Goldie's band was on stage and Pudge somehow persuaded me to join them. To this day I am convinced that over-indulgence in conch causes amnesia as I struggled through a rendition of 'Jammin' with most of the lyrics muffled or missing. I had conked out!

On this trip we only had a half-day in port so I had a quick Kalik and grabbed a bottle of hot sauce for my burgeoning collection. As I made my way back to Prince George Wharf, the Junkanoo girl was right behind me.

By this time I was convinced that it was Jewel playing some sort of joke on me. Standing on the dock, I was just mustering up the courage to inquire about her upper thigh when she

said,” Dance Junkanoo, eat callaloo, how do ya do now?” and disappeared back into the crowd.

I did not have time to reflect upon this curiosity as an elderly couple staggered into me on the wharf. They were the Livingstons as I could tell from their nametags but I had no idea why they were wearing them. I introduced myself and resisted the temptation to add, “I presume” to their name. They told me that they were fortifying themselves for their trip through the dreaded Bermuda Triangle. I said, “Rest assured. I’ve been through it several times and was even in Bermuda itself”.

“And nothing happened” they queried?

I replied solemnly, ”Well all the ships sank but I was able to save myself by eating my life preserver”. Their initial look of amazement was followed by one of disgust and they continued their stagger towards the ship.



## **Jack and Joanne**

### **“Sun soleil moon marae rhapsody”**

**“Get it yourself”, she cried as Jack Warren drained the last of his Stroh’s. He was reluctant to leave the television and make the long and arduous journey to the kitchen. It was the ‘68 World Series and Lolich was on the mound for the Tigers. It had been a long wait for fans in the Motor City and Jack was relishing the moment. But he knew he could relish it much better with another beer.**

**The kitchen table was strewn with fabric, leather and beads and other mysterious appurtenances that Jack regarded disdainfully. There a young woman with flowing black hair was bent over a sewing machine blissfully unaware of Jack’s presence. Jack reached into the fridge and helped himself to a beer and a burrito.**

**“Oh Juanita, can’t you see that I’m getting fatter? Try and make your tortillas flatter,” he kidded her.**

**“Go back to your silly game. I’m busy”, she retorted. Joanne, born Juanita, had come to Detroit with her father when she was only five years old. Her father had been employed as a plant mechanic who also taught night classes on the side, before his untimely death earlier that year. Joanne was employed as a saleslady in a downtown department store and spoke English without the slightest trace of an accent. She was endeavouring to create a new fashion line based on Mayan motives which Jack referred to as ‘Montezuma’s Revenge’.**

**Jack, who had never been to Mexico, didn’t know a Toltec from a totem and was perfectly happy to comply with Joanne’s wishes. Fair-haired and in his late twenties, he had been at the same plant as Joanne’s father for over ten years. He had met Joanne at a**

Christmas party for the plant's employees and she moved in with him shortly after her father's death. For some mysterious reason she would never discuss her childhood in Mexico and blanched at any questions regarding her mother. Jack had been born and raised in Warren and had never been farther than Travers City where his family used to camp near the big sand dunes by Lake Michigan. He had never tried to be nosy about her past, but had an insatiable curiosity about tropical places.

Recently Jack had felt the stirrings of discontent and had secretly been planning on taking an early pension and setting off on some South Seas adventure. Although they were totally taken with each other, both also suspected that some sort of detour was about to jeopardize their relationship. But today, like every other loyal Tigers' fan, Jack was content to watch history unfold before him.

**“Why the Tigers?” he wondered. “Or the Lions?” He could understand why the Pistons were the pistons and why the Wolverines were named after some indigenous animal found in northern Michigan. “But why the Tigers?” “Why not the carburetors...the Carbs versus the Cards or some such thing?” His reverie ended abruptly as Northrop blasted a two-run triple in the seventh inning to put the Tigers in the lead. It had been a long drought for Detroit fans and for Jack who vividly remembered their last championship the year the war ended.**

**As the first batter came up in the ninth, a lot of memories flooded through Jack’s head. He had followed this team religiously ever since he was a kid. Jack had to marvel that the team had got to where it was after the riots in Detroit the previous summer. He had been at the park that day and was dubious about the continuation of the season at all. He had tried to interest Joanne in the sport and**

had taken her to Tiger Stadium a few times. After a while he conceded that it just wasn't in her blood. In all fairness, she had not tried to force him into any of her hobbies and so a working arrangement had come to pass between them during baseball season.

Joanne's father on the other hand, had become an ardent fan and accompanied Jack to many games. He knew where all the good Mexican restaurants were down near the Ambassador Bridge, and Jack soon became an aficionado of the enchilada, eventually persuading Joanne to take up the culinary part of her heritage. However, it remained a mystery to Jack why Joanne and her father refused to try the various guacamoles that were offered them. They would not even make it at home, usually excusing themselves with some muttered phrase about avocado intolerance or something. Once, when under the influence of a few too many tequilas, Joanne's father had told Jack about some lady

**in Mexico who had chopped up her lovers and mixed them in her guacamole. Jack would not find out the real gruesome truth for another thirty years.**

**As St. Louis threatened in the bottom of the ninth, Jack began to worry and wondered about his other dream fading away as well. Then suddenly... Lolic had done it...Detroit had won! Jack jumped up and flew to the kitchen to hug a disinterested Joanne.**

**“That’s nice Jacky boy, now let me finish this”, she said. Her words came as a letdown for Jack who really wanted her to share in his celebration. At that moment he knew he must pursue his dream of South Seas adventures alone.**

**The Pacific Ocean is a big place. One could fit a dozen Caribbeans in it and still have room for a small continent. It did not take long for Jack’s romantic vision of lazy ports full of Somerset Maughan types to fade. This was the era of passports and visas and**

Jack had found himself deported from virtually every island he visited. Furthermore, evidence of Western civilization had come to taint the idyllic, picturesque vision that Jack imagined these islands to be. Abandoned automobiles and plastic bottles littered the once-pristine lagoons. Many cultures had lost their traditional skills as they became dependent on foreign aid. The slogan, 'Leave no footprints' had not been adhered to as a synecdoche since many societies were permeated with European influences. In desperation, Jack tried growing a beard and ripping his shirt so as to gain employment on some tramp steamer which never came.

Moorea had been his last resort. He had read accounts of Paul Gauguin throwing off the last vestiges of civilization to live and work amongst the natives. He soon found that an assembly worker with a torn shirt did not assimilate as easily as French painters. Out of

loyalty to his home team, he still proudly wore his Tigers cap from island to island.

However, there had been Felia. Although Jack still kept in touch with Joanne, he had been involved in a brief affair with this local Polynesian girl.

“Jack Warren from Warren Michigan” he had introduced himself, hoping to ingratiate himself to her by having the town named after him. Felia was not taken in.

“Looks more like Jack is all warren out to me,” she had replied.

Felia was a grad student doing research in marine biology. Jack had spent countless hours in the shade of a flamboyant tree listening to her talk about the fauna and flora of her Polynesian islands. Tiare, jasmine, hibiscus and frangipani were all produced for Jack’s inspection. She also instructed him on the myriad uses of noni, the local miracle fruit. Felia was deathly concerned about the nuclear testing that was being conducted by

the French government in the Tuamotos north of there. She had seen the films of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and had nightmares about her paradise being poisoned by a foreign power.

Jack had been fascinated by her knowledge of sharks and she obliged him by taking him past the reef to see the greys and the hammerheads.

“The tigers” she explained, “are not to be reckoned with.” Jack had tried baiting her with the Tigers from Detroit but she wouldn’t bite. “I know from your cap that you are referring to baseball,” she started,” and I became a Giants fan when I was studying in San Francisco. I even met Willie Mays when I was working as a waitress in Fisherman’s Wharf. And speaking of food, you must try our poisson cru, a local fish delicacy marinated in lime juice.” Jack knew that he was falling in love with this girl but she was to have none of it.

Felia had shown Jack an unusual rock formation close to the reef that looked like two fat men sitting by a table. She explained the legend of the two wise men and went on to explain how the English had abandoned these islands for subsequent exploitation by the French. She told Jack how her ancestors had been exiled with the Queen of Raitea to the Marquesas Islands far north of here. She took Jack to several marae, or sacred places, and showed him tikis while she explained to him the myths and traditions of her people. One night as they looked out over The Sea of the Moon, Jack could see the outline of Tahiti across the waters, surrounded by a halo of stars. All of the legends seemed to come alive now. In spite of his efforts at assimilation, Jack took a particular disliking for uru, or breadfruit, and wondered why such a bland food could be the source of the mutiny on the Bounty.

Felia tried to explain to Jack how the movement for self-determination was tied to her quest for ecological preservation. Her father was the aide to the chief of the independence movement. The head honcho was Claude something or other, who had recently married his brother's widow, a wealthy French woman. Felia's father, Polytua, had reservations about this conflict of interests, but remained loyal to the movement. He had forbidden Felia to pursue a relationship with Jack for fear of compromising the integrity of the movement.

"This is tapu, or taboo as you call it," Felia explained. Jack had wondered about what became of the daughters of men who reach for their dreams.

He did not have to wonder long because his deportation came faster than he had expected. Thus, less than a year from his exodus from Detroit, Jack found himself waiting on tables at a resort in Oahu, his

idyllic fantasy tarnished. His expulsion from Tahiti had been especially hard since he did not have a chance to say goodbye to Felia. Their last night together had been spent at the enchanting Tiki Village that was an authentic replication of traditional Tahitian life. Although at first it seemed a bit touristy to Jack, later in the evening one of the frequent power failures meant the festivities would have to be conducted under the light of a full moon and supplemented by torches. The music and dancing transported Jack back to another time. He could feel the beat of the drums synchronized with the rhythm of the reef while even the stars seemed to become animated as their stellar namesakes.

Adding salt to his wounds, Jack also found out that his beloved Tigers had fallen to pieces this year. Jack vaguely felt pangs of guilt for not being there to support them. He also felt guilty for abandoning Joanne, although he had corresponded with her

regularly and discovered that she had become an overnight sensation with her line of summer wear.

For over two months Jack waited on tables supplemented by his small pension. In spite of the fact that he had bought a new shirt, he was constantly the butt of his co-workers jokes.

“Jack, you look warren out” they would say while Jack forced a smile. He had heard this joke too many times not to go along with it. The truth was that he was indeed worn out and disillusioned with his South Seas fantasy. He did not even use the opportunity to visit some of the incredible parks throughout the Hawaiian Islands. Then during one glorious Hawaiian sunset he spotted a woman with long, dark flowing hair sitting in his section. A ping of recognition ran up his spine as he approached her table.

“Merry Christmas Jacky boy. Would you fetch me a Mai Tai?”

