

## UP FROM THE BEACH

by Peter Frankis

**O**n its final approach the plane turned across the island and Cathy saw the turquoise line of the water and then something dark, a cruising shape in the lagoon where the children splashed and then the run of palm trees and the ground coming up with the engines roaring.

'You got signal?' said Ennis tapping his phone.

'There was a thing, a shark maybe near those kids.'

'Zero bars. Nada. Global roaming phooey.'

Usually Cathy did their holidays. She understood the power of lists and detail while Ennis was an approximator leaving majors such as

accommodation or currency exchange to at-the-airport or in-the-taxi-from-the-airport.

But this time she had no choice. She was lost in her exhaustion.

And he had found it, right on the dateline. 'For three weeks we'll be the first people to see the new day.'

Exhausted by long hours day after day working on the IPO: high security in the vault, tell no-one not even your family and then the day before the prospectus, crisis had run through the city like...what? Like a tsunami, like hive-collapse, like deep impact, like all her slow-motion dreams.

They called a meeting on the floor but all she heard over the blood roaring in her ears were the nouns: 'Rationalisation', 'cuts', 'even keel.' Words, words, words none of it mattered: it was gone, the mountain vanished with the summit in view. She felt something in her chest breaking and she would have stumbled but for her warrior toughness and her righteous suit.

But after, with Acheson busy assigning and making calls (he hadn't yet realised that he was dead, that the whole division was dead) he had quibbled over her leave and she snapped. She had watched herself from over on the windowsill, an angular woman, reaching across his desk, grabbing the lapels of his jacket and, so that there would be no doubt, whispering into his face: 'I HAVE TO.'

Fifteen hours later they were on the island, the smell of rain and salt and kerosene and the clatter of palm fronds in the evening wind.

She took his phone and cocked her arm to hurl it into the lagoon but he stayed her hand. 'There's nothing anyway.'

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The road wound between villages, graveyards and taro gardens. At intersections the taxi swooped right or left, the driver never slowing,

never looking for pedestrians or traffic until, suddenly, an army truck was there in front of them, horn blaring, soldiers waving their guns. The taxi bounced off into the sand.

Ennis didn't notice any of this. He was busy aligning the tourist map he'd picked up at the airport, trying to find north or south and match their progress down the atoll. Cathy nudged him. There in the taxi's headlights was a child, just sitting there on the ground beneath a large frond roof, holding his little arm up against the glare. Look further and in the dimness mothers were fanning themselves, whole families dozing, stretched out together on the swept cement floor.

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'Welcome,' said the tall islander behind the counter. 'There is nothing for you to worry about.'

She read *Cumberland* on his nametag.

'What have you heard?' he continued. 'Whatever it is, they are misrepresenting.'

'We haven't...' she said turning to Ennis. 'You checked didn't you?'

Ennis shrugged. 'Those government travel advisories are just protecting their arses.' He gave her shoulders a squeeze: 'Like the man says there's nothing.'

'There is *no* situation,' Cumberland repeated as he walked around the counter and hefted their bags.

Although it was evening the place was quiet. Beneath the high thatch arch the restaurant and bar were empty. Little birds flitted in the upper reaches and fans rolled around stirring the air. A gardener sat in the greenery like Buddha pulling weeds.

## Day 1

Ennis was getting ready.

He sat on the bed with the map in his lap pushing his finger along at the kind of Olympian speeds he had in mind. Ten kilometres, fifteen. One hour. Pretty good even if it was flat and at sea level.

'You know Deek did forty-two kilometres in two hours eight back in 84 and he was already thirty-four. And I —'

'—you're thirty-six,' Cathy said.

'— I've got more to prove.'

It had only been a mild heart attack: a three or four, the surgeon had said, on a scale from one to ten where ten is... A new mitral valve, 28 grams of Taiwanese moulded plastic and polished titanium, eight weeks recovery and the rest of his life on anti-coagulants: good as new.

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She was on time for the health club but no-one was there, so she undressed, wrapped a towel around her and lay on the table.

Cumberland came in.

'I thought...' she said.

'We've had to double up. We haven't many guests for a time now. It's so undeserved, you see how beautiful.'

'How many currently?' she asked.

After a pause he said: 'There's you, and your husband. But we maintain the highest standards and will be ready when they return. Do you want the shakuhachi? It's very calming.'

'That's OK,' she said.

He rubbed oil onto her back and started to work on her shoulders.

'Are the rooms not clean?' Still musing on the unfairness of it all.  
'And chef does the finest seafood.'

It was no good: she was clenched, resisting.

He stopped. There she was, head down saying nothing. Then she whispered: 'Are you? Are you an *Islamist*?'

Cumberland didn't reply (he may not have heard).

Instead, he placed five large round stones on her back and left, closing the door.

