

Island Rhapsody

By Barry Briggs

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The sun rose higher in the cloudless sky, and the air was growing hotter. I walked over to the spreading banyan tree in the middle of our village, near the harbor, and sat down next to the wizened old man. As had become his custom in his old age, he sat staring out into the distance, across the sea. My arrival did not seem to disturb him at all; in fact, I wondered if he'd noticed.

After a time, I asked, "Grandfather, how did it happen that Hae-moni became blind?"

For a moment, he did not answer. Then he raised his wrinkled head, and looked at me, and smiled. He slowly lit his wooden pipe. I marveled, as I always had, at his movements: he seemed to move to an inner rhythm, almost as if every motion was a part of some great dance. His hair, what was left of it, was long, stringy and grey; his walk was stooped and his gaze had diminished to a squint. Yet he was the most graceful human being I'd ever known.

In his quiet voice he began. "I came to this island many, many years ago, when I was a boy like you. Did you know that? That I was not born here?"

I knew. I also knew he always got to the point, even though sometimes it took a while. It was his way; he wanted you to understand.

"As a youth with much, much energy, I couldn't wait to go to sea, and when the mainlanders came on their ship to my city on the big island I leapt at the opportunity. I was what they call a deck hand, running errands -- mostly delivering meals and carrying messages from one cabin to the other.

"The mainlanders were archaeologists studying ancient cultures. They desired to come here to our island to see the rock signs, 'petroglyphs' they called them." Grandfather gestured to the huge outcroppings of volcanic rock where the ancients had carved giant symbols of people holding spears, of tropical birds, and other things now indistinguishable. It'd become a regular stop on the tourist bus which came through about once a week. Grandfather spent much time there.

"After a short voyage we arrived here on our island. The archaeologists went right to work, photographing the carvings, measuring them, comparing them to others in the South Pacific, and so on. As for me, I found myself drawn to the carvings. For me, they were more than simply lines in the rock.

“One clear night when it seemed clouds were banished from the sky I walked out to the rock, right over there. At first, it was quiet, very very quiet, as if any noise or commotion was forbidden. I sat on the rocks under the watchful stars and contemplated them. I wondered who had carved them, whose passion the symbols carried. And I gradually became aware of a rhythmic drumming. I felt others near me, I could sense their dancing and their singing. I could see the sparks from their fires rise to the sky, becoming new stars.

“They were there, that night.”

I looked over at the outcropping. At the moment it just looked like a big rock with some carvings, sweltering in the midsummer heat.

“The archaeology team got what they wanted, and went home. I stayed.

“I was very sure of my decision. Something about this place beckoned me, wanted me to stay, felt that I should be here, that I belonged. As a young man, it’s very important to feel that kinship.

“Besides...” he smiled his toothy smile again, “I’d fallen in love.”

“Her name was Hae-moni, and she was the most beautiful thing I’d ever set eyes on. She had long, black hair, with shiny streaks of brown in it. In her eyes was a sparkle I’d never seen before, and it was irresistible to me. I lived for her smile and gay laughter, which was never far away.

“Yes, I was in love.” The old man paused for a moment; he looked away, no doubt reliving his youth. “We tried very hard to be discreet, you know. We had a sense of modesty, but everyone around us knew, and I’m sure they found it all very amusing. Because at every celebration Hae-moni and I would sit together, and I couldn’t help but find every and any excuse to touch her, to fleetingly hold her hand, or rub my shoulder against hers. I would bring her flowers as often as I could, and she would take the freshest bloom of hibiscus or a strand of bougainvillea and run it through her hair. Everyone knew who the flowers were from as hard as we tried not to let them know.

“But we were young, too young by our customs to be married. So I had to rein in my passion for at least a year.

“In that time a young man returned from the big island, where he’d gone to seek his fortune. He seemed much older to me of course, though he was not yet thirty. He’d left a decade ago, affected by probably the same youthful wanderlust that had brought me here. But he had been successful in the city, and came back in his own brand new fishing boat.

“Everyone was impressed, it was the largest boat on the island, diesel powered with mechanical nets, a radio, and all sorts of navigation equipment. Palo-va, as he was called, had returned to fish our waters and settle down.

