

April 2017

THE ARCHIPELAGO OF PEACE

A Memoir of Micronesia

*(Part Two of an, as yet, unpublished memoir.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

Part Two

A few minutes before landing, the Air Micronesia pilot had announced the temperature in Truk: 89 degrees. That sounded comfortable enough, seemed to fit pretty well into a vision of the life I was about to embark upon: some heat, of course, yes, but it would be softened by gentle trade winds wafting across days of important work, adventure, perhaps even romance. I was carrying in my mind the paintings of Gauguin, the pages of Defoe, a few episodes of Gilligan's Island. Never having been truly poor, I was carrying a certain tidy idea of poverty. Never having been seriously ill, I was carrying in my body, in my arms and thighs and torso, a sense of my own strength and vigor and toughness. Of course there would be some sickness, some frustrations, some 95-degree days. None of that would be any trouble for a person like me.

The trouble for a person like me, it would turn out, lies in what the pilot did not include with his description of the weather: Truk's fiery combination of equatorial sun and tropical humidity.

For someone who has spent his life in temperate latitudes, the act of stepping off a jet for the first time into the wet furnace of a Micronesian afternoon is somehow comic, the way a tragic opera can be amusing if witnessed from some emotional distance. In those first few seconds you think: Impossible. Some kind of joke. No eighty-nine degrees has ever felt anything like this. Ninety-nine, the pilot must have meant. A hundred and nine. This can't be an ordinary afternoon on Truk; it must be an aberration, something like those rare hundred-degree days that paralyze the atmosphere over Boston for a week or so every other summer. This is more like Guam weather. Steamy. Oppressive. It was supposed to be different here in the Territories. Trade winds and so on. I had imagined it as being different.

The metal rail of the portable stairway is too hot to touch. The sun is no longer contained in a yellow disc but has filled a white sky which you cannot look at. It's not especially surprising that the water is bright. What is surprising is that the palm fronds are bright, sunlight reflecting off them so strongly that you can't let your eyes rest there either. Needles of light in a bowl of light. Underarms, back of the neck, forehead - these are sweat zones in any latitude. But by the time you reach the bottom of the stairway, your forearms are wet, the skin around your navel is sticking to the cloth of your shirt.

In a loose association of other passengers, you start across the runway in the direction of the customs shed, and it is as if you are a small parade of prisoners making your way across the bottom of an ocean of light and heat, bearing on your shoulders an immense watery weight. A fluke, an aberration, a rare hot spell to mark your arrival. It must be only that: who could live here otherwise?

In the customs shed, two men with grim faces and skin the color of copper pipe run their hands through your clothes and supplies. They are looking for alcohol, which has, not long ago, been made illegal on the islands of Truk (According to the tales we heard on Guam, it was the Trukese women, given the vote only a few years earlier and fed up with the behavior of their men when under the influence - the word 'rape'

was mentioned, machete fights, murders - who had collected enough signatures to put the anti-alcohol measure on the ballot, then gone to the polls as if they'd been voting since Magellan, and rendered the islands dry.) There is something in the bearing of these men, some somberness, that doesn't fit with the notions of island life I have been carrying with me all the way from the east coast of North America.

They are a kind of contraband, those notions. It would have been better for me if they'd been visible, hidden there in my three pieces of luggage like bottles of home brew. The somber customs inspectors could have found them, confiscated them for their own use, or placed them in special containers to be labeled and destroyed.

Instead, the second-in-command finishes his business, looks up at me and says, "*Well-come to Truk,*" in a voice with a drop of kindness in it, an unofficial kindness, somehow not what anyone would have expected from him.

Between the door of the customs shed and the chain link fence that marks the airport boundary, two island women in bright dresses are setting leis onto the shoulders of the newly arrived. They are extraordinarily beautiful young women, with waist-length hair as black and shining as ink, and wide, real smiles touched with a hint of playfulness. No doubt the Trukese Tourism Board is paying them to perform this ritual in imitation of some ancient island custom, but that doesn't matter to me. I'm soaked in sweat, knocked off balance by the difference between my imagination and reality, and it doesn't matter in the slightest that the women's kind gestures might fail some litmus test for anthropological authenticity. They are beautiful women. The flowers they place with such care and gentleness over my head are beautiful flowers, sweet as sea-breath on the north shore of Boston on an August evening.