**Recovering quickly, Jack grinned and said, “Get it yourself”, and then embraced her.**

## **The Not So Virgin Islands**

**“Thousands of windstorms would not make you yield”**

**One would think that after a day and a half at sea, the grand entrance into Charlotte Amalie harbour would be a welcome sight. However, there is plenty to do on these new mega ships...rock climbing, ice skating, roller blading, shuffleboard, mini golf, bridge, aerobics, ping pong, towel folding and of course dancing and dining. On the decks with the pools and hot tubs, one can find acres of white flesh baking to a merry shade of pink in the tropical sun. I knew I had done my best to entertain the passengers and had added an extra show in the afternoon for our day at sea.**

**I had already met a cross-section of cruisers and immediately became friends with Jack Warren from Laguna Beach. I could tell by his hat that Jack was a Tigers' fan and**

**we traded stories about the great players from the Sixties.**

**“You know that was when teams were teams before all this expansion stuff and free agent crap,” he lamented. Agreeing wholeheartedly I proceeded to tell him how my late grandfather would take me to the games in Detroit by train. He knew every watering hole within a half mile of Michigan and Trumble. I told him I had even hitchhiked to Tiger Stadium the day of the riots.**

**“What a coincidence”, he replied, “because I was there too”. Suitably impressed that I had not gone over to the Blue Jays’ side after their back-to-back championships, he added, “They are all American players anyway.” I decided not to discuss hockey.**

**Jack told me that he had spent some time in the South Pacific but confessed he had always been fascinated by the Caribbean. I suggested that he and his wife join me for snorkeling at Trunk Bay on the island of St.**

**John. Enthusiastically I continued to tell him about the underwater snorkeling trail and how beautiful the island was. We then discussed the relative merits of snorkeling versus diving, and agreed that the spontaneity of snorkeling was more appealing than wearing those cumbersome suits and forking out the expense of the dive boat.**

**Just as there is a Big Five for those who favour an African game safari, there is also a Big Five for snorkelers and divers. The big difference is that the snorkeler is not observing from the comfort and safety of a Land Rover. I had seen many predators in their element, and I assure you that it is disconcerting to realize that I was merely part of the food chain. Whales, sharks of any kind, dolphins, rays and turtles would probably fit the viewing menu of the aquatic Big Five. I couldn't promise Jack that he would see any of these specimens, but I assured him that it**

was a welcome alternative to a day in the duty-free shops.

Usually, sailing into the sparkling blue harbour of Charlotte Amalie is spectacular with the sight of the surrounding hills scattered with pastel dwellings. However, that Wednesday morning I was dismayed to find no less than five ships had preceded ours. St. Thomas was about to be overwhelmed with the potential of over ten thousand passengers disembarking. There would not be a square inch of sand available at beautiful Magen's Bay, one of the most spectacular beaches in the world. I was glad to be bypassing this by way of the ferry to St. John.

As I made my way down to join the tour, I came across Jack being berated by a woman whom I assumed to be his wife.

"Swimming with silly fishes" was all I could hear her say as I walked up to greet them. Jack introduced me to his wife Joanne,

and I was momentarily taken aback by her aggressiveness.

“So it was you music man, who talked Jackie into this?” When I assured her that there were some wonderful shops in Cruz bay, she seemed to warm to the idea and even tried to be friendly.

“Did you know that Jackie boy wrote a play about these jungle islands?” she asked me. Surprised, but delighted to discover that my new friend was an author, I replied negatively. Joanne continued, “Yes, it was called ‘The Two Wise Men’ and was even performed one night at the MC5. The critics didn’t seem to think there was much action and that it was sort of a minimalist Zen thing. But they said it was full of verisimilsomething.” I replied that I was looking forward to reading it and asked if he had written anything else. Jack replied no because he was too busy looking after

**Joanne's interests with some business venture on Rodeo Drive.**

**The ferry ride was as beautiful as ever with a host of islands dotting the horizon and inviting us for exploration. As we docked in Cruz Bay, Joanne immediately took off towards the shops while Jack and I waited for our transport. The village was already teeming with people on tours from other ships as we patiently queued for a beer or a ride, whichever we could get first. As I suspected, Jack was into conservation as well as baseball and already knew of the endowment by Lawrence Rockefeller to make this island two-thirds National Park. He informed me that his country had purchased the Virgin Islands from Denmark during the First World War for what seed to be an extravagant twenty-five million dollars. I wondered what kind of tourist revenue they were generating today and wished that Canada would invest in some tropical oasis.**

Finally, just as Joanne returned with her shopping booty, our trolley was ready. We filed into the back of the open vehicle and sped off.

“The driver’s a lunatic,” shrieked Joanne. “He’s driving on the wrong side of the road.” I quickly reassured her that it was normal to drive on the left side of the road in a lot of countries. I could not however, fathom why they drove American cars here that had the steering wheels on the left side as well. Because of our proximity to the left, we were afforded a stunning view of Hawksnest Beach as we came over the summit. This had been the location for several Hollywood movies that required an accessible paradise. We arrived at Trunk Bay a few minutes later and stopped to admire the kapok trees before heading to the beach.

Disappointing would hardly describe our arrival there, as throngs of tourists lined the beach and splashed cheerfully in the

water. As I suspected, the coral had been damaged by this onslaught of tourism and I said regretfully to Jack, “This used to be pristine. All these people and those boats...it used to be an aquatic wonderland.”

Seeing my embarrassment, Jack replied, “ Not all this damage is anthropogenic. The endosymbiotic algae, or zooxanthellae as they are properly called, often disappear through natural causes such as hurricanes or a change in water temperature.” I stared at him amazed as he continued.

“These are primary sources of nutrition for the polyps that build the reefs. Corals have natural predators as well, such as the Crown-of thorns that feed on many reefs in the Pacific. Corals are also susceptible to ultraviolet rays, sedimentation and diseases, so it is not just a problem caused by humans.” Fascinated, I asked Jack how he came to know so much about this subject. Jack paused then

said wistfully,” I had a fabulous teacher in Moorea.”

On our way back to the ship I had time to reflect about the need for conservation. Some places like the Galapagos and Los Roques had been designated as sanctuaries for marine life. I also thought of the unselfish work being performed by organizations such as the World Wildlife Foundation. My thoughts drifted back to the disgraceful act of the French government sabotaging the Rainbow Warrior. The Kyoto Accord, fossil fuels, war in the Gulf...was it out of our hands now?

As we chugged back into our harbour full of no less than seven luxury gas-guzzlers, I realized that I was contributing to the problem. I wondered,” Could they not stagger the sailings instead of always departing on a Saturday or Sunday?” What if they stayed in the same location for a few days so we could explore more of these islands? Practicality

was the order of my life. I could have ridden my bicycle to Florida and then paddled my canoe a thousand miles into the Caribbean. No, it is better to do what I am able to do... write! It's coming to me now. 'Hug a tree but don't touch the coral.'

Just as we had reached the ship, I saw the Junkanoo girl again. This had gone too far I thought and rushed over to confront her. To my surprise it was Jewel who coyly said, "Eat Callaloo, how do you do now." I knew now that I had been the victim of one of her many practical jokes.

"But how...and what are you doing here?" I stammered.

"You knew I was working on a cruise ship this winter," she began, "and it just so happened our itineraries co-incided for these two ports."

I introduced her to Jack and Joanne, and Jewel complimented Joanne on her Mayan Melody line of clothes. I was so intent

on trying to comprehend the roots of these recent coincidences that I could not recall either a Mayan melody or a Toltec tune I was so flabbergasted. Since we both had an hour or so to kill before returning to work, we decided to wander down to one of the stalls by the dock for a drink.

Over our virgin coladas we reminisced about some not so virgin coladas we had shared on Union Island in the Grenadines. We had awoken there the following morning with the most monumental hangovers in the history of the world, before embarking upon a sailing excursion to the Tobago Keys, another protected sight. Once again nature proved to be the ultimate healer as the beautiful hues of the lagoon rejuvenated us like a tropical version of blues. Soon we would once again be like ships passing in the night, as hers was headed to Puerto Rico, and mine towards the French Antilles.



**Guadeloupe**

**“Ate Johnnycakes, roti, conch fritters and stew”**

**“There is a gargantuan difference between a gastronomer and a gastropod” I explained. The Rogers were not merely apprehensive about their meal, they appeared to be mortified. Why would anyone come to a French restaurant and order a cheeseburger?**

**“A gastropod is a small mollusk like your escargot while a gastronomer or gastronomist is a culinary connoisseur”, I finished smugly. They were still not convinced. Young Peter piped in, “It’s a good thing you can parlee French.” The truth was that my oral skills were limited to backwoods slang but I was still able to translate a menu.**

**We had arrived at Guadeloupe that Thursday morning and had enjoyed the wonderful scenery off our portside as we docked at Pointe-a-Pitre. To everyone’s delight, we were the only ship docking that**

Wednesday morning. Our captain had somehow outdistanced the rest of the herd that were probably stampeding the more commercial islands of St. Martin or Antigua. Furthermore, we were here until midnight, which meant that we could enjoy a night on the town for a change.

I decided to indulge myself and rent a car for the day. I had intended to drive around Basse-Terre and assault the summit of La Soufriere, the steaming volcano. I asked Jack and Joanne if they were interested in joining me, hoping to redeem myself for yesterday's failed excursion. Joanne had replied tersely that not even a major eruption would keep her out of the boutiques today. I managed to conscript a couple of college girls from Vancouver who were on spring break, as well as a retired roofing contractor from Newark named Mario, who was living in Florida now. Angie was originally from Hong Kong and spoke fluent Mandarin, a skill I

hoped we would not have to use if we got lost that day. Andrea was Afro-American or I guess Afro-Canadian, whatever is politically correct, and could blend in easily with the locals here.

Satisfied with our ethno-intellectual motoring ménage, we proceeded southwards down the east coast of Basse-Terre until we reached the botanical gardens called Valombreuse Floral Parc. Here we were treated to all manners of tropical plants... orchids, heliconias and ginger. I never seem to tire in delighting in flowers, being a true child of the Sixties, but the rest of the group seemed anxious to move on.

“Hell” said Mario, “you can see all this stuff at Fairchild’s back home.” He had assimilated well as a Floridian, and had long forgotten the sloppy, grey winters in Newark. Then Angie added, “We have botanical gardens right on our campus that contain most of these species.” It was time to move on.

Next we turned at Saint Sauveur and headed up towards the Chutes Du Carbet, and soon saw two magnificent waterfalls plunging down the mountain. A short hike through the jungle brought us to the base of the first waterfall. It was too beautiful to resist and the girls were soon frolicking in the water.

“Come on in,” they yelled, but I shouted back something about catching bilharzias. Mario said that his bills were all paid and jumped in after the girls. I had wimped out but would redeem myself at the volcano.

The drive to La Soufriere was spectacular as we passed banana plantations and more botanical gardens. Mario explained that he had done enough climbing for a lifetime and was content to sip on some Corsaires while he waited for me. The girls decided to explore the impromptu straw market in the parking area while I assaulted the summit.

La Soufriere had not erupted since 1976, but the smell of sulphur increased my trepidation as I ascended through the various strata of flora. Volcanoes have fascinated me since an early age when I saw Spenser Tracy rescuing the villagers in 'The Devil at Four O'clock'. I knew that the next day the ship was scheduled to pass Pele on Martinique and was to proceed to the Pitons on Saint Lucia. We were going to anchor outside the town called La Soufriere for an excursion by tender to a drive-in volcano. I was not included in this exclusive excursion so I was hoping to make the most out of today.