The stones were supposed to be heated, the brochure definitely said *hot* volcanic rocks. But these were cool and slippery and she was slimy with the oil and they slid about on her back so she had to roll her shoulders and hips to keep them from skidding off. Eventually, they gathered along her spine, heaviness separated from bone only by skin pulled tight: thin skin and nerves.

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'You've offended him.' Ennis was pulling on his runners.

'It was the first thing that popped into my head.'

'A Moslem man is forbidden from touching an infidel's wife even in times of staff shortages. The Pacific is mostly Christians and neo-colonialists and reality TV. "Welcome to *Survivor Dateline*,'" he intoned stretching his hamstrings while holding onto the doorframe. 'It's down to the last two, who will outwit, outplay, outrun?'

'There's Fiji,' she tried.

'Hindus and Sikhs. Not the same.' He kissed the top of her head and then he was gone down the empty echoing corridor.

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## Day 2

While he ran dodging pigs, dogs and children, she walked. Along the shore and the up to the market where she bought a Coke and sat in the shade watching families at work and the fishers on the lagoon.

On the beach, the light was uncompromising. Runs of heat distorted distance, shadows materialised out of nothing and aerial islands hung on the horizon in a mirage so detailed she could imagine climbing up those wavering steps to explore some new inverted geography.

Here was the whump of the surf against the reef, a storm of seabirds diving like arrows into a shoal of baitfish, the water boiling, sharks cutting the surface. She found a crab shell perfect and vacant. What was the poem? The schoolgirl recited as she walked.

'I found this jawbone at the sea's edge:/There, crabs, dogfish, broken by the breakers or tossed/To flap for half an hour and turn to rust.'

*Rust* or was it *crust*? She couldn't remember, just that there was something odd at the end of that line.

Further along was a row of concrete bunkers. On some the iron doors were rusted shut, one had collapsed and the one closest to the water was only an outline, a low ridge of concrete and some bent steel. One was open where the sand had pushed in. On the far wall was stencilled *Laundromat*, and an arrow, curls of paint and that was it: a decayed cube disclosing nothing of its past, its purpose. She looked out one of the slots and there was the lagoon, the foreshortened sky and the horizon.

'Time in the sea eats its tail.'

—

Mum. Hi.

What time is it there?

It's three. It's afternoon.

Yes but what day?

Tuesday.

It's Monday here.

We're a day ahead. We're over the dateline.

How is that possible?

I don't know, it just is. How's Dad?

Nothing changes. And Ennis? He's still working for...?

You know I can't talk about his work.

I can't believe my daughter married a spy. What were you thinking?

Ennis is not a...He works in IT.

I bet he's glad he doesn't. The NASDAQ's down another five hundred since Friday. You can't walk down the street for the brokers swan diving onto the pavement. But you already know that.

What?

You can look on CNN and see tomorrow's news. You *have* got CNN there haven't you?

Mum.

Well...?

Kiss Dad for me and take an umbrella.

Now what do I need—?

...for all those diving brokers.

And then she was gone.

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Thunderheads had been piling up like mushroom clouds, the lagoon was yellow-green and luminous.

He was late and went straight to the shower.

'Mum still thinks you work for the CIA,' she said.

'Your mother needs to give TV a rest.'

'At least she called,' she said half to herself. At least there was something.

By evening the storm was on them. Rain beat like stones on the windows and water piled up across their balcony and leaked leaves and salt onto the tiles and the carpet. She pushed their fluffy white towels up against the window.

'It's still getting in,' she said.

'What would happen if we just opened wide and let the storm rage? Come, blow tempest, blow.'

She called for his robe clicking her fingers.

Standing naked on the bed with his arms wide showing the little paunch of his belly and the vertical seam of his operation.

He can't bear to be touched there, even in the dark: 'Don't. I —'

He has nightmares. She hears him grinding his teeth and groaning.  
(...I might unzip. I might fall out all over the floor, all my insides.)

It rained for hours. Gutters overflowed, the tide rose, windows rattled and shook and eventually a tree branch broke the glass and water rushed in. But by then it was late and they were asleep, their bed an island.

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In the morning, Fleur, the housemaid was bent over sweeping up.

Cathy asked: 'Where do the children... in the storm?'

'They just sit up out of the tide.'

'But don't they...?' Cathy thinks of the mothers and the sleepy child in the taxi's headlights.

Fleur yelped as a shard of glass tore her thumb.

Cathy went to her.

'It's fine Missus. See.' Fleur sucked on the torn thumb and now placed it in Cathy's hand for inspection. Cathy bent to kiss it better as a mother would but Fleur giggled and pulled away.

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### **Days 3 & 4**

The men were sitting up against the wall smoking and they laughed at her passing.

She turned on them. 'Why don't you do something for your families, your children ...?'

