Across the Magic Line
Growing up in Fiji

PATRICIA PAGE
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Across the Magic Line
BY THE SAME AUTHOR


*Australian writer Page knows her characters well and renders her setting — the last glow of Paris as an artists, wonderland — with a few brief but resoundingly bittersweet passages.*

KIRKUS REVIEWS. USA.
Across the Magic Line
GROWING UP IN FIJI

PATRICIA PAGE

PANDANUS BOOKS
Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies
THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY
For

Alan, Valya, Melanie and Gay
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Patricia Page
Patricia and Gay, 1944
### FIJIAN SPELLING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conventional Fijian spelling</th>
<th>Pronunciation-based spelling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>MB (as in number)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>TH (as in that)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>ND (as in end)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>NG (as in sing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q</td>
<td>NGG (as in finger)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CONTENTS

1 Full Circle 1
2 A Place in the Universe 11
3 Cannibal Forks 25
4 Sharks and Husbands 37
5 Coming Soon: Big Mac 51
6 A Touch of the Tar Brush 63
7 War Games 77
8 The Lady and the Cannibals 91
9 White Water 103
10 The Memory Necklace 115
11 The Most Beautiful Island of All 127
12 Coconuts and Castor Oil 141
13 Honeymoon Island 151
14 Mr Strong 165
15 First Love 181
16 Pets and Pedal Drills 191
17 The Sailing Ship 205
18 The Driftwood House 217
19 Lonely Levuka 229
20 Dead Selves 247
Notes 262
Bibliography 266
Map, Fiji Islands 268
'Oh no, look at that.' My sister Gay's head filled the plane window.

‘What?’

She sat back so I could see.

We’d left the glare of the pillowy sky floor, dropped through the white mist of the upper clouds and come out into greyness. Rain streaked the window. Below us a purple blanket of low cloud partly shrouded a land mass of roughly the same colour. Fiji.

I flopped back in disgust. ‘And I’ve waited fifty years for this.’

‘What about me? My birthplace!’

Gay’s birth. My father’s voice waking me in the middle of the night. ‘You have a little sister.’ His face pushed against my mosquito net, his features stretched flat into a Humpty Dumpty smile. The next day he took me to see her at ‘Nurse Morrison’s’, a fly-screened sanctuary which produced babies. She had hair like a black feather duster, fiery ears and a tiny wet polyp mouth that went in and out. I was so glad she’d finally arrived. From now on, she’d be the centre of attention, not me. I’d be up there with the big ones. The three of us would be united in looking after the new baby. And perhaps, from time to time, nobody would notice if I slipped away.

‘So the hurricane season’s not over.’ Gay inspected the gloom we were flying through. The purple blanket was flecked with livid flashes. The rain slanted thick and fast.
Scary memories. The ominous triangular flags flying from public buildings: yellow for the preliminary warning and black for the final warning. The battening down of windows. The felling of dead branches. The checking of roofs for loose sheets of tin that could fly through the air and slice off someone’s head. Everyone was confined indoors except for policemen who, I was told, patrolled the streets wearing lead-lined boots to stop them blowing away. I wasn’t so sure this was true. Once, during a cyclone, I peered through the battens and saw a policeman going by in his blue jacket, white skirt and red sash, but he was wearing the usual crate-sized sandals.

Then there was the cyclone lore. When the breadfruit tree had unusually big yields of fruit or the ivi tree had come into leaf early, severe gales were sure to come. And cyclone tales. A 14-year-old girl was struck dumb when she woke up to find a hen house had been transported by the force of the gale over a seven-foot fence and dumped under her window. A whole coral island village was washed away during a storm by a tidal wave. The inhabitants took refuge in the tops of the palm trees, clung there like burrs to a tuft of wool until the tops themselves were torn off and blown out to sea, scattering the ocean with bodies.

Such weather was unthinkable for our trip. To be trapped in a battened-down hostel with the wind panting and clawing outside. Or, less dramatically, cancelling all our excursions and trips because of rain. Just before we took the plane we’d read of severe cyclone damage in Fiji but put it aside, refusing to believe anything could happen to spoil these precious eighteen days we’d planned so carefully.

Our limited time and narrow budget had been painstakingly shared out among the places we most wanted to visit. No package tours for us. We would stay only in accommodation run by Fijians. Even our one luxury — a three-day cruise in the Yasawas — was to be on an old government yacht run by Fijians. To rediscover Fiji, we had to rediscover Fijians. The place and the people were inseparable: their aura was one and contributed to the lure we had felt since we left the islands in 1948, as children.
This was also a holiday of escape and rest. Away from all our responsibilities. We loved being together and the gap in our ages meant that it hardly ever happened.

My father believed that to get the best out of life you shouldn’t stay in the same place longer than seven years. After Fiji we went back to Australia, then to New Guinea, then to the Solomon Islands. When Gay was at home, I was away at school. When she was away at school, I was away at university. When she was at university, I was travelling round Europe. By the time she came to Europe, I had settled in Paris with an Englishman. She also met an Englishman but settled in London. For the next thirty or so years we saw each other only on family holidays. With five spirited children and two choleric husbands between us there was bound to be strife. It was significant that this first peaceful holiday was going to be in Fiji — the only place where we’d spent any length of time together.

There was a gentle rivalry of ownership between us. Gay had the advantage of having been born there. She was a *kaiviti*. A privileged person. But I had a greater wealth of childhood memories and had visited more tropical islands. I was solid in my conviction that Fiji was the best. It has fewer dangerous diseases and a benign climate for most of the year. Perfectly placed on the planet, it is the portal between Polynesians and Melanesians, mixing the most attractive traits of each. And it is on that magic line where west passes into east and yesterday touches today.

My imagination is even seized just by the look of the word on the page. Fiji. It sits so prettily there: the boxy top of the ‘F’ balancing the lower curl of the ‘j’, the three little straight lines of the ‘iji’ balancing the three dots above. Neat and harmonious as a piece of jewellery, it danced in front of my eyes, beckoning me.

‘You know, you may have been born there,’ I reasoned with her now on the plane. ‘But I’m the one who’s always dreamt of going back.’ I uncrossed my arms to show my fastened seat belt to a flight attendant who was peering at it with unusual intensity. Maybe we were in for a particularly bumpy landing, I thought with a twinge of fear.
‘Of course you have,’ smiled Gay. ‘You’re the dreamy one.’

The dreamy one and the practical one. They were the slots our parents had slipped us into. But we know better. Gay often daydreams and talks to herself. ‘Here’s Mum, talking to herself again,’ say her kids, seeing her coming towards us down the road, making gestures. And I’m not so impractical. I can use a power drill, lay bricks, drive a camper van, do up a ruined Normandy cottage pretty well single-handed.

But parents often like to put their children into slots and I was well and truly in the dreamy slot. ‘You’ll kill someone some day, Patsy, with your dreaminess,’ my mother used to say. I would wonder how I was going to do it. It seemed a curious warning. But death was often used in her discipline. She had a collection of stories of girls who came to a grisly end when they disobeyed their mothers. There was the girl who died from eating the green guava, the girl who picked a mosquito bite on her forehead fatally infecting her brain and — the most horrific — the girl who climbed a tree and fell out, landing with her legs so wide apart she split up the middle. Most of these stories were told before Gay came along because my mother was so desperately protective of me. But there was one brought out especially for her, an obstinate thumb-sucker. It was the girl who sucked hers so vigorously all she had left was a tiny raw stump. At least Gay’s disobedient girl story didn’t end in death.

We had now penetrated the purple blanket and it was night at four in the afternoon. Then out into slightly lighter air, a glimpse of black sea with white tufts, a flurry of grass at the edge of the runway and, finally, not such a bumpy landing at all.

This was our first time at Nadi Airport. It was an American air force base when we lived in Fiji. Most people left and arrived by ship in those days. But near Suva there were ‘Catalinas’ or flying boats which took off on floats. We went for a trip home to Australia at the end of 1945 on their maiden flight. Gay still has the passenger list for such an important event with our names on it. Water rushed up to cover the windows as we took off. Then up into a blue sky and Suva a toyland below us. The sky was always blue in childhood.
Now it was murky.

‘Don’t worry,’ said a man in the queue waiting to go through immigration. ‘It’s often like this in Fiji in the afternoon. The clouds build up, then there’s a storm. And in the morning it’s bright and sunny again.’

Ah. That’ll be it. All gone tomorrow. We’ll wake up to a freshly washed sunny day. Palm fronds will glitter. The sea will dazzle. I gave him a grateful smile.

Outside the passport offices there were several people waiting, mostly Fijians, some with boards with names on them, a few with garlands — ‘leis’ — in their hands. But meagre leis with a lot of coloured paper and only a few flowers.

How different it was to my arrival by ship in 1941. As Robert Louis Stevenson wrote: ‘The first experience can never be repeated. The first love, the first sunrise, the first South Sea Island, are memories apart, and touched a virginity of sense.’

Everyone had been up on deck since dawn looking at the horizon until there was a shimmering quiver in it — a mirage-like blur. I ran about, peering through legs trying to get a decent view. The blur became a dark blue bump that slowly grew and changed colour: through paler blue to shades of brown and green. Scattered buildings appeared and a wharf black with ant-sized people. As we drew closer I saw they had banks of leis up their arms: garlands and garlands of pink and white frangipanis, purple and lavender morning glory, double and single hibiscus. They were all smiling and looking up. Not combing the faces for one particular person, but smiling at everyone. A smile of welcome. Welcome to Fiji.

When the gangway was lowered they swarmed up, throwing leis over necks. A giant took me up in his arms, higher than anyone had ever lifted me. He was the first black man I’d ever seen. I marvelled at his shining teeth, coconut-smelling skin and glistening hair standing out in a bushy halo. It brushed my cheek as he turned his head to see his way down the gangway. I felt a little fearful at being carried off but then saw my parents over his shoulder. At the bottom he swung me gently to the ground.
The Fijian men now standing around waiting in the airport had their hair cut short, but most of them wore the traditional ‘sulu’, a piece of cloth reaching just below the knees and fastened at the waist. The women also still dressed as I remembered: an ankle-length sulu and, over that, a ‘Mother Hubbard’, a garment the missionaries had introduced to hide bare breasts: roomy with elbow-length sleeves, colourful and flowery. Most of them wore their hair in the old puffball style. As we went past there were mumbled greetings of ‘bula’ (hello) from the women and the men. We, of course, bula’d them back — delighted that this friendliness to strangers still existed.

Selita of Hunt’s Travel Agency met us. She had dimples and honey-coloured skin and told us that a van from the Sandalwood Inn was coming to pick us up. In Fiji even bottom-end accommodation had thoughtful touches usually associated with luxury: a welcome at the airport, transport laid on.

While we waited in her office in a line of other offices hung with seductive travel posters, she told us how much she missed her village on Vanua Levu, the second-biggest island, where there were no tourists and you didn’t have to earn a living. You went and caught your fish, grew your vegetables and didn’t have to pay for anything.

So many things haven’t changed, I thought with pleasure. Still subsistence living, still village life, still the same clothes, hairdos. It’s strange how we are so possessive of our past. It must stay immutable. My Fijians. They must stay how I remember them. Otherwise I’ll be lost. Why should I be so desperate that they should still paddle around in outriggers, fishing for their dinner? That men and women should wear wrap-around skirts and sticking-out hairstyles? Why couldn’t they have cars, electricity and wear jeans, floppy shorts, back-to-front baseball caps, tug-sized trainers like practically everyone else in the world?

Some say Fijians are to be envied because they’ve been able to resist the lure of money-making that in many places has brought only misery. Others say they are to be pitied because they are trapped in an out-of-date feudal system in which the main beneficiaries are the chiefs.
Most people now believe they should at least have the choice. But here was an example of what that could bring. Selita had chosen to earn money in a soulless airport in a row of booth-like travel agencies and now regretted it, yearning for the village camaraderie and easy plenty of her unspoilt Vanua Levu. But she could always go back. Or could she?

Behind Selita’s desk was a rack holding dozens of shell necklaces. She daintily unhooked a couple and slipped them over our necks with a slightly apologetic smile as if she thought them a poor substitute for the traditional fresh-flower lei. But Gay and I loved the necklaces and wore them our whole stay.

The driver from the Sandalwood Inn arrived in a pointy-edged brown sulu. He asked us a lot of questions on the way there in the van and we yelled at him above the noise of the rain beating on the roof and swishing up from the tyres.

The two beautiful girls in reception wore deep pink hibiscus behind their ears and deep pink Mother Hubbards. In the corner there was a large umbrella stand full of golf umbrellas.

This made me anxious. ‘Do you think it’ll rain for long?’ I asked the stately back of one of the girls as she showed us to our room. Fijian women have a graceful gait: head poised like a flower on a stem, back straight, hips lazily swaying, footfall light and easy. Mostly they aren’t all that slim. Not fat either. Just firmly fleshed, powerful and proud of it. Proud because their menfolk like them that way. ‘Very few European women are really attractive,’ said Ratu Sakuna, Fiji’s greatest statesman, in a speech in 1939, ‘being mostly thin and fragile.’ Earlier on, in the cannibal era, they found them bony and unappetising. Hardly worth eating.

‘Oh I don’t know,’ the girl replied, turning slightly to look at us. ‘A week maybe.’ She flung back her head and gave a rapturous smile. ‘I love the rain.’ A week. She led us up an outside staircase that overlooked the swimming pool. It was brimming over from the rain. I’d seen postcards in the office of hotel guests being served drinks around an enticing blue version. Now the lonely grey pool slopped over and sloshed around the legs of empty chairs.
Our bedroom was more cheerful. Its curtains and bed covers were patterned with parrots and jungle flowers. I noticed my cover had a line down the middle. On one side of the line the colours were bright, on the other they were faded to whispery pastels. The sun. Strong sunlight coming through the window and hitting the bed in the same place every day had faded the colours to nearly nothing. Look at all that sun, I thought. I’m going to believe the man at the airport. The rain can’t last. It’ll be fine tomorrow.

The dining area was a cluster of tables near a counter where a cook and his helpers came and went and waitresses collected the food. Others seemed to be there only to chat and laugh with the busy ones. I was often going to see this in Fiji: people working surrounded by companions whose main occupation was to encourage hilarity. The Fijian laugh. It rumbles or ripples and rises to a delighted final squeak. But it doesn’t jar. Compared with most of us they move quietly, speak softly.

At the tables there were a few tourists but also Fijians — mostly clerical types in gabardine *sulus* and shirts and ties. Past the dining area was an empty dance floor. It had cane armchairs grouped around the sides and a bandstand with potted palms and hibiscus arrangements. Our van driver was sitting on the edge playing the guitar.

After the reef fish cooked in coconut we asked for fresh fruit salad. Although you could now get tropical fruit in Europe there was nothing like the on-the-spot sun-ripened kind. We were longing for the heavenly goo of a real Fijian mango, the intense banana taste of thumb-sized finger bananas, the sweetness of Fijian pineapples. The waitress told us in a regretful, motherly way that there was none. It had all been blown away in the cyclone.

Beside our plates were cardboard coasters with a poem printed on them:

*The early visitors to Fiji,*
*It seems could only come by sea,*
*Their voyage here took many weeks,*
*Their ships were always full of leaks,*
Reefs and storms and other trials,
Awaited them across the miles,
The food was bad, the decks were hard,
They had to struggle every yard,
And when they reached the distant shore,
They often found themselves at war,
But all these problems they withstood,
To fill their ships with ‘Sandalwood’.

We turned over our coasters and found that the poem continued on the other side:

Today the traveller comes by air,
An easy flight without a care,
Looking forward to Fiji’s delights,
The sun and sand, and all the sights,
To welcomes that warm and drinks that cool,
To friendly people, a dip in the pool,
To days of fun or peaceful leisure,
Memories you are sure to treasure.
Food that really is a winner,
(Dinner for you — not you for dinner!)
And the only thing that is still the same,
Is the great allure of the SANDALWOOD name.

SANDALWOOD INN — The Inn place to stay.

Sandalwood. As was fitting. Here we were at the beginning of our trip and the sandalwood trade was also a beginning. It marked the arrival of the first Europeans in Fiji. A stepping-off point.

Two hundred years ago a shipwrecked sailor, Oliver Slater, started it all. The crew who staggered ashore with him spread cholera and dysentery that killed thousands. Some of the castaways also succumbed to the disease, others were eaten. But Oliver Slater survived. He’d seen the sandalwood trees, he’d sniffed the money. Lots and lots of money. The fragrant wood, bartered for trinkets and old nails, could be sold at a 600 per cent profit to China. News of Oliver’s discovery spread and ships arrived from Europe, America, Australia. Greed grew on both
sides. Trinkets weren’t enough. It had to be axes and knives. Then muskets and gunpowder. Finally, the only barter the chiefs accepted was help in their inter-island battles. The scented trade that had begun in the stench of disease ended in the blood of war. By 1813 supplies of sandalwood were exhausted. But the Europeans were well entrenched in Fiji.

Oliver Slater, who’d spent these years partly living among the natives, partly on sandalwood vessels acting as interpreter for the traders, was finally clubbed to death while asleep on a mat.

There was a boy called Slater about my age in Suva when I lived there and I’d been reminded of him only a short time before Gay and I left on our trip. His name appeared on a travel article in an English Sunday newspaper supplement. He’d lived in Fiji when the first Blue Lagoon film was being made, as I had, and hadn’t been back for many years. A sadly changed Suva had greeted him: the magnificent Grand Pacific Hotel boarded up, theft and muggings rife, the streets full of touts and prostitutes.

‘Read that!’ my husband had said. ‘I wouldn’t go there. Dangerous.’

That only made me want to go more. I had to see for myself, even if it was going to be painfully disappointing. I had to tie off the loose ends, come full circle.
In Suva I found my place in the universe. There I discovered who I was. Until then I didn’t have a feeling of belonging, either to a family or a country. It was there I realised I lived in a town called Suva which was on Viti Levu, an island in the Fiji Group. I saw a map and it stayed in my head. It appealed to me with its round motherly Viti Levu, lean fatherly Vanua Levu and the smaller islands like hundreds of little children. Suva was a pinpoint snuggled into Viti Levu’s side facing inwards towards the Koro Sea and I was a pinpoint inside it. Around the Koro Sea all the islands were grouped in a circle, protective, comforting. I was anchored at last.

Until then I didn’t have a feeling of identity. I knew I lived in a place called Australia but I felt perched on the edge of the planet, about to fall off. At night I would lie in bed, unsleeping, the endless fearful sky outside my window. It was as if I’d just come from there and it was waiting to reclaim me, suck me back into its void.

I would try to compress its vastness between my hands. ‘I am Patsy. I am Patsy,’ I would repeat like a mantra, gritting my teeth and pressing my hands together. It was not only the sky I squeezed between my hands, but the idea of me. I tried to knead the conception of self like a piece of plasticine and give it form.

Of course, I knew I had parents but I didn’t see them as whole people. I was aware only of parts of them. My mother’s
breasts. Soft and buoyant. She’d rest my head on them and rock me to sleep; like a cradle floating on the sea. And her hands. She had neat little hands, pale and boneless. Plump white birds that picked here, darted there, fluttered there. My father’s legs. Legs in grey serge that came home from work every evening. I’d be waiting for them and run forward to grab one as they came through the door. Then I’d look up at his face smiling down from so far away.

People were in bits but animals I could see whole and clear. My very first memory was of animals: pink and blue and yellow ones, decking my cot the morning of my first birthday. They filled me with fear, hanging there with their black button eyes.

When I was two I went to visit my Aunty Peggy’s farm in Western Australia and someone put me on the back of a calf. I was terrified. She had a fearsome tabby cat who stalked around with his bushy tail held high. I hid from him under a table; being so small I didn’t have to crouch or bend, I just walked straight under. She also had a dog. Australian dogs are the friendliest in the world and hers was a maniac of friendliness. He ran in mad circles at the slightest promise of a pat and flung himself with demented joy at anyone who approached the farm. Of course, when he jumped on me I fell flat. Wagging all over with rapture at my response to his affection, he stood astride me, his great shaggy face with its drooling tongue only inches from mine. I think this is why I’ve always been afraid of the first approach of a strange dog — a friendly one was bad enough, imagine an unfriendly one. Although I feared these animals, it was their world I felt a part of.

Even on the ship to Fiji in 1941 it was the wildlife I remembered. The people were still in bits. Hands patted me on the head or tweaked my cheek. Legs ran around playing deck quoits, stretched themselves in deck chairs, leant against the rails at sunset. But what I cared about were the dolphins that followed us, corkscrewed through the wake, fanned out to the sides of the ship, threw themselves up out of the water, showing off. I felt
they were calling me to join them. The same with the flying fish that skipped from wave top to wave top, went higher and higher till they flew over the bows, coming closer and closer. Sometimes one would hit a part of the ship and fall on to the deck, gasping and flapping, milky silver scales winking in the sun. I’d stand watching it dry and die on the deck in the heat. Sometimes I’d nudge it sorrowfully with my toe but I wouldn’t think of edging it further until it fell back into the water.

I have a small sepia coloured photo of us taken on deck. My mother’s hair is raked back by the wind. I am leaning up against her and reach just above her waist. She has her hands on my shoulders and I’m holding them. I’m wearing a scarf on my head tied under my chin, a shrunken knitted skirt and jumper, and a large pair of white bloomers that protrude below my skirt. My mother and I look worried. My father, one arm round my mother’s neck, the other crooked with hand on hip, looks triumphantly happy. He’s pleased no doubt to be on such an adventure. Just as he’d later find it thrilling to take his family in a flying boat on its inaugural flight, he found it exciting to take us across the sea in wartime with a minesweeper going on ahead of our ship.

He explained to me what a mine was. It was a floating ball with spikes on it like a sea urchin. If one of the spikes touched the side of the boat it would be blown into little pieces. But I wasn’t to worry, the minesweeper was there to sweep away the mines.