The West Indies has a history of violent eruptions, the latest happening on Montserrat, the so-called Emerald Isle. Most of the islands were formed by these karst occurrences that created a rich volcanic soil for the next generation of islanders. Those like Pele had tragically taken more life than it gave. It was food for thought as I continued

my ascent hoping I would not become fertilizer for some banana plantation.

Under normal conditions, I could walk for days but climbing was another matter. Being a habitual smoker had not affected my legs whatsoever, but my lungs were panting halfway up the mountain. I had quit smoking several times and considered myself an expert on the subject. The patch, the pill, and something called intestinal fortitude had worked on several occasions. Satisfied I had beat the cravings, I defiantly started again with renewed vigour and determination to catch up on my nicotine intake. I had even tried hypnosis and had to be hypnotized a second time so I would stop barking between drags on my cigarette.

Some two hours later I returned huffing and sweating and perhaps even looking a bit like Spenser Tracy. I had been defeated by the volcano so I suggested we find a beach. Mario was getting pretty soused at this point and

was making lewd comments about the woodcarving that Andrea had purchased. We drove north to Malendure Beach and were just in time to join a snorkeling tour on a glass-bottom boat. Mario declined to join us preferring to entertain customers at the local bar with his rendition of 'inky-dinky parlez vous' served up with his Italian accent.

The boat took us out to Pigeon Island, where Jacques Cousteau had established an underwater reserve. Here I was surrounded by myriad species of fish and wished that Jack had come along to enjoy this. I once again commented to myself that more areas needed to be conserved and cherished if we are to pass any legacy of the planet on to future generations.

When we returned to our rental car, we found Mario slouched in the passenger's seat muttering something about 'Eve of the garden's delights'. He had met some woman in the bar where his roofer's charm had only

served to have him physically extricated. He slept most of the way back to the ship. After depositing him in his cabin, I returned the rental car and decided to try the island's fare instead of eating on the ship.

The French Antilles have a decidedly different flavour than say the Spanish or British islands. Pointe-a-Pitre was bursting with fabulous Creole restaurants and since my presence on stage was not required until later that evening, I decided to peruse some menus. Quiches, flambes and fromages tempted me to raise my cholesterol levels exponentially, but I at last settled upon the choice of lambi fricasee. Upon entering the restaurant, I was greeted by the Rogers family who kindly asked me to join them.

They hailed from suburban Philadelphia and this was their first trip abroad. Peter senior had a car dealership while his wife had her hands full raising

young Peter whose spiked hair gave him the appearance of a sea urchin on legs. Metallic rap did not seem to be much of a topic for conversation but it turned out that the whole family was sports enthusiasts. I couldn't resist.

“What does your baseball team order when it goes to a French restaurant?” “Philly mignon of course.”

Thank goodness it wasn't long before our steaming plates arrived redolent of garlic butter and local spices. Peter had obviously thought it apropos to order French fries in a French restaurant. His parents who did not know Chateaubriand from Chateau Frontenac, were horrified at the sight of their entrees. When I had finished my explanation about the delicacies of snails, Peter was ecstatic to trade plates with his parents. Then he asked me about the lambi and I told him that it was lamprey.

**“Cool,” he said admiringly. I was sure  
the kid would barbeque a gerbil if he had one.**

**Will Come to my Paradise**

**“She glides down through the streets”**

**We had concurred conclusively that we owed ourselves a vacation. The band had been touring and recording for almost four years now without a break. Most of this time had been grueling-long distances on the Trans-Canada, searches at the border, and countless nights in the recording studio while friends were out partying at the beach. Breakdowns on desolate stretches, equipments malfunctions, colds and flues constantly impeded our progress. We owed ourselves a vacation.**

**It was mid February, I was approaching my thirtieth birthday, and our plane was headed for Trinidad and the annual Carnival festivities. Already I had doubts as to our ability to adapt to a week of leisure as I glanced at my fellow passengers.**

Sandy, our drummer, had his harmonica out at the airport, and being a born entertainer, had performed for an impatient crowd in the boarding area. Now, on the plane, he had been keeping his drumsticks in constant motion for the last hour, eyes closed and headphones on.

Billy, our sound engineer, was alternately checking his camera gear and reading a technical report regarding sound specifications. Having time to reflect myself, I wondered about the future of the band and the direction it might take. Times were always changing and the advent of disco had seen the demise of many performing bands. The musical pendulum had swung back to a simple good time music that required more physical energy than cerebral energy to appreciate.

It was my job as the band's writer to keep the material fresh and in tune with the times. So although I was on vacation, I was

eager to sponge some new ideas from the islands. I had envisioned a sort of fusion between the progressive and tropical genres of music... Frank Zappa meets Bob Marley if you will.

Port of Spain customs was no different than any other we had encountered on the road. Three longhaired travelers were ushered into the immigration room for the customary search and interrogation. I've always been tempted to write "missionary" rather than "musician" on the declaration card just to see what happens.

After the customary cassette tapes and signed 8 by 10's were surrendered, we ventured out into the heat. And what heat! Anyone who has flown out of Canada on a bitterly cold February morning will attest to the fact that stepping out onto a tropical tarmac is tantamount to a full body and soul massage.

We decided to pass on Port of Spain for the day and head straight to the beach. The boys busied themselves negotiating with a taxi driver by the name of Toby while I detoured for a refreshment. Becoming impatient with their decision on cab drivers I quipped, "Toby or not Toby, that is the question," and that settled it.

As we sped along the North Coast Rd. and through the mountains, our winter-weary trio was treated to a blur of bamboo, jungles and vines. Maracas Bay is one of those classic scenic tropical beach postcard vistas. Billy, who had never been to a beach outside of Canada, had used up an entire roll of film before we had even hit the surf. "A Patois of Palms' is what I will call this series," he said excitedly.

"A bucket of beer would excite me even more" I replied.

Carnival was starting the next day and would prove to be beyond our expectations.

Carnival was not merely Calypso, but a cornucopia of musical styles impossible to digest or analyze in one day. Flatbeds would transport the various performers, many of which had PA systems, through the narrow streets lined with spectators.

Unlike Mardi Gras in New Orleans where beads were thrown off the opulent floats, this was a musical festival in motion. The trucks did not linger long enough in any one place so as to hear an entire song, so we found ourselves hurrying alongside them.

Ubiquitous were the tiny bottles of Polar Beer, manufactured in Venezuela with a Canadian carnivore on the label. Pausing often to refresh, we were constantly engulfed in a cacophony of cheering revelers while the sounds of music and its Doppler effects and echoes were hypnotizing. It was raw material for a Charles Ives's opus.

The next two days passed quickly. I was analyzing, Sandy was socializing, and Billy

was photosizing. Our careers had somehow become entangled with our personalities, - or was it vice-versa. Regardless, we were thoroughly enjoying ourselves, jamming and crashing with the locals and becoming rejuvenated.

Sandy was in his element, clowning around and playing the drums and harmonica at the same time. He had a natural propensity for getting in the middle of things, moving from band to band and jamming with them. Billy was shuddering at the cost of shuttering. Word had spread around that he was some kind of famous photographer from an American Model magazine, so he constantly had an entourage of female admirers waiting to have their pictures taken. Billy wore an unusual gold ring on the middle finger of his right hand that flashed in the sunlight whenever he raised his camera. He would jokingly refer to it as "O'Precious" since the design on it signified some Celtic myth about

nymphs in the River Liffey or some such blarney. Nevertheless, it was stunning and attracted a lot of unwanted attention.

I felt like a fish out of water. Although I had some ideas fermenting about a fusion of rock and tropical music, I could not understand how the notes were arranged on the pans. Steel drums are modern instruments that were ingeniously fashioned out of discarded oil barrels. After World War Two, they came into their own prominence as the drums quickly developed from a medium for simple calypso tunes, to a repertoire of massed pan philharmonic proportion. While working on a music degree in university, I had learned to play a variety of instruments, but the notes on the pans were all over the place and I could not figure out the logic of the note placement. I had to content myself with a simple version of Jamaica Farewell.

Shrove Tuesday promised to be the highlight of Carnival with awards presented

to the best bands. Even the fans seemed to compete with each other in an intense party atmosphere that became more primal each day. It is unlikely that many understood the religious significance of Mardi Gras or Lent, and it was certainly the farthest thing from our minds that tropical Tuesday.

Late in the afternoon, as we were about to head down to Queen's Park Savannah, Billy was trying to capture a new and exciting subject in his lens. She could have been the Pageant Queen as she was regaled in some traditional African costume. Her entire figure moved and mesmerized as the pulse of the music fuelled her forward. Her body was as contrapuntal as the music that drove it. Hands and torso moved in opposite directions from her feet, while her eyes hypnotized bystanders who froze in their tracks.

Billy was in a trance. He shouted something about catching up with us later and started following her up the street. His

camera protruded from his face like some hunting apparatus, while his ring was flashing some subliminal code. On and on she lead him like a dancing Delilah enticing his shutters, synchronized with the intensified rhythms of the music.

Night was falling as Billy looked up from his camera to survey his surroundings. She had been metamorphosized from a photo opportunity to primal prey. Billy, now totally disoriented, had no choice but to pursue her down the narrow back alleys of Port of Spain. He felt like Kurtz being drawn up the river in “Heart of Darkness”. Sweating profusely and with his heart and temple pounding, he watched as she turned and flashed her eyes at him and disappeared into a wooden shack.

Breathless and still in a trance, he staggered through the door after her. As his eyes adjusted to the dimness of the dwelling, he beheld her dancing around a small fire in the middle of the hut shaking a couple of

bamboo rattles. Faster and wilder she moved about on the bare, dirt floor, dancing and entrancing. A wisp of a poem he had written seemed to come to him from the smoke.

“Eyes see red at every glancing, leads the dead in devil dancing.”

Adrift in a sea of smoke, he continued to let himself be seduced by this siren, as if he was marooned on some fantastic island ruled by this goddess of obeah. Billy found it increasingly hard to breathe but stood rooted on the spot like some totem transported into another time. Suddenly the music stopped and she leaped through the fire to face him.

“Welcome to my paradise,” were the last words he remembered.

Wednesday morning Port of Spain had the somber look of ‘the party’s over’. The entire city seemed to groan like a hangover ensemble. Sandy and I were waiting at the ferry dock and were not surprised that Billy did not show for the first embarkation. We

thought that a couple of days in Tobago would be a nice contrast to the last four days of bacchanalian behaviour. We decided to go on without him figuring that his new subject required some extra attention. Besides, Billy could catch up with us in Pigeon Point or at the airport on Friday.

Tobago was indeed refreshing after the confinement of Port of Spain. We did some great jungle treks, sometimes lasting close to two hours without returning for a beer. It was the snorkeling that astounded us.

“We’re not in Kansas anymore” became the joke as the spectacle of tropical fish and the richness of the reef held us spellbound.

Friday came and with resignation we boarded the ferry back to Trinidad. Our flight was scheduled for late evening so we had some time to kill. Sandy wanted to visit the zoo and I wanted to check out the botanical gardens. We were surprised that Billy was not

at the dock to meet us when we arrived at Port of Spain.