Just beyond the airport fence, a small fleet of pickup trucks stands waiting on the street. We load our bags into them. Some of the volunteers climb in on top of the bags or beside them or beside the driver in the cab, and the rest of us walk slowly behind like a dozen arriving rajas preceded by their beasts of burden. Two blocks closer to the center of the small, extremely modest town of Moen stands the Hotel Christopher, a plain, three-story building with a peeling stucco façade and a pair of palm trees sprouting in a square of dust out front.

In the lobby ceiling fans turn in endless humming rounds and the carpet smells not unpleasantly of mildew. The clerk painstakingly registers us, room by room, passport by passport, odd American name by odd American name. There is no sign in his features that he is pleased or displeased by our arrival. His demeanor is official professional, competent, a posture and attitude taken from some imaginary hotel school on some nonexistent mainland. I study the ceiling fan, the potted palms. I look out at the hot tar street and wonder what it will feel like to run in this air.

We are fresh from three somewhat useless weeks of training on Guam, five hundred miles to the north. Useless because, on Guam, we'd been prepared for our Micronesian adventure not by living in cabins in the jungle, or tents in a field, or barracks on one of the U.S. air bases there, but by staying at a luxury resort at Tumon Bay (not far from the cliff where, in 1944, hundreds of Japanese had hurled themselves to their death rather than surrender to the American marines).

We slept three to a room in that resort motel (One of my roommates, whose name I have forgotten, was on his way to Yap, another Micronesian district. He was the only person I had ever met - and have ever known since - who told me, with an offhand certainty, that if one ate the proper diet, the diet humans were designed to eat, one's stools would be green. Our other roommate, a tall, ironic, Greater Boston intellectual, asked this guy if his stools were, in fact, green, since he was so careful about what he ate. "*No,*" the volunteer said, "*but I'm working on it.*"), but it was luxurious all the same and nothing like what our Trukese living conditions would turn out to be. There was a swimming pool around which camera-

toying Japanese honeymooners strolled and posed, and there was a nightclub with a sort of hula-dance act that involved audience participation, and a breakfast buffet that featured, among other dishes, octopus and seaweed.

During those three weeks I became friends with Jack Warndof, a lawyer from Russellville, Arkansas. Jack and I and sometimes a third volunteer would run along Guam's highways every morning at six o'clock, before classes began and the real heat of the day set in. Those runs - we'd go out for three-quarters of an hour or so - stand now as markers of the prime of life for me, the last chapter in a youth of unblemished good health.

The three of us would stretch a bit, trot out past the motel buildings where the honeymooners and our fellow volunteers lay peacefully in their air-conditioned sleep. We'd find the nearby highway and float along there in wet air filled with the scent of bougainvillea and hibiscus. We'd run past the coconut palms that guarded the flat sandy yards and cinderblock houses where the Guamanians lived. We'd run along one edge of a two-lane highway that lay flat for a mile or so, then climbed steeply. Whatever conversation we'd been making fell away at that point. The sun was just rising through a sea mist, the island just waking, the sound of rhythmic breathing and rubber soles on pavement accompanying us as we moved. When we at last reached the summit of the long, steep hill we were rewarded with a view to the west, out over the nearby rooftops, over the crowns of palm and breadfruit trees to a vast bowl of diaphanous blue, no line yet marking the place where sky and sea met.

Once our legs and lungs recovered from the climb, we felt as though we could run on for hours in the clean morning. We had cut, or were in the process of cutting, some umbilicus that tied us to the known and comfortable world. In a matter of days, we would be leaping off into a mystical Oceania of exotic affairs and noble sacrifice, and a great breath of freedom lifted us, a sense of invincibility, even righteousness. Buoyed by it, we ran on for another half mile, slowed, jogged in place staring out over the sea, then started back. Drawn by duty and promise back to the tedious day of lessons, we glided down toward Tumon bay effortlessly, as if we had been built only to run in perfumed air, as if nothing in the islands nothing in this world, could possibly break us.

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When the hotel check-in is finished, as if to reconnect ourselves to the feeling of those Guam mornings, Jack and I leave the other volunteers to their hot explorations of Moen and go out for a run. We will, it seems to us, have more than enough time to acquaint ourselves with the attractions of the dusty, nosy town. It is important, we tell ourselves, to establish a certain discipline here, to clear our heads for what lies before us, to shake ourselves free of this thin shirt of apprehension before being sent off to the far-flung atolls and our true assignments. We stay in our rooms just long enough to throw suitcases onto the bed, change into T-shirts, shorts, and running shoes, then we meet in the lobby in the last hour of daylight and step back out into the heat.