The ship we were on, the Goonawarra, was a Swedish freighter with only a few passengers. I had my sixth birthday on board and the Captain and his officers gave me a party. The Captain sat at the head of the table and I sat at the other end. All I can remember of him and his officers are their uniforms; the stiff, lustrous whiteness, the brass buttons and the gold braid on their cuffs. And the strange cake they had brought out and put in front of me with such pride. High and lopsided and covered in whipped cream with quarters of mandarins, pieces of peach and apple studded in it. I knew enough about birthday cakes to know they shouldn’t be like this. They should be round and flat, topped
with smooth pink icing and wiggly decorations. This made me a bit ashamed for them because they didn’t know what a proper birthday cake was like. It was different with the present. I knew it was more for a lady than a little girl. But I loved it. A crystal jewel box with a red glass top and a rose carved in the glass. I wonder whose officer’s girlfriend or wife went without it.

When we arrived in Suva we stayed in ‘Mrs Wisdom’s Flats’, a weatherboard apartment building built around a courtyard. Our flat was on the ground floor and, at first, was empty except for a wooden table painted the same cream as the walls with some stiff-backed chairs to match. Most of the buildings in Fiji were painted cream inside and out. ‘Colonial cream’ it came to be known as.

We sat at the table on the hard chairs. The atmosphere was bleak. My mother’s chin began to tremble. ‘Never mind, dear,’ my father said. ‘It’ll be all right when the furniture comes.’

Mrs Wisdom became friends with my mother and I was told to call her Aunty May. I always had to call my mother’s friends Aunty. I detested Aunty May. She killed cats. Suva was full of strays and a lot of them converged on her courtyard. This could have been partly because another friend of my mother’s, Aunty Dolly, who lived next door to us, used to feed them. She and Aunty May were always arguing. I’d sit between them, miserably contemplating their legs. Aunty May’s were shanky and mottled and she had painted toenails in smashed-down sandals. Aunty Dolly’s were plump and smooth, with small, neatly shod feet. She’d say things like it was a free world and she couldn’t bear to see the cats starving. Aunty May said she’d chuck her out of the flats if she persisted because the cats kept everyone awake at night and wrecked the garden.

I’d pat the cats that came to Aunty Dolly’s and give them names. No sooner would I get friendly with one than I’d find it dead. The image of these dead cats — strangled, stoned or squashed — stayed with me for years. It would come to haunt me when I went to bed and give me insomnia worse than I’d had when I hadn’t been placed in the universe.
On one memorable occasion it took away my appetite. My mother had a surprise for me. Ice cream. Not the semi-liquid kind people tried to make in their iceboxes but real industrial ice cream in a carton with a picture of round scoops of chocolate, vanilla and strawberry on the lid. I didn’t ask where it came from because I knew when a luxury appeared in wartime you didn’t ask questions.

To make the event special, we weren’t going to eat it in our flat but picnic with it under a flame tree on a vacant block opposite. We’d just got our bowls and spoons ready to ladle out the ice cream when May Wisdom came across for a chat. She mentioned she’d killed another cat. Suddenly the ice cream looked sickening: headachy pink, disgusting brown. My mother couldn’t believe me when I said I didn’t want any. Aunty May ate my serving instead.

On the way home I was scolded for being ungrateful and temperamental. I had to realise just how difficult it was to get luxuries in wartime. I did realise — that’s what grown-ups were always talking about. They hardly talked about anything else: silk stockings, ‘wedgie’ shoes, coins, sweets, eggs.

To replace stockings some women painted their legs with orange-brown leg paint with a darker line down the back for the seam, but my mother said this was ‘common’ and left hers natural. Most had a pair of wedgies — platform toe-peeper shoes — for best, because longed-for shipments did come occasionally, but the rest of the time they had to wear sandals made by the Indian cobbler in roughly cut hide.

The shortage of coins meant small paper notes were issued with ‘Government of Fiji—One Penny’ written on them in green and black. We children felt so rich with swathes of these in pockets or purses.

Sweets were always home-made and somewhat limited: toffee, caramel and coconut ice. They were boiled in a pot and then spread in a flat pan to cool and be cut into squares. There was always a new batch of one of these when I went to play with friends. Sometimes we helped in the making. Toffee was near-burnt sugar:
hard, transparent and tooth-breaking. It was ready when the drip of toffee from the spoon hardened as it fell into a glass of water. Caramel was toffee with butter added and difficult to cut into squares, so it was hacked into big chunks instead. These filled your mouth and tended to stick your jaws together. Coconut ice was sugar and grated coconut dyed bright pink with cochineal, which I used to love to add, drop by potent drop, until someone told me it was made from squashed ladybirds.

Eggs and the accompanying chickens were the biggest subject of conversation of all. I couldn’t understand how there was a shortage because most people seemed to have hens. Talk centred on the different types and their merits — Black Orpingtons, White Leghorns, Rhode Island Reds. Any menace to the precious fowls was the talk of the town and written up in the newspaper.

An object of particular venom was the mongoose, an animal resembling a ferret introduced from India to eat the rats in the cane fields but which preferred to kill chickens. It had a price on its head, or rather its tail. People were told to shoot them and a reward of six pence was offered for every tail turned in at the Department of Agriculture. A Fijian who came to collect his bounty on some tails asked how long new ones would take to grow. ‘There is in our midst,’ commented the newspaper with typical colonial disdain, ‘one Fijian at least whose business instinct is strongly developed.’

Chicken thieving was rife and the culprits were heavily fined. One thief mystified everyone because he managed to empty hen houses in the dead of night without making a sound. Then it was found that all he did was leave a trail of grain from his victims’ houses to his place.

‘The first thing I’m going to do when we move to a house,’ said my father, ‘is buy some chooks.’

In the meantime we had a way of obtaining eggs I wasn’t supposed to know about, but I did. ‘Oh we can always get eggs when we want them,’ I said in class one day. ‘My father just gives a bottle of gin to Hanka Singh and he gives us some.’
The horrified teacher immediately warned my mother to keep me in check because a European faced a heavy penalty if he corrupted either a Fijian or an Indian by giving him alcohol.

My punishment wasn’t my mother’s initial fury but her realising it was an amusing story to tell at her tea parties. She told it for years. How I hated it when she started out on this story — especially the part ‘and then Patsy piped up …’ I would glare at her toe poking from the tip of her wedgie shoe and long to stomp on it.

The ‘piped’ referred to the squeaky voice I had at this stage of my life. ‘We hear her piping little voice all night,’ complained a neighbour to Mrs Wisdom. ‘I’m tired of your piercing little voice,’ my teacher shouted at me.

It could have been because of the piping that I was described as quaint, an adjective which didn’t please me at all. ‘Patsy’s such a quaint little thing,’ someone had said. It appealed to my mother and she often repeated it. Fortunately, when I was about eight the piping and the quaintness wore off and weren’t mentioned any more.

A story that went on and on in endless humiliation, like the eggs, was the one about me kissing boys. I don’t know who the boys were, or why I kissed them, but I came to be known all over Suva, thanks to my mother, as the little girl who liked kissing boys.

What I do remember is a group of big boys dragging a small boy and me to the centre of the playground. They pushed him down to the ground and shouted at me to kiss him. I’ll never forget his look of terror as my face was forced near his. His neck was craning away and streaked with playground dirt. I felt like a killer, like Mrs Wisdom with a stone in her hand. But I had to do it. I was too afraid of the big boys. Their legs were in a circle around us, dusty and scabby-kneed, hemming off any escape. Their legs. I still saw most people in bits. But not everybody.

One of the boys I saw whole. Pink-skinned and bony. A bristly cap of pale orange hair. White-lashed eyes that drooped at the sides. Adenoidal half-open mouth. Face splashed with rusty freckles. Mossy Frisby. The bane of my childhood.
The most remarkable thing about his face was its absence of expression. His eyes just looked with nothing there. This was probably the basis of the Mossy Frisby drawing power and accounted for his faithful band of followers. There were about five or six of them, of all sizes and degrees of muscular strength, ready to do his bidding as serfs to a warlord.

The only other memories I have of this time are of sitting in a classroom cross-legged on the floor keeping my back very straight, chanting with the others ‘one and one are two, two and two are four’ and looking out the window at the sparkling blue day and wishing I wasn’t at school. The other is having a nose-bleed in class and covering a white dress with blood. My mother was called to come and take me home and I was so pleased to go that I didn’t mind the humiliation of the blood.

Then, in December 1941, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. The conflict spread to the Pacific and came as near as the Gilbert and Ellice Islands. It seemed Fiji would be next. American soldiers flooded into Suva: partly to be there ready for the invasion and partly to find respite from the fighting elsewhere. In February 1942 a wonderful thing happened: the schools were closed down.

A blissful time followed. Outdoor days of endless play. Off came my shoes. Whenever I could, I went barefoot like most of the children, whatever race. Suva became one big playground. In those days its buildings were scattered. There were vacant blocks everywhere. A friend might live by a field of tapioca, or a ravine hung with creepers, or a piece of pasture for a horse.

To go to the shops or to someone’s place to play, you didn’t have to follow the roads — long and winding because of the steepness of Suva’s hillsides. There’d always be a short-cut that would take you quickly down or up, through clumps of bushes, under giant banyan trees, over creeks. On the way you’d meet frogs, butterflies, parrots. Sometimes you’d see a mongoose — scuttling off fast to save its tail.

The short-cuts had their dangers. If you were unlucky you could meet Mossy and his boys skulking there, waiting to waylay
and terrorise some smaller child. But I always had to promise my mother to keep off the roads so I wouldn’t get run over. Before the Americans came there wasn’t much danger of this as there were very few cars in Suva, but now army trucks and jeeps hurtled along everywhere. Two Indians had been killed, both times because the vehicle had gone up on to the pavement. In my mind, the scrub held more dangers than the roads. But I never told my mother about Mossy.

One day I was taking a short-cut home — a familiar one where I knew every tree and hummock. I came to a clearing, lorded over by the grandfather of banyan trees. A massive trunk, more like several welded together by age, was half hidden by ropy vines weighting the branches nearly to the ground. Buttress roots spread out to the sides like curving walls. But there was something wrong with the tree. An odd rustling, a twitch of one of the vines. I stood in front of it, petrified, knowing there was something behind. Something big. My beating heart knocked in my throat.

Mossy Frisby appeared from one side, his gang from the other, swinging their legs arrogantly over the roots. He gave an infinitesimal signal — a mere flick of the head, the stirring of a finger — that I noticed as clearly as if he’d shouted an order. His followers immediately knew what to do and moved into their positions: a wide circle with me in the middle. Slowly they advanced and at each step they took they kicked a leg towards me. What Mossy lacked in expression, they made up for. Grinning, sneering, grimacing, they came towards me, their kicks gaining in force as they got nearer. Mossy joined them, his blank face making his kicks even more terrifying. Their feet were bare but hard as shoes. One grazed my waist.

Then a terrible thing happened. A hot wet feeling went down one leg and spread under my feet. I stood in a large, shameful puddle. They stopped. A couple of hyena-like laughs and they were off, bounding back over the banyan roots. I stayed in the clearing, trembling, soggy and sick, for as long as it took for my clothes and leg to dry. My parents must never know what
happened. Whenever I suffered an injustice or indignity I had that illogical feeling many people have: the guilt of the victim.

So there was another unpleasant incident that joined the dead cats and waited for me on my pillow to keep me awake. But even at this young age I’d come to the conclusion that you couldn’t expect everything to go right — there was nearly always something wrong. At the moment, it was Mossy and I just had to put up with it. Thinking about it now, I, with my squeaky voice and quaintness, was as obvious prey for Mossy as a zebra for a lion. We were made for each other. The good thing was, most of the time I was extremely happy. I saw myself as a lucky child.

Living practically every day outdoors, I got to know Suva well. Not just its layout, buildings, contours and foreshore, but its very ground under my feet. The land the town was built on had a thin layer of topsoil and under that was soapstone or solidified volcanic ash which was soft and crumbly and turned slippery when wet. It was treacherous for people wearing shoes but with bare feet I could get a good hold and liked the way the silky mud squished through my toes.

It was also fun to play with. I’d take chunks home and carve objects out of them with a blunt knife (my mother wouldn’t let me have a sharp one). My finger, wet with spit, smoothed the angles. I made all sorts of things this way and called them my ‘toys’ because they were also a luxury you couldn’t get in wartime.

In the topsoil over the soapstone grew patches of sensitive grass. We had to be careful with this. It had small fern-like leaves that, when touched only slightly by a finger or foot, closed up like a pair of praying hands. The closing movement would brush the other leaves and pass on the sensation leaf to leaf until a whole patch of sensitive grass lay dark and closed. The tightening of the leaves exposed tiny thorns which left scratches on the sides of your feet that soon turned into festering red and yellow welts.

Near the sea front the soil and soapstone gave way to volcanic sand and crushed coral. You had to watch out for the coral. The dead kind wasn’t a problem. It was hard and scratchy
but we were all so proud of the toughness of our feet we went out of our way to walk on it. But to wade into the water among live coral was risky. If we stood on it flat with the hardened soles of our feet there was no danger, but a scratch on an ankle or instep could swell into an angry sore that pulsed and hurt for weeks. It could even cause tropical ulcers that never got better.

My best friend was Joyce Morgan, who lived in a house at the bottom of a gully beside Wisdom’s flats. I liked her because she told lies. They were lies I loved to believe. Instead of making toys out of soapstone she made them up in her head. Fabulous toys. The one I liked to hear about most was a doll that walked and talked and had 300 dresses. Whenever I was there, the doll had just gone out for a walk and taken her dresses with her.

Joyce knew of all sorts of exciting places to play. The best was under the Methodist Mission. Most of the buildings in Suva were built on stilts for coolness and underneath them were nooks and secret places. Joyce’s cousins joined us there and we built ‘cubbies’ and ‘shops’ from bits of wood, bottles and boxes. We had pet geckos — funny little lizards with pads at the end of each toe. If we found neglected gecko’s eggs we put them in matchboxes lined with cotton wool and waited for the babies to hatch. I liked Joyce’s cousins because they were just as protective of the geckos as we were. Most of the boys I’d known until then pulled off their tails (they had the distinctive quality of being able to grow them again, but it was still horrible to see), trod on frogs, tore off cicadas’ wings.

Apart from the playground buildings on sticks, there were the solid ones near the waterfront I was even more attached to: the Cinema, the Library and the Town Hall.

The Cinema was an elegant little art nouveau building with an architrave of interlocking semicircles a bit like a squashed Napoleonic hat and the word ‘Regal’ written in a curve above the entrance. I never went through its doors without a feeling of breathless excitement.

The Carnegie Library, an imposing place with broad steps leading up to it and four square columns, was named after the great Scottish–American benefactor, Andrew Carnegie, who had
libraries set up all over the colonies so that the gems of English literature would reach the farthest outposts of the Empire. Here I started my lifelong love affair with books.

The Town Hall, a whimsical building full of curves and points hung with filigree iron balconies, had a ballroom and a stage with scenery, which were often used by us children. It represented festivities, prizes, triumphs.

To me Suva was a storybook kingdom. Its king, the Governor, lived on an emerald green hill on the edge of town in a huge cream mansion — columned and curlicued like a Riviera casino — surrounded by terraces, palms, lawn sprinklers and sweeping driveways, tended by gardeners with rollers, hedge clippers and mowers, protected by minions in uniforms of imperial opulence with white pointy-edged skirts.

From his hill, this governor-king could take in his kingdom at a glance. Straight in front he could see the downy slopes of the Domain, dotted with the mansions of those directly under him. Then, on the flat land below, Albert Park for ceremonies and sport and the new Parliament Buildings with a mini Big Ben. Slightly left he could see the raintree-lined Victoria Parade with the white wedding cake of the Grand Pacific Hotel at the water’s edge. On the same seafront strip were the library, the cinema, the Town Hall. Further along came the bustling Indian quarter, the market with its milling people and finally the docks with their constant loading and unloading, their vessels pulling in or out. During the war there were battleships, after it ocean liners. Behind all this, stretched the bay as blue as a Malibu cocktail. Here boats came and went to myriad islands — sub kingdoms with their immaculate villages, their intricate hierarchies both British and Fijian: the District Commissioners and junior officials, the chiefs or ‘Ratus’, the sub-chiefs or ‘Bulis’. On the other side of the bay he could see the mountains changing colour, from morning gold, through midday blue to evening lilac.

In my eyes, no king had a more magnificent uniform than the Governor. There were variations according to the weather or degree of importance of the occasion, but always on the same
sumptuous theme. The star item was the headgear: the topee or ‘pith helmet’. Invented as a screen to protect European skulls from tropical rays, this was once the most important article in a prudent colonist’s equipment. By the Forties it was going out of fashion for ordinary wear although most people owned one. It was a high bulbous hat with a small brim, partly lined with cork, partly hollow, covered in fine stretched kid, with metal eyelet holes to let the air circulate. In the Governor’s case it was topped with billowing ostrich plumes and had many possibilities: dark helmet with white plumes, or white helmet with dark plumes, or both white. His uniform matched his headdress. Sometimes he had a dark frockcoat with the tails turned back slightly to show a gold lining and dark trousers with gold strips down the sides. Other times he was all in white. Various harmonising regalia, such as gilt or silver buttons, epaulettes, toggles, medals and cufflinks, completed his outfits. He wore white gloves, often carried a carved gold-tipped stick and nearly always had, at his waist, a sword in an engraved silver scabbard.

In spite of his dashing uniform he was a cosy king. He gave out prizes on school speech days. His presence graced sporting events and ceremonies held at Albert Park. He was there the day the Fijians marched away to war.

All of Suva — some had been waiting since dawn — lined Victoria Parade to see them go by in full battle-dress, their rifles on their shoulders, their bayonets flashing in the sun. There were cheers, screams, shouts. Confetti and streamers swirled in the air. Some people were crying — bystanders and troops alike.

I clung hard to my father’s hand as I watched the tears running down the soldiers’ massive faces. They had so many leis around their necks they were like immense ruffs and the tears fell into the flowers. Some broke ranks to say goodbye to a loved one, to hug a child. The police cordon melted out of respect for these farewells and a confused, stumbling crowd made its way slowly to the docks.

The battalion filtered through the wire enclosure and boarded the troopship. The crowd crushed against the barriers,
singing, crying and waving. As the vessel steamed away, everyone sang *Isa Lei*, the Fijian farewell song, and a shower of pale circles rained down its sides. Thousands of *leis* were being thrown into the water by the soldiers. If your *lei* drifted back to the shore, it meant you would come back to Fiji. If it sank, you wouldn’t.
One of the leis I’d thrown from the boat when I left Fiji in 1948 must have floated back to shore.

A roaring noise woke me on my first morning. Outside the window near my bed was a slanting pipe attached by a wire sling to the guttering: an emergency extension to the roof plumbing. Water arched out of it with the force of a fire hose. Thick ropes of rain bounced off the ground in muddy fountains. Tropical rain. I’d forgotten its fury.

Gay came over to my bed and we sat there forlornly in our nighties.

‘Well, we’re going to look round Nadi, anyway,’ said Gay.

‘In this?’

‘We could shop.’

‘Yes, I suppose we could shop.’

‘After all, I need to buy a lali for the kids.’ Gay is a school teacher and encourages an interest in multicultural musical instruments. She meant a miniature model, of course. A normal lali is a bath-sized drum — a hollowed-out tree trunk hit with two squat sticks to call people to meetings and church. For us it was a symbol of Fiji.

When we were children we used to visit an old lady who could remember the cannibal era. Once she saw a group of Fijians go by, carrying bunches of human arms and legs on a pole. She would lie in a long basket-weave chair on her private veranda at
the Grand Pacific Hotel and cool herself with a plaited palm frond fan as she told us her stories. Every time she heard the sound of a *lali* in the distance she would say, ‘There goes the dear old *lali*.’

This became a refrain in our family. My mother bought a small one which we called ‘the dear old *lali*’. It travelled with us from country to country and ended up in my Paris flat. But it had lost its sticks, was made of cheap wood and gave out hardly any sound at all when hit. Gay wanted a better one and knew we’d find a big selection in the souvenir shops.

The girl who said she loved the rain gave us two golf umbrellas and told us where to find the bus stop for Nadi. We weren’t very suitably dressed. Mud oozed between the toes of our sandalled feet and splashed my long skirt as I jumped over puddles. Gay’s denim one got heavier and heavier in the rain until it clung clammy around her ankles. Our guidebook had advised modest attire — longish dresses or skirts for women — everywhere except resorts.

As we waited, taxi after taxi hooted us. These were mostly driven by Indians and severely battered. It was as if the contents of a breaker’s yard had miraculously risen and taken to the streets. We shook our heads and pointed to the bus sign. Answering with a cheerful nod, they hurtled on their way. Finally we accepted an offer to take us into Nadi for the same fare as the bus and clambered inside with our unwieldy umbrellas. It was cosily decorated: family photos, pictures of Hindu deities, false flowers, Christmas decorations. Bits of brilliant cloth draped the seats, pieces of lino and carpet covered the floor. Didn’t quite cover it, in fact. A gap revealed a disconcerting hole, the road flying by underneath.

As we tore along, the driver looked back over his shoulder and asked us where we were from, if we were married, if we had any children. Somehow his shoulders and head bumped up and down over the pot-holed road to a different rhythm from ours, as if the taxi were devoid of a chassis and its parts held together with rubber bands.

He thanked us for the small fare and rattled off. Nadi seemed not much more than a long main street full of mostly
Indian shops with a Swami temple at one end, densely carved and painted in lollipop colours which were lit with a special longed-for glow.

‘The sun,’ I gasped.

There was a break in the clouds above the temple that gradually widened and descended the street, lighting up the saris of the Indian women and touching on gold hems and bangles.

We suddenly felt reckless and chose the first attractive sidewalk café we came across as a place to eat instead of looking for the cheap ones we’d noted down. The food was an expensive and unsatisfactory mishmash of European, Chinese and Indian cooking. But we were so pleased to be sitting there in the sun at a table with flowers in a vase of red-tinted water and to be served by the waitress as tenderly as if we’d been the only customers she’d ever had, that we didn’t mention its drawbacks even to each other.

After our meal we headed for Jack’s Handicrafts as advised by Selita of Hunt’s Travel Agency. It was obviously the biggest souvenir shop in town: two floors and a vast doorman in a ‘Jack’s Handicrafts’ T-shirt. There was even a small museum in the back.