“I spent much time with Palo-va, who was in the prime of his manhood: strong, handsome, muscular. He attracted the attention of all the marriageable women, and even Hae-moni, of whose affections for me I had no doubt, occasionally teased me about him.

“But he and I became great friends. Every boy wants a teacher and a role model; Palo-va became mine. He taught me everything about fishing, and everything about his boat. He loved teaching me and I loved learning. And at that age everything comes so easily. I became an expert at tearing down and rebuilding those two diesel engines in the stern, and once he and I completely rebuilt the rudder underwater after hitting a rock. We were inseparable, and I thought that I was in heaven: in a land I loved, with a girl I adored, and a friend for life.

“Everyone, as I said, admired Palo-va, and it wasn’t long before all the adults elected him the mayor of our little village. Why wouldn’t we? Here he was with his big and shiny new boat, every day bringing home a delicious catch, selling most of it but saving whatever we all needed to eat. We all ate from his table, and it was good eating.

“Those were good times.”

“Pretty soon Palo-va himself fell in love. There was a girl named So-lee who cast her spell upon him. I had never myself been attracted to her, but who knows the ways of love? He was mad for her, and that much I understood, having had the same experience myself with Hae-moni. I privately worried, though. I’d seen So-lee’s temper once or twice. I’d seen her angrily kick a cat which had wandered into her hut, and I’d seen her kill a chicken for dinner by breaking its neck...and it seemed to me that she enjoyed it. But how could I tell Palo-va that? A man in love has no ears.”

Grandfather took a deep drag from his pipe. The sun was now directly overhead, but we were sheltered by the banyan. Beyond us the blue-green ocean gently lapped the beach.

“So Palo-va and So-lee were wed. Perhaps that is when the bad times began. I do not know, my memory is foggy. I am an old man, you know? But I do know that my best friend and his wife were unable to conceive a child in their time together, and that was a source of great frustration to him, for he desired that everyone respect him for his manliness and strength. He wanted many sons. But he had none.

“The great war came soon after that. No fighting ever occurred on our island, or anywhere nearby, of course. But that is when the military people came and built the airport, and stationed airplanes and helicopters there. And from time to time big ships came into the harbor with fuel for the planes, and the pilots and sailors all came into town, and we prospered. Everybody thought that was due to Palo-va, and we all looked up to him. We thought he brought us luck; and he thought so too.

“Then the war ended, and the soldiers went home. But the airport remained, and I guess some of the soldiers told their friends about our little island, for little by little tourists started to come to visit, as they still do. Things were still going well for us.

“And then one dark day God decided to loose a storm upon us. It was a torrent unlike anything I had ever seen in my life, and I have not seen its like since. The wind howled like a wounded pig, and the rains were like bullets from the sky. All of our huts were destroyed, blown away as if God brushed away a few specks of dust. We were forced with our few possessions up into the mountains to live in caves, like primitive people. I remember thinking that the archaeologists should come back and study us cave people now!

“But as the storm passed, I realized that even though we had almost nothing left, every one of us survived. Hae-moni and I walked back to the site of the village together, and though her deep brown eyes were filled with tears, I thought she looked more beautiful than ever. I didn’t care that we’d lost these *things*; we could rebuild. That made me happy.

“I suppose I was the only one feeling happy that day.” Grandfather smiled again. I remembered hearing of the typhoon from my father, and how it had virtually wiped everything out on the island.

“Then we all saw Palo-va. He was standing on the beach looking out where the dock had once been. Beyond the dock we saw his sleek boat impaled on a huge rock -- that one, over there.” Grandfather pointed. “And as we watched, the boat came apart on the rock, the keel on one side, the rest, the cabin, and my beloved engines splitting, falling into the still-rough seas, which broke apart what was remaining into splinters.

“We all became aware of Palo-va’s screams at once. He cried the cry of the helpless, for there was nothing he could do. He screamed and screamed in rage and anger. He screamed until there was nothing left, until his voice gave out. Then he ran into the forest, So-lee chasing after him, begging him to calm down and return.

