

March 2017

Starting this month, we will begin the serialization of an - as yet - unpublished memoir by Roland.

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THE ARCHIPELAGO OF PEACE

A Memoir of Micronesia

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[Author's note: I wrote this memoir almost twenty years ago and it has sat in a drawer at the bottom of a filing cabinet since then. I've made a few small edits in this version - changing the first line from "Twenty years ago" to "Thirty-nine years ago", for example - but I've basically left it alone. Truk is now written Chuuk, and Ponape is now Pohnpei, spellings that more closely represent the way the Micronesians say the names of those places. But I've left them as they were then, and I've left the prose the way I wrote then, and the thoughts the way I thought then.

I'm a different person now - in some ways - and a different writer in some ways, too. But this seems to me, even from the distance of twenty years, to be an honest piece of writing, so I have tried not to impose upon it the ways I have changed since I first put the story on paper.]

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Prologue

Thirty-nine years ago I boarded a plane in Boston, bound for the islands of Micronesia, where I would spend five and a half months doing volunteer work among so-called primitive people, and where my understanding of the world and of myself would be dismantled. This was a slow dismantling, a piece by piece demolition of an entire cathedral of assumption. So slow, in fact, that at the time and for years afterwards, I did not realize anything had been knocked down and taken apart, and had no idea what I might be building in its place.

I went to Micronesia in order to save the world. I was twenty-four, and in the great tradition of idealistic twenty-four-year-olds I mistook youth and health for wisdom. My view of the situation was a simple one: there were people like me, people who had plenty to eat, a comfortable place to sleep, a close family, good education. . .and there were people who went around barefoot, slept in tin-roofed shacks, and did not have access to Novocain, penicillin, or libraries.

What life required of us, then, was sacrifice. If all the well fed people in the world stopped trying to refine their pleasures and protect the objects they kept accumulating, and if they spend just a small portion of their time working to improve the lives of the poor, then the human world, like a wobbling unicycle pushed on with a bit more force, would find its balance and roll smoothly forward as its maker had intended.

Even now, this theory, simplistic as it is, holds some deep attraction for me. Even now, thirty-nine years after I went off to the Central Pacific and saw my view of the world smashed there like a pretty vase dropped on a hot tar street, the idea of sacrifice, of giving, seems to me to be sitting somewhere very close to the heart of the great puzzle. Now though, it no longer seems possible to sanctify the world by

force of will and good intentions. Now, the vision of a life well lived seems to me a very complicated vision, shaded in grays, intricately layered, paradoxical.

Since Gauguin, since before Gauguin, the Pacific islands have been associated in our imaginations with an idea of earthly paradise. The balmy breezes, the everywhere available and wholesome food, the guiltless easy sex, the freedom from hustle, dirt, and pettiness. Charitable instincts notwithstanding, I suppose that image was strong in my mind when I signed up to go to Micronesia. And I suppose I write this, with as much adulthood behind me now as I had youth behind me then, in order to stake out for myself a new position on the idea of the good life.

I did not find paradise in Micronesia, neither in guiltless easy sex, nor through my sacrifices, such as they were. But I believe that not finding it there began to enable me to find it everywhere else, in glimpses at least, intimations of the possibility of some dependable inner peace. Another way of saying this is that Micronesia was the place where I learned to trade hope for fact, and began to be an adult.

Chapter One

For the first hour of the flight south from Guam, there is only ocean below us. The sky is a very pale blue and nearly cloudless, and beneath its delicate canopy the sea gives the impression of being completely still. Here and there small lines of white are scratched upon its surface. Here and there a solitary tanker or freighter appears, frozen in place, caught towing its wake across the blue expanse. Once, we fly over a deserted atoll. The sight of it calls up a hundred images from *Robinson Crusoe*, scenes from a simple, holy, uncluttered life, a life in which work and breath are inextricably linked. From this altitude the island looks to be the size of a baseball field, a patch of yellow beach where the grandstand should be, palm crowns shading each base. In a moment, it passes beneath the wing and the Pacific is empty again and immense.

A few more minutes and the pilot directs our attention out the port windows. What appear to be - in fact, they are - the blunted tips of sunken Everests shoulder up out of the water, covered with a dense quilt of foliage. (Millions of years ago these islands were volcanoes standing thirty thousand feet above the sea. Their slow wearing-away has left the odd collection of rounded green shapes that goes by the name Truk Lagoon). Near the base of these mountaintops metal roofs flash, chips of mica, and a short way out from shore the coral reefs are marked by lines of cream-colored surf that shrink and swell as if indicating the pulse of some water-god. The skin of the water-god is a translucent turquoise in the shallows, mint-green and blue-green above the deeper places, and a bottomless purple-black near the middle of the lagoon.

The plane banks sharply and loses altitude. The large islands of the lagoon grow distinct and separate now, seven of them, and as we circle into the landing pattern they reveal new sides of themselves, shadowed and sparkling, rounded and sharp, like facets of emerald. Cumulus clouds brush against the wing in churning bolls of white, gray, and pewter-blue. They sail past the tops of the green hills, billowing and shifting, throwing shadows that race across the surface of the water, make landfall, and sprint like fleet dark cats up the hillsides. Candy shapes. Toothpaste colors. Silhouettes from a nursery wallpaper - this scene comes from no world you know of; it resembles no other earthly vista.

The 727 banks again and drops in a tight curl among the luxuriantly forested hilltops above the town of Moen. Ahead, tilting up through the window, lies a landing strip of rough pink coral. It looks absurdly short. It is.

(Many years later, on a trip to Philadelphia, I stopped to play golf on a course in central New Jersey. There I happened to join up with a father and son, and the father, it turned out, was a pilot manager for Continental Airlines - which flew the Micronesia routes. "It's not so bad now, with the seven-six-sevens," he said, when I asked about the Moen airstrip, "because those babies can stop on a dime. But in the

Seventies and Eighties you had seven-two-sevens flying into Truk. The runway there is fifty-six-hundred feet. Seven thousand is considered short.")

On days when there has been a recent rain and the runway is slick, commercial pilots do not even attempt to land in Moen, so small is the margin of error. They make a pass, call in for a radio report, then fly on to Ponape, an hour to the east, leaving ticket-holding passengers standing helplessly in moist air, waiting for a lift to Honolulu.

But this morning, apparently, has been dry enough. The pilot seems to have made a commitment to land, is bringing his bulky ship in on a neat arc. Now we can make out a settlement pressed against the hillside's northern base, individual palm trees, a row of shacks on stilts at the water's edge. The plane slips lower, levels its wings. For a moment it seems to hover, trembling, in the humid air, and we are suspended at the level of the tops of the palm trees. Then there is a flash of coral runway, a thump. The wheels are on the ground but the jet is still moving at flying speed, lagoon islands rushing past, sunlit water rushing past, the whole cabin shaking and creaking and clouds of dust flying up behind. Someone in the rear lets out a muffled scream. The sound sets off a small audible confusion, a moment of panic, a flicker of terror, before the fuselage shudders and the brake drums groan, and the great metal beast slows and finally stops, seven degrees north of the equator, 3,600 miles west-southwest of Hawaii, half a jet length from the berm of stones that marks the end of Moen International Airport and the start of the sea.

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