An Indian boy explained the exhibits. He seemed new and nervous and as he talked his shirt fluttered to the beat of his heart. Just as the Fijians are large and solid, the Indians are gaunt and thin. Especially the men. As he bent to pick up a museum piece, his backbone showed through the cloth and his trouser leg pressed on a sharp knee.

‘Honeymoon bowls,’ he said shyly. They were carved out of red wood and linked with a ring so that newly weds could drink gazing into each other’s eyes.

‘War clubs.’ He gestured to a row of them, some with knobbly or spiked ends for cracking skulls and others with forked ends for breaking necks. Slipping his own frail neck between the prongs, he showed how they worked.

We gave cries of gleeful horror.

‘Cannibal forks.’ His smile was confident. These were sacred relics, each with a pronged end in the shape of a lily whose petals were about to unfold, used for cannibalistic feasts by chiefs,
who couldn’t eat with their fingers like other people because
of their god-like status.

As he explained the customs of the cannibals there was no
reproach in his voice. He was gravely recounting interesting facts,
not implying ‘look how savage they were compared with us’.

All the time I was in Fiji, either in my childhood or during
our trip, I never came across any sign of resentment between the
Indians and the Fijians — in spite of there being obvious political
rifts. Paul Theroux, in *The Happy Isles of Oceania* claimed Fiji was
seething with it. He found a nutty Indian who raved on about the
sluttishness of the Fijian girls as compared with the strictly moral
Indians. He unearthed a Fijian religious fanatic who believed the
Fijians were God’s chosen people and that God wanted all the
Indians to go back to India. But bigots and fanatics can be found
anywhere if you dig for them and in other books I found examples
of kindness of one race to the other.

For instance, a *Handbook of the Colony*, printed in 1941,
says: ‘Relations between the Indian and Fijian people are, gener-
ally speaking, very friendly. Each race seems in some way to
supply what the other lacks — the Indian his steady industry and
frugality, the Fijian his light-hearted freedom from care.’

Indian plantation labourers at the end of the nineteenth
century described the cruelty they had endured from Europeans
and Indian overseers, but ‘there was no conflict with Fijians.
Some of the Indians used to run away from work and go to the
village. They were given shelter there and food.’

A guidebook published in the Eighties mentions how
Fijians and Indians lived apart and didn’t intermarry but they
united round the kava bowl. Kava drinking is an ancient and
almost sacred pastime in Fiji and for Indians to be included in
the ritual must mean they are considered mates.

Nevertheless, reasons for tension were there.

Indians were brought into Fiji as indentured workers
by Sir Arthur Gordon, the first British Governor, in 1879. He
and the chiefs protected the Fijians under their care from being coerced into commercial labour on the European plantations, but
vast numbers of cheap workers were needed to make the new colony profitable, especially in the sugar cane fields.

He felt he was doing India a favour by syphoning off some of its teeming millions. After the five years of their indenture, Lord Salisbury, Secretary of State, said they were to be free men with the same privileges as Her Majesty’s other subjects resident in the colonies.

Indenture was a terrible introduction to Fiji for most Indians. Conditions were harsh and many committed suicide. An eyewitness at the time said he was working with a physically weak man who he later found hanging from a tree. ‘Apparently he didn’t like Fiji,’ he commented.

After indenture many Indians came to like Fiji but things were still hard. They had nothing like the same privileges as other subjects. Although they could lease land, they could never hope to own it. But families came out to join them and their numbers grew.

By the Forties, when we lived there, the Indians nearly outnumbered the indigenous Fijians. But neither group had much of a say in their affairs because, although existing chiefly structures were preserved, they were ruled by a white minority. These were always known in Fiji as ‘Europeans’ even if they came from Australia or New Zealand. ‘European’ was to do with whiteness, not with geography.

My mother thought this way even after leaving the colonies. Many years later, I was travelling with her in Italy and I stopped outside my favourite kind of Italian restaurant, no tourists, plenty of locals, and suggested we eat there.

She glanced in with distaste. ‘No dear. I’d rather go where there are Europeans.’ Italians, for her, because of their slight swarthiness, couldn’t be classed as such.

Although the whites had the power, the Indians were flourishing as shopkeepers and bureaucrats. They were portrayed as money grubbing ‘upstarts’ who would do anything to get their hands on Fijian or European property.

‘Of course,’ my mother used to say, ‘they live off the smell of an oil rag.’ That is, they suffered squalor and near starvation so
they could save their money, invest it in businesses and eventually take over the country.

They were seen as cowardly because, understandably after the hardships they endured, they didn't enlist in our war. Some were ready to, but insisted on equal pay and when it was refused they withdrew. A group of Muslims was prepared to enter the war on low pay, saying that because of their religion they didn't seek material benefits, but their offer was refused. They were told the best way to help the war effort was to work in the cane fields and make money for the colony and the British Government.

The Fijians, on the other hand, spurred on by illustrious chiefs such as Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna — World War I veteran, Oxford graduate, great lover of everything British — enlisted in droves. They became heroes as tales of their bravery fighting the Japanese in the Solomon Islands were circulated. In any case, the magnificently built Fijian was heroic in statue and the slight Indian wasn't.

Then there was the notion that the Indian was dirty and the Fijian clean. It’s true that wherever the Indian was he created an impression of clutter. His front lawn, his shop, would be overflowing with a jumble of objects, whereas a Fijian village was so neat even a fallen flower petal seemed out of place. This fastidiousness actually came from a superstition left over from heathen days — not even the tiniest speck connected with one’s person should be left lying around in case evil spirits got hold of it and used it to do you harm.

Some Indians had a way of blowing their noses that displeased the Europeans. They would lean over the gutter and place a finger over one nostril and efficiently clear the other in a jet of yellow and silver mucus. Then they’d do the same to the other nostril. My father decided that this was a good way of blowing your nose. It saved on handkerchiefs and cleared you out nicely. Whenever there weren’t too many people around, he’d blow his nose like an Indian. ‘Ern. Ern [short for Ernest],’ my mother would protest in vain.

There were contradictions in this attitude of Fijians versus Indians. An Indian servant was considered more ‘chic’ than
a Fijian one. When my mother gave a party an Indian in a white uniform and coloured sash would serve while the food would be prepared in the kitchen by an out-of-sight Fijian ‘girl’. She was always called a girl even when well and truly past girlish age.

My father had Indians as business partners and used to go riding with Hanka Singh, the Sikh he gave bottles of gin to in exchange for eggs. ‘Hanka Singh’s here, dear,’ my mother would say, standing small and proud beside this figure in spurred boots, doe-skin jodhpurs and turban, waiting high on his horse. They would go off to inspect plantations Hanka Singh managed for my father’s company.

I, too, was impressed; mainly by the great rolling haunches of the horses as they departed and their plumy fly-switching tails. My parents referred to Hanka Singh as a Sirdar even though Sirdars — vicious Indian team leaders who often treated their own kind worse than the white overseers did — had gone out with indenture in 1920.

Perhaps my parents and other colonials saw the Indians — in spite of their nose-blowing habits — as more civilised than the Fijians. Their mistrust of them was in a way a compliment. They were rivals whereas the Fijians weren’t a threat. Mostly the Fijians stayed in their villages and were satisfied with a subsistence life but when needed they made fine policemen, soldiers and house girls.

‘Although they were savages and even cannibals until about a hundred years ago,’ went an old schoolbook, ‘they were clean and had a fine moral code.’ Considered a recently evolved people, they were in need of protection, like children. The Colonial Administration was a father to them. ‘The position of the Government with the Fijians,’ goes an official letter, ‘is analogous to that of the guardian of a child who is heir to an estate.’

An exception was perhaps made for royals. A crown had no colour and British royalty encouraged royalty in others. King Cakobau (pronounced Thakombau), who handed Fiji over to Queen Victoria was considered the King of Fiji, even though in theory he didn’t have a right to the title as not all the chiefs supported him. Cakobau’s descendants and those of high chiefly
lineage were always respected, often given scholarships to be educated in England and sometimes knighted.

The non-princely Fijian was treated with condescending affection and never with the hostility shown towards Indians. An example of this anti-Indian feeling was the anecdote of Mrs Willoughby Tottenham.

Head of the Empire Society and wife of puce-faced, rosy-kneed Major Willoughby Tottenham, who organised rallies and parades, she had wild wiry hair and protruding teeth. I'd always been afraid of her. She was deaf with a hooting voice and a large trumpet-like instrument she inserted in her ear as a hearing aid. Once, in the post office, an Indian accidentally brushed her foot with his while she was waiting to be served. She turned on him and brandished her trumpet: 'GET ORF MY TOE YOU SCUM!'

My mother was almost as horrified as I was by this. When we got home she mimicked Mrs Willoughby Tottenham to my father. I thought she did it brilliantly — the way she brandished her imaginary trumpet and shouted 'scum' just like Mrs Willoughby Tottenham: 'SKAHUM.' They agreed that this was going much too far.

The intermingling of Fijians and Indians was frowned upon by the Government and, while mission schools were being set up for the Fijians, very little was being done for the Indians. A report by an Education Commission in 1909 said, ‘To educate an Indian is to create inducement for crime.’ Mistrust was official.

By the Forties there was an Indian school in Suva but it was separate from the Fijian one. The Europeans were separate from both. Part-Europeans didn’t seem to have any schooling at all. But after the war any child with the slightest tinge of white was accepted in the British school so Indians and Fijians met there in diluted form. I don’t know what happened to Fijian–Indian mixtures. Very likely there weren’t any.

With such rifts and injustices, politics in Fiji was bound to have a bumpy ride. As Brij V. Lal writes in Broken Waves, his book on Fiji, Fijian history in the twentieth century was
dominated by the problem of reconciling three incompatible interests: ‘paramountcy for Fijians, parity for Indians and privilege for Europeans.’

After independence in 1970 came prosperity and racial harmony became a political aim. Fiji leadership was mainly in the hands of the hereditary aristocracy of the East. Ratu Sir George Cakobau, descendant of King Seru Cakobau, was Governor-General for many years and Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, a handsome giant of a man from an equally distinguished princely strain, was Prime Minister. They sought international respect by steering the new Commonwealth country towards democracy.

This led to a new government that gave equal representation for Indians. A Fijian extremist group — the Taukeis (Fiji for the Fijians) — protested, threatening murder and destruction.

To prevent this — he claimed — moustachioed Colonel Rabuka stepped in, in May 1987, with his masked gunmen and led a bloodless coup d’état. Mara protested. Fiji’s record, ‘a symbol of hope for the rest of the world’, mustn’t be besmirched.

He and Ganilau, the Governor-General, tried to right things by forming an interim government and promising democratic elections, but the extremists threatened violence again and Rabuka replied with another coup only a few months after the first. This time he pronounced Fiji a Republic. It was expelled from the Commonwealth. Thousands of Indians left the country.

Fiji was in the news. It was no longer seen as a smiling paradise for tourists. Nasty things happened there. First one coup. Now another. There were rumours that more than Fijian interests were involved. Some accused the CIA — acting to protect American plans for nuclear testing. Others said it was the Methodist church — coup leader Rabuka, a lay preacher, imposed Sunday observances on the whole country.

International opinion was divided. Poor Indians, said some, been in Fiji for five generations and couldn’t own land — couldn’t even call themselves Fijians. A democratically elected government had promised to give them a fairer deal and it had been chucked out. An unconstitutional and unacceptable act!
Others were for the Fijians. They were there first. Why should they be dispossessed of their land like the indigenous peoples of Australia, New Zealand and America? Good for them. Go for it. ‘No real blooded ethnic Fijian is going to let a bunch of Indians run the country,’ said the spokesman for a South Pacific Forum.

But whatever side people were on, they didn’t want to go there any more. Tourism plummeted. Aid from Australia and New Zealand was suspended. The dollar was devalued and wages were cut. Poverty and crime increased.

Soon realising he couldn’t run the country without the help of the experienced traditional chiefs, Rabuka returned to his military duties and made Mara Prime Minister. Diplomatic relations were partly restored and aid began to flow again. The economy picked up.

By the time of our trip in 1997, the country’s recovery was almost complete. Mara was now President. Rabuka had made a surprising comeback as a populist Prime Minister urging democratic reform. He was negotiating for Fiji to be taken back into the Commonwealth, having presented the Queen with a whale’s tooth, a symbol of contrition.

Tourism, Fiji’s main industry, was at an all time high, however, it received another, even worse blow in 2000 when George Speight, a failed businessman posing as the Messiah of the Fijian people, staged a coup which, unlike Rabuka’s, was violent and bloody. Souvenir shops closed, resorts emptied out, hundreds of people lost their jobs.

But in 1997 they were doing well. Even in the off-season Jack’s Handicrafts had plenty of customers. After the museum we went to the lali shelf and Gay bought a lali painted with a special black paint to improve the sound. We looked at the other souvenirs. Apart from some hairy mannikins hacked from unhusked coconut shells there was nothing tawdry. Everything was made with skill and taste: carved artefacts inlaid with shell and bone, finely woven mats, trays and fans, beautiful ‘masi’ or ‘tapa’. This is a cloth made from the inner bark of the paper
mulberry bush decorated with striking patterns in natural dyes of pinky brown, rusty brown and black. In the old days, as well as being used as wall hangings, chiefs and warriors wrapped it around themselves and sometimes women wore it for their ‘mekes’ or traditional dances.

There were baskets of shells, cleaned and polished: cowries with brown and purple spots, chonches with a blush of salmon pink inside the lip, mother-of-pearl with rainbow glints. These brought childhood memories of beloved collections, sorted and fondled. And of toddler Gay running along the beach towards me, little fists held out frosted with sand, which she’d open with slow triumph on the smelly treasures within. Everyone collected shells. Proud displays were in corners of people’s homes. They were made into lamps and encrusted table tops.

During the war trade in them boomed. There were trochus shells for buttons and cat’s eyes American GIs took home as jewellery. A cat’s eye was actually the lid of a shell which polished up to a swirl of white, dark green and brown, hence the name.

At school the boys’ pockets were stuffed with cowries, used for the Fiji version of marbles. As they didn’t roll they were held up in the air between the thumb and forefinger of one hand and given a sharp flick with the same fingers of the other. The game was often fierce and fights would break out with punching and kicking and cowries flying everywhere.

After inspecting the shells, we left Jack’s Handicrafts and found it raining again. This time we were determined to get the bus and walked all the way to the station to find one. Our first experience with Fiji buses. Wonderful vehicles, first introduced in the Fifties, they looked as if they dated from the same era. Rounded and snub-nosed like my old Combi camper van, rippled with dents and scrapes, rattly engined, they had open sides with rolled-up tarpaulins which could be let down when it rained. The bumps and dents were masked with coats of bright paint and decorated with flowers and slogans. Our bus was yellow with orange and red capering capitals proclaiming ‘BULA FM — the best mix of Fijian music’. ‘BULA FM — Fiji’s own.’
When we climbed inside it was like stepping into a party — an intense buzz of laughter and chat with people turning to look at us, give us smiles of welcome and edge up on their seats to make room.

As with other Fijians we would meet, the lady we sat next to made us feel like the most interesting people who’d come her way in a long time. ‘You born Nurse Morrison’s! Aiee! You kaiviti [Fijian born] Auooo! You live in Fiji seven year? You live in England now? In France? Pareese? Very very far! You sisters? Twins?’

Others were twisting round and listening in. The window-seat passengers had rolled down the tarpaulins and held them still with elbows and hands to keep the rain out. Some were old and torn and let in the rain anyway. Nobody seemed to mind. Saris flapped in the wet wind. A little boy poked his head out and opened his mouth to catch the drops. The driver had turned the music up high. Maybe it was BULA FM. Suva 102 FM. Suva tomorrow.

I thought of seeing Suva again almost with apprehension. Would I still recognise it? Would I understand why I loved it so much?
To reach Suva we had many miles of coast road to cover. Repeating the experience of the merry BULA FM bus would have taken nearly all day and left us in the middle of town after dark. With the dire warnings of the Slater article in mind, we opted for the ‘express bus’. It took two hours less, stopped at the luxury resorts along the way, and would deliver us to our backpackers’ hostel before nightfall.

We filled our small packs and left our suitcases in the box room of the Sandalwood Inn. These were cheerfully heaved around by the same Fijian who’d picked us up at the airport and played the guitar in the dining room. He fuzzed over us like a fond and anxious uncle. ‘Where you going now? You all right there? You booked your seats on the bus?’

Our guidebook had told us that ‘tipping is not expected or encouraged in Fiji’ so we didn’t tip him or anyone else during our stay. We enjoyed the Fijians’ warm smiles so much we didn’t want to do something that might make them fade.

There were many ways you could offend, especially when visiting villages. Hats must not be worn. Shoulders should be covered. Bags and cameras should be carried in the hands and not over shoulders or on backs. Sunglasses were out; they were considered the height of rudeness, particularly when meeting somebody for the first time. A Fijian’s hair was considered sacred. Never touch it. If a village child or even adult asked you for your
shoes or jewellery, this was the custom of shared property or *kerekere*. If you didn't feel like parting with these you shouldn't show surprise or take offence but refuse gently. The traditional and unavoidable *yaqona*, or kava drinking ceremony, was hedged about with dos and don'ts that went on for at least a page.

The bus had none of the personality of the BULA FM type. It was a banal tourist coach: air-conditioning chill, shiny-haired upholstery, dead television set, vast front window with windscreen wipers as big as brooms, curving seats that were supposed to fit your morphology but didn't. The few passengers talked quietly, in pairs.

This stretch of road had a special significance. In 1947, the year before we left Fiji, I started a diary in a school exercise book with an illustration for each day. The drawings are more lively than the text which is restrained and prim as if my mother was peering over my shoulder. I think she often was. In the drawings — coloured with paints or pencils and carefully outlined in ‘Indian ink’ — I make myself look a lot younger than my eleven years: a babyish creature with a big head, round eyes and tiny body. This reflects my dislike of growing older: common in an adult but unusual in a child. When I was eight I lied and told children I was seven.

The first entry begins: ‘DIARY NO 1. July 6th. 1947. Sunday. Dear Diary, Today we are going to start our trip right round the island. Started out at 8 a.m. It is a beautiful day.’

Of course it was a ‘beautiful’ day. It was July. From May to the end of September Fiji has a balmy climate: sunny, slightly breezy. For the rest of the year it’s either too hot or too wet. Sometimes the dry season starts earlier than usual and we’d vainly hoped it would be the case, April being the only time Gay could get away. Although both sun-lovers, we had now become reconciled to the weather. After all, we weren’t on a hedonistic holiday, lolling by the water drinking cocktails, acquiring a tan to show our friends. We were on a trip back in time, delving for memories, reliving my diary.

We had both read and reread it so much over the years it was worn and tattered. The Fiji volume was made of several
exercise books sewn and glued together and bound in blue velvet curtain material. The five-day trip around the island was to celebrate a special event.

‘Quickly dear,’ my mother said, running out to me in the garden, fluttery with excitement. ‘We have to go to Daddy’s office immediately. He’s got something to show us. It’s a surprise.’ We rushed downtown, Gay toddling beside us.

He was waiting for us outside W.R. Carpenter & Co — ‘Suva’s progressive store’ — where he worked, grinning and giving nervous chuckles. With little nudges and shoves he manoeuvred us round the back of the building to where, in a side street, stood a small square black car. We sat inside while my father cranked it up, smiling at us through the windscreen, his teeth gritted with the strain. In those days you didn’t have driving lessons. The car salesman took you round the block a few times and showed you how and when to change gears, then gave you the keys and you were ready for the road. During the trial run around the town my father breathed heavily every time a vehicle came the other way. He soon got the hang of it but a couple of strange driving habits stayed with him all his life: he scarily coasted down hills in neutral and he never slowed down at the lights but came to a dead, windscreen-hitting halt.

On the express bus fifty years later, we were doing only half the diary trip, following the sealed Queen’s Road south from Nadi through hills then cane fields and along the Coral Coast to Suva.

I write of the mountains just after Nadi: ‘We drove straight up into the hills, it was very pretty, but the height made my head and ears ache.’

This time I had no problem with my ears. The highest part of the road had been replaced by the New Queen’s Road, which avoided the old twists and curves and cut more cleanly through the mountains to the coast and its beaches. ‘Went to thoo thoo beach. Had a lovely swim in the surf.’ The illustration is of two big waves with curly tops and my bottom and baby legs poking out of one of them.
Today Cuvu Beach, a reef break prized by surfers, is the gateway to Shangri-la Fijian Resort on Yanuca Island, linked by a causeway to the mainland. We drove there to pick up passengers through acres of landscaped grounds, scattered with individual thatched accommodation, or mock Fijian ‘bures’, bearing luxury features traditional bures never had: balconies and verandas, panoramic window panes, flower-hung garden lamps. All the resorts we visited were constructed in this Pan Pacific style, reaching a climax in the main hotel building where ‘native’ materials were used in a majestic way: soaring intricate thatch, rough-hewn beams and pillars from whole tree trunks, king palms growing up through the roof. The ubiquitous turquoise pool lapped at the edges of bars, dining areas, sun decks.

Not far from the resort entrance on the mainland was a freshly painted railway station with a sign ‘Coral Coast Scenic Railway’. The old diesel sugar train, also painted and primped, waited there for tourists.

When we had a ride on it in 1947 it was still a no-nonsense working train. Then owned by the mighty Australian-based Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR), it was impressively long. Truck after truck, piled with cut and trimmed cane, stretched into the distance, dwindling to specks on the horizon. A couple of open carriages near the engine had benches for passengers, used mainly by colonials who found it amusing to take the trip from time to time. I found it boring. The train went so slowly we were able to get off, have a walk to stretch our legs and then get on again. All around us spread the flat shaggy fields of sugar cane. An ugly crop. It towered like massed scarecrows: gawky crowded posts of cane, stringy leaves flapping.

The trip ended with a tour of the sugar mill. An inferno of noise and stench. Pistons, steam and boiling vats of black molasses puffed and bubbled, letting forth a smell like no other: sickly, heavy, sweet and bad. The illustration is of a tiny me holding my nose.