We wandered up to Independence Square and asked directions to the police station. There we were relieved to find out that no red-haired white boys had been incarcerated this week. Sandy and I shrugged at each other and then continued our long walk to the zoo.

I really don't care much to see animals in captivity, although I have seen how some zoos have become much-needed refuges for endangered species. Nevertheless I was still enthralled to witness the spectacular plumage of some of the tropical birds one might only catch a glimpse of in their natural habitat.

Next we ventured through the Botanical Gardens with magnificent trees that were over a hundred years old. We were lured down paths with various flowering bushes that were the envy of any gardener up north. One red-flowering bush was labeled

**'Chaconia' and was the national flower of Trinidad and Tobago. It was in a plot of heliconia that we beheld one of the strangest sights we had ever seen...a half-naked man with flowers in his shocking red hair...it was Billy!**

**He was unshaven and badly sunburned and seemed to be totally disoriented.**

**"What the..." was all I could manage as a faint glimpse of recognition forced a feeble smile from him. As he stood up and hobbled towards us, I was stunned to see a Celtic design had been branded on his chest...it was from his ring. Sandy and I looked in horror, neither of us able to venture a question. Billy simply said, "Welcome to my paradise."**

## **Carnival**

### **“Buccaneers, pirates and knaves”**

**As we disembarked Saturday afternoon in Trinidad, we knew they had started the party without us. There were few excursions planned for that day. Everyone was up for Carnival, with many of the passengers already bedecked in full costumes. Although the parades didn't officially begin until Monday, there were impromptu performances and mas camps everywhere. As was the case with every destination on our itinerary, I would have like to have a few days to explore more of these islands. Trinidad was one of the larger islands and had designated a lot of space for National Parks and bird sanctuaries. Being so close to South America, it had a unique ecosystem that would have to be explored at another time.**

**I experienced a strange sensation, as I strolled up to Woodford Square, that I had**

some unfinished business here. Mario had jumped off the boat early, no doubt in search of a Trini beauty pageant. Angie and Andrea had set out to find a mas camp and assimilate themselves into the festivities. At Woodford Square I encountered the Livingstons who were well bedecked in Carnival attire, and well on the way of getting soused again.

“I see you folks made it safely through the Bermuda triangle” I quipped as they regarded me contemptuously.

Ever since we left Guadeloupe I had began to sense that this whole trip had been pre-destined. Trinidad seemed to act as a magnet, that while drawing the ship southward, had also drawn me to the introspective. After my fine meal Thursday night, I had got to thinking more of the variety of culture one finds in the West Indies. No doubt much of the cuisine was based on what food resources were available on each island, but the variety of nationalities also

contributed. For example, in the past hundred years, the number of people from the Indian subcontinent began to grow in Trinidad, as did their contributions to the culinary arts. Curry and roti found their way to other Caribbean islands and so today a culinary cornucopia awaits the hungry traveler.

I tried to put this variety of cultures into some kind of historical perspective. Although the Spanish originally laid claim to most of the Caribbean, some of the islands had changed hands as much as twenty times before the present scheme of things. The French, the Dutch, the Danes, and of course the British, all decided to help themselves to a share of this Spanish paella. Swashbucklers like Captain Morgan were rewarded with governorships and soon the wholesale theft of islands was encouraged under Cromwell's 'Grand Design'. However, it was a little-known battle outside of Quebec City that more or less

decided the fate of the Caribbean's present-day cartography.

The ensuing Treaty of Paris saw Guadeloupe returned to the French while the British took full reign over the land of the beaver. At this time, most of the other Caribbean islands had their sovereignty decided as well, and except for an occasional purchase or revolution, have remained this way ever since. The West Indies thus became a checkerboard of cultures stretching from Havana to Port of Spain. The game was played for sugar that fuelled the industrial revolution for the host nations. The unfortunate pawns in this game were the African slaves whose sweat and labour became the cultural glue that formed the region's homogeny. The King of France must have had some chuckle knowing he had retained his cane fields in Guadeloupe while the English were counting moose droppings in the second largest country in the world.

Furthermore, this treaty returned Louisiana to the French who traded it back and forth with the Spanish before the States purchased it for a few million buffalo pelts. Indeed the only European nations not involved with expansionism were the Swiss, whose navy could not penetrate the Alps, and the Irish who had failed to repel Oliver's armies. Imagine the latter nation occupying Louisiana. We would have McIssippi Delta, the Celtic Quarter in New O'Leans, Bushmills Street, and Guinness served at hurling matches in the Dome. The Blarney Gras would be a celebration of jigs and reels. And then there would be Irish cooking, an oxymoron if I ever heard one.

I could never ponder the topic of the Irish without my thoughts straying back to Billy. Why his parents had ever named him after the victor of the Boyne was one of those marvelous contradictions that kept the world interesting. He had frequented my pub

several times over the years but even through he still had his Celtic wit, I could tell even through the alcoholic haze that he wasn't quite all there anymore. However, he was still a brilliant striker on the soccer team that was sponsored by the tire shop where he worked. I had seen him play on several occasions but each time his shirt came off in celebration, the reminder of the past Carnival was still painfully evident.

Sports in the Caribbean are also diversified but influenced by the mother countries. You will have a long wait to see a bullfight in Barbados but cricket remains popular here and in other former British colonies. Baseball has emerged on some islands that have American influences, while soccer remains the common denominator in athletics throughout the West Indies.

As soccer is to sports, Scotch Bonnets or capsicum peppers are to Caribbean cooking, except of course in Mexico where chile and

jalepeno peppers are preferred. They say that the coconut does not fall far from the tree, but in the case of Jamaica this is certainly not true. Here more than anywhere else in the Caribbean, a truly unique cuisine has emerged with saltfish and ackee, Jamaican patties, and jerked everything to name a few dishes.

It was becoming increasingly muggy so I bought a drink and paused in a shady spot to listen to a mas band practicing. There was a young woman there with an expensive-looking video camera, who looked to be making a documentary or something like that. I approached her and with my Irish charm, asked if she would like to do a video of my shadow bunnies. As I wiggled my two fingers and thumb to simulate the bunny's head, I further suggested that she could document my shadow bunny surfing and sailing with a full musical score provided by myself. In no uncertain terms she told me

what I could do with my fingers and I moved on.

As I thought about the evolution of the steel drum, it occurred to me that music in the Caribbean also fell into cultural categories as well. The former British colonies had invented calypso, soca and reggae while the French islands had developed zouk. Cuba and Puerto Rico had produced salsa and lemon merengue and many other musical offerings that could be danced to or devoured. All shared the roots of African rhythms.

While listening to a band rehearse becomes monotonous to other people, I personally enjoy hearing the development and polishing of a piece of music. I had considered returning to the Botanical Gardens, not so much for the sake of nostalgia, but to see how nature had developed here since my last visit. Besides, I couldn't remember the names of half the species that were growing there. Something

about the music kept me riveted to the spot. It was like watching an old master like Van Gogh developing a masterpiece through a series of sketches and experimenting in colours and hues. Music, like painting, had evolved over the centuries from the patronage of the Church to one of universal expression and enjoyment.

Religion also was part of the cultural baggage brought from overseas. Roman Catholicism is prevalent in the French and Spanish islands, while Protestantism remains the chief faith in the Dutch and British islands. One can find pockets of Asian religions such as Hinduism and Islam in Trinidad, while Rastafarianism with its African roots, has spread from Jamaica throughout the West Indies. Indeed, I could not remember seeing any Rastas in my prior visit a couple of decades ago. Obeah, or a type of black magic voodoo, was also imported

from Africa and is still clandestinely practiced today.

While I was dwelling on this practice of sorcery, I came upon a poster in Woodford Square that stopped me cold in my tracks. Elections were drawing near, and posters of the hopeful candidates were plastered everywhere. I had seen her face before. It had been over twenty years but who could forget that seductive smile and those eyes that seemed to burn right through you. At the bottom of the poster her campaign slogan read, "Welcome to my Paradise." Hanging around her neck on a gold chain was Billy's ring.

While I stood there riveted to the spot, one of the musicians came up to me and asked, "You okay mon?" As I inquired about the face on the poster he proceeded to tell me that she had once been the leader of a street gang and now owned a nightclub where she

continued her spurious activities on a grander scale.

“Ech night she perch on de bar stool til she find a mark den she strike. She be like de dancing Delilah. Mon don know wat hit im. She be de queen of de night.”

I am not the least bit superstitious, but I couldn't help thinking about my friend Billy and how his life fell apart after our trip here in the Seventies. I am also one who tries not to dwell on the past and was determined not to let this event tarnish the festivity of the afternoon. Although I felt smug in having encapsulated the regional socialism of Caribbean culture, I felt that there was something I was still missing...something mysterious and sinister imported from the Dark Continent fermenting here.

Sunday in Barbados

“Cast on the shore...marooned”

As the old joke goes, 'if today is Sunday we must be in Barbados'. I didn't think it was funny the first time I heard it either. We had docked at the terminal in Bridgetown just before sunrise and the city was still fast asleep. This served as a refreshing change from the previous night's raucousness as Carnival parties raged through the night all over the ship. Usually I like to be up in time to watch the ship entering the different harbours, but social obligations which I considered part of my employment, had meant that I had hit the sack shortly before our arrival.

We only had a half a day in port and none of the excursions particularly appealed to me. Tours had been offered for a submarine ride, a spelunking expedition and a dash through the Flower Forest complete with lunch. This last offering had tempted me, but I preferred my flora at a more leisurely

pace and so I was standing on deck with six hours and a coffee in my hands.

As I've mentioned before, one of my greatest enjoyments in life is a stroll through botanical gardens. I especially like the ones that label the various species, as I am still unfamiliar with the myriad tropical varieties. Even more appealing are the ones that have some history to them like the baths and gardens in St. Lucia that were designed for recreational purposes for Napoleon's troops. The botanical garden in Kingstown, St. Vincent, has breadfruit trees that were transported there by the infamous Captain Bligh. There were probably some really famous plants here that Admiral Nelson might have planted but they would have to wait for another time.

The forecasters had prognosticated a chance of, or rather a possibility of, or a maybe and perhaps some drizzle today, further dampening the idea of toddling

around some soggy plants. Most species are best admired in the sunlight, especially one of my favourite plants, the croton, with its hallucinogenic colours. Both the Flower Forest and the Andromeda Gardens offer the visitor some spectacular foliage if that is what one is into.

It was not as if I had nothing to do, but most of what I should have been doing involved some useless endeavour called work, which could be performed on some snowy evening back home. Once a friend of mine, known as the Bear and since departed, had suggested that when faced with the dilemma of choosing an activity for a short layover, find a restaurant that serves up some local cuisine. Kipling had judged a country by its smell, myself by ecological standards, and the Bear by its epicurean offerings.

Being Sunday, I knew that the Mount Gay distillery and the Banks' Brewery would be closed. These are two of my favourite

famous plants that can be savored in any weather. This limited my choices. I remembered that the peppercorn in Holetown was extraordinary, but Ouistins served up bar-b-qued flying fish that were out of this world, or at least out of the water. By now it was past eight o'clock and looking to be overcast as predicted. As usual, my mind began to wander while my feet were still moored to the deck.