'What?' one of them replied. He bent down and grabbed a fistful of sand and let it empty between his fingers, making a point of some kind.

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She walked on through the village and past The Governor's Residence with its high black fence. Guards were lazing on the verandah and they waved and whistled. And there was the dog.

The village dogs were short-legged yellow mutts with curled tails. Their lives were spent scrapping, rooting through garbage and alert for food snatched from a table or the hand of an inattentive child.

This was a different dog: black, larger, much larger and interested in Cathy. It paced her on the other side of the fence wagging its stub-tail. Then it galloped ahead and as she reached the open gate, it was there before her on her side of the fence.

She looked about but the guards were gone. (Why have all that security if the gate is left open so anyone...?)

'Heya fella,' she tried querulous and put her hand out. The dog followed this with yellow-eyed calculation and then—

—one sharp bark, ears flat, a line of raised fur along its back.

She backed away right onto the road stepping in front of a mini-bus crowded with laughing hanging-on commuters. (Where are they going?) Honking and hooting they passed and then she was alone again on the road with the dog.

It took a step. Another. She held its gaze as she bent down scrabbling for a stone for anything. She did the sums as it closed on her. Find something, anything to throw—but found only coconut husks, some leaves, an empty Sprite can. The dog was close now, growling.

She backed away turning her ankle on a stone in the road. ‘Ow. Shit.’

Obediently, the dog sat.

‘You, you stay. Stay.’ She turned her back and hobbled across the road. She’d go down that side street, the one that goes back to the market. Where the people were. But it was past 11 and the stalls were shut, the islanders already gone for lunch and siesta.

If she looked, she would break the spell. But the dog’s claws were clicking on the cobbles next to her. She had to look. There it was, head swinging from side to side, catching her gaze, turning, crouching low.

A jeep pulled up. Here was someone, a soldier, he’s striding over, drawing his pistol—

—the bullet—

the hot line of its passing, time slowed so she can think. And the noise, a whole street-full of noise, four pigeons startled into the air, wings beating once and then, twice. Noise so loud that even though she thought she was ready, she jumped and it was that that made her want to blub like a five-year-old, blub and bite her fist.

— smacks in lifts the dog up and drops it in the gutter.

It coughed and kicked once and lay still, eyes open still watching.

She walked over and nudged a paw with her foot, it twitched. Then she kicked it. Kicked it hard, so the body coughed and then her ankle gave way and she tumbled to the pavement.

‘It was pacing you,’ the soldier said. ‘Keeping you in its view. It could have, if it wanted, just like that but most dogs they’re going to pace you a while.’

She read *Colonel Delgado* on his name tag. ‘I’ll have my men remove it.’

She turned on him. ‘It was your gate.’

‘I ask myself, why do I have all these soldiers lazing about when anyone could...?’ He nudged the dog with his boot. ‘And these Pinschers cost a fortune.’

He looked at her. ‘You are skinny and pale beneath that hat.’

‘And you are a big fatso,’ she said defiantly.

He laughed but still pushed out his chest and sucked in his gut.

‘You are at the resort for how many days.’ It wasn’t a question.

He offered her a lift but she shook her head: if not for her ankle she would have swaggered.

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‘You know what I thought? Where’s Ennis? Why am I fighting dogs on my own? Aren’t we a couple?’

He was sitting on the bed with a runner in his hand. ‘Have a look at this will you.’

‘Ennis!’

‘Yes, you met a scary dog. Have a look at the size of this thorn, it penetrated right through 1.5 centimetres of neoprene and canvas.’ He

wiggled a finger through the hole in his sole. 'And if not for the extra cotton—'

'Ennis, I was scared.'

—

They were in the restaurant, the candle between them flickering.

In the centre of the room was an ice sculpture. Carved across a hemisphere of blue ice was the atoll—the lagoon, the village and there was the resort, the thatched bures dripping.

Someone had put on *The Best of Michael Bublé* but the CD tracked back and forth:

ir...responsible

got the world on a string

call me ir...responsible

start spreading the news

ir...responsible

I'm leaving today

got a so-o-o-o-o-o-on-on-on-on-nnnnnng

Call me ir...responsible

the more I want you

ir....responsible

irrrrrrrrrr.... mad for you

The food was wonderful and poignant.

'Look at this.' Ennis held up a rose cut from a radish. 'It's perfect – each petal, the stamen, the bloom on the curl of the outer.' He pushed a finger into the flower and then pulled it back. Attached was a tiny carrot earwig.

Her dish was called '*An end to sorrows*'. It was nothing more than a grey egg served on a black stone oblong. But in her mouth it cycled from salty to hot to sweet to bitter and back; it was neither hard nor soft but it resisted her palate and then in an instant it collapsed into a clear clean liquid, water just water that nourished and filled her mouth, filled it up until her cheeks were full, stretched ridiculously and then bursting, a spout across the table; she had to laugh.