Something happened back then that made the cane fields seem even uglier. I didn't mention it in my diary: a cheerful
journal with no place for horror. We were driving along the Queen’s Road, where it ran between the fields, when a far-away dot gradually became a lone Indian woman standing by the side of the road. As we passed she made a strange movement with her arm: a wave both frantic and feeble. With her other hand she held a red sari around her face. That is, I thought it was a red sari. Then I realised it wasn’t. The part around her face, across her breast and halfway down her skirt was red but the rest was pale yellow.

My father braked so hard a cloud of dust cut the sight of the woman from my terrified eyes. I hoped I’d imagined her. Then the dust settled and she was still there, covered in blood.

‘What are you doing, Ern?’ asked my mother in a thin voice.

‘Going back to her,’ answered my father, hurling himself out of the car.

I watched as he skirted the long bank of looming scraggy cane to get back to the woman. She kept her sari over her face as they talked. After a while he returned to the car and eased himself into the seat, weak and weary.

‘Her husband cut off her nose,’ he said. ‘He was jealous.’ He sat there, not moving, his hand limp on the wheel.

‘Come on Ern. Drive on,’ said my mother.

My father put the car in gear and we went on our way. Both of them looked straight in front at the road ahead, my mother’s thick brown curls brushing her shoulders, my father’s neck ruddy from the sun. I turned round, knelt on the seat and looked out the back window at the woman standing by the cane field getting smaller and smaller, one hand over her face, the other by her side. From then on, I couldn’t look at a field of ripe cane without remembering her.

The cane fields must have held terrible memories for the Indians as well. For many of them they were their whole life, morning to night. Just as they squeezed the cane for the sugar, CSR squeezed the Indians for every drop of work they could get out of them, first as indentured labourers, then as tenant farmers.
— for the lowest possible pay. There were protests over the years but these were swiftly dealt with.

In 1943 the Indian cane growers went on strike and managed to hold out for some time. They refused to cut the cane and it rotted in the fields. How dare they! Sabotaging the war effort. Getting too big for their boots. Fijian security forces were sent to punish them, a race-dividing tactic used again for strikes in the Sixties. ‘When a child fails to respond to coercion, there is only one solution, a good hearty wallop.’ Unlike the Fijians, the Indians weren’t dutiful, malleable children but naughty ones — a bad influence. They were officially barred from attending Fijian schools or settling in Fijian villages, even if they were welcome there.

After independence in 1970 conditions improved; CSR was replaced by the Sugar Corporation which gave the Indians a fairer deal. But in 1997, at the time of our trip, some of their land leases were expiring. Others were due to end in 2000. The Government hinted at possible extensions and Speight used this as one of the arguments for his coup. The Indians would dominate the cane fields for ever. Fijians would never get a look in. And it was their land.

At Sigatoka the cane fields are divided by a wide handsome river lined with market gardens and palms. After it comes the most beautiful stretch of the Coral Coast, now dotted with resorts.

Back in 1947 hotels were few: practical pubs in the centre of the main towns. As Sigatoka was the only place of any size between Nadi and Suva, we stayed at the Sigatoka Club for three days and went on sightseeing tours from there.

Colonial hotels were the opposite of modern resorts. They aimed at reminding you of ‘home’, that is, Britain. Everything was inward-turning, protective: heavy wooden shutters re-created shadowy British interiors, dining rooms and lounges reassured with staid British furniture, the bar was thick with the smoke of cigarettes and the smell of ale. None of them were near the beach and none had swimming pools. At the Sigatoka Club I had only the river for entertainment. ‘Another perfect day. After breakfast
I went to a little warf and tried to catch some fish. I didn’t get a bite so I gave the bait to the lovely big brown and white dog and went inside.’ And another time. ‘When I got home I fished for crabs. I only caught one little crab with all the legs off one side of his body and only one nipper.’ In the evenings there was even less to do. ‘After tea I watched daddy play snooker with an awfully handsome officer.’

Modern resorts do their best to make you feel as far as possible from home. Everything turns outward towards sea and sky (which, of course, should be bright turquoise and azure, powdered with the gold of the sun, otherwise the point is lost). Everything you touch, smell or taste should remind you you’re indulging in exotica: icy fruit cocktails in hollowed-out pineapples, frangipanis scented finger bowls, menus with lilting descriptions of tropical food sensations — ‘reef fish simmered in wild lime juice garnished with a julienne of mango and pawpaw and served on a bed of fresh seaweed’ or ‘steamed swordfish fillets with grilled peanuts and watermelon strips’.

In the Forties nobody wanted hotels to produce this kind of food. People wanted what they were used to and that was British fare.

Even in Australia, before the Fiji years, apart from eating greater quantities of meat (always offal for breakfast), we ate as the British did: Sunday roast, toad-in-the hole, spotted dick, steamed treacle pudding, custard every meal. The figure of the Australian ‘throwing another prawn on the barbie’ hadn’t yet appeared.

The only Fijian dish that the colonials adopted was curried seafood in lolo (coconut milk), otherwise solid British stuff was the order of the day and was well documented in my diary. Day one. ‘For tea we had pea soup, ox tails and Spanish Cream.’ Day two: ‘Brains, vegetables, prunes and creamed rice for tea.’ Day three: ‘Finished off the date loaf.’

One of our visits was to the giant sand dunes at the mouth of the Sigatoka River and on another we followed the river up into the mountains: home of the most ferocious hill tribes in Viti Levu, devourers of the Reverend Barker, the only missionary killed in Fiji. ‘Daddy took us for a lovely nine mile drive. Half way
we climbed a hill. From the top we could see a lovely view of the
fertile valley below. The palm edged river wound in and out of the
far stretching fields of sugar-cane, far away in the distance you could
see the smooth, bare green hills fold upon fold against the blue sky it
was a very pretty picture and I was sorry to leave it.’

We also visited Korotogo, just past Sigatoka on the way to
Suva and well-known for its spectacular reef. In my diary I make
a long list of all the sea creatures I saw. I’d been there many times
before, never tiring of exploring it and discovering the workings
of its seething watery universe.

At high tide it was an ordinary bay dotted with dugout
canoes filled with men, women and children fishing, but when
the tide went out it left a magic world. Channels crisscrossing the
reef became safe sandy paths for bare feet. The ebbing water fell
in cascades between the rocks and coral clumps. The pools
cupped there held millions of marine creatures going about their
eerie lives. Lumpy stone fish opened and shut their orange
mouths, eels and snakes slid and unwound, crabs with shield
backs and armoured claws guarded their anemone-fringed caves,
bald-headed octopuses lurked. Then, light and quick, in and out
and all around twinkled myriad shoals of sequin fish. A world
of dragons and fairies.

When I’d explored every pool and crevice I would wade to
the edge of the reef where a ledge pierced with large holes
overhung the deep water. From there I’d look down through one
of the openings into a wider realm of turrets, domes, shrubberies
and forests spun by coral on the sea floor. Here the big fish
skulked: giant rays with undulating wings, huge sharks.

In the Coral Coast area sharks were a feature of the local
lore. In a sandy cove near the reef a gory event is supposed to
have taken place. A chief and his braves were overturned in their
war canoe and swam ashore chased by a school of sharks. The
warriors formed a half-circle behind their revered ‘Ratu’ to
protect him and were picked off one by one until the water
boiled with blood. The Ratu reached the shore at last with his
devoted bodyguard reduced to three, one on either side and a
fatally mauled one behind who expired on the beach. I don’t know whether this story is true or a legend invented by a chief.

When we lived in Fiji we saw evidence of shark attacks among the native population: missing limbs, scarred bite holes on torsos, hunks out of thighs, but they never seemed nervous when swimming. And the Fiji Europeans weren’t either. It was as if they thought they were immune. In the Solomon Islands it was the same. The Islanders would throw sticks of dynamite left over from the war into the water to stun the fish and we’d all dive down to grab handfuls, with sharks speeding in from afar to get their share. Nobody took any notice of them — except to try to grab a good catch before they did. Maybe they weren’t the man-eating type or perhaps they were too interested in the fish to bother about us. So different in Australia. There we thought about sharks all the time. The shark watcher sat in his three-storey high tennis umpire seat and rang a bell when he saw one. I even had nightmares that stayed with me for years. The most vivid was of lifesavers coming out of the surf with a roll of canvas. They unrolled it before me on the sand. At first there was nothing, then spots of blood, then smears and clots, then fingers, a piece of leg, a lock of blood-soaked black hair. They were pieces of Gay. But in Fiji sharks weren’t objects of terror. Even for parents.

Another danger that didn’t loom large in parental worries in those days was sunburn. There were no hats, no sun creams, no ‘put on your T-shirt’. I often got sunburnt but, in spite of the raging red pain of the first night, I found it an interesting experience. I’d pop the blisters and wait eagerly for the peeling stage. I’d peel my skin off carefully so as to keep it in one big piece and hold this flimsy membrane up to the light to examine its minute creases and hair holes. My skin against the sky.

Now I regret this folly. Even in the overcast weather we drove through in the express bus fifty years later, we travelled with our sun blocks in our handbags, our hats on our knees.

Korotogo was one of our stops. At its modern resort, the Hideaway Hotel, we drank foaming pineapple and mango punches — the cyclone having spared the fruit for such places. The hotel
guests looked disgruntled that good weather hadn’t been included in the service. They sat at the bar, silent because they’d been there so long conversation had dried up, or strolled around making disapproving flapping noises with their thonged feet. The cushioned pool lounges were empty, the umbrellas furled.

After leaving The Hideaway we continued along the coast to a wide smooth beach and a calm lagoon: Korolevu. In 1947 we sped past it, being the scene of a much earlier holiday my mother didn’t want to relive.

Just arrived in the islands, my father — ever the adventurer — was eager to taste some genuine Fiji-style living. He rented two large buries right on the beach. These were the real thing: small paneless windows, layers of grass-smelling matting on the floor, furniture a scanty afterthought. ‘Those awful buries’ my mother called them for ever after.

This was in the days before I became fearful of certain wildlife. A false ceiling made of calico was tied to the four corners of the sleeping bure and I enjoyed lying in bed watching the moving bumps of the rats running across it. When we were asleep they’d come down and gnaw the soap and the crotches of our underwear. My father found one eating his shaving soap and chased it around the room, nudging it with his foot like a footballer with a football, giggling with the joy of this new sport. He finally got it cornered and stomped on its head. I stared at him and bit on the fingers stuffed into my mouth.

Hornets nested in the eaves. Every time we went out of the buries we walked through a cloud of them — similar to wasps, but bigger and a uniform tawny orange colour rather than striped. My mother would squeal and beat her head with her elbows. My father would wave around a newspaper or a book. But I liked running through their golden buzzing blur.

I’d changed by the time I was the eleven-year-old diary keeper. I’d become a prudent and fearful child. On the reef visit I was scared of the sea slugs that blocked my passage back to shore and shouted until my mother came and led me through them. A grasshopper got in the car and I yelled until it was taken
out. My father wanted me to help him catch whitebait with pieces of my clothing and I refused. The fearless little friend of rats and hornets was gone for ever. I was by then a squealy pre-adolescent.

At Korolevu Beach in 1997, instead of a couple of old bures there was the Warwick Hotel, so luxurious it was intimidating — orchestrated to such perfection you felt emotional crashing music should accompany you on the drive through. This was the last stop before Suva.

It was not only ‘those awful bures’ that had gone, but all bures of any sort — apart from the ones at the resorts. We passed several villages but the houses were of weatherboard or concrete blocks with tin roofs. They still had that neatness I remembered: swept paths, tidy lawns, raked garden soil, flowers at the doors.

As we left the Coral Coast we passed Taunovo Bay, mentioned in the diary. ‘We stopped for lunch at Taunova. Had a small swim and went on with our journey. Stopped at a clear fresh mountain spring to drink and wash our sticky faces.’

Now Taunovo Beach is the site of a huge tourist and residential complex — Pacific Harbour. A pamphlet described it: numerous restaurants, 18- hole championship golf course, international school, shopping mall, all villas with water frontage. And that unavoidable aberration: a theme park. A boat trip across an artificial lake and around artificial islands takes you back into Fijian history and culture. The full Tropo Disney experience.

‘The tour begins,’ went the pamphlet, ‘with the haunting sound of the “trumpet shell” announcing the arrival of a fierce traditionally dressed warrior who acts as your escort. The boat makes about ten stops which gives you the opportunity to observe traditional handicrafts such as pottery, carving, tapa and weaving being created by Fijians in traditional attire.

‘Warriors re-enact battles from the past as they attempt to overthrow the enemy. Other attractions are performances from the Dance Theatre of Fiji and the firewalkers of Beqa.’

Beqa is a small seal-shaped island just across the water from Pacific Harbour. The firewalkers are famous. They work
themselves up into a trance and walk across a pit of white-hot stones, then show you the soles of their feet, unscathed.

According to the pamphlet, the creation of Pacific Harbour hadn’t been all plain sailing. The shark god Qaraniqio, who lived there, stopped the developers draining the swampy ground until his two spirit ladies had been appeased.

‘The spirit ladies must be mighty pleased with the result. Looking for Utopia — look no further.’

Utopia behind us, we crossed the Navua River — narrower and more mysterious than the Sigatoka, its steep banks rent with waterfalls. Gay suggested we come back there later for a white-water rafting trip.

‘White-water rafting? You mean with a helmet and everything?’ A picture sprang up in my mind’s eye of Gay and me in helmets and puffy jackets swirling around in angry froth.

She was always more interested than me in doing sporty things, having been in rowing teams, hockey teams, and playing a mean game of tennis all her life. I’d always been bad at sport, especially ball games. For me a ball was an enemy — particularly one coming my way. She was always a team leader, I was the one the team leaders didn’t want. They’d take turns to pick their players, leave me until last and then fight over not having me.

This difference in our natures is reflected in the way we walk. Gay has a bouncy, athletic walk, I have a more drifting gait. Her physical confidence and prowess could account for her fearlessness. She is rarely intimidated. Mossy Frisby would have got nowhere with her. Defying bullies was her vocation. Once at a birthday party in Fiji a little boy cowered behind her while she stood between him and another boy twice her size.

‘Let me get at him or I’ll punch your face in,’ said the bully.

‘You try!’ said Gay: blazing blue scowl from under a black fringe, little feet in party shoes planted bossily apart.

My parents loved this story. And it meant there were two more slots to put us in. Gay, the brave. Patsy, the fearful.

The coast became rocky and sandless for a few kilometres then greener where the mountains came down to the sea.
We climbed, took curves around wooded flanks, then descended and came out of the trees. And there it was: a perfectly semi-circular harbour, blue in the sudden sunlight, with, on its far side, the city of Suva.

Rectangular highrises on the foreshore marred the harmonious downhill tumble of colonial dwellings, foliage and palms. But the city hadn’t spread from its original position on the east side of the bay. It could still look over to jagged mountains piled around a central peak turned back at the top like a tropical Matterhorn — Joske’s Thumb, named after Paul Joske, owner of Fiji’s first sugar mill.

Of my last sight of Suva, as we sailed away in May 1948, I wrote: ‘We just caught the tail end of a beautiful gold and crimson sunset sinking below “Joske’s Thum”. You could see the baby rose tinted clouds hovering above the darkening hills of Lami.’ Then I threw my *leis* into the water. Night fell. I peered after them, trying to follow their paths over the black waves. Float back *lei*, float back to shore.
‘An unforgettable experience,’ trumpeted a notice which immediately caught my eye. ‘Rafting on the Navua River with “Wilderness Ethnic Adventure Fiji”.’ Lifejackets were provided but you needed to know how to swim. People over fifty had to sign a liability disclaimer.

‘I don’t like the sound of that over fifty business,’ I said as we went up the wide wooden staircase to our room. A couple of young Fijian men coming down the stairs greeted us with *bulas* which we returned.

‘Don’t worry. Nobody’ll know how old we are,’ said Gay.

It’s true that at a reasonable distance — the other side of the room, in snapshots — we look a lot younger than our age. We’ve kept youthful figures, rather childish faces. In a way we missed out on the middle-aged look and went directly from being young girls to old girls.

Nevertheless our passports held the grim truth. A disclaimer? What did they mean by a disclaimer? I saw our dislocated bodies washed up on the river bank, people gathered round us, somebody saying, ‘Pity. But they signed the disclaimer.’

Our hostel, the South Seas Private Hotel, was weather-board inside and out with paint deeply chipped off here and
there to show the layers of various colours the walls had been over
the years. It reminded me of the chokingly huge sweets we used
to buy just after the war. They were called Rainbow Balls and
slowly changed colour as you laboriously sucked them. We
popped them from our mouths from time to time to see what
colour they were and our hands and elbows grew sticky with a
mixture of saliva and sugar. Impatient children cracked them in
half with a stone to reveal their multi-hued layers.

Our room, spartan except for an elaborate ceiling fan, had
been built on the top of a veranda roof and the floor sloped
steeply. Through the glass louvres was a view of Albert Park and
the blind-eyed Grand Pacific Hotel, its back to the bay.

The day was ideal for walking. A canopy of cloud
protected heads from the sun but was thin enough to leave the air
limpid and luminous.

As we did when children, we looked for a short-cut, a way
of avoiding the long walk down winding roads to the flat seaside
stretch that was the heart of the town. We found one, an almost
plumb-straight descent, obviously much used, with bared rocks
and squashed shrubs. The soapstone was squishy and treacherous
after days of rain, so we went down barefoot, our toes curling
into the soft rock at each step.

I’m back in Suva, I thought happily, as I levered myself
from stone to stone.

Our first stop was the library. Stolid, vaguely Grecian, like
a transplant from some Anglo Saxon university campus, it stood
there unchanged, but no longer acknowledged the benefactor
who had bestowed it on the town. The name Carnegie had been
erased and it was now Suva City Library.

Inside, there was the usual over-staffed look. Behind the
counter were an Indian lady, two Fijians and some other people
wandering around in the background who may or may not have
been working there. But the counter was the same, as chipped and
worn as an old school desk, with handwritten notices nailed to the
front — one saying ‘adults’ with an arrow to the left and the other
‘children’s’ with an arrow to the right — so faded they could have
been written years ago. Near the door was the old wooden cabinet housing the catalogue cards, thin and pale with age.

In the Forties there was only one person behind the desk: Mrs Coster, the librarian, a spindly British lady with wire-rimmed glasses and her hair in a bun. I went to the library nearly every day and we became so friendly she even made me a doll: Raggedy Anne. She advised me on my reading and put books aside for me.

I didn’t have time to learn to read during the couple of months I spent at school, so I taught myself. My mother spent hours reading to me, especially when I was small and ill in bed. Sometimes she went through the same book five or six times at the one sitting, and I would follow her eyes as they picked the words from the page. Later I’d try to work out other texts by drawing on this bank of recognisable words. The newspaper particularly fascinated me; I felt it was a key to our lives. One day I said to myself, while struggling through the paper, ‘If I can get to the bottom of this column it will mean I can read.’

Once I started I couldn’t stop. I read practically every minute of my free time, in bed by moonlight, under the table while I ate and, when school opened again, under the desk in class. My mother became desperate. ‘You’ll ruin your eyes.’ ‘It’s unhealthy.’ ‘Go outside and play. Get some fresh air.’ I tried to cut down to please her. In my diary I drew a scroll of resolutions to be a better child. One of them was: ‘I will not read so much.’

Mrs Coster expertly guided me through the children’s favourites: Peter Pan, The Secret Garden, The Wind in the Willows, and on to stronger stuff, the French classics: The Count of Monte Cristo, The Hunchback of Notre Dame and The Three Musketeers. A new world opened up — far, far from Fiji and Australia and even England. Marseilles and Chateau d’If, with the Count escaping by replacing a dead man thrown into the Mediterranean in a bag, the twisted Quasimodo loping among the gargoyles high above Paris, the beautiful but evil Milady with the fleur-de-lis tattooed on her shoulder.

I would rush down to the library wondering what Mrs Coster had for me. I anticipated the scene in my mind: her small
smile as she reached under the counter and brought out a book, her thin-fingered hand placed reverently on the cover as if she were holding closed a casket of jewels. ‘I think you’ll like this one dear.’

Then came the day when, like a princess on a tour of her palace flinging open the final most treasure-filled room, she introduced me to Dickens. I read all his books but was most drawn to *A Tale of Two Cities* — about the French Revolution. Once more this fascinating mixture of the gruesome and the elegant: Madame Defarge knitting as the aristocrats’ heads tumbled into baskets. But these weren’t real killings like those of Fiji cats and rats — they were fantastic like the slaying of dragons in fairy-tales. Although intrigued by France, I didn’t see it as a place you could actually go to, like England, but as a dream world, alive only in books.

Next door to the library was still that exquisite piece of tropical Victoriana, the Town Hall, which had survived to become a Chinese restaurant. During the war it was taken over to house American soldiers but, as soon as they left, the life of the town revolved around it: concerts, fancy dress balls, school prize-givings.

There were protests when school prizes were reintroduced after the war — the little ones wouldn’t understand and it encouraged favouritism by teachers. But it was pointed out that it imbued children with a desire to conquer, to strive after excellence which was the very spirit of the Empire. So prize-giving came back, with the Governor in full regalia bestowing the prizes.

A Mrs Arbutnot regularly organised fancy dress balls. Once I went as Humpty Dumpty, after a terrible struggle turning flat cardboard into a round egg big enough to put myself into. Mossy Frisby was a pirate and was after me. He looked up the armpit of my costume to see who it was but I danced away. I felt safe inside my egg.

Fijians put on ‘tralalas’, usually to raise money for the rugby club. The tralala is an adaptation of European dancing, a fox trot with the partners chastely side by side. The ‘filthy tralala’ a crackpot in the paper called it, claiming it degenerated
into ‘unspeakable orgies’ and that, because of it, the Samoans called Fiji ‘the Sodom of the Pacific’. He had it all wrong. It was the other way round. Even back in cannibal times, Fijians were modest in their dancing and found that of Polynesians lewd.

All performances — school concerts, ‘scintillating revue devilles’, the Indian play The Ruthless Landlord, Fijian traditional *mekes* with dancers in war paint and grass skirts — had the choice of only two decors: a backdrop depicting the parkland of an English stately home or a curtain painted with gondolas, onion domes and curly roofed towers, a Venice that looked more like the Kremlin in a flood. These examples of late-Victorian billboard art had already been there for so long they were crazed with cracks and darkened with mildew.