“Why call it Sunday if the sun is not guaranteed to appear all fifty-two weeks of the year,” I was thinking profoundly. “The French call it Dimanche or dimday which is perhaps more applicable. And Barbados was named by a Portuguese sailor and means ‘the bearded ones’. But what if it had been named by the French? ‘Isle sans Gillette’? And how many words like epicurean and boycott are named after people and would I ever have a word named after me...”they macked up the whole island until it was mackable in its

mackishness". If etymology is a sort of word history, then do cuisines evolve through ethno-indigenouculinarydemographics?

Sounds German. It was time to jump off de boat." I was thinking too much.

I had made my way to Trafalgar Square when it began to drizzle. Just then an elderly couple from the ship strolled by and asked if I would like to join them for a visit to St. Michael's Cathedral. They were the Lawrences and this was their first time off the ship. He was a retired professor of Latin while his younger wife was an elementary school supply teacher. Both seemed to prefer an Ivy League sort of apparel onboard and were quite fond of the dining room traditions and their after-dinner brandies. They were not part of the Hawaiian shirt and Mai Tai crowd. I had some raucous Latin jokes in my repertoire, but judging from their look of piety, I thought I had better keep them to myself. I would risk being part of the

congregation rather than be the focus of Mr. Lawrence's conjugation. There seemed to be lots of people like the Lawrences who just enjoyed cruising and never left the ship. It was not turning out to be a beach day and since everything in town seemed to be closed, I thought "Why not?"

While I am not a religious zealot, (my faith seems to linger in a Celtic-Buddhist limbo) my skills as an organist and arranger had required my presence in churches of many denominations for weddings and funerals. I admit that there are probably not a lot of people who would wander into a church just to check out the tunes, but I was one of them.

Furthermore, my passion for architecture has often manifested itself in tours of cathedrals, wats, and numerous other sacred edifices. In Cambodia I had toured the ruins of Angkor Wat with an overweight psychiatrist who was on vacation. When I saw

his look of concern over the fifty or so stairs leading to the temple, I couldn't resist.

“Wats up doc?” I kill myself sometimes .I had recently driven all over the Philippines in search of a church with a bamboo organ that was out of commission. It was another been there but not done it scenario. I had even taken my children on what seemed to be an educational tour of the Vatican when they were quite young. In the middle of St. Peter's Basilica my five year old daughter had asked,” Daddy, what's all this God stuff?” As this question echoed around the dome for what seemed an eternity, we were met with austere looks from several nuns who were no doubt wondering what us heathens were doing there.

In Barbados, St. Michael's looked like the sort of place one could find refuge from the perils of daily life as well as hurricanes. However, upon investigation, I was informed that the original structure had been destroyed

**in a hurricane and that the new church was only a little more than two hundred years old. Even though it was well past the hurricane season, I ventured inside with the service already started.**

**“For what is a man but to sleep and feed?” came the voice bellowing from the pulpit. “The Sirens will seduce you with lust and greed until you are cast alone on the shores of damnation. Marooned”, he continued. At this juncture Mrs. Lawrence leaned over and whispered, “Don’t you just love Ecclesiastes?” I was about to inquire if Ecclesiastes was one of the Three Tenors, but seeing the look of piety on her face, thought it better to contain my biblical humour.**

**The bellowing voice continued.” For what is a man who lacks integrity? He will be cast off of the mountain and set adrift at sea. Marooned”. I’m not sure why, but anytime a priest or minister is sermonizing about sin, I always feel like they are staring right at me. It**

was the ultimate time for soul-searching and after a fruitless search, I breathed a sigh of relief. Next it felt like the whole congregation was looking at me as if it was me and me alone who was the subject of the minister's wrath. I hoped it was just my imagination but nevertheless I performed a cursory examination of my physical looking for anything amiss or unzipped.

“Two can seek wisdom while one grieves in sin. Thus he will endeavour vainly to recapture the wind”, the minister finished. For some reason, this struck a chord with me and I pondered this statement until the end of the service. I thought, “Two heads are better than one unless of course one of the heads is a drunk or something, and impedes the other head. And wouldn't two heads be more of a wind block than one? I wonder what discourses Plato or Pluto would conduct on the subject, and how would Pluto look like in sandals?” My thoughts meandered over to the

shores of damnation that were lined with coconut trees and then to a Siren whose poster I had seen yesterday in Port of Spain.

For over twenty years I had postponed the inevitable day when I would have to face my fears and proceed on some course of action against this self-proclaimed Eve of the garden's delights. I at least owed as much to Billy, who was never the same after his encounter with the voodoo lady. I hastily excused myself from the Lawrences and headed back towards the ship. I had some e-mails to send. My aimless thoughts had recaptured the wind.



## **Taxing Events**

**“Rosita’s a princess, a rose in her teeth”**

**Like a school of hungry barracuda, taxes follow you around. Even on the high seas we were obliged to pay port taxes supposedly so we could anchor in a choppy bay, tender ashore and dispose of our cash in the port that just taxed us. For the third time now, I have seen the shore of Grand Cayman Island, and for three times I have been turned away because of unsafe landing conditions. I have roughly calculated that Cayman Incorporated now owes me the sum of two hundred and twenty five dollars for not letting me squander a fortune in its shops. I am beginning to wonder if it is a personal vendetta against me, and that fourteen hundred passengers were not allowed ashore because of something I wrote about the mayor’s wife.**

It was Shrove Tuesday and it was starting out badly. The sun didn't come up at its appointed time. Someone had neglected to tell it that we had moved into a different time zone. Next the band from Tempest Lounge decided to wish me a happy birthday by serenading me over my pancakes. Did I mention that they were a polka band? Toast and tuba...coffee with a dash of cacophony. And now, another day at sea was to plague me. I knew then that I was unfit for any trans-Atlantic crossing. I was not seasick. I was sick of seeing it! I was beginning to feel like the ancient mariner and mentally made a note to give up albatross for Lent.

Another day at sea would mean that the college girls, Angie and Andrea, would be pestering me over pina coladas to play some rap music. I am sure it was a pre-conceived conspiracy on their part to somehow make me lose my cool. It was always a co-ordinated attack with Angie coyly

commenting that she like the way I played my organ thingy. As I was basking in this backside compliment, Andrea, who I think was majoring in Advance Quantum Logic, would attack. “If rap is so simple, why can’t you play some?”

Mario too was becoming a nuisance. The guy never stopped talking or comparing life and all its appurtenances to those back in Italy. Now I’m not saying that one should discard their traditional baggage, but I think it’s a good thing to keep a compartment or two open for new cultural souvenirs. For that reason, I would carry a steamer trunk if it worked like a backpack. Mario was forever chastising me for not including some Italian arias in my repertoire. Moreover, he had the annoying habit of peering over the shoulders of card players inevitably adding, “You know what you should have done?” The galley doors were now barred to him for obvious reasons. In his little beret which looked like it was out

of some fifties movie, he was forever following the Livingstons around the miniature golf links disbursing advice. It was pretty much a hit and miss game on the deck anyway, but especially so in the inebriated cloud they seemed to float through. Their putters deemed to serve a secondary role in keeping the couple upright. The Rogers boy who had surpassed his instructors in rock climbing, was encouraged by Mario to keep on going up the smokestack. His parents were not impressed.

For many other passengers that morning, it was an opportunity to finish that book they never started, or to start a book they weren't likely to finish. I was tired of reading my programming manuals, so I borrowed a copy of 'The Wide Sargasso Sea' from the ship's library and decided to join the deck chair crowd. To my horror, Mrs. Lawrence was next to me and reading a work by the wicked witch of Canadian Literature.

What precious years I wasted praising that author of the insipid in essay after dreaded essay. Which is it...propaganda, prozeletization, promotion? If I were back there now I would tell her and her sissy friends to hide behind their garrison and form a knitting bee. I would rather run with the wolves than sew with the sheep, even if the grammar lacks finesse.

One of the wolves I had always admired was Walt Whitman. His involvement and inspiration in the transcendental movement in Canada, is now etched in stone, or rather on a fifty-foot cliff face at Bon Echo Provincial Park. He also went skinny-dipping in my hometown, which is something I'm sure our first-lady poet would never consider. The local Chamber of Commerce has never publicized this, probably for fear of having a whole bunch of naked poets swimming around the town. I thought someday I might return the

**favour in his hometown if there was no danger of arrest or deportation.**

**There is a fine thread that ties the arts together and usually a thick bowline that attaches them to life itself. Concepts like ‘synchronicity’ and ‘art as a reflection of society’ are wonderful categorizations that one gets or doesn’t get. ‘Art for art’s sake’ is another concept in itself, which I have indulged in during my serial experiments. I have dazzled myself with all sorts of symmetrical cancrizans, carefully avoiding tonal centers and anything that resembled rhythm, thus creating a musical Masonic code that few can decipher.**

**Traveling involves all of the above elements since we return home with our photo albums stuffed with pictures of the Eiffel Tower as well as some pictures of unnamed places. It is the unnamed places that attract the serious traveler as we paddle from island to island in our own little Starship**

**Enterprise. (By the way, I have often been asked about concerns of personal safety as I camped on some uninhabited atoll. I have always figured that most muggings happen around resorts where tourists carry money and jewelry and are obvious targets. What thief in his right mind would paddle for two hours to some island; hike seven miles through the jungle only to find a backpacker that has no money because there is nothing to spend it on out in the boondocks.)**

**Once as I was wandering through the enchanting city of Cartagena, I stumbled upon the statue of the shoes of the poet Lopez. I had read a poem by a Canadian author that told of this statue, but I had not been out looking for it that day. I suddenly fell into the “I get it” category and chalked this up as another epiphanal experience. All the analytical dissections of the arts can show the supporting techniques, but only a kindred**

**spirit can experience the true illumination of the seed or motive. Get it?**

**Most of my favourite literary lines come from plays. I love to experience an actor's interpretation much the same way that I enjoy jazz musicians using alternate chords. One of my most-loved quotes comes from Tennessee Williams. In 'A Streetcar Named Desire' Blanche cries, "I want magic!" Many authors labour over verisimilitude but I am quite tolerant of anachronisms in a good fantasy. I don't think it is necessary to speak Druidian in a play about Druids. "Meajuhatunk" might be authentic but "Pass me one of those ten ton obelisks there my good fellow" works for me. If it were not for fantasy and imagination in general, we would still be in the Baroque era.**

**I was just about to open my book when I thought about Jack's play, 'The Two Wise Men.' He had produced a copy for me the previous night, and although it contained a host of characters and description, it was**

**totally devoid of dialogue. It had taken only a minute to read, but I had fantasized about the sunset and the sound of the waves breaking over the reef. I understood why the play was not a big hit with audiences and I had fantasized myself back to sleep.**

**After my noon show, I was taken aside by Rosita, the dance instructor, resplendent in her twenty-inch stilettos.**

**“Happy birthday sweetie, I am going to teach to you how to tango. Your body will soon be moving as gracefully as your fingers.” Most men even those in their nineties would have leaped from their wheelchairs at such an offer. Rosita and her partner Rosito had tangoed their way out of the slums of Buenos Aires and across the stages of the world. He was reputed to have been a gaucho while she came from the Argentine aristocracy. Shunned by her family, she had literally taken to her heels with the dashing cowboy. They had been on their electrifying tour for over**

twenty years now and had never returned home.