She looked up and the candles across the room trembled and blurred in her watering eyes.

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**Another day...**

Another mechanical day. The island moved from one horizon to the other; the sky spun, an empty blue bowl. The cogs and flywheels ticked away and at one point a series of promising white clouds inched slowly across only to evaporate before they reached the far horizon. The power to drive all this movement came from the adhesive strides of a single running man. If he would have paused even for a moment to take his breath or retie a lace or rub the soreness in his chest, all the great clockwork—the road pasted onto the island, erected from corals encrusting the top of some sea-mount bolted onto the greater Pacific plate, jostling with the others to impart spin to the flywheel that drives this planet on through the dark soil of the cosmos—would surely have stopped.

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Cathy was in the room when the phone rang.

'Yes. I can come,' she said. 'Is he alright?'

Ennis was at a table with Colonel Delgado. Soldiers were hanging back in the gloom joking with the barmaid, feet on tables looking at newspapers.

'Ah, the dog fighter.' The Colonel half rose.

'Ennis —?'

'Your husband was out at the far end of the village—' said Delgado.

'I was at the fifteen kilometre mark and about to turn for the stadium—'

'The villagers down south, they're discontents... There are rumblings, a few hotheads.'

'—they made me get up in the truck—'

'For your protection.'

'—with guns.'

Ennis stared hard while the Colonel lit a cigarette blowing a plume at the ceiling. 'We're going to be conducting some peacekeeping exercises. Nothing to worry about but maybe stay in for a while. Do some laps, catch some sun.'

'Laps?' Ennis protested. 'The pool's a duck-pond.'

'How long?' Cathy asked.

'Have you tried the sushi?' The Colonel gestured to the platter before them. 'Their chef is from Kobe. Very precise, very particular.' He speared a triangle of red emperor smeared it with wasabi and tossed it into his mouth.

The Colonel slapped Ennis' knee. 'So no more running for a while, eh?'

It wasn't a question.

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### **Un-numbered days**

Here then are the days of their confinement. Un-numbered days behind palm rows and hibiscus hedges, a handful at most but Cumberland's despondency, the dead telephones and the guard dozing

on his rifle at the gatehouse were sure signs that they were no longer free. They could no longer come or go as they pleased, act on a whim, they were no longer a pair of idle gods observing and smiling and carrying themselves without effort, without care until dinner-time.

Children from the village came in the afternoon and passed papaya or sticky rice wrapped in palm leaves. In return Cathy would take their photo and they'd gather in delight as she'd show them on the camera's display.

She tried the books she had brought but none held her interest, her gaze drifted off the paper to the grass and the concrete path and the green ants that swarmed through the cracks.

Sleepless, wordless they leant on the verandah as the moon ploughed the lagoon, a night-fisher standing on the prow silhouetted against the brightness.

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Ennis tried of course.

'What did you think the guard would do?' she asked as she washed the long graze on his leg, the water in the sink turning pink.

'He was *laughing* as he shoved me.'

'God Ennis, this isn't reality TV. No-one's *voting* us off; next time he'll shoot.'

She stopped. He was looking hard at her.

'What's wrong with you? This is unacceptable.'

The next day, instead of taking the road he simply walked down to the water's edge and along.

An hour later, there was a knock at the door and there he was, arms up behind his neck the guard behind. Unsmiling, the soldier wagged a forbidding finger and closed the door on them.

'Jeez, jeez-us.'

He had walked into the village but it was empty, no-one about but a naked child burbling to itself at the edge of a puddle. And there was a body bound to a tree with barbed wired. Turning black. A dog licking at its toes.

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### **Finally...**

They climbed to the upper floor and then through the hatch and squeezed onto a small balcony, the one with the flagpole and Ennis held his phone up in the air and yes, there was one flickering intermittent bar and he's dialling.

(Who? Who do you call for this kind of trouble?)

She's in next to him looking out to the village and across in the bay there's something black risen in the water and then noise all around as a plane passes overhead, tree-top high, wheels down, engines roaring lined up for the airfield.

Ennis is yelling into his phone, trying to make them understand.

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She goes back to the room and sits, waiting on the bed.

Soon enough, there will be vehicles down the drive, men running down the corridors, doors slamming one after another, coming closer.

Soon enough, they'll be pressed down into the belly of a Land Rover as it bounces along, past the burning village. Then there will be rounds thunking into the side and the driver will swear as glass shatters in front of him.

She wasn't afraid. She had learned that about herself. She was calm, could see things moving, coming together, her breathing, the soles of her feet, the shift of her balance.

When Ennis came in, he was pale.

'What will happen now? What will happen to us?'

She stood up and took his hand and they stood in the room as the engines grew louder.

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