So we’d found the library and the Town Hall. What about the Regal? Surely that little candy-box of a cinema with its lean-to café, wouldn’t still be there? On the way into Suva we’d passed an ugly new cinema complex decorated with crude portraits of Mickey Mouse, Marilyn Monroe and other movie icons: a bad sign.

The Regal held the most exciting memories of all. The film was announced in the newspaper days before it came to the town. *Smiling Through*, one of the great love stories of stage and screen. *Rose Marie*, the most enjoyable musical comedy ever presented to Suva picture patrons. Heavy rush for bookings.

When the night arrived my mother prepared herself with care: best dress, thick chestnut hair brushed on to her shoulders and swooped up at the sides. Rich red lipstick and powdered nose. You went to the cinema to be seen as well as to see the film. It was the Suva version of going to the opera in European capitals, to stroll down the aisles in diamonds and tails nodding to friends and acquaintances.

I didn’t dress up because I wasn’t even supposed to be there. I had to be hidden until the lights went down. During the war there was a curfew — no children allowed out in the town after dark. Not even with their parents. As the war also brought an end to children’s matinees, the only time I could go to the cinema was during the curfew. The army had soldiers posted all
over the town to enforce this law and children or their parents were fined if caught. All sorts of excuses were used by the culprits. A Fijian youth, for example, said he was sleepwalking.

I had to pester my parents for days beforehand and they gave in only after saying over and over what a risk they were taking. But I think my father got a kick out of disobeying authority. Before we bought our own car we used to go with Aunty Dolly the cat-lover and her husband Uncle Bob. They made me crouch down on the floor when we passed a check point. My beating heart, the smell of metal and leather as I cowered behind the seat, the blue light on the craggy American military face as we drove slowly by, increased the feeling of adventure.

Then the films. Black and white ones with misty lamp posts and villains with Viennese accents. Murder and love. Bette Davis, globular eyes emoting. Joan Crawford, square mouth trembling. Humphrey Bogart, scarred lip twitching. Musicals. Nelson Eddy and Jeanette McDonald singing cheek-to-cheek. Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney clatterety clacking, wide eyes, wide grins. Miraculous Technicolor films with dancers with pointed feet emerging from towers of water or clouds of pink smoke. Newsreels keeping us abreast of the times: helmeted silhouettes leaping over bomb craters, Winston Churchill walking up steps making the ‘V’ sign, royalty bowing at balconies, tickertape snowstorms twirling in New York canyons. The intensity of the commentator seemed to say to me ‘You are in the thick of history Patsy Thomsett. These are the most exciting times the world will ever know.’

I would reel out of the cinema in a haze of joy, so drained by emotion all I could do was flop into bed and long for the next time. The Regal was still there, its old shed-like café leaning beside it. Instead of colonial cream it was now painted pale pink with the curlicues picked out in dark pink — prettier than ever.

We crossed the road to get a better look. A sinister realisation gradually took hold. The Regal door was blank. No cinema posters. And, at intervals on the wall of the café, three printed signs, all the same. ‘McDONALD’S SOON HERE’.
To recover from this blow, and to find a less threatened past, I suggested a trip to the archives to look through old Fiji Times & Heralds.

The Suva Archives was a white chalet tucked behind the Government Buildings. The new Government Buildings, as they were when we lived there. Built in 1939, they replaced the ramshackle tin and wooden ones that stood in the long grass on stick legs, waiting to be demolished — another fantastic playground for Joyce Morgan, her cousins and I. Until it became the haunt of the Mad Dog. Mangy and foamy-mouthed, it growled and showed a lot of gum to keep people at bay. Its attacks were reported in the paper: a messenger was severely bitten below the knee, an old man with two arms missing from a shark attack ‘escaped with no more than a torn sulu’. Men who had to pass there on their way to work armed themselves with sticks and stones. To us he became a legendary creature. The Mad Dog of the Old Government Buildings.

The ‘new’ Government Buildings were no longer new. Built of stone around an imposing clock tower — probably with Westminster in mind — they were now completely blackened with mould. This could have been because they had been constructed on a swamp filled with rubble and ‘small blind fish’ which probably had never been properly drained. The area was formerly a shabby red light district and an old Fiji joke went that a sailor returning after years at sea saw the pompous buildings and said, ‘My word, Annie has done well’. Annie’s place was looking a bit run-down now.

They were also no longer the official government buildings, even though they still housed a couple of state departments. The newest government buildings were very different — an attractive complex done in the latest ethnic-inspired style set on flowered hills off the coast road heading out of town. It is in these idyllic surroundings that, in 2000, George Speight held thirty people hostage — including Chaudhry, the first Indian Prime Minister of Fiji — for two months. Day after day George addressed his supporters on the grassy slopes and gave press interviews at which
he threatened to kill off the hostages one by one if he wasn't allowed to run the country his way — that is, with no say for the Indians. Son of a minor politician in the opposition party and known for his shady deals and tax evasion, he had nothing to lose by holding the new corruption-conscious government captive. And if it led to him gaining power so much the better. One of the hostages was President Mara’s daughter, a minister in Chaudhry’s Government. Speight threatened she would die first if Mara didn’t step down and meet his demands. Mara stood fast for some time, then finally handed negotiations over to a military man. It seemed as if they were going to have to give in. The world looked on in disbelief. Surely they weren’t going to let Speight, known as ‘the Fiji Mussolini’ because of his shaved head, heavy jaw and paranoid eyes, take over the country? They did. But only for a few days. They found a loophole. His supporters hadn’t given back all their arms, so he hadn’t fulfilled his part of the deal. They arrested him and imprisoned him on Nukulau Island.

In 1997, none of this drama was going on in the Government Buildings, new or old. They were jogging along with their day-to-day bureaucratic tasks. So were the archives.

A young Fijian woman was sitting at a new computer obviously entrusted with the task of dragging these records into the cyber age. She was finding it difficult. Her high round brow was furrowed with anxiety but her eyes flicked merry looks at the Indian who was trying to help her. He didn’t seem to find it too easy either and every now and again they giggled at what came up on the screen.

Seated at a trestle table was a chieftain-looking person: large and venerable, dressed in the usual Fiji executive garb, scribbling in a black ledger behind a wall of worm-eaten files.

The Indian said the microfilm machine wasn’t working too well and brought out the original newspapers for me to look at. Their pages were as soft as cloth. I found the one for that wonderful day: February 17, 1942. ‘The Government has decided, on the advice of the Military Authorities, that all schools on the Suva peninsular should be closed for the present.’
Nothing took me back into the past as much as those newspapers did. The Gothic-lettered masthead, the photos of battles, the advertisements, the films, the petty details of life in the colony made me realise that in spite of being right in the middle of probably the deadliest and farthest flung war in history we lived in a comfortable cocoon.

I can remember the paper when it was fresh off the press poking in a tight roll out of my father’s pocket. He read it first and then it was mine. Sometimes I’d go with him to the newspaper office when he took along an advertisement for W.R. Carpenter’s. It was a company that came in many guises.

Mostly it was W.R. Carpenter’s General Traders: ‘We have supplies of

- Desiccated Coconut
- Player’s Cigarettes
- Enamel Saucepans
- Razor blades
- Choice red salmon
- Copra Knives
- Axe handles.’

Soon after Pearl Harbor it became ‘W.R. Carpenter’s Auctioneers’ as it auctioned off the property of the Japanese in Fiji, mostly fishermen, who were rounded up and, as dangerous aliens, ‘safely put under lock and key’. After the war, when shipping movements could be advertised again, it was ‘W.R. Carpenter. Overseas Shipping Company’, agent for *Corialanus*, the Quantas flying boat. Then it soon became ‘Carpenter’s Suva Motors’, the importer of Morris cars. Most of its money was made from its many plantations. The owner was Old Sir Walter, whose name often appeared but who no one ever saw.

My father was friendly with the *Fiji Times & Herald* people and we’d always stay there a while. I’d watch the typesetter at work and the inky rollers turn. They’d give me glossy press photos of the Royal family: the King and Queen in their robes, Princess Elizabeth looking at her stamp collection, the two princesses in army uniforms sitting in a jeep doing their bit. Worship of the Royal Family was always encouraged.
At the archives I came across an article that particularly appealed. It was the story of a clothes line ‘belonging to a high government official which has rigidly reflected his austere bachelor existence’. One day, to the shock of his neighbours, ‘it suddenly blossomed with scanties, skimpies, panties and bits and pieces of this and that necessary for the adornment of the female body’. Before a major scandal could break out it was discovered that he had ‘placed his house at the convenience of a bevy of charming evacuees from a distant isle. The evacuees have since departed and the old clothes line is not the same. Dejected and disconsolate are pairs of lonely gents trousers hanging dismally in a place where once, for so brief a period, the alluring enticements of female charm flew their suggestive signal in the happy breeze.’

After reading a piece like this I was hooked. I knew that sometime somewhere I would read every single issue of the Fiji Times & Herald from October 1941, when I arrived in Fiji, to May 1948 when I left.

On coming out of the Archives we saw that it was nearly six, the end of the day. In Fiji dark comes down as swiftly as a cover thrown over a bird cage. Sometimes there is a brief intense blaze of sunset, but no long pearly twilights. After the Slater article about the muggings, we were jumpy about being out after dark. The short-cut didn’t seem a good idea in case darkness fell when we were half-way up, so we toiled back along the winding climbing roads, past high hedges and arrow-topped iron gates with signs informing intruders of sophisticated security systems, often accompanied by pictures of fang-baring dogs.

What a different place Suva was when we were children. In spite of curfews, schools closed down, American soldiers rolling around drunk, blackouts and the like, our doors were mostly left unlocked. If you visited someone and they weren’t there you just went in, sat down and waited until they came home. The house girls and garden boys had lots of friends who came and went but nothing was ever taken. Stealing was hardly known. Theft was so rare it was always noted in the paper, however petty: ‘larceny of watermelons’, ‘fined for stealing a cane knife’, ‘larceny of a pair
of putees.’ If property was separated accidentally from its owner, every effort was made to restore it: ‘Dentures: Upper set found at Lami dump. Owner can obtain same at this office.’

Back at the South Seas Private Hotel there was a youth hostel atmosphere in the kitchen. Nobody seemed to mind about modest clothing. People were dressed in halter tops, jeans torn off into shorts, sleeveless shirts. Mostly they were young Australians and New Zealanders — friendly and helpful, vacating burners so we could cook, showing us where we could store our food.

‘Where are you two girls off to?’ asked an Englishman about my age. He slipped on to the bench beside me and put his bowl of food on our table.

‘Taveuni’s our next stop,’ said Gay.

This was all he cared to hear about us and went on to talk about himself. He said he’d soon be off to Savusavu on Vanua Levu to join his Indian girlfriend who he’d met on a former trip to Fiji.

‘I’m back here to stay now,’ he said. ‘You know I made more friends in three weeks in Fiji than I made in fifty years in the south of England. Don’t care if I never see that place again. Wife divorced me. Best thing that’s ever happened to me.’

His Savusavu girlfriend was a teacher and his suitcase was full of schoolbooks for her that he’d picked up during a three-month backpacking trip around Australia on his way to Fiji. He’d also picked up two Japanese girls on a Greyhound bus who he’d made love to all night.

Whenever people say they make love to someone, or even imply it, I always imagine them doing it. Difficult with him. In a way he’d followed a similar form of ageing to me and Gay. From a distance he looked like a teenage stripling — long gangly legs in Scout-cub shorts, thin neck, boyish tight curls on a small head. But up close he was definitely a pensioner. Still, I did the best I could with him and the Japanese girls.

‘No wonder his wife divorced him,’ said Gay as we went up the wooden staircase to bed.
Walking around Suva streets as a child, I found it comforting that they were nearly all named after people I knew. Johnson Street was named after the father of my father’s boss: old Tavua Johnson. He was called Tavua because he had made his money in the town by that name on the other side of the island. There was also a Tavua Street, probably named after him as well. His son, William Grainger, was nicknamed Tui (the king). ‘That Tui Johnson,’ my father always called him. He was manager of Carpenter’s and my father was company secretary, doing all the work, he claimed, while Tui reaped the rewards. He would complain for hours about him to my mother, who would say ‘Mmm, mmm’ at intervals, lying in a cane chair waving a plaited palm frond fan and looking across the veranda rails to the garden. I used to wonder if I’d find my husband boring when I grew up.

Carew Street I first took to be named after my mother’s friend Moira Carew from Wisdom’s flats, who later moved to Lautoka in the north and always stayed with us on her trips to Suva. I drew her in my diary arriving with a suitcase in her hand and a baby slung over her arm. Now I know that the street was named after her husband’s grandfather, Walter Carew, resident commissioner of the Hill Tribes of Fiji. ‘A Fijian with a gun,’ he is quoted as saying, ‘a few ounces of powder, and pieces of broken
bottles for bullets when his lead gives out, will still think himself invincible and ready to defy the whole world.’

Cumming Street gave me a special shiver of recognition even though I knew it couldn’t be named after John Cummings, the boy who caused the shiver, or his family, because there was no ‘s’. Later I learnt that it honoured the name of Constance Frederica Gordon-Cumming, niece of Governor Gordon and noted travel writer, who visited Fiji in 1875 and wrote a book about it. Cumming Street was a lively, mainly Indian place where for a long time I wasn’t allowed to go on my own. During the war it was crowded with American soldiers buying curios and jewellery: coveted filigree silver, tortoise shell, cat’s eyes. There were curry houses and kava dens and probably bootleg liquor outlets. (Like Fijians and Indians, Americans also had to buy alcohol on the black market.) The buildings were terraced with slatted shutters on the top verandas and a welter of goods stacked on stairs and in corners: sacks of flour, strings of sparkling bangles, vibrant saris hanging on lines, plates of scarlet toffee and green cakes. Big-eyed children perched here and there.

I thought Pender Street was named after Johnny Pender, the sportsmaster at the school, but it was most likely a tribute to his ancestor, Sir John Pender, pioneer of submarine telegraphy. The workers who had laid the miles of cable linking Fiji with England had lived in our backpackers’ hostel when it was a cable and wireless hostel. Thanks to them, Gay could ring London easily and cheaply whereas Paris, connected by some expensive satellite route, was a headache. Pender Street ran behind our hotel, high on the hillside. Then curving away from it and going even higher was Denison Road, named after a relative of Pender’s.

On Denison Road we had our first house after moving from Wisdom’s flats. It was a rambling low-roofed bungalow with an air-raid shelter out the back — a rare privilege because there were public ones all over Suva. Not that it looked a lot of use. Half above the ground and half under, the Fiji jungle had practically reclaimed it in the few months since it had been built by the previous tenant. Creepers of every kind were swathing it out
of existence and the dank hole of the entrance was shaggy with grass. It should have been fitted with a piece of sinister equipment called a ‘gas curtain’: a blanket weighted at the bottom with a plank which, when not in use, was rolled up and in an emergency let down and kept wet. Our gas curtain had either rotted away or never existed. In any case, my mother said that no way would she ever use the air-raid shelter. She’d rather brave the bombs than go into that mouldy hole with the spiders and mice.

Otherwise she was cooperative. She bought sticky netting to put on the windows to keep the shards together if they were shattered by a blast, she had buckets of sand at the back door to put out fires from incendiary bombs and there were rolls of black paper near each window so they could be blacked out at night.

We all knew what to do in the event of a raid: put a topee or a hat ‘of firm material’ on our heads, cotton wool in our ears, an India rubber between our teeth and lie flat.

Everybody was very war conscious about this time. It was early 1942 and there was fighting in the Philippines, the Solomon Islands, New Guinea, even the Gilbert and Ellice Islands, which were very close to Fiji. Suva was full of American soldiers. A torrent of khaki flooded the streets and diluted the familiar dazzle of bright saris, colourful Mother Hubbards, gleaming ‘whites’ of civilians. Khaki-clad soldiers tore along the roads in their matching khaki jeeps, trucks and motorbikes with bullet-like sidecars; hung out on street corners, appeared as guests at our friends’ homes.

Aunty Dolly and Uncle Bob adopted a soldier called Chuck. He had a fresh open face and blond tufty hair and talked to me just the way I wanted to be talked to: not too babyish and not confusingly adult. I was always glad when Chuck was there. When he wasn’t, Aunty Dolly always talked about him: Chuck this, Chuck that. She had a photo of him in his uniform on their piano and she would read his letters out to my mother. They were full of holes, because of being censored. ‘You know,’ my mother said to my father. ‘Chuck is Dolly’s baby.’ This referred to the mysterious tragic side of Aunty Dolly. She couldn’t have children
and had lost two babies. This puzzled me. How could you lose a baby if you couldn’t have one?

Then one day we visited Aunty Dolly and her apartment had a strange shattered feeling. Her face was puffy, her eyes red. Chuck’s picture frame had a black ribbon across one corner. She saw me looking at it, transfixed. ‘That, dear,’ she said, dimples trembling in her chin as she tried to still her voice, ‘is what war is all about.’

Another day I was standing with some of my friends where a short-cut ended on a street corner. Along the road came a young soldier with a cheerful smile and his beret perched on his ear carrying a big cardboard box.

‘Hi kids,’ he said. He propped his foot up on a garden railing and opened the carton. ‘Like some candy?’ It was full of chocolate bars with double wrappings, chewing gum of every flavour, packets and packets of sweets of every kind. Things some of us had never seen and others had nearly forgotten. ‘Here. Help yourselves. Come on kids. Don’t be shy.’

Stunned children began taking out the sweets, exchanging unbelieving glances with one another.

‘That’s it. That’s it. Take what you want. Take ’em all.’

I hadn’t moved.

‘Hey. Little girlie. How ’bout you? Dontcha want some candy?’

I slowly and miserably shook my head. My mother had told me I must never talk to strange men and never, never take sweets from them. Unlike her other warning stories, I wasn’t told what happened to girls who did this, but I supposed it was too awful to be mentioned. I didn’t reason that the children who were taking up the soldier’s offer were so far not suffering in any way, I just stood there in blind foolish obedience.

The attitude of the colonials towards the Americans was ambiguous. There were hundreds of them there ready to protect us from the enemy. They had a magnificent P.X. (Military Cooperative) stuffed with scarce luxuries which they generously distributed to the citizens of the town. Yet response was subdued.
Gratitude was tempered with shame. The colonials felt their homeland had let them down. The Fiji Times accused the British Lion of ‘deserting its cubs and leaving them to be devoured by the Japanese tiger’. And now here were the Americans, all over the Pacific with a mightily well-furnished war machine, pushing back ‘Japs’ almost as fast as they came and the Fiji British had to be grateful to them.

To make matters worse they were changing the locals’ attitude towards them as rulers, undermining their authority. The Americans loved the Fijians. They found them cheerful, honest, refreshing. In the Solomons, where they fought side by side, they had nothing but praise for them as soldiers. A New Zealander who was in charge of a battalion, which was a mixture of New Zealanders and Fijians, recounted his experiences: ‘The Fijians were immensely popular with the American units, who loaded them up with all sorts of presents. After a while we began to capitalise on it to the extent that if we wanted anything particularly badly from them we would send the Fijians.’

The Americans not only favoured the Fijians on the battlefield but in the towns as well. In Suva the colonials complained that whenever the Americans hired Fijians they gave them wages that were far too high. They would never want to go back to the miserly pay they’d received before the war.

Also, the Americans were a bad example. Through them, the Fijian was going to lose all respect for the White Man. The British knew when and where to drink and get drunk, the Americans didn’t. One drank in the evenings and through the night behind the lowered shutters of private homes, hotels or the Defence Club, not as the Americans did, in broad daylight, on the street, starting at 10 in the morning.

The Americans’ carousing wasn’t lost on me. I was amazed to see them in careering, veering jeeps, piled up and hanging out the sides, shouting and waving. And others doubling on motorcycles and crammed into sidecars, whooping and making rope-throwing movements with their arms like cowboys in Westerns. Gene Autry the Singing Cowboy. Suva was suddenly
full of Gene Autries. The footpaths were also taken up by drunken Americans, staggering and leaning on one another, sometimes sliding down to a sitting position against a wall. Once I saw one lean on a bush until it gave way and closed over him so that he disappeared and only his boots were showing. I supposed he was asleep — like a Babe in the Wood.

I also heard my mother’s friends complaining about how the Fijians were losing their awe of the Europeans thanks to the Americans. ‘I remember,’ one of them said, ‘when, before the war, a Fijian would step off the pavement if a European was walking along it.’

Their favourite grouch was that it was the Americans’ fault they had so much trouble getting servants. ‘All the nice girls have been recalled to their villages,’ said my mother. ‘All we can get are trollops.’ I was intrigued by the word ‘trollop’ and wondered what one looked like. Was Sala a trollop? No, not my lovely Sala. She’d been with us for too long. The other girls we’d had, who quickly came and went, were probably trollops.

What I didn’t know at the time was that the hospital just down the road was full of girls my mother and her friends would have defined as trollops. So many were in there with venereal disease they overflowed on to the veranda from where they’d make further assignations with Americans as they strolled by.

When not centred on Americans, the talk was of Japs, Japs and more Japs. I knew all about the Japs from reading headlines about ‘Bestial Japs’, ‘Treacherous Japs’ and seeing cartoons of them with big buck teeth and tiny slitty eyes. I had also read that, from their earliest childhood, every single Japanese believed firmly they were direct descendants of the gods and were therefore sure they would win the war because we were descended only from monkeys.

If the Japanese won the war, then the Germans would win it as well. ‘If the German’s win the war,’ my father said, ‘we’ll all eat black bread.’ I thought how terrible this would be. It would taste like charcoal and stain our teeth.
My mother didn’t know how much I’d gleaned from the newspaper and felt she should explain the Japs to me. They were bad little yellow men, she said, and the Americans were there to chase them away. ‘But Mummy, I’ve seen yellow Americans too.’ This was true. The American soldiers were given Atabrin, a now old-fashioned treatment for malaria, which affected the liver and turned their faces yellow.

As well as yellow Americans I’d seen black ones. This confused me at first and I thought they were Fijians in uniform but I soon realised they weren’t. They had a different expression on their faces. I decided it was an American expression.