Now I have spent well over ninety nine percent of my entertainment time on stage. The only time I had spent on a dance floor is when I had to build one for the pub I used to own. Rosita's prompting turned to shouting while clapping and counting only seemed to make my body forget what came after one or before two. After telling me to emulate my favourite performer in a Broadway musical, I began scratching and licking myself. Rosita stomped out of the room to a chorus of 'Dios mios'. I thought I had done a pretty good rendition of Mephistocolese. 'Cats' is my favourite musical.

Because we were not going to be able to celebrate Mardi Gras in port, the entertainment director suggested we have a mini-Carnival on board the ship. I guess he slept through all the improv parties the other night. Regardless, I hastily threw together an

arrangement of 'When the Saints' for a marching band made up of steel drums, kazoos, and whatever brass and woodwind instruments were available. Rolls of duct tape were produced to make harnesses for the drums and to fashion feathered costumes for the dancers from the cabaret. It was also decided that each musician would duct tape their music to the back of the performer who proceeded them. In this way music stands could be eliminated.

It was during this quick rehearsal that I came to appreciate the diversity and high level of musicianship that was present on board. The cruise line had recruited an amazing array of talent. I was almost speechless as the tuba player jammed out a solo by Santana. There would seem to be more to oom-pa than meets the eye. Indeed, the musicians and performers assembled on the ship were all world class and a sense of intimidation began to creep over me.

However, parades were not new to me. After all, I started my musical career in a marching band. I also had a few unofficial, but very spontaneous parades to my credit. While playing in a rock band in the resort town of Grand Bend, I had proposed the idea of an end of summer parade to a few dozen friends. Floats were hastily constructed and costumes flew out of attics everywhere. I wrote a theme song and a band was thrown together with a motley assortment of instruments and equally motley instrumentalists. Our assembled multitude simply butted our way into the traffic and marched down the main street to the beach. It was such a huge success that we did it again the following year. However, on this occasion the cops were waiting for us and gave us a full escort. Sensing that corporate logos were soon to follow, I got out of the parade business.

We assembled in Ariel's Lounge and thundered our way towards the pool deck with the dancers in the lead looking like flamboyant flamingoes in fishnet stockings. When we reached the windward side of the deck, feathers and sheet music began flying all over the place providing unusual garnishes for those sun-worshippers sipping their tropical drinks. As we retreated to Ariel's Lounge, the Saints had become martyrs while the dancing had become x-rated.

Later that night the icing came for the cake I never received. I had wandered down to the stern to watch the stars come out after my seven o'clock set. The equatorial galaxies are as stunning as the equatorial gals. My thoughts drifted back to my paddling experiences in Polynesia where the nights felt phosphorescent and luminous while I guided my way with the Southern Cross. My reverie was rudely disturbed as I received a summons to the communications room. I had been

preparing myself for the worst when I entered that room and was met by a serious looking Franz.

“It seems that some lady politician that you didn’t much like, has been arrested in Trinidad on all sorts of gruesome charges. Do you know anything about this?” I truthfully answered that I did not, because it was the first I had heard of the arrest. Elated, I thought to myself, “Lead us to a land, full of sun and sand, where the sea can wash all our sins away.” My Cheshire countenance had returned.

“It wasn’t a bad day after all Billy boy”.

Playa del Carmen

“Oh Juanita, you know we need an explanation here”

It occurred to me as we were tendering into Playa del Carmen, that this was the first Spanish speaking port we had visited on our itinerary. I had been to a dozen or so

**countries which afforded me the opportunity to practice my language skills but still couldn't get past ordering a beer or finding a bank or train. I had even tried the language cassettes without much success. Reading Spanish and hearing Spanish are two different things as I found out backpacking through Peru. Everything I tried to eat contained mice, which I later understood thankfully to be maize or corn. My frustrations had come to a head some years earlier when my cousin and I bought a small casa in Costa Rica and had the task of furnishing it. Berlitz does not cover translations for items such as garden rakes and after I had gestured for some time as to the use of this appurtenance, the proprietor offered me his cat. Gesturing for the use of a pillowcase got us thrown out of the store. Today I was determined to attempt a day without English and hopefully not insult any of these Mexicans' grandmothers.**

I would not have recognized it if it were not for the presence of Senor Frog's on the left of the wharf. The sleepy little fishing village had become the hub of the Mayan Riviera with condos and hotels stretching as far as the eye could see.

"Hey gringo" shouted a portly figure standing on the dock and clutching a bottle of Dos Equis. I could hardly believe my eyes...it was Mudflap! With his mustache and battered sombrero he looked like a character out of a Pancho Villa film. A few weeks ago I had e-mailed him in Monterey where he was currently employed as plant manager.

Mudflap was a virtuoso bullshooter who had indeed elevated hyperbolic blarney to a new art form. He possessed the efficacy to procure management positions in all sorts of endeavours he knew nothing about. He had captained a fishing boat on the Great Lakes that doubled as a party and dive boat on the weekends and had been a director of agro

research at the University of Guelph although he never finished high school. He had been involved with the installation of portable power plants for resorts in Costa Rica before a snake bite sent him back home for Ontario health care.

His resume was as long as 'War and Peace', with as many nicknames as the characters in that novel. The name Mudflap had stuck the night he waltzed into my Irish pub and with a well-aimed note from his trombone (which he knew nothing about) brought the house down.

"What the hell?" I ventured.

Smiling broadly he explained, "just drove down here on the Harley and with a little Quintana ruse, got a job managing the Play at de Carmen resort."

"How long have you been here?" I asked.

"I just arrived yesterday. Today is my day off" he answered. "By the way," he

continued, "I'm supposed to say Sally sent me."

"Typical" I thought.

Mudflap had expropriated the hotel limosine for the day and suggested we drive down to Tulum. If we left now, we could beat the hoards and then perhaps do some snorkeling at Xel-Ha. Just then Jack and Joanne came up to us and were invited along for the ride. Strangely enough, Joanne agreed and we were off with the radio blaring a version of 'Guantanamero'. She was not her overbearing self today, and I wondered if she was feeling a little sick. However, true to form, we were forced to pull over at every stand along the way to Tulum until the limo was bursting with blankets, hammocks, and all sorts of trinkets and beads. I was surprised she didn't pick up a couple of Mexicans and a donkey as well.

At the entrance to Tulum we sipped on Coronas while we waited while Joanne

shopped for a bag big enough to stuff her souvenirs into. The patio we sat on was surrounded by oleander so I tried my feeble and well-worn joke about these flowers having an Irish name. Having got past that, we reminisced about the time Mudflap came into the bar wearing dark shades and sang a rendition of 'I Feel Good'. For weeks afterwards the rumour spread around the neighbourhood that James Brown was at the pub disguised as a white guy with a handlebar mustache. Then we laughed about the Christmas Eve he taught me to drive a standard with the required bottle of Captain Morgan's between my thighs. Our conversation had ended when Joanne appeared with a bag large enough to accommodate a small hippo.

Tulum was as enchanting as ever. It is the only known Mayan site to be built by the sea but its location was more magnificent than the ruins themselves as its dramatic cliffs

plunged down to the turquoise waters. Jack, duly impressed, asked Joanne, “Why did your people ever abandon such a beautiful place?” She answered haughtily, “Jack, these are not my ancestors any more than the Mohawks are yours.” Obsequiously he replied, “Of course dear. Why don’t we head up to Xel Ha for a swim?”

Xel Ha is a snorkelers’ paradise with crystal springs and a sparkling lagoon all sheltered from the sea. It is a unique compromise between commercial development and natural preservation. The Mayan Riviera is dotted with these eco-parks as well as cenotes, or underground springs that provide a refreshing change to the endless resorts as well as bolster the local economy. For those who like their nature a bit less tame, there is the five-thousand square kilometer Sian Ka’an Biosphere at the end of the highway which is teeming with wildlife. I fondly remembered my first visit to Xel Ha

when my girls jumped off the cliff and swam with the dolphins. Not to be outdone by my progeny, I have since jumped off higher cliffs and swam with bigger mammals in an effort to maintain my patriarchal dominance. I am sure there is some Freudian explanation for my behaviour. A wonderful afternoon was spent hiking and splashing while even Joanne managed to muster some mirth while dancing to the marimba band.

“Mojitos and moonlight”, she sang while Jack shook her towel in front of her like a toreador.

At Xel Ha I had time to reflect on the qualities of this great country. True, it was part of our Caribbean itinerary, but it was more than an island since it contained a huge palette of physical and cultural diversities. My first taste of Mexico came back in the Sixties when I was refused entry for having long hair and was ignominiously escorted out of Tijuana. I wasn't sure if the authorities back

then were afraid I'd roll up my hair and smoke it, or if they were worried about the degenerate effect it might have on the youth of their country. Since then, I've come to enjoy many different areas of Mexico even if I don't enjoy the haircuts that precede these visits.

It was on the way back to the ship that all hell broke loose. Mudflap, always enamoured with pushing a vehicle to the limits of its velocity, noticed la Policia flashing their lights behind us. Joanne started freaking.

"Don't stop! You gotta lose them," she screamed. Mudflap, totally unperturbed, pulled over to the side of the road. As the police car stopped behind us, he exited the vehicle and began his soliloquy.

"Senor, soy el capitaine of the Andrea Doria. El presidente is my mucho amigo". His voice tailed off as he approached the policeman. Joanne was trembling and

crouched down on the floor in the backseat. Moments later Mudflap returned and with a shrug of his shoulders said, “No problemo.” The next thing we knew, we were getting a police escort back to Playa del Carmen.

That was the last time I saw Mudflap . Some said he had become the ruler of a colony of pygmies in the Amazon delta. Others swore they saw him on the launch pad of the shuttle. Buccaneer, pirate and knave, Mudflap was one of a kind.

Joanne still had some shopping to do in Playa del Carmen so Jack and I deposited ourselves at Senor Frog’s. Jack seemed content to sample all the Margaritas on the menu, while I opted for nachos and guacamole. I took this opportunity to question Jack about Joanne’s strange behaviour that day. He slurred out some reply about the police questioning Joanne on several occasions when he was away in the South Pacific. Evidently they were suspicious

of Jack's disappearance and made several inquiries about her mother's whereabouts as well. There had been some local legend during the Sixties about some crazy woman who was serving up her lovers in a greenish sauce. "Avocado amour?" I wondered.

Jack was evidently proud of Joanne's success but made a point of telling me that a large portion of their income was from the sale of noni.

"I proccrd the distribraturship with my connections in Pollyneser," he explained. As I tried to press him to elaborate, he turned his ball cap backwards and stared into space.

"Sweet apparition..turquoise and greens" he slurred.

"Pink coral gardens", he nodded.

"Strings of pearl sunsets", he passed out.

I sat back and savoured the view. The bar's sound system was blaring "Holy moly your guacamole tastes a little tart" when Joanne returned pale as a ghost.