The Hotel Christopher stands on the eastern edge of downtown, not far from the northernmost point of the island of Truk. We turn our backs on Moen and head south along the shore road.

For the first few hundred yards the road is paved, a thick tongue of new tar between dusty shoulders. There are electric wires looping from metal poles, and the houses are solid and neat, concrete-block houses - coated in stucco and painted in pastels. Some have screened windows, TV antennas, driveways paved with pieces of acorn-size shells. Automobiles sit in some of these driveways, trophy-Toyotas, as incongruous here as dugout canoes in the suburban driveways of home. We move on, breathing and sweating in the heavy air. From time to time a new pickup races past, headed out of the city, tires humming on the hot pavement, its bed full of passengers, mostly girls and women with flowers woven into

their hair and bright print dresses drawn up modestly between their knees. Some of them flash smiles and wave in a friendly, laconic way.

"Are there any ugly people here?" Jack asks.

At first, interesting as it is, the terrain seems somehow too American for our tastes. Too tame. Tar, Toyotas, sleepy homes in the tropical-suburban style - we were hoping for something more exotic. Then, abruptly, half a mile from the hotel, the pavement gives way to dirt. Another minute and the telephone wires disappear. Now, instead of stucco houses with small front yards, we are running past plywood shacks with rectangular holes cut into the walls for windows, and a concrete block or two for front steps. To our right, what seems to be a little store appears, fifteen feet by six, its hinged front window flap folded down and revealing a girl clerk who leans her forearms on a plywood counter, painted blue. Closer by, we can see that the shelves at her back hold boxes of Tide, cans of Spam, melting Mounds bars. Arms crossed loosely at the wrist, hands curling down in a posture of queenly relaxation, she grins as we pass, calls out a pair of questions we don't understand (for some strange reason there was no language training during our three weeks on Guam). We push on through the heat.

To the left, the lagoon shows itself in flashes between a row of plywood shacks. On stilts behind each of the shacks stands an outhouse set just beyond the low-tide line, the stink hanging plainly in the humid dusk.

"Kee-reist Jezziz," Jack says.

Behind us, children materialize out of air. Laughing delightedly, they sprint ahead, showing off, prancing, mimicking us, the pink bottoms of their feet kicking back high. Black hair, smooth brown skin. The girls wear only underpants; the boys are naked. The older boys, the more brazen, adjust their speed and move in close, reach out a hand, touch us, then fall back shouting, over and over again, a question that sounds like, *"Kopwayfayya? Kopwayfayya?"*

The road curls with the shoreline, our friends fall back, laughing and pointing and gasping for breath. No houses now. We are following two pitted, puddled strips of sand separated by a weedy ribbon and curling between the green hillside to our right and a bramble of mangroves at the edge of the water to our left. Here and there along the shore a solitary palm reaches up and out, holding its umbrella of fronds over bunches of fruit and clutching at the sand with a thousand tiny fingers, a study in grace. There are strange dark notches in the trunks of these trees, regularly spaced. Some kind of measurement, we decide, in a quick, breathy conversation, some exotic totem language of symbol and superstition.

Our shirts and shorts and socks are soaked in sweat. Then there is a break in the mangroves and the lagoon comes fully into view. Fifty yards out from shore two boys are swimming after a dark object about their own size, which seems to be drifting out away from them.

Two more minutes of running and in the fading light we can see it clearly. *"At's a hawg,"* Jack says. *"Christ."*

Drowned and bloated, its snout and ears and one swollen flank showing above the water like a bathtub toy, a sow is drifting out on the tide. As we watch, the first of the boys reaches it. He holds on happily, like a child gaining the float at summer camp. We can feel his laughter reach the shore, a wild burst of joy caroming in over the shallow water and echoing out again toward the dusky, purple, million-year-old islands of the lagoon.

We turn and start back, suffering a bit now, struggling with our own bodies. We pass through the waiting gang of children and the game repeats itself in a shortened version. The little store is closed up, the proprietress retired for the day. We reach the outskirts of Moen just as two lonely streetlights there flicker and come on. But now, instead of being real, the place has turned into an imitation township giving off heat at the edge of a naked, laughing wilderness into which we will soon be sent.

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

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