My father, having turned forty, was too old for active service, so he joined the Home Guard, a division a bit like a Dad’s Army. He dressed up for us in his uniform and marched up and down pretending to be warlike. He had a helmet with netting on it, a tin water bottle, a backpack and a square box with a weird object in it. I flinched as he drew it out. It was like a sea elephant with goggly eyes and a long snout. ‘A gas mask,’ he explained, putting it in front of my face so that I smelt its rubber breath and looked through its thick eyes.

I had a nightmare about being chased up a flight of stairs by a horde of little yellow men with snouts and dragonfly eyes. Each step was my height and I had to haul myself up whereas my pursuers seemed to brush the tips of the stairs in their eagerness to catch me. I woke up just as they succeeded.

My father also volunteered for the demolition squad. If the Japanese raided Fiji this unit would carry out a scorched-earth policy and destroy any buildings that could be of use to the enemy. ‘Right up your alley,’ my mother said. ‘You’ve always loved breaking things.’ On the weekends he’d go off with the squad and practice blowing up old sheds and deserted bures. Once they tried out their skills on a real, substantial building. They set the dynamite, lit the fuses and ran off fast to view the result from a safe distance. They waited and waited but nothing happened.

As well as these special exercises the Home Guard drilled once a week and there was stretcher-bearer practice, target
practice, air-raid siren tests, cannon firing, testing of flares in the harbour. This mock war wasn’t without its casualties. With so much trying out of weapons there were a lot of unexploded shells around. Children played with them and were killed. One Fijian even took two he found lying on a beach and used them to prop up a barbecue spit. A whole family was wiped out.

Then came ‘the scare’. An official report stated that Nadi airport was being bombed and shelled by the enemy. Destroyers were sighted in the Rewa River. The island of Bau was said to have been invaded. The Indians hit the roads in motley vehicles or on foot loaded up with their possessions. But then it turned out to be a false alarm. Just another exercise.

Scorn was poured on the Indians because of their panicky retreat. Europeans had to resort to wearing shorts as there were no laundry men around to starch and press their long white trousers. ‘They took to the bush at the first alarm and have not yet returned,’ said the paper. But this, it pointed out, could be a blessing in disguise as ‘the day may come when we have to fling ourselves as soon as possible into the nearest ditch. It is then that we may thank our lucky stars for Suva’s deep soapstone drains and the fact that we are wearing shorts instead of the encumbering long variety of trousers.’

But the Indians weren’t the only ones who fled. Many Fijians returned to their villages and the Europeans got more and more jumpy. Fiji could be the next target any day. Evacuation was advised and some of the wives and children left for Australia. But my mother and I stayed.

I had fewer children to play with but I didn’t care as I still had my beloved Joyce Morgan and her tall tales. She never came to my house but I went to hers — through the short-cut and then into the gully, under the looping lianas and granadilla blooms, round vegetable patches and taro plants to her house at the bottom with its mosquito wired doors that flapped as people and animals hurried in and out. She’d run to meet me with a basket full of our ‘collections’: gecko eggs and pieces of broken glass — blue, green, red — that had worn smooth. We’d take
these to our hide-out under the mission and lay out our glass to make a jewellery shop and wrap the gecko eggs in cotton wool so they’d hatch. Her cousins would sometimes join us and bring more ‘jewels’ and eggs. Then one day when I came home after a magical afternoon of blue-green glass, minute transparent lizards uncurling and stories of talking walking dolls of staggering beauty my mother said to me, ‘You know dear, I’m not all that keen on you playing with Joyce.’

Somehow I expected it because of her shut face whenever I told her I was going off to play. I knew some day she’d say something but I had no idea why. I didn’t want to know why and didn’t ask her.

But she told me, ‘There’s a little touch of the tar brush there.’ She gave a tiny smile of contentment at her tactful way of putting things. ‘Half-caste. I’m not too keen on you playing with half-castes.’

I clung on to the ‘not too keen’. She didn’t say ‘I don’t want you to’ or ‘you mustn’t’. I held my breath as I willed the conversation to end, so it wouldn’t be modified and a definite interdiction given. The thought of not playing with Joyce was too painful. So I went on doing it. But things had changed. I was doing something that displeased my mother. Something wrong. What made it wrong? Joyce’s skin.

I had not only found my place in the universe, I now found where I was placed in relation to Joyce. Higher up, I believed this because my mother had told me so. A child isn’t born a racist, it becomes one. It has to be told, to be convinced of its superiority. Although I’d spent the first five years of my life with only people of my skin colour I wasn’t afraid or repulsed when a black man came and carried me off the ship. If there was any fear it was because he was a giant-sized stranger who was bearing me away, not because he was black. Once I’d realised that there were skin colours other than white (or boiled pink or tanned) I forgot about it. It was of absolutely no interest to me. When I played with children I didn’t think of their colour, only of their qualities as a playmate. Even now I have no idea whether Joyce was part
Indian or part Fijian or whether the cousins who joined us in play were full-blooded Indian or Fijian or had the same mixture as Joyce. All I cared about was that they were gentle boys and I loved them. But now my love was tinged with something disturbing. I was better than they were.

I shouldn’t be too resentful of my parents for this indoctrination. Tolerance wasn’t in fashion. Superiority was an officially held conviction. It was the duty of the colonials to make their subjects better people — people more like them. Colonel Oliver Stanley, Secretary of State for the Colonies, said in a speech, ‘We want to make good Africans, good West Indians and good Malayans. What we want first in Fiji is a good Fijian.’ Alas we can’t make him white, but we can make him good.

But good or not, the Fijian was less dangerous than the part-European who, like the Indian, had a toehold in money-making. He had to be squashed. So there could have been something more behind my mother’s aversion to half-castes. But I wasn’t aware of these political ins-and-outs then and the message I got was a simple one. Black was inferior. If a little touch of the tar brush wasn’t desirable, then how much worse was someone totally tarred?

From then on I even applied this skin-hue scale to my own place in the hierarchy with regard to those above me. It was already clear to me the top people in the colony were the British. They had a king — a real king, not a governor — who ruled not only Fiji but Australia. It wasn’t so long ago that Australia itself was a colony and the colonial aspect was slow to leave. There were details I wouldn’t have realised fully but must have felt: Australian passports with their own coat of arms started to be issued only in the Forties, God Save the King was played in cinemas and everyone stood up, vessels sailing from Australia to England were always referred to as ‘homeward bound’. I now saw the superiority of the British as also one of greater whiteness. Children who came fresh from Britain tended to be whiter than Australian children, who were usually heavily freckled or tanned. I was only six or seven when I first heard of Joyce’s stain and
maybe didn’t have things figured out as precisely as this, but the seeds were sown. Seeds that would turn into insidious growth so hard to uproot later.

As Joyce was never invited to my place and all the other friends I could get to via short-cuts had left the country, when I was in my backyard I had to amuse myself. This was easy enough. I had my books and when my mother urged me to stop reading and do something healthy, there were plenty of interesting things there.

As well as the air-raid shelter there was a spreading breadfruit tree and a hen run. The breadfruit tree was used by my father to practise his gymnastics on. He had medals to show what a good gymnast and diver he’d been in Australia. These figured men in precise relief with their bodies neatly flexed and their toes pointed. When my father swung from the tree he pointed his toes like the men on the medals. I thought he was being a bit of a show off when he did his gymnastics, although I liked the look of him as he swung up and down and around from the branch of the breadfruit tree with dappled sun sliding along his fine muscled limbs. But not as much as my mother did. ‘Grandma Thomsett always used to say to me,’ she’d repeat, ‘out of all my eight children, Ern is the most beautifully built.’

The hen run was another source of interest. It meant that we would no longer have to rely on contraband eggs from Hanka Singh. Crates of cheeping buttercup-yellow chickens arrived. I gave them all names and watched them grow, feeling sure I still knew which was which. I’d sit looking at the poultry pecking around in its pen imagining it was a busy town where they all had special purposes and intrigues. Then one day a horrible thing happened. My father took the one I’d called Flufkins — now a hen — stretched her neck on to a square rock and, to the accompaniment of wild squawking and flying feathers, chopped off her head with an axe.

After the nausea and shock went, I had a long, careful think. I knew how often we ate chicken and that a massacre was inevitable. I just had to absorb it as a grim fact of life. But I let
my father know I never wanted to see him do that again and next time he was going to kill a fowl he had to tell me and I’d go for a walk and come back when he’d finished. So when he decided to do away with one of the roosters he warned me. He said if I went around the block he’d be finished by the time I got back. I went for a slow stroll trying to keep my mind off what was happening to the rooster. After what seemed to me a very long time I turned into our front driveway only to see the most terrible sight coming at great speed towards me. The rooster was running down the drive, his stumpy wings lifted, his pantalooned legs stepping high, his head was no longer there, replaced by a fountain of blood spraying up from his neck. I went screaming off down the road, my father behind me.

Apart from the interest of the hens there were also some fascinating neighbours. They were newly weds called Mr and Mrs Southwick.

‘There’s a new lady next door,’ my mother said. ‘And she’s just a bride.’

A bride, I thought! Fancy having a bride as a neighbour.

I peered through the hedge hoping to see her in white tule and satin festooned with waxy blossoms come out the back door or from behind a bush.

One morning I noticed my father doing his gymnastics differently. His toes were even more pointed than usual and he had a look of pain on his face. Then suddenly he slid out of the tree and went inside, giving a quick glance over the top of the hedge. I was too small to look over the top so had to find a hole. To my disappointment instead of a bride there was a young woman in shorts and a halter top bent over a patch of garden turning the face of a flower to hers. Silky blond hair swept up at the sides freed a profile as perky and beautiful as a princess in a story book. Shining curls parted on shoulders bared by the halter top. Her knees were tensed as she tipped forward on her platform-soled sandals and her shorts showed a little more sleek thigh at the back than at the front. She wasn’t a bride but she was the prettiest lady I’d ever seen.
Inside the house my mother and father were also watching her through the living room window. ‘She’s wearing a playsuit,’ my mother said.

‘A playsuit. Is that what it is?’ my father chuckled. ‘A playsuit.’ He chuckled again. He had a funny chuckle. It came out through clenched teeth and made a noise like ‘sh sh sh’.

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Ern,’ my mother said severely.

Rather too severely, I thought. Why should she sound cross just because he repeated the word ‘playsuit’?

It wasn’t long before my mother was chatting to Mrs Southwick over the hedge and then having her over for afternoon tea. She had china-blue eyes and a laughing lipstickked pink mouth. My mother told my father all about her and he was careful not to make any more jokes. We found out that her name was Maureen and that she came from an old settler family — the Storcks. Her grandfather was a botanist from Germany who came to Fiji in the mid-nineteenth century to hunt and cultivate rare orchids. (The family was too long established in the colony to inspire any anti-German feeling.) She had four sisters and six brothers.

She had met her husband, Bruce Southwick, in Suva’s department store, Burns Philp, where she’d worked in the perfume and pharmacy section. He was the chemist there. But none of us were very interested in the husband. We were interested only in Maureen. Maureen on the veranda with her foot on the ledge painting her toenails. Maureen in a new sundress running down the path. And Maureen in the garden. Always in the garden. Sometimes she wore a wide straw hat that threw lattice shadows on to her face, sometimes thick green gloves that enhanced the smoothness of her arms. She dug and trimmed and trussed, but mostly she just admired, stroking and gazing at the flowers.

I wished I’d look like Maureen when I grew up. It was her nose especially I coveted. I’d look at myself in the mirror and push mine up with one finger to make it turned up like hers. My nostrils and top teeth showed. I looked like a piglet. I didn’t look a scrap like Maureen and I knew I never would.
This vision, this fixation, hovered a little with me all my life until it became vague and unreal as if she’d never happened. Then fifty years later, in the dining room of the South Seas Hotel, I came across proof that she had.

We were hunched across a table half-heartedly eating a warmed-up tin of something we’d bought at an Indian shop and leafing through a copy of Fiji Magic: the Tourism Magazine of the Fiji Islands. The other backpackers seemed more organised than we were. They bustled around efficiently with pans and plates of more inviting looking food than ours.

We were trying to decide which company to go white-water rafting with. At least Gay was. My eye had caught something else. ‘Tour: 90-minute tour of tropical gardens accompanied by well-known Fiji horticulturalist, Mrs Maureen Southwick. Cost includes home-cooked morning or afternoon tea.’

‘Maureen Southwick! Mummy’s friend.’
This was a connection we couldn't miss.
I’ve always been afraid of going up unknown driveways because of my early experience with an over-welcoming dog. We’d phoned to say we were coming and Maureen’s gate was wide open. I was still nervous.

‘Come on,’ said fearless Gay, urging me up the drive. ‘She’s not going to have dangerous dogs biting tourists.’

It wasn’t just the dogs. There was something intimidating about the extravagant luxuriousness of the garden, much bigger than the one she’d had in Denison Road. It stretched on either side; giant ginger plants with flowers in colours ginger plants don’t usually have, palms with pink flecks on their bark, orchids in icing-sugar clusters dripping from hairy fern-tree supports, huge lacquered crotons, immense flounced hibiscus. It had been raining but the sun had just come out, blackening the shadows and starring the raindrops on the leaves. With the sun came the heat through the humid foliage like the breath of a beast.

The house came into sight and was reassuring — comfortably sprawling with wide windows front and back so you could see straight through. A couple of smallish dark people moved around inside. A swimming pool out front was full of bulgy toys floating on the water and scattered on the edge.

‘Grandma!’ called one of the small people and ran out of view.

There were footsteps, the door opened and there stood Maureen. Silvery-gold hair framed an unwrinkled forehead, china-
blue eyes beamed from behind glasses, a smooth-skinned hand rested on the doorknob. Time hadn’t effaced her beauty.

‘Come in girls. Patsy and Gay. After all these years.’ She settled us down in armchairs around a low table with a pink orchid in a pot. I noticed that the room was decorated with things my mother always had in her Fiji homes: carved Buddha lamps, crystal whisky and brandy decanters, embroidered cloths, antique showcases filled with figurines and porcelain.

A Fijian girl poured us tea into gold-rimmed flowery cups and served us fragrant cake: mango, banana, cinnamon, ginger. The children we’d seen were relatives of hers staying with her in a couple of bures in the garden so they could go to school in town.

Maureen had an ambiguous attitude towards the Fijians. Those around her she treated affectionately as family and she seemed to love the children calling her Grandma, but when talking of the race in general she wasn’t very complimentary. The Indians fared no better.

She did have reason to feel disgruntled because she’d been burgled not long before. A noise in the kitchen woke her in the middle of the night. Holding aloft a carving knife, she crept up on the two intruders from behind. ‘Get out you black devils,’ she shouted, and they ran off terrified.

According to her, the neighbourhood was going down. Before she’d been surrounded by bank managers but now the banks were closing branches and some of the neighbours were not as they should be.

Her husband had died the year before from Alzheimer’s, which had taken the form of unreasoning jealousy. He suspected her of hiding lovers everywhere. The sadness that came into her eyes as she began to tell us of his death ebbed a little when she described his dementia. Perhaps she found it comforting his illness had taken this form.

As she talked she crossed her legs and hooked a knee up in her cupped hands. They were unmarked and shapely and she displayed them like someone who’d had beautiful legs for so long she knew just how to show them off.
In her visitors’ book a Frenchman from a cruise ship had written not long before, ‘Un très beau jardin, mais la plus belle plante c’est la maîtresse de la maison.’

‘The most beautiful bloom is the lady of the house,’ I translated.

‘Oh, I know what it means,’ she laughed, stroking her calf.

After the tea we went on a tour of the garden. The most precious plants were at the back of the house, growing in impeccably weedless black loamy soil. Walkways of planks or pebbles wound through the display. Rare ferns were protected from the sun by a tunnel of lightly laced bamboo. Orchids had their own specially built houses. Maureen lovingly commented on everything we passed. ‘You know my grandfather was a botanist, don’t you? Well look at this.’ She drew a postcard from her pocket. It showed an orchid shaped like a cockatoo crest. ‘Read on the back.’

I turned it over and read, ‘I. Storcki.’

‘It was named after him. That orchid was named after my grandfather. You can keep that card.’

On the way back to the house she reminisced with us. ‘Oh yes. I remember when your mother was expecting you, Gay. Doctor Paley used to come and visit her. We all had him. Old Paley. Ah Mossy Frisby. That was that big redhaired boy with all the freckles.’

She seemed to remember most of my schoolmates or at least their families. Some were still living in Suva. Perhaps I’d like her to help me get in touch. I told her we wouldn’t have time. But really I wasn’t keen on the idea. I didn’t want to be part of a situation like those terrible television programs where some hapless person has this wonderful surprise. A roll of drums, a curtain whipped aside to disclose smirking elderly kindergarten friends dug up from the far corners of the Earth. Desperate smile of fake recognition. Hugs. Crocodile tears. No thanks. There was only one childhood friend I wanted to see again and he left Fiji before I did.

Maureen told us the two houses we’d lived in were still standing and how to get to them.
At Denison Road everything seemed smaller than I remembered — the street, the house, the garden. The air-raid shelter had gone and so had Sala's bure.

Sala. Even the loosest of Mother Hubbards and long black sulus couldn't hide the beauty of her figure: the upswept breasts, the taut buttocks, the perfect curve from waist to hip. But her demeanour was demure. Whenever my mother spoke to her she looked at the ground and mumbled shyly, ‘Yes, Marama’. From my small height I could intercept her gaze and decided she was putting it on. She wasn’t all that shy. Her eyes were mischievous and darting, her lips pressed together as if stifling laughter.

She had many friends, male and female, always coming to lean at the kitchen door for a talk. I spent a good deal of my time there with her as well, sitting on the kitchen table absorbed in making paper dolls or colouring pictures and cutting them out. I relished the tools of my craft: the paints, the brushes, the crayons, the crisp or shiny paper, the deal table I worked on. Sala scrubbed it every morning and it smelled of damp wood and soap, the soft parts were scoured into hollows between high polished knots. It spread away in its white vastness on all sides with Sala’s laughter at the edges hemming me safely in.

When she was off duty her friends visited her in her bure in the back of the garden, sitting on her front step or the floor. Like other house girls I knew, she used the bed for decoration only. She stacked it with embroidered pillows and covered it with a fresh counterpane, but it was never sat on or slept in — she preferred a mat on the floor. Instead of a pillow she laid her neck on a convex wooden block to protect her hairdo. In the mornings she combed her hair upwards and outwards with a four-pronged wooden comb, releasing the smell of frangipani oil and young healthy scalp. Then she'd pick a hibiscus and, with a firm little tap, fix it behind her ear.

One man visited her more than the others — a soldier with his hair worn short, parted in the middle and flattened into greased wrinkles, rather like a miniature corrugated roof. His khaki sleeves were rolled up to show off an ornate watch which
flashed in the sun as he played the guitar to a rapt Sala. He didn’t seem to like me and I felt the same way about him.

My mother wasn’t keen on him either. ‘That cheeky individual,’ she called him. ‘Too sophisticated for words.’

One day I came into the kitchen with my arms full of creative equipment to claim my play space on the table, but Sala was spread half across it, her head down, her face hidden, her shoulders heaving with sobs.

‘I wouldn’t take it, Sala.’ My mother paced up and down. ‘Get rid of him.’

‘I know,’ Sala’s voice was muffled, almost inaudible. ‘But when he play the guitar I forget.’

My mother noticed me. ‘Run along Patsy. Sala’s not feeling very well.’ Later I was told that Sala had gone to her bure. I had to leave her alone. The next day she was in the kitchen but every time I came near her, she turned her face away. Then I saw a purple welt on her arm, another near her wrist and another on the back of her neck. I stopped wanting to see her face and knew what she forgot when the soldier played his guitar.

Soon after that, Sala vanished. She was replaced by Pauline, an older, sadder girl, who moved with us to our next house and stayed until we left Fiji.

This house, on high and winding Waimanu Road, not only seemed smaller but the garden had disappeared. All gone. No croton hedge, no palm-fringed drive, no flower beds, no mango tree, just a long, steeply sloping, fenceless lawn.

The house was propped up against the hillside on stilts. When we lived there the area under the house had swings, climbing frames, cubbies. My father also made a room for Pauline — he found the bure in the garden too old and leaky — by adding walls between the poles, a door and a window.

The back garden was flatter than the front, being on the crest of the hill, with vegetable patches, hen runs, avocado trees and a vine-hung tunnel which led from the back door to the outside toilet. My mother called the tunnel the arbour.

I hated the toilet: the stench, the buzz of the flies, the frighteningly large hole in the wooden bench seat and, through it,
the evil gleam on the surface of our wastes far below. And then there was the arbour: the awful gauntlet you had to run before you got there. From it hung fruit bats — or flying foxes as they were mostly called — upside-down and asleep, like broken umbrellas. It was all right if you ducked successfully between or under them, but if you touched one and woke it up, a horrific experience was in store.

One day Pauline was hurrying across the arbour with a basket of washing. In her haste, she unhooked a flying fox and it clung to her head. Washing and basket were hurled into the air with a scream as she lifted up her arms to try to free herself from the animal. Its wings spread over her head like a macabre leather hat, one of its clawed paws was caught in her hair, the other slipped on her cheek; its furry face was split with a silent nonsqueal of fear. Arms flailing and tugging she shook it free and it soared into the air, as harmless as a bird. I always had this scene in mind every time I went to the toilet.

Soon after we moved into the Waimanu Road house my mother took me aside for a serious talk. I was soon going to have a little brother or sister and, as she would have to eat a lot to make milk to feed the baby, I mustn’t be surprised if she got rather fat. As she got fatter and fatter, I became alarmed and asked her to stop eating because she was fat enough and must have made enough milk. This she found amusing and recounted to her friends.

She and my father were in a fever of preparations. My mother decorated the baby’s bed — a cradle on a high wooden frame with hoops over the head which you couldn’t see much of because it was smothered in drapes, frills, ribbons, rosebuds and bows. As well as this ‘bassinet’ she made curtains and bedspreads for the new house and silk lampshades with ruching and bias binding.

My father was also busy — trying to freshen up the walls and floor. In vain. During the war you couldn’t buy paint — its ingredients were needed for making weapons — but had to make do with a water and powder mixture called kalsomine. It went on
in thin uneven layers and dulled the walls instead of brightening them. The floor he desperately varnished with ‘shellac’. Just as ineffective. It came off on your feet in brown flakes like cockroach skin.