**“Jacky, we gotta go now” she ordered. As we hoisted Jack onto the tender I looked back and wondered if there was any connection...**

**Martinique**

**“They’ll never find her now...she’s on the ship”**

**Without hesitation she dove in after him. The murky waters of the Mississippi did not flow fast at this point and she had no problem reaching him. On the dyke his mother cried hysterically while his father, though well imbibed by this point of the afternoon, also shouted encouragement. Then the boy let go of her and once again disappeared under the water. The woman then shed her bulky dress and submerged once more in search of the child.**

**What had started out as a pleasant Sunday stroll along the levee had turned into a nightmare. It was a warm autumn day in 1861 and New Orleans had just seceded from**

the Union. Celebrating their independence, the Duvalier family had decided to survey their domain starting with a stroll along the river. Many other families had similar thoughts that day which gave the levee an air of festivity. Jean Duvalier was forty-eight and was content to enjoy his inheritance with his young wife and their six year old son Louis. Promenading arm in arm with her husband, Marie Duvalier was happy to acknowledge complimentary greetings from passerbys while Jean kept a sharp eye through his pince-nez on the shapely backside of their housekeeper Martinique, who walked ahead with Louis. It was Louis' fascination with the steamboats that plied the Mississippi that had brought on this sudden tragedy. Neither of the Duvaliers saw Louis hit the water and were momentarily stunned when Martinique plunged into the river after him.

After what seemed an eternity, they broke the surface with the boy choking and

coughing while she held a strong arm around him. She swam skillfully and gracefully with one arm back to the bank where someone had produced a makeshift rope. After struggling up the embankment, Louis was smothered in shawls and kisses by his mother who kept thanking Martinique. Many of those who had witnessed the scene wondered how and where this slave girl had learned to swim so well. Mr. Duvalier congratulated himself with another sip of brandy from his flask, and then promised Martinique that she would be well rewarded as he surveyed her drenched figure.

Martinique had seen this look before and knew that trouble was brewing. She had been preparing for her escape for some time. She had been born in the Duvalier household back when New Orleans boasted the largest slave market in the New World. Her father, a sailor from the West Indies, had visited her once when she was very young and had taken her on a clandestine trip to the seashore

where he taught her to swim and catch fish with his bamboo pole. Her mother had died in the most recent Yellow Fever epidemic along with the elder Duvaliers. Jean Duvalier then became master with his new wife and their infant son, and life became harsh for Martinique.

Along with her regular household duties, Martinique became Marie's hairdresser. For reasons that seemed strange to Marie, Martinique would sweep up all the golden curls she had cut, and keep them in a small box she kept hidden. Mrs. Duvalier seemed more concerned with her appearance than with the quotidian business of the household and family, and so Louis and Martinique had developed a real bond between them. Emancipation was not a possible option at this point but hope flowed from the rumours of the abolitionists that President Lincoln would soon free all of those still in bondage.

Martinique's servitude became more unbearable as Jean's drinking habits increasingly lead to more fondling incidents. Recently he had flown into a rage accusing Martinique of shrinking his favourite promenade suit. It was only Martinique's desperate pleas that she could re-tailor the suit back to its original size that saved her from being assaulted that day. His leering remarks by the levee left no doubt in Martinique's mind that she must act quickly before a tragedy occurred. Returning from the levee soaked and humiliated, she decided she would act tonight.

Dinner was a somber affair that night and both Louis and his mother retired early while Martinique cleaned up the dishes. The leftovers were put in a sack for her escape. She then returned to the levee and found to her satisfaction that the remains of her dress had washed up on shore with the outgoing tide. Quickly she removed Marie's scissors

from her pocket and began to shear her head. She returned to the Duvalier household by way of the backstreets and alleys, depositing bits of her hair as she went. Her thought was that the hounds would trace this trail to the river and then head upstream toward the bayous.

Her plan seemed to be working well until she returned to her quarters to find a drunken and enraged Jean waiting for her. He had found her box and was holding a blonde wig and beard in one hand while scrutinizing a note that had just arrived that week on the table. Looking up from his pince-nez he snarled, "So you are planning on leaving us? Stupid girl...you think I can't read French? 'Meet me on the beach where we last parted-Papa'". Then he lunged at her. It was over quickly...so quickly that Duvalier did not see the scissors plunge into his heart.

Later that night while torches lit the levee and the sounds of the hounds filled the

**air, it was reported that a passenger with blonde hair and a beard had just boarded an Antillean ship. He wore pince-nez and a bright promenade suit.**

## **Tour Guide**

**“Come along to Bourbon Street we’ll get you higher”**

**I know it was not part of my contract, but Antoine, the assistant cruise director, had been flat on his back since we left Mexico. Although we joked about Montezuma’s revenge, it was best that he was quarantined in case of another nasty outbreak of the Norwalk virus. Besides, the cruise was coming to an end and the staff had been more than gracious towards me. I have noticed that camaraderie seems to develop more rapidly between travelers than between neighbours or co-workers at home. I could soon add ‘tour guide’ to my already diverse resumé as the ship anchored in New Orleans on that crisp February morning.**

**I had taken a Cajun cooking course decades ago and spoke enough French to decipher most menus. I had even been to**

**Mardi Gras when I was a student, although my memory of that event and its geography was hazy. Nevertheless I was about to lead a group of sixteen on a restaurant tour in the French Quarter, although I would have preferred the Garden District.**

**In retrospect, I find it ironic that myself, a Canadian, was teaching Americans about one of their own cities that had been originally settled by expelled Canadians. The first fact I would impress upon them was the difference between Acadians and Arcadians, otherwise we would be touring the Greek Quarter. As I tried to bone up on the history of the region, I realized that the Big Easy had been everything but easy. Its iconoclastic past had been filled with many battles, epidemics of yellow fever, conflagrations and floods, as well as the stigma of slave markets.**

**Of course I knew nothing about New Orleans the first time I landed here either. It**

was party time then, and a release from the dreaded Chopin with which my piano teacher had been embalming me. This was live music and alive music... jazz, blues, Dixie, zydeco, honky tonk. We had gone to Al Hirt's club and Kelly had told the doorman "Sally sent us". This magically transported us to a front row table where we sat watching the band and sipping our hurricanes. Sally was reputed to be the best friend of Al Hirt's wife. Unfortunately, when Mrs. Hirt arrived, she professed no knowledge of acquaintanceship with any Sallys and we were ignominiously shown the back door as well as the bill that broke Kelly. He had to stay in New Orleans until funds were wired for his escape. I had departed on the midnight bus that was filled with drunken revelers and a stench that would vanquish my thoughts of food for quite some time.

It was a much smaller bus that dropped my group and I off at the Audubon Aquarium

of the Americas. A lease that was to wait for the appointed hour of our return. Promising the driver that we would be back on time, I had no idea what I was getting myself into. The Rogers' boy wanted to go see the poison frogs in the aquarium but time being of the essence, I promised his that if he was good he might have one for supper. By the levee I noticed a sign 'Martinique's- Cajun and Creole- Live Music in our Magnolia Garden'." A strange place for an advertisement" I thought, and then began to shepherd my group towards Bourbon Street.

Then it was the Lawrences that detoured us down Royal Street to see the Hotel Monteleone, a favourite watering hole of William Faulkner. I could see by the looks of the rest of the group that I was not the only person unenamoured by this literary giant, but we agreed that a quick drink might help take the nip out of the night air.

Next it was decided we should ride the streetcar named Desire and I was met with disappointed looks when I informed the group that it was no longer in service. However I suggested that we trod down to St. Peter St. where we could see where Tennessee Williams wrote his famous play. We could also check out Jackson Square and Preservation Hall. Many pit stops were required along the way to fend off the increasingly damp and nippy air. Soon many were calling pit stops 'nip stops' and one couple was singing "come along to Bourbon Street we'll get you higher".

We finally arrived at Martinique's, which was surprisingly busy, three days after the conclusion of Mardi Gras. As my red faced mob waited in the foyer, I could see the numerous plaques and awards above the bar surrounding what looked to be a bamboo fishing pole. Then Joseph, the maitre d, ushered us into the garden where a BBQ buffet provided a welcome antidote for my

peripatetics. There we were welcomed by a mulatto woman who looked to be a hundred years old, dressed in African silks and sporting a pair of pince-nez far too small for the size of her head.

“Martinique, je crois s’appelle” I said with my best French accent acquired from logging camps in northern Quebec.

“No, that was her grandmother’s name” interceded Joseph as he kissed her reverently on the cheek.

Crawdads shish kebobs with hot pepper sauces and a cold Voodoo Lager got me wondering about the connection between Joseph and Josephine, which was the centenarian’s real name. It had been rumoured that Joseph had an older brother, Jean Claude, who had disappeared under spurious circumstances while philandering in Mexico. He was suspected to be having an affair with a lady named Juanita whose guacamole was said to contain body parts. She

had disappeared as well. The subsequent investigation and search of Juanita's cantina had produced a cadaver stored in her freezer. Joseph had come to work for Josephine during the late Sixties when the French Quarter was being restored, and now Martinique's had become a veritable institution. I was curious about the insignia of the pair of scissors that was embroidered on the establishment's serviettes.

I came out of this reverie as the Swampfoot Boogie Band came on stage. They dedicated their first number to the late Louisiana Lou who had passed away a year ago. This managed to wake up the Livingstons who were attempting to drain Bourbon Street of its namesake.

I knew Swampfoot and Lou well and had written charts for their band over the years. Lou was a man of many talents and never let his blindness impede his endeavours. He would set up his own equipment, program

synthesizers that would normally require a lexicon of Japanese, and could memorize a phone book of lyrics while the rest of the band were still shuffling cheat sheets. He had campaigned endlessly for social and political reforms for the handicapped and was instrumental for the implementation of talking crosswalks. His original idea for singing crosswalks was quelled by the municipal transportation committee who were afraid of having groups of blind people doing the hokey-pokey in their intersections.

I have always been a big fan of the blues, for about twenty minutes at a time. I love the performers but there is something about the twelve-bar form that just gets monotonous after awhile. Lou and I had played a lot of blues together but in spite of the fact that he was blind and I was half-blind, we didn't come anywhere close to sounding authentic. I am sure that it was because we didn't have a delta back home. Deltas are essential to the blues.

**Kettle Creek ran straight into Lake Erie with not so much as a spit or a sandbar that could further our careers as bluesmen. Geography had eliminated another career option.**

**Adding to the decadence of the evening was a large, muscular black man, who seemed to be checking ID and guarding the outdoor gate. With his shaven head and painted face, he looked to be a voodoo villain out of some James Bond movie. I flashed back to the first summer I was on the road with a band, and we had used theatrical makeup in our stagemusings because we were underage. Now I was considering using it because I was overage.**

**Josephine and Joseph lead off the dancing and I was surprised to see how gracefully they moved for their ages. As more couples moved out to join them, I once again lamented by inability to dance. Most of my group was sufficiently imbibed to cast off their inhibitions and soon the dance floor was**

filled with gyrating cruisers. At this juncture, Mario wandered over and clandestinely slurred, "I got the scoop on the old babe." He managed to pour half his beer on my lap as he spat the other half in my ear telling me a sordid tale of sex and manslaughter. According to Mario, Martinique had escaped with her father, a Haitian pirate, and soon gave birth to Josephine's mother while the Duvalier family fell into decline after the Civil War. The story reached epic proportions as Martinique's son fathered Josephine, but died when storming San Juan with Teddy Roosevelt, and soon after Josephine's mother died in a volcanic eruption on an island named after her mother, and then she was adopted by Bolsheviks from Sarajevo and thereafter became a war bride whose husband committed suicide during the Depression.