“We did not see either of them for several months. We rebuilt our huts, and we used some of the materials from the military base so that our huts -- houses, now -- were strong, with foundations and doors and windows. This would not happen again. Because we loved him so much, because he’d done so much for us, we pitched in together and built Palo-va and So-lee a house as well, the biggest one of all, right on the very spot where they’d lived before.

“And one day, with no warning, they returned. With no ceremony, or explanation, they came back and moved into the house we’d built for them. They stayed there for many days before even coming out to talk to us.

“Naturally we had a lot of questions. Were they all right? Where had they gone? But they did not answer. Palo-va who normally was outgoing and even boisterous had become quiet and withdrawn. I think he felt that God had treated him unfairly, that he, Palo-va, had done everything right, and had been wrongly punished.

“One day I saw a small dog which belonged to one of Hae-moni’s cousins run up and playfully nip Palo-va on the ankle. He angrily kicked the dog so hard that it was thrown several feet, and I think a couple of its ribs were broken.

“I’d never seen Palo-va behave that way, I didn’t believe him capable of it. It was then I knew that Palo-va would never forgive God for the storm which had ruined him.” Grandfather’s brow furrowed, and he grew very serious. He took several puffs on his long pipe, and for a time both of us stayed quiet. I saw thunderstorms off in the distance, on the horizon. But here it was very quiet and peaceful.

Grandfather spoke again, startling me. “Palo-va’s behavior worsened, and it seemed to me that So-lee’s nasty temperament only exasperated it. I worried for my friend, and tried to help him, to tell him to put the past behind him and start over. I knew he could do it. We all knew he could do it. But he did not, and grew angry with me, and slapped me, saying I was a silly boy.”

“‘What has happened has happened,’ I told him. ‘You can’t fight that. You can’t fight God.’

He gazed at me with a look more hateful than I have ever seen. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I can. God has wronged me, and he is my enemy.’”

“I left him then. I left my friend forever, and I mourned the death of our friendship.

“But Palo-va did not forget my words. Because I tried to reason with him, because I tried to rationalize God’s actions, I believe that he saw me as an agent of the force which had destroyed him and his life. I know now that he embarked on a plan to wrong me as he had been wronged.

“And this is what happened. One day I had gone off into the forest to gather some fruit for us to eat, and I returned late. I’d brought back some flowers for Hae-moni, and I walked to her house to give them to her. When I arrived her parents were sobbing. She was nowhere to be found. She’d gone for a walk in the afternoon and had never returned.

“I was frantic, I looked in every house, barged in on every family in the village. I could not find here. For a moment I felt the need to scream, scream the same helpless cry that Palo-va had. But that was not my way. I kept looking.

“And then late that night I heard a pitiful sound, a sound of moaning and sobbing, a sound of pain and hurt. Recognizing Hae-moni’s voice, I ran to her, she was staggering up the path from the forest.

“There was blood on her dress. In fact blood was everywhere. It was streaming from her eyes, and her dress held a big stain beneath her waist. She’d been brutally violated, and I had no doubt who had done it.

“I was out of my mind with rage. I ran into the forest, running faster than the winds of the hurricane. I heard the drums again, those same ones I’d heard that night on the rock, and I felt the presence of

mighty warriors all around me. I could feel their strength in my muscles, I could feel their hot blood in my veins. They were coming into my world to help me, I knew that.

“I was growing, too. Physically. As their war chants pounded in my ears I felt my stature increase, I was at least a foot taller than I had been before. My arms thickened with muscle.

“Deep in the forest I came upon So-lee first. I could see Hae-moni’s blood on her face and her clothes.

“She was laughing. It was an evil, filthy laugh.

“With one blow, to her face, I killed her. I did not pause to take revenge, to dismember her. She was not worth my time. Because I knew not far from me Palo-va waited.

“But as I watched So-lee’s lifeless body disappeared. In its place lay the body of a small, but pretty parrot. I wondered at this. I did not understand the symbolism, what God, or my warrior friends intended by this.

“I had no time to ponder however. I chased in the direction I knew Palo-va to be, my righteous strength and power growing with every step.

“Palo-va had gone to the airport. I do not know how I knew this. But I did, and I hastened there. The sun was coming up over the trees, and I broke out into a clearing.