Every morning I’d go and look inside the bassinet to see if the baby had arrived. ‘No. No. Darling,’ my mother laughed. ‘It won’t just appear. I have to go to Nurse Morrison’s first.’

I had no idea that Gay was actually inside her and probably concluded that Nurse Morrison’s was some kind of baby-making factory. Or that she climbed on to her roof at night and plucked babies from the starry void to give to mothers the next day. But I don’t think I thought about it much. I was so looking forward to the baby coming I didn’t bother with how it was going to get here.

At last the bassinet was complete with baby. Its tiny fingers clung around one of mine and seemed to say, ‘Help me, Patsy. Help me meet the world.’

She had blue eyes that soon took on a clear turquoise hue. These were mostly nearly hidden by her fat rosy cheeks pushed up by a wide toothless smile. She sat up early but didn’t do it too well, as if she were boneless — a melted-down baby, a pile of clothing with, on top, a pink-cheeked, gummily grinning, black-haired head. This is how I always remember baby Gay.

Just as in Denison Road, the kitchen was the most interesting room in the house. Separated from the main building by a long back veranda, it was rather like a ship anchored at the end of a pontoon.

Pauline used the back veranda as a kitchen annex. The icebox was out there so the iceman could come up the back steps and throw the ice straight in. Sacks of sugar and flour were piled against a food cupboard with netting doors and its four legs standing in tins of water — to stop the ants getting into the food. But it didn’t stop them. The sugar was always full of little black bodies. I got so used to eating ant-infested sugar that when I came back to Australia and ate sugar without ants I felt something was strangely lacking. Pauline usually had a land crab,
waiting to be put into the pot, tied up on the back veranda like a dog. It would strain angrily on its leash, waving its outsize front pincers that could snap off a toe if they managed to get hold of one. She put a tin bucket over it to quieten it down but it became only more enraged, banged on the inside and even made the bucket come calypsoing down the veranda towards me. But however scary the crab was I didn’t think it deserved its horrible death. Crabs and lobsters are cooked alive — to preserve their flavour they say. Pauline would hold it aloft over the water, carefully by the back of the neck to avoid its claws, then lower it in and turn up the flame underneath. At first it wouldn’t protest much but as the water heated and began to boil it leapt around in the pot and pushed up the lid. As the steam hissed and the water bubbled, its struggling became more and more feeble. Just a couple of taps on the lid and then stillness. The sight was sad but only slightly marred my later enjoyment. Land crabs have the sweetest most delicious flesh imaginable.

Sometime about the time Gay was born, in March 1943, there was talk of the schools opening again. Just as a year before there had been appeals in the paper for the schools to be closed — children’s lives were in danger as bombs could drop on them on their way there and back — now they were clamouring for them to open. Juvenile behaviour was getting lax. There was a certain girl who hung out on street corners in a ‘tight jumper and short shorts’ who ‘should be told to go home and put on a skirt’. The Americans were grumbled about again because they had taken over schools to house their troops — they should find permanent quarters and ‘release public buildings for their proper purpose’. Otherwise children who were straying on the streets would become ‘idle and shiftless’ and ‘We will have a batch of youngsters who certainly will not want to go to school when the war is over’. So the schools opened again — more or less.

Only the older children approaching final exams were assured of any sort of education. The little ones and the middling ones were crammed several classes together under the one teacher. When there was a teacher. They had all left for New
Zealand where they came from and weren’t going to brave war-torn oceans to come back to us. So another measure was to have class only in the morning or the afternoon, not both.

The next two years are vague in my mind. I don’t remember doing anything that resembled school work or remember anyone who resembled a teacher. Mostly we hung around in the playground amusing ourselves while we waited for this chimera to appear. The girls would play skipping games or hopscotch or jacks. We had real knuckle bones for jacks — not the plastic ones that came later. It was a complicated game I’ve forgotten the rules of, but throwing them up in the air and catching them on the back of your hand seemed to be the main feature.

The boys had their own games and didn’t bother us because they had so much time in the playground to disperse their energy it was never pent up and rearing for a victim. Mossy Frisby would occasionally give me some light kicks in the ankles or, when I was standing with my legs taut, creep up behind and slice me in the back of the knee so I’d fall down, but otherwise he left me alone.

We did sometimes go into class, usually to be supervised by the headmaster, Mr Brock, who was much too busy and important to teach us. He would hurry in with piles of papers he’d lay out with great seriousness. Then he’d sit down, bend over them and tell us to get on with our ‘private studies’. This suited me fine as ‘private studies’ to me meant reading my latest library book under the desk.

Johnny Pender, the sportsmaster, was around — he was a kaiviti, so didn’t leave Fiji — and he had to think up things for us to do. We spent a lot of time at the swimming baths. Those who couldn’t swim took lessons and I learnt to dive. This became the one sport I was good at. At first I could only stoop from the edge and fall in but then he showed me how to take a run, spring off the edge and swoop over in mid air, arms, body and legs all in a straight cutting line. When I resurfaced I imagined I was Esther Williams, water streaming off my Technicolor face and
bepetalled, braided hairdo. I’d return to the side of the pool doing backstroke and drawing my shoulder up to my smiling mouth at each stroke just like Esther did in her films.

Then Mr Pender had a plan. He would train us all to get our lifesaving medals. Things took a downturn. Lifesaving was no fun. We were in pairs: the ‘drowner’ and the ‘saver’. The saver had to pretend to knock the drowning one unconscious to stop him clutching him and pulling him under so they both drowned. This usually resulted in a rough almost genuine tussle for survival. When you were dragged out you had to be resuscitated. I don’t know whether mouth-to-mouth existed in those days, or if it would have been considered a little ‘rude’ in a mixed class, but we didn’t do it. Instead we pressed on the drowned one’s chest to squeeze the water out. This also hurt, depending on who was pressing. Finally we all got our medals and Mr Pender was hailed as a patriot. Why was lifesaving patriotic? Did they think we’d all swim out and rescue sailors from a torpedoed vessel?

But patriotism, the war effort and vanquishing the Huns and the Japs was just about all grown-ups talked about and they were keen to give children’s activities a military slant whenever possible. The cadet corps flourished and we were always having to watch miniature soldiers marching up and down.

We were enlisted for The Patriotic Fête which was to be the biggest war drive ever and prepared for months before it was held. ‘Act loyally. Pay royally’ was the winning slogan. Money came in from the four corners of Fiji, raised from social functions organised by all races, local fêtes or simply private donations. A photo in the paper showed a Chinese couple with the massive cheque they’d contributed. An American woman said she’d been saving up for a divorce but would give the money to the war effort instead because ‘she hated Hitler more than her husband’.

We took part in the Children’s Drive: ‘Spare a coin for the kiddies.’ ‘Penny-a-poke cards’ were distributed — pieces of cardboard marked with a grille with a black spot inside each square. When a person donated a penny you gave them the supreme treat of poking a pin through a spot. When all the spots
were replaced with holes, you turned in your card and the ones who gave in the most cards had their names printed in the paper. Mine was spelled incorrectly — Patsy Thomsitt. (How much easier Page is than Thomsett. I used to get Thompset, Thomas, Thompson, Tomson, Tonks, even Tomtit.) The girls had a higher score than the boys. ‘Although the boys have gained a little ground, the lassies are still in the lead.’ Later when the girls were still winning, the paper had the last word: ‘Girls can never beat boys in the long run.’

Then the fête day came. Crowds turned up in Albert Park. By this time the worst of the war scare was over and many of those who had fled had come back. My mother wheeled Gay in a mammoth second-hand baby carriage, the kind Victorian nannies pushed their charges around in Kensington Gardens. People who hadn’t seen my mother for months came and peered into the pram. ‘Look what I got for staying,’ she preened.

A Rhode Island Rooster and two geese were raffled, a battery of artillery fired at meteorological balloons, we all played a game called knocking Hitler’s teeth out. And a wild rainstorm left the park sloshy with mud. It was just as muddy more than fifty years later when we walked there from Waimanu Road.

It was a Saturday afternoon and the park was full of people: Indians playing soccer and Fijians rugby, all slithering and falling in the mud. Some tackled with such vigour they shot supine through the wet grass, sending up brown fans of water from their flanks like a seaplane taking off. On the edges of the groups were friends, wives, children, picnicking and playing under the ivi trees. Some of the little boys kicked balls around with their twig legs practising for the time when they’d be stalwarts in striped jerseys. The Fiji Rugby team had just won the World Rugby Sevens in Hong Kong and were the heroes of the land. Pictures of the team decorated the walls of shops and cafés. People talked about them as if they were everybody’s old friends. For lunch we found a café recommended in our guidebook: good food, old-fashioned setting, favourite spot of swinging Suva office workers. Two old colonial houses side by side with curving
tin-roofed verandas and wooden steps cradled in lush foliage had been converted into a restaurant. A friendly mix of races milled around inside. The lady in charge explained the different dishes, arranged in steaming metal containers, and plied us with free titbits. With urging from her helpers, she told us a little about the political party she was a member of. ‘We believe in all races being friends. Indians and Fijians can work together towards a better Fiji. Everybody. You. Us. Friends.’

This seemed a good idea to me, especially with the delicious aroma of my favourite Fijian dish wafting from my tray.

‘Our ribbons.’ The lady gestured towards a helper with a dish of pins and narrow orange satin ribbons. ‘You want to wear our ribbon?’

‘Yes. Thanks. Pin it there.’ I agreed, letting the helper fix it on my T-shirt. I felt elated. What a great place.

We chose a bowery corner of the veranda and sat down.

‘You know,’ said Gay, ‘I wouldn’t go out into the street wearing that ribbon.’ She sometimes takes this chiding attitude with me, but it’s just us slipping into our old roles of the practical one and the dreamy one — a game.

‘Why? What could happen?’
‘Might offend rival groups.’

There were others wearing orange ribbons, threading between tables, juggling trays, hailing friends. Some even came in off the street with their ribbons already on. They didn’t seem afraid of rival groups.

It was difficult to see Fiji’s political situation as other than peaceful in such an optimistic place during this bright green-glowing lapse in the rain.

‘Hello,’ said a white man to an Indian girl sitting at a table next to ours. ‘See you’re in the papers again.’

She gave him an upward tilting smile. But you felt she couldn’t have been in the papers for frivolous reasons. Her hair was cut short to show off her brilliant eyes. She was wearing Western dress and arranged things in front of her in a classy determined way. There was another Indian and a Fijian at her
table who seemed like acolytes. I wondered why she’d been in the papers. Was she some kind of politician?

It wasn’t just in the café where harmony reigned. Out in the streets there was an enjoyable mix of bustle and stroll, friendly *Bulas* greeted us on all sides. You felt people were happy in their lives, there were fewer boundaries than fifty years before, everyone had plenty to do and liked doing it.

In spite of the highrises and the security systems, Suva still seemed a wonderful place to live.
Gay was getting impatient, walking ahead with her ‘strumpet strut’ as her husband fondly calls it: calves taut, bottom determined, head craning.

We were looking for a church where a young girl in a music shop had invited us to hear her sing in the choir. Nobody can sing hymns better than Fijians. They harmonise perfectly pitched notes — from vibrant bass to crystal soprano — into a skin-tingling mesh of sound. Having experienced only scanty choirs of screechy Australian women leading tuneless congregations, I was stunned when I first heard this music as a child. I was taking a short-cut that led me past the back of a Fijian church. Frangipani trees and thick bushes hid the building and it seemed as if the sound was part of the scent of the frangipanis — deep and warm but at the same time ethereal. Something that couldn’t be issuing from human throats.

At the address we’d been given there was only a dirt path leading into some scrub. We were going over that stretch of road again. So far no sign of a church.

This was the luxurious part of Suva — sea views and high hillsides. Satellite dishes in the gardens were more like flying saucers: enormous circular frames lashed down with cables and covered with black metal webbing. Television had come to Fiji
only three years before. So far there was only one local station for those with ordinary aerials: the news read in Fijian and English, home-made advertisements. ‘My son’s rugby jersey is covered in mud,’ says a Fijian housewife. ‘I’ll soon get it clean with this.’ Waves a box of washing powder. Of course those with dishes had a surfeit of programs from every part of the world.

One of the mansions, once belonging to Tui Johnson, my father’s boss, had become the American Embassy. I’d remembered it as a brand-new house on a windswept hill, now it was a venerable pile with cascades of blooms and battalions of trees.

We were back where the church was supposed to have been, when a Fijian in polished sandals, serge sulu, shirt and tie, came to the entrance with a lali stick in his hand.

‘Yes. It’s here,’ he said, gesturing us to follow him.

As we went down the path I realised we were in a village. Our guide turned around and looked us up and down as if checking for correctness of dress. He seemed to approve of the long skirts, covered shoulders, hatless heads but then lingered on a money bag I was wearing round my middle — commonly known in France as a ‘banane’ and in England as a ‘bum bag’, although it’s worn at the front and not on the bum.

Guidebook advice flashed across my mind. In villages bags must not be carried on shoulders or backs, but in the hands. They didn’t mention stomachs but they must be even more objectionable.

Anyway, who would have thought the church was going to be in a village and the village practically in the middle of Suva? It had the usual vegetable plots, the clearing or ‘rara’ — the Fiji version of a village green — and small houses on either side of a central path: no bure, but dwellings with corrugated iron roofs and weatherboard or cement block walls softened with flowers and bright-leaved bushes. The church was a hut on poles with wooden steps and a small cross nailed to the top of the porch.

The man in the serge sulu had gone with his lali stick to a lali under a tin canopy and an ivi tree. There he began to beat on it vigorously and the villagers, in the freshest of neatly pressed clothes, came out of the houses and poured into the church.
We went with the flow. An elderly lady took my elbow and sat me beside her on the mats spread over the floor. She put her open hymn book between us and a small girl on the other side of Gay did the same with hers. The pages of the books were limp with age, their covers powdery at the edges with years of fingering.

Everyone sat on the floor, choir included. The girl from the shop smiled at us. Like the rest of the choir she was wearing a dark blue satin Mother Hubbard with a wide white satin collar. A clean smell of flower-scented coconut oil and washed cotton mingled with the grassy fragrance of green pandanus leaves used for weaving the newest mats.

A space in the front of the room had a draped table in place of a pulpit and behind it stood an impressive pastor wearing a loose black garment. He turned over papers with a grave downcast gaze while the lali-beater, who had come in and stood beside him, gave a speech in Fijian. It now seemed obvious he was the village chief giving a pep-talk on communal duties. During his speech there were furtive smiles exchanged between children or solemn nods from adults. Some people had started to fan themselves, more for something to do than a remedy for the heat, which was nothing compared with what it must have been when the sun was beating on the tin roof. A little dog poked his nose in at the door. A swift backward push of a foot removed him.

When the chief had finished, the minister gave a final smooth to his papers, raised his eyes and in a deep monotonous rumble, gave his sermon. Some of the children squirmed or even gave a muffled giggle but were soon jabbed into silence by a grown-up. As Gay and I had spent years at a Methodist boarding school (same school, different years) and been raised on a diet of Sundays of solid religion — church in the morning, scripture in the afternoon, vespers in the evening — we knew how to lull ourselves into a dreamy, almost comatose, quite enjoyable state during sermons. As Gay said later, it didn’t matter whether they were in Fijian or English, they had the same effect.

We’d both been able to speak Fijian as children but had forgotten it all. Gay had been particularly fluent. She spent more
time with Pauline who loved her because she was cute and cuddly while I was gangly and of not much interest to anyone. On her time off Pauline would take Gay down to her room under the house. From my bedroom I could hear her bell-like Fijian chatter drifting up through the chinks in the floorboards, tinkling in and out of the melodious murmur of Pauline and her friends. I could only just follow what they were saying and wished I could speak it as well as Gay did. But now neither of us could understand anything. The service was broken up with readings, prayers and hymns. We got to our feet for the hymns and joined in lustily. They were also in Fijian but we had no difficulty fitting in the words and the tunes we knew. There is nothing like a Methodist hymn to make you want to exercise your lungs. Sometimes the choir sang alone. That was the best part. The magical blending of a multitude of registers. The singing of angels with love in their voices.

The fervour of Fijians is impressive. It’s amazing how a people renowned for their treachery, constant wars and voracious cannibalism only a hundred and fifty years ago are now objects of marvel because of their friendly gentle natures and deep religious convictions.

Way back in Fiji history, cannibalism had strict rules. Only enemies were eaten, to humiliate them in death. The chief had the best bits — fed to him with a cannibal fork — and the rest was passed around to honoured friends or to chiefs in other villages. But gradually the taste for human flesh grew until, in the mid-nineteenth century, when Fiji lore began to be recorded by European writers, it had reached extremes of gluttony.

A Fijian’s most precious possession was a club and it had to be bloodied as soon as possible. The victim could be a lone man or woman, washing by a stream and bashed from behind. Anyone would do. But he had to kill them stone dead with his club. Then he was a real man. And he and his fellow villagers could have a feast.

These rites of passage were nothing compared with the horrors of war. Children were slung from the masts of victorious
canoes which had been launched across supine bodies to ensure their success. Enemies were often tortured before being slain and eaten. Bits of their bodies were cut off, dangled in their faces and eaten raw in front of them.

I know there were, and still are, atrocities all over the world, but the Fijians are exceptional in that they are now ranked ‘among the friendliest people on Earth, full of warmth, good humour, charm and gentleness’. There are stories of whole families weeping as staff at resorts envelope them in goodbye bearhugs, of Australians loving the place and the people so much they wouldn’t holiday anywhere else, of stranded yachtsmen being taken in and looked after by tender and selfless villagers. (Once castaways, more than anyone else, were regarded as obvious cannibal fodder.) Then there is Isa Lei, sung by Fijians to those departing — a heartfelt, yearningly sad farewell song.

How could such a people have once been so heartless? And how could the change have been wrought by just a handful of missionaries, recklessly convinced of their right to primitive souls? ‘Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession’ (Psalms 118). How and why was the club replaced by the bearhug?

King Cakobau, when he handed Fiji over to Queen Victoria in 1874, presented her with his favourite old war club which he’d had overlaid with emblems of peace: a silver garland of palm leaves and doves. This was then topped with a crown and later became the mace in the Fiji House of Commons. Cakobau’s gesture marked the end of the old Fiji.

The old Fiji wasn’t written as Fiji but as the less attractive ‘Feejee’. The Fijians themselves called it Viti and the first Europeans to hear the name probably used an approximation of what they heard.

An early mention of Feejee was made by Captain Cook in 1777. ‘Feejee and Tongataboo [Tonga] engage in war against each other; and the inhabitants of the latter are often so much afraid of his enemy that they bend the body forward and cover the face
with their hands, to express the sense of their own inferiority to the Feejee men.’ So Cook kept clear of ‘Feejee’.

His notes he passed on to Lt Bligh who’d been with him on his round-the-world voyage. These Bligh kept in mind when he found himself close to Fiji a few years later, after being forced into an open launch by the mutineers of the *Bounty*. Nobody expected him and his few loyal men to survive, but they made it to Timor and recorded many uncharted islands on the way. In Fiji waters he became rather jumpy, especially when two large sailing canoes began to chase them. Luckily the canoes were sailing against the wind and Bligh and his men were able to slip past.

The *Argo*, in 1800, also wanted to slip by but didn’t make it and was wrecked on a reef. The survivors — including Oliver Slater, who started the sandalwood trade — were the first Europeans to set foot in Fiji, soon to be followed by others. Many of these were beachcombers, desperate and often dangerous men: shipwrecked sailors, deserters from naval vessels, escaped convicts from New South Wales. Living by their wits, they ingratiated themselves with the natives by giving them firearms and helping them in their wars. They dressed in the same way, painted their bodies and spoke their language, probably learning a lot more about them than the later colonials did.

Thanks to their journals and sketches we’ve been given some idea of what the ‘Feejeeans’ were like. Their clothing was made from *tapa* (or *masi* as it’s often called). It was usually left white and decorated only in the typical black and brown patterns for ceremonies. The men wore a short piece around their waist and often another wound around their head like a turban. When their heads were uncovered they vied with each other in imaginative hairdos: growing their hair long, dyeing it many colours and arranging it in ringlets, spikes or dense cut shapes like a yew hedge.

Chiefs had hairdressers who could take up to two hours to arrange their hairstyles into great edifices often more than a metre across. They wore *tapa* in abundance — sometimes wrapped several times around their body then looped at the back in a double or triple bustle which ended in a long train. Other times...
it was arranged so that it fell from the shoulders in stiff folds, giving the effect of an immense kimono.

There were no shapeless Mother Hubbards to hide the charms of the women who wore only a bark mini-skirt. One beachcomber, William Lockerby, noted that they ‘are remarkably handsome and have all that delicacy of form and softness of voice which distinguish females in every part of the civilised world’. They, too, had numerous hairstyles, scented with sandalwood dust and threaded with leaves and flowers. Young girls partly shaved their heads and grew hip-length ringlets from behind each ear.

One of the most readable accounts of this period is from someone who was anything but a beachcomber. *Life in Feejee. Five Years Among the Cannibals. By a lady.* The lady in question was the spunky Mary Wallis, wife of the captain of a *bêche-de-mer* trading vessel from Salem, Massachusetts, who kept a diary of her trip with him from 1844 to 1849.

Cannibals didn’t frighten her — one threatened her with a hatchet and she chased him away with a pair of scissors. An ideal wife for a *bêche-de-mer* captain. *Bêche-de-mer,* or sea-slugs, the cleaners of the marine ecosystem, were much valued as a delicacy in Asia. The trade flourished for a few decades until, like sandalwood, greed exhausted the market. The *bêche-de-mer* traders were more involved with the natives than the sandalwood merchants were. For sandalwood they just had to be directed to a wooded cove (not always that easy — sometimes they were eaten instead) and then hack down the trees with a few helpers. Whereas for *bêche-de-mer* they had to have reef fishermen to find the slugs and harvest them and they needed labour to build the drying houses and pack the merchandise. This meant long negotiations with the chief of the region as the men would help only if he told them to, no matter how tempted they were by the guns, axes, beads and cloth that were given in exchange for their labour.