"And there you have it," Mario said triumphantly as he finished soaking me. I had had it all right.

In the meantime, the college girls, Angie and Andrea, had found a pair of Jimi Hendrix look-alikes and were heading towards the exit. The Livingstons looked to be totally soused but were somehow managing to hold each other up. The Rogers were trying unsuccessfully to form a conga line while their son occupied himself by feeding Josephine's parrot. I was hoping to chat with Swampfoot after the band's set was over, but things were getting out of hand. I knew we still had to perform a thirty-minute stagger back to the bus, so I hastily wrote a note for Swampfoot and began my roundup.

Swampfoot was one of the few musicians who still played bass pedals with his feet. While his ambidextrous accomplishments amazed and awed, a caseful of Dr. Scholls could not keep the patrons seated in the front row by the end of any given night. One might say his

malodorousness preceded his reputation and his nickname stuck much like his socks.

As I was attempting to herd my group together, Joanne and Jack returned sporting brand new tattoos and bandanas and muttering something about shivering their timbers when they got back to the ship. Jack had apologized to me earlier for passing out at Senor Frog's. He also thanked me for retrieving his precious Tigers cap that had somehow ended up in a platter of salsa. I have left my share of caps, cameras and other apparel around the world and realized that waiting for their safe return was an exercise in futility.

I had to dash across the street to drag Angie and Andrea out of a strip club where they had decided to compete in amateur night. As one could probably discern, my performance there was not greeted with enthusiasm as I dragged the girls off the stage amidst the howls and jeers of the patrons.

**When we finally made it back to the bus, I noticed the Rogers' boy's backpack was jiggling wildly...he had stolen the parrot! Of course I was elected to make the mad dash back to Martinique's with the bundle of squalling plumage.**

**"Never again" I told myself.**



## **Litoralis**

**“Getting high as a kite, those Caribbean nights”**

**I love the sea. I never tire of its rhythms and cadences. Mind you I have never experienced those thirty-foot rollers that will jaundice even the most experienced sailor. It had been an incredibly smooth and beautiful trip, but I would have liked to have traded a couple of days at sea for the likes of Jamaica and Grenada with all their spicy foods. Someday I hope to return on a smaller boat and visit some of the smaller and quainter islands not yet spoiled by tourism.**

**Cruising gives one the opportunity to sample a number of destinations that can be revisited at one’s leisure. Even on the smallest of islands it is virtually impossible to exhaust all the possible activities unless of course, one limits their scope. Even a sunset will look different in January than it does in June.**

Cuisine can vary with the catch of the day and with what is being harvested in any given season. Festivals are not limited to Junkanoo and Carnival.

Last night the passengers were treated to a farewell dinner complete with a parade of flaming baked Alaskas, flambeed Dakotas and torched Wisconsin's, before their return to those frigid states. Afterwards they gathered in the lounges and exchanged addresses for letters that will never be sent. A few of us who did not have grueling trips ahead of us, stayed up half the night trying to exhaust the bar's stock in order to prolong our voyage.

I had bid my goodbyes to all my new found friends and made inquiries as to their future plans. Angie and Andrea were returning to Vancouver and having doubled their study weeks, were determined to make up for their truancy. The Rogers and the Livingston's both shared the same plans of returning to their frosty nests along with the

**Lawrence's who wanted to check out the Dali Museum in St. Petersburg before heading north. Mario was heading to the Keys to check out the babes and watch for any last minute deals on other cruises.**

**While Joanne was making her last minute purchases in the ship's boutiques, I had an opportunity to talk with Jack Warren. They had originally planned to fly to LAX the following day but now they intended to make a detour to Cancun for some unfinished family business. When I pressed Jack on this subject he replied that Joanne had confessed to him earlier that day. Evidently her mother was indeed the guacamole murderess and Joanne felt the need to exonerate her own name from this sordid affair that had been following her around for decades. She had made inquiries in Playa del Carman and found out her mother had died from food poisoning. Ironic I thought but I assured Jack, "We've both had our ghosts to vindicate on**

**this voyage” and proceeded to recount my story of the voodoo lady.**

**Not content with this, Jack began to recount the story of Felia and how much she had influenced his life. To my surprise, she was indeed the girl whose body they had found floating in the lagoon after the nuclear protests in Tahiti. Jack had corresponded with her up to the time of her death in spite of her father’s dismay and retorts from Joanne. This made me even more convinced that there is something Jungian in the coincidences of this world.**

**Today I paid the price for my nocturnal shenanigans. Deciding that a morning dip would be my best course of action, I dashed up seven decks only to find that the pools were drained for cleaning. The elevators were jammed with passengers and porters hustling baggage off the ship for morning flights. My next best choice was to consume a barrel of coffee before showering and moving my gear**

ashore. I had an insane craving for rhubarb, which I could not find on board or anywhere in the tropics for that matter. Having lived close to Shedden, the so-called rhubarb capital of the world, I was nurtured on this stuff for as long as I can remember. Mangoes and pineapple are great but there is always a longing for something sweet that was left behind back home. Oh yeah, my children too.

Returning to my quarters I was alarmed to find that the porters had already removed my luggage. I was left with the bathing suit and t-shirt I was wearing, and a set of tuxedo tails I had stowed in the locker vowing never to wear them again. Modesty being the better part of my valour, I decided to don the tails and rush ashore in search of my bags. I had barely set foot on the dock when a little urchin wearing her best Polly Flinders dress confronted me.

“Look mama” she yelled as she pointed at me, “a penguin in the heat”.

**Not to be outdone I shouted, “Tell your mama that Sally sent me,” which left her genuinely confused.**

**I prefer my litoralis on the balmy side. A warm tropical breeze is a sure sign that my ink won’t freeze along with my cerebral faculties. Perhaps my literal endeavours about the litoral will encourage a few to take that first step towards exploration before they turn into stone. It’s your move.**



## **The Two Wise Men**

**“What becomes of the daughters of men who reach for their dreams”**

**It had been an exciting week on the island of Raitea. News had spread westward from Moorea. A giant poti, or boat, had sailed across the Sea of the Moon. It was full of strange white men with red noses who had come ashore. On Raitea, the grandfathers Yap and Yap had tried to calm their families by wisely suggesting that “As the wind can garble speech, so too can it colour the facts”. “For all we know, they might be red men with white noses. Let us wait and see.”**

**As a diversion, the grandfathers agreed to continue their shell board game of ono-ono that had become an annual contest between them. The word ‘ono’ is Tahitian for the number six, but it also translates to barracuda. Because of this confusion, the contest was only for the sagacious. Once a**

year for as long as the people could remember, these two wise men had matched wits in this cerebral extravaganza.

Little Felia, their youngest granddaughter was delighted about the match, and ran through the little village of Uturoa reminding them of the time and location of the match, and informing everyone that their presence was paramount. Most of the villagers were relatives, and had witnessed this event for as long as they could remember. Every year it was the same outcome- a draw.

Felia, who had never been to one of these matches, was confident that a winner would emerge this year. However, she wasn't sure whom to root for, since both men were her grandfathers. Grandfather Yap on her mother's side had been a farmer and with the help of his bounteous family, a successful farmer whose retirement was proudly

bestowed on his girth...a Polynesian Buddha if you will.

Grandfather Yap on her father's side had been a fisherman. He too had become rotund in his retirement and was slightly smaller than his rival. Nevertheless, their hands were still strong and calloused, and their minds as sharp as coral. Both were acknowledged to be the wisest men on the island. The Yaps were the antithesis of their names for they seldom spoke except for the obligatory greeting, "E aha te huru?"

A short walk west of the village stood an old pier on which the event had traditionally been staged. A path bordered with hibiscus and various species of bird of paradise opened up into one of the finest stages in the world, for silhouetted behind the pier was the mysterious island of Bora Bora. After supper, the villagers would gather on the palm-fringed shore and watch the spectacle of the two grandfathers immobile at their little table

on the pier and behold the cerebral energy that passed between the beloved grandfathers Yap. Even the sunset, as spectacular as it was, setting behind the ancient volcano on Bora Bora where the mist there gave the appearance that the god had come alive again, was a display secondary to the drama unfolding on the pier.

The only sound one heard was the gentle breaking of waves on the reef, some half-mile from shore. Even the birds, who normally created quite a cacophony at sunset, seemed to respect the gravity of the situation.

For Felia, she could hardly contain her excitement for as the two revered elders sat statue-like, she thought she could see sparks rebounding off the board game, back and forth to her grandfathers' foreheads. When they were younger, many of the villagers had thought this too, but as they grew older and more jaded, they concluded that this

phenomena was due to fireflies or perhaps reflections off the lagoon.

Disappointment ruled again as night fell and the first match ended in a draw.

“As usual”, many said, for no one person could ever remember one of the grandfather Yaps making a move in all the years they had played together. When questioned about the lack of activity, both grandfathers would reply, “Life and grandfather Yap are both formidable opponents. One should not venture out blindly until one can clearly see the way”.

Statements like these became the dogma for the island. No one would venture past their known fishing grounds or off a path that could lead to some abyss. In this way the islanders lead peaceful and conservative lives. They had no way of knowing that just two islands to the east of them, events were unfolding that would change the lives of all the islanders on all the islands, forever.

On the third evening of the match, Felia was on her way to the pier feeling that something monumental would happen tonight and she was eager to bear witness to whatever event might happen. It had rained hard in the late afternoon and all of the islands waterfalls had come alive in their splendour. A double rainbow had appeared over the sister island of Tahaa. There had been a great feast of mahi-mahi where both grandfathers were toasted. As she approached the pier, she could see schools of fish jumping in the lagoon and Bora Bora was covered in a dark shroud. The palms glistened like festive flags in the waning sun. The scene was set for something magical to occur this evening.

The two wise men were already seated and the board, their bellies protruding proudly, and their heads bent solemnly. The entire pier seemed to vibrate in cognition. There was a slight murmur among even the most cynical and skeptical family members

that tonight might prove to be of epic consequence. Indeed, family and neighbours had made the long paddle from Huihine just to witness this drama so as to be able to pass down the legend of the two wise men through generation to generation.

It was during the second hour of this contest that it finally happened. As the mist cleared over Bora Bora, the larger Yap looked over his left shoulder to behold the spectacle. The crowd held their breath as fisherman Yap's right hand approached the board and seized one of the shells. At that moment even the reef was silent as farmer Yap returned his gaze to the board and upon seeing the hand of his adversary reaching for the shell, gasped in horror and surprise.

Felia would remember the next moments for the rest of her life. Indeed, the story would endure in all the fares where tales were told of wise men and gods of old. As fisherman Yap seized the shell, his head

**slumped forward. At the same instant the horizon shrieked forth an explosion of reds and oranges while farmer Yap's right hand moved to his heart. The two wise men had played to final draw.**



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