“Then I heard the sound of a helicopter coming overhead. It was Palo-va. I knew that he himself could not fly a helicopter, but I was also aware that forces stronger than either of us were aiding us in our conflict now.

“I saw the helicopter, it was a green military one. It swooped down on me, and I was compelled to dive for cover. As the helicopter flew by I could see Palo-va in the cockpit, and an evil grin was painted upon his face. His teeth had grown large and sharp, as on a mask.

“I stood up and came out from my cover. I did not fully understand what was going on, but I knew my role was not to cower in the bushes. I stood tall, the blood of the ancients coursing through me, and waited for Palo-va’s next attack.

“Down he came out of the sky, toward me. I could see that his plan was to spear me with the landing skids of the helicopter. Perhaps he intended to stab me as his boat had been stabbed by God; I do not know. But I could feel the power of a hundred warriors in me. As the helicopter raced along the clearing, only a few feet off the ground, I ran toward it. I could see surprise in Palo-va’s face. This he did not expect. I lept up and grabbed the landing skid. I twisted it around. I threw the helicopter down.”

Looking at Grandfather I could tell he was not with me, not in the here and now. In his memory, Grandfather was at this very moment again struggling with Palo-va.

“The helicopter did not immediately crash. Palo-va had however lost control of it, and it spun around, again and again. Its death, and Palo-va’s, were inevitable. I ran from the clearing to avoid the impact.

“I was not entirely successful. One of the rotors struck the earth, and instantaneously the copter swung around into the ground, and it exploded. The shock wave from the explosion knocked me over, threw me down, and I lost consciousness.

“I awoke quickly, and realized that for this brief moment many worlds, many spheres had come together. The morning sky was no longer blue, but pink. All was silent. I walked over to the site of the crash, where no wreckage remained, only the body of a beautiful red and blue parrot. Of course it was Palo-va.

“I turned, and saw an infinitely huge structure, like a house, but not one. I saw levels upon levels of this structure that stretched beyond the limits of my vision, and I understood that I was gazing upon Creation itself. Each level in the house was its own universe, its own life, its own history; words cannot describe this.

“I looked in more carefully and saw Palo-va and So-lee. Both were climbing from one floor in the giant house to another, and as they did so their bodies were shrinking, from adults to infants.

“They were being reborn. And then there was a small, brief flash of light, and it was if I were flying through the house, over continents, to a city, and a room in a hospital, where a young mother was giving birth, and I saw the baby, and knew it was Palo-va. Not far away, or perhaps very far away -- I had lost all sense of distance -- in a small hut on another island, a similar scene was replayed; and this time I knew So-lee was reborn. I looked at them, looked deep into their souls, and I saw no blemishes, no evil. I was pleased at this, and I wished them well.

“What will happen to them? In their new lives will they meet? Will they turn evil, or keep to the way of goodness and righteousness? I cannot say. I cannot say even what the nature of evil is; but I think it is like a disease, it is like a cancer which eats at good people. This was the meaning of the lovely bird-corpses, as if to say inside Palo-va and So-lee were spirits of lightness and beauty that somehow were infected with the contagion of evil.

“As I left this great structure to awaken again on our earth, I briefly saw an giant bird flying overhead. The dark, forbidding creature never moved its wings to fly, but kept its fearful eyes on the ground as if looking for new prey.

“This bird was of course the spirit of Evil itself. It briefly acknowledged me, and for a moment I feared it. It had lost the battle today. But then I understood it had no claim on me, and was simply noting my victory. I believe it recognized that its role is always to lose in the end; it strikes man, and takes hold; and sometimes it takes days, and other times generations to dislodge it. But it must always lose.

“I returned to my home, and things returned to normal. I married Hae-moni shortly thereafter, and she and I learned that to live and to see beauty does not always require eyes. We had many sons together - - “ he turned to me “ -- your father the first.”

He stared at me for a moment, and then looked again off into the distance, across the waves. I realized his story was over. “Grandfather,” I said.

“Yes, grandson.” Again I felt his gaze upon me. “Do you have something to tell me?”

“Yes, Grandfather. I too have heard the music on the rocks.”

And Grandfather laughed out loud, for all the world to hear.

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