Mary and her husband spent a lot of time anchored off the kingdom of Bau, a tiny but illustrious island near Viti Levu. In all of Fijian history there was no island more powerful, yet it wasn’t much bigger than a playing field. Here Cakobau was already king.
even though his father Tanoa — ‘Old Snuff’ people called him, because he wheezed when he breathed — was still alive. But from the age of seventeen when Cakobau outwitted rivals plotting against his father, he was seen as the real king of Fiji. ‘His influence is now almost unbounded,’ Mary Wallis writes. ‘I think he may truly be called the Napoleon of Feejee.’

Still a young man when she met him on her husband’s vessel, she describes him as ‘tall, rather good looking, appears fully aware of his consequence, and is not destitute of dignity. He wore an enormous quantity of hair on his head, and several yards of native cloth around his body.’ On this occasion, accompanied by several courtiers, he stayed a long time negotiating with her husband for use of his men in the bêche-de-mer trade and warning him of the awful fate he would meet if he trafficked with the enemies of Bau.

When she chose not to accompany her husband on sea trips she stayed with her missionary friends, the Hunts, on the island of Vewa, not far from Bau. While there, she saw Cakobau quite often. The picture she gives is of a quirky intriguing personality, switching from innocence to guile, from seriousness to flightiness, from dangerous rage to sweetest good humour, from primitive stubbornness to intelligent reasoning.

In a way he shows all a Fijian is capable of. ‘Beneath their wild and uncouth exterior,’ writes C.W. Flanders in the introduction to Life in Feejee, ‘have been found marks of intellectual power and sagacity. Minds have been discovered there, which, under the discipline of refined culture, might have ranked high on the scale of mental attainment.’

Cakobau was proud and quick with an answer to any white man who took on airs with him. He told a high-handed ship’s captain that white men made good eating — just like ripe bananas. Harry, a beachcomber from Virginia who was widely detested by the Fijians because of his insulting ways (he was later killed and eaten, which was to be expected), was quickly squashed by Cakobau when he tried the same tone with him. ‘Who are you?’ asked Cakobau haughtily, ‘nothing but a runaway sailor, who has no riches but what he earns.’
With women Cakobau showed his playful side. Once Mary went to see him in Bau to find him ‘amusing himself with a little pop gun’ with his wives and other ladies of the court. They were trying to make decorations for a party and he kept firing pellets of dalo at them and when they looked his way ‘his attention would be fixed upon some distant object with the most innocent look imaginable’.

Another time he visited Mary on the ship, came to her room, called her Marama Venaka (lovely lady), sat down in an armchair in front of her mirror, gazed at his reflection for some time, then departed without another word.

She was always giving him lectures on how bad it was to eat people, especially those who weren’t his enemies but were killed just to feed visitors to his island. He replied that it was all very well for Americans — they had beef to give their guests. But when he was offered beef by Mary and her husband, he refused to eat it. He said he knew that poor little cow, now cooked and on a plate. He’d seen her grazing and he loved her. You’re always trying to make me feel bad about eating people, well I’ll make you feel bad about eating beef.

He had the same technique in fending off the missionaries. They relentlessly pursued his conversion. As king of Fiji he was their biggest catch, because once a chief converted, all his subjects followed. Cakobau seemed to take pride in keeping Bau a stronghold of violence and cannibalism as one by one his rivals became pious and peace-loving. When Hunt told him that he and other cannibals would go to hell if they didn’t convert and repent he said such a fire would keep them warm in cold weather. Hunt answered he’d pray for him anyway, even though he treated the subject so lightly. ‘Go on with that,’ jeered Cakobau.

Nevertheless he seemed to enjoy talking religion with missionaries Calvert and Hunt. ‘He appears very fond of Mr Calvert and family, frequently coming to pass a day with them, and holding long and sensible conversations with Mr Calvert.’ He was touched and shaken when Hunt died with his last words a prayer for Cakobau’s salvation and for the remaining heathen in
Fiji. ‘Lord, bless Feejee! … Thou knowest my soul has loved Feejee! … Save the people in Feejee!’

Such faith impressed him but he still mulled it over for another few years. Finally in 1857 he dismissed his many wives, married his chief queen, and was baptised. The floodgates to Christianity in Fiji were open.

Most of this was achieved by about half a dozen men and their wives. They had to be replaced over the years because some died of dysentery and tropical diseases but only one was killed. This was the Reverend Barker, eaten by the ferocious hill tribes who were the very last to be converted. He went just a bit too far up the Sigatoka River — far into the hills where I’d stood as a child and looked at the ‘furtile’ valley below. There his skull was cloven by one of the sharp axes he used as trade. When he was cooked, bits of him were sent around as tributes to other villages — the custom when important people were baked. They even tried to eat his shoes. Gay and I saw them, gnawed and discarded, in the Suva Museum.

In spite of the indiscriminate murders and war lust, the ‘Feejeeans’ of the cannibal era in some ways are not so different to the Fijians of today. Mary was so touched by their many thoughtful acts that she commented, ‘I believe the Feejeeans, when not excited, are very kind.’

The Fijians are a fervent people and everything they do, they do fervently. The old gods were ravenous for human lives, so they provided them enthusiastically. In turn, they expected the gods to show their gratitude in practical ways. The more men they buried in the pits holding up the poles of a new bure, the more they expected the owners of the bure to prosper. The more lives they sacrificed at dalo planting time, the bigger the crops they expected to have. The more wives and servants that were strangled to accompany a dead chief, the more comfortable his stay would be in the hereafter.

There was only a thin line between this life and the next. They were almost interchangeable. The hereafter wasn’t in the sky but on earth, an island in Fiji where a particular cliff was the jumping-off spot for departing souls. Gods often disguised
themselves as people, stones, fish, plants. The dead would sometimes come back and talk to the living. Even pieces of the dead. A cannibal told Mary that he wouldn’t go out after dark because one evening a bone he had thrown behind the house had whistled to him.

The priest or ‘bete’ was not only a prophet and a witch-doctor with healing powers, he was considered a god. He and the gods had the same ‘mana’ or power. But everyone had mana to some degree. Chiefs, of course, had an abundance of it but even the common man had some. That’s why his head was sacred — it was the centre of his force.

So it wasn’t surprising they attributed a strong mana to the missionaries and therefore let them pass among them without harm. For here were men proclaiming a new religion with a sole all-powerful God. He wasn’t hungry for human lives. All He wanted you to do was sing and pray and be kind. It must have had a certain appeal. Also the missionaries had bigger ships, more effective weapons, beautiful things like mirrors and lamps for their homes. Their God seemed to provide for them better than the heathen gods did for the Fijians. Another big point in His favour.

Most missionaries had medical knowledge and were more successful in healing the sick than the native bete with his potions and incantations. Many Fijians were eager to convert when they realised this. Some did so even before seeking a cure for their illnesses, thinking heathens might be turned away.

Some became Christians through superstition. A heathen village set off to fight a newly converted Nadi. On arriving they became afraid and fled. They were ashamed. Why did they falter? Was it because the Christian God filled them with fear? There was only one thing to do — become Christians themselves.

The many ways the Fijians came to God don’t fully explain why the missionaries were so much more successful in Fiji than they were in other places, where they were just as insistent. Especially as these islands were considered the toughest of all. ‘The natives of the Fiji Islands have, heretofore,’ said the introduction, ‘been regarded as the Ishmaelites of the South Pacific Ocean, who would never endure the discipline of civilisation, and who, if ever
converted to Christianity, would be the last brought into the kingdom of heaven.’

In any case it seems to have made for a safer Fiji. Now a chief who once might have roasted me alive for being so disrespectful as to wear a *banane* tied round my middle, was sitting, albeit on the only chair in the room, his head bowed as he listened to the preacher’s confident drone.

It was now time for the collection. Two little girls, one about eight and the other about six, stood up at the back of the room with plates in their hands. Their dresses were crisply pressed, the six-year-old’s was too big and the eight-year-old’s too small. I hunted in my *banane* for some change but Gay poked me and pointed at a plate as it was passed along. Notes. Everyone was putting in notes. I hastily slipped back my mean-looking coins and did the same. When the plates were full the little girls took the high, spilling piles in both hands and carefully trod along the aisle cleared for them on the mats, bringing one foot up to meet the other before slowly putting the next foot forward, like two little brides reverently approaching an altar. The choir sang a closing hymn.

The hymn — *There is a Green Hill Far Away* — was once my favourite, until humiliation made me dislike it. I can’t see why this was so acute, but a child’s embarrassment knows no bounds or reasoning. It was on my last day of Sunday school before leaving Fiji. I found Sunday school boring but liked the dressing up part: frilly dress, pastel socks, hair in ringlets bobbing with bows. My teacher, the dour-faced, monk-cassocked Mr Donne, ‘asked me what my favourite hymn was and I said “There is a Green Hill Far Away” and then he said for them TO THINK OF ME WHILE THEY SANG IT’!!’

This was my humiliation: squirming while the smirking children yelled the endless hymn. Thinking of me all right — of what a fool I looked, standing on the stage with Mr Donne’s hand on my puffed-sleeved shoulder, his booming notes stirring my ribbons.

Hearing the hymn sung so beautifully in Fijian in that touching church rehabilitated it for me.
The day for white-water rafting arrived and Tania, the receptionist, rang to fix up the trip. There were permutations and complications.

‘There’s just one thing,’ I timidly interrupted her during yet another call. ‘What about the disclaimer for people over fifty?’

‘Oh don’t worry about that,’ she comforted, the phone held against her neck by a crooked-up shoulder as she waited for information, pen poised over paper. ‘You have to come hobbling along with a stick for them to want you to sign that.’

‘But is it dangerous?’

‘No. Not dangerous,’ she said breezily.

She finally got a trip organised and said they’d be along in about half an hour. ‘Fiji time,’ she added with a smile. We were always hearing about this ‘Fiji time’, meaning that Fijians did everything in a leisurely way, not caring much about being late, but until now we hadn’t experienced it.

The half hour dragged. Every time we heard the sound of a vehicle outside we jumped up to see if it was going to stop. At last there was a noise of brakes and a dying rattle as something came to a halt — only a derelict pick-up truck with a pile of junk in the back. A few minutes later a smart white mini bus pulled briskly into the curb and a white-clad Indian jumped out.

We went to meet him. ‘Are you from Wilderness Ethnic Adventure Fiji?’
‘Sorry,’ he said, busy and brisk. ‘I’m the laundry man.’

We looked at his departing back, then turned our gaze to the road. A pair of bare feet appeared from the truck and gave a jerk to propel their owner down from his seat. A wiry fellow emerged, dressed in worn shorts and T-shirt.

‘I’m Kai,’ he said, making a sign that was half salute, half wave. ‘River trip.’

Inside the truck there was a scary lack of space between our shabby seats and a dashboard full of levers with their knobs missing, leaving lethal metal stumps. There were no seat belts. And Kai drove fast.

We swung down into the lower part of Suva, taking the curves like a roller coaster. Kai told us he wasn’t a Fijian but a Solomon Islander. He was born in Fiji but still considered himself from the Solomons.

I wondered if he was a descendant of some victim of the blackbirding era when natives of the New Hebrides and the Solomons were kidnapped for work on European plantations. Fijians, protected by their chiefs and later by the enlightened ideas of the first two governors, were able to avoid this kind of labour.

The cruelty of the blackbirding captains was horrific. ‘We captured the natives generally by breaking or upsetting their canoes,’ reported one shipowner. ‘We smashed the canoes by throwing pig-iron into them, and then seized the natives in the water … sometimes hitting them over the head with clubs or slung shot as they were at times very difficult to get hold of.’ Once on the ship, if they fought back, they were killed and thrown overboard. There was a slave market at the mouth of the Rewa River where they were sold to planters for a few pounds a head. Things were no better on the plantations. Nearly half the labourers died during their stay.

Blackbirding was cleaned up when the British took charge in 1874. Inspection ships made sure the worst abuses were stamped out. But it existed in the Pacific — not known as blackbirding, of course, but as ‘recruiting’ — well into the 1950s,
maybe longer. The islanders weren’t kidnapped, but they were tricked. Three fingers were held up under their noses when they were asked to come and work. But how did they know these represented years of service? The money they earned was taken back by the planter by way of his store where they were encouraged to buy plugs of black tobacco, iron-hard ship’s biscuits, tins of corned beef and peroxide for dyeing their hair.

My father, you could say, was a blackbirder. When we had a plantation in the Solomons in the Fifties he would take a ship to the heavily populated island of Malaita and return with a load of men to fill his ‘labour lines’: curved tin ammunition stores called Quonset huts left over by the Americans after the war. We lived in Quonset huts as well because the old plantation house had been bombed — leaving only a flight of vine-smothered steps like an Inca ruin — but ours had big windows cut in the sides, verandas built around them, a covered walkway to connect the two and curtains, cushions, lampshades and coverlets sewn by my mother’s deft fingers. The labour lines had nothing done to them other than being filled with rows of two-tiered metal bunks to sleep ‘the boys’.

On pay days at the end of the month my father sat behind an overturned packing case with a tin of money, a store ledger and a labour list. A spreading mango tree drooped its boughs to make a roof for this makeshift office and chickens picked around the ground at his heels. Workers waited in front of him, straggling in a long line past the pig pen, the fowl run, the goat paddock, the vegetable patch.

Life in the Solomons changed my father: constant outdoor exercise knotted his finely toned muscles, the equatorial climate grilled his skin to a permanent angry redness and — probably to avoid expensive trips to Australian dentists — he robbed his face of much of its charm by equipping it with a pair of false teeth. But he was happy; rid of the wearying hierarchy of Tui Johnson and Old Sir Walter, proud to have created a flourishing plantation out of an overgrown waste of bomb craters and broken trees.

This he couldn’t have done without the help of the hundred or so islanders queued up before him. Unlike the
Fijians, their garb was varied. The lap-lap — the equivalent of a *sulu* — was worn by only a few. Others wore long trousers or shorts, some ragged, some neat, or even our cast-offs — my father's evening trousers, my mother's skirts.

It could have been a form of entertainment. Like their hair. They used the peroxide not only to dye it but to make patterns: alternating black and pale chess-board squares all over, or long yellow front and dark short back, or fair tufts here and there.

They all carried brush knives, razor-sharp and broad-bladed, for hacking away the scrub under the trees. Some looked ferocious but they were a gentle people and sometimes easily scared. Once I was serving in the shop, delving among the ship's biscuits, when a big spider ran over my hand. I flung my arms about like a windmill and screamed with all the breath in my lungs. At my sudden inexplicable dementia, they ran out in terror, brush knives in the air.

As each one came up to be paid, my father consulted the store ledger then gave them the balance. Many looked disappointed when, instead of the seven pounds they were supposed to earn, they got only two or one or none because of the debt they owed the store.

All this didn't worry me then. Everybody said my father was the kindest employer you could find in these parts and I was happy with that. I didn't stop to think that our livelihood — and he made more money during his stay in the Solomons than he did at any other time in his life — depended on sheer exploitation. I was pleased we had a plantation of our own that he had rescued from the oblivion of war damage and that we were living a proper tropical planter life rather than being town dwellers as we had been in Fiji and New Guinea.

Our plantation, ‘Aruilgo’, was on Gaudalcanal, facing the island of Savo across a stretch of water known as ‘Iron Bottom Sound’, where most of the fighting in World War II took place. ‘You may search the seven seas in vain,’ writes Samuel Morison in a history of US naval operations, ‘for an ocean graveyard with so
many ships and sailors as that body of water between Guadalcanal, Savo and Florida Islands.’

While in Fiji during the war, we read about this area in the newspaper. It was on these shores and in these hills that the Fijians performed their heroic deeds. It was on this patch of silvery sea where the sole survivor of an American warship, a twenty-year-old from Illinois, popped up like a champagne cork through the oil, bodies and debris of his torpedoed ship, later remarking ‘I sure was glad to see the stars again’.

One of the vessels that had been hit during a battle, a Japanese troop carrier, had made it to the beach in front of our house and towered there, orange with rust, an enormous hole in its side, half under water. You could enter it only from the hole. Gay and I would go out in our ‘put put’ — as weak-engined dinghies were called — to explore. The decks flaked under our feet, ladders came away in our hands, new holes opened up before our eyes, caverns with black water far below sometimes blocked our passage, but our curiosity overcame our caution. The huge pots for boiling rice were still there and hundreds of blue and white bowls were scattered over the decks.

Further up the beach there was a miniature submarine. It was so small only Gay could fit into it and I, now adult size, couldn’t. In the tops of the palms, bits of wood were nailed crosswise for the Japanese snipers to sit, hidden by the fronds. Shells — the brass casings of heavy ammunition — were lying everywhere. Planters’ wives polished these up and used them as umbrella stands and vases for hibiscus arrangements. One of them acted as a gong for calling the boys to work.

The swamps and rivers were full of discarded American material: motorbikes, ambulances, jeeps. Some of the islanders had a natural gift for mechanics. They fished out these vehicles, took their engines apart and fixed them with bits of cardboard, wire and string. We had a fine fleet to work the plantation and Gay learnt to drive an ambulance, sitting on my father’s knee.

During the war the Solomon Islanders weren’t enlisted as soldiers as the Fijians were, but, like the New Guinea natives,
were used as porters. A poem was written about them in the *Fiji Times & Herald: Fuzzy Wuzzy Angels:*

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Many a lad will see his mother
And husbands see their wives
Just because the fuzzy wuzzies
Carried them to save their lives.
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The Solomons were always seen as a wilder and more dangerous place than Fiji. They had malaria and crocodiles. Sometimes we went on crocodile-hunting parties at night, aiming our rifles at their eyes. They glowed in the light of our torches like rubies. While we lived in Fiji a crocodile was found in Suva’s Nabukalou Creek and a great fuss was made. A reptile expert said it couldn’t have strayed from the Solomons or New Guinea and pronounced it a Florida crocodile. The Americans again. It must have somehow boarded a troop ship and smuggled itself into Fiji.

Although the Solomons never replaced Fiji in my heart, I became more friendly with a Solomon Islander than I ever did with a Fijian. He was Fred, our ‘boss boy’, and he looked rather like Kai with the same straightforward appealing manner and kind humorous face. From him I learned about spells being cast that killed people, about sons knowing when their fathers were going to die and setting out to a far-off village to get there just in time. Fred himself dreamt our mill was burning down when we were miles away in the capital, Honiara. He came running to our hotel and woke up my father who told him to go back to bed. But when we got home we found the mill a blackened ruin.

Sometimes he talked of religion but he didn’t think much of it, saying he went to the Baha’i religious gatherings because they had the best cakes. The Solomon Islanders didn’t adopt Christianity wholesale as the Fijians did. The French Catholic Mission just up the coast seemed poverty-stricken compared with the thriving Wesleyans in Fiji. Father Morlaix, who would drop in for a drink on his way through our plantation, rode an ancient horse (one of the few on the island to escape the Japanese cookpot) and his long socks were so covered with a close webbing of darning that there was practically no actual sock left.
The mission provided Fred with girlfriends or ‘marys’ who he regularly ‘took into the scrub’. I don’t know if that was a Pidgin English expression or just Fred’s way of putting things.

Fred used Pidgin sparingly. But this mixture of swear words and baby talk introduced by the first traders and settlers, which was then enriched by the natives’ own imagination, can be a lively and evocative language. Cat’s tail becomes ‘grass belong arse belong pusscat’. The Lord’s Prayer loses its august resonance. ‘Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name’ takes on a rap rhythm: ‘Papa me belong topside. Speak good along him.’ A piano is explained as ‘black box, hit him in teeth, he cry’.

Kai, the Solomon Islander who took us on the white-water rafting trip some forty years later, had no Pidgin; his ancestors, blackbirded to Fiji, would have escaped it. But he not only looked like Fred, he had the same dry offhand way of speaking.

‘Raft,’ he said, jerking his head in the direction of the window behind me. I turned round and looked at the contents of the back of the truck. It wasn’t formless rubbish as I’d first thought. There was a big piece of blue rubber half hidden by some soaked cardboard and rags. Ah, yes. The raft.

On the open road Kai really hit the accelerator.
‘Does everybody in Fiji drive so fast?’ I asked.
‘Yes. Everybody drive fast.’
‘Are there any accidents?’
‘Plenty.’

We shot along the road, our wheels sending out fans of mud. There were people here and there, standing well back, selling piles of dalo, garlands of crabs, mysterious seeds and vegetables spread on mats. They gave us broad smiles and waved.

‘See that white cross,’ said Kai.
I turned my head to look at the rough wooden cross as it whipped by.
‘That’s a very bad accident,’
‘You mean a fatal one? People killed?’
‘Yes. Bad accident. People die.’
After that I saw a lot of white crosses. It was 40 kilometres from Suva to the mouth of the Navua River but we got there in no time. The river was full and fast from the rains and swirled around the bottom step of a wooden staircase that lead down to the water. Near it were tethered brightly coloured motorised canoes with yellow oilskins and lifejackets on the seats. There were several people waiting: young ones in Kai’s charge and older ones who we learnt were from a round-the-world cruise and had their own Fijian guide called Kim.

The cruise people were rather overdressed for the occasion: designer sportswear, designer sunglasses, unsuitable shoes. One Frenchwoman, with a cotton Lacoste cardigan slung elegantly round her shoulders and fine white kid shoes, seemed particularly ill-equipped for the jungle. The young people were more the wilderness ethnic adventure type: safari-style jackets with photographic equipment in the pockets, old shorts, chunky walking boots or scuffed trainers. They accepted us readily into their group and were impressed when they saw Kai loading the bundle of blue raft into our canoe.

We shared this with two New Zealand girls who were on a package stay at a resort and had chosen the outing as a way to while away the time during the bad weather. They didn’t fit in with either the safari people or the cruise group. But as far as I could see, all river trips converged on Kai.

The New Zealand girls’ holiday was nearly over. ‘I’m going to look a bit silly back at the office,’ said one of them, rolling up a yellow oilskin sleeve. ‘Look at that. Great tropical holiday.’ She stretched out a white arm.

They said they’d signed up for the village visit. How come we were going rafting?

The banks of the river were becoming higher and wilder. Kai sat in the back of the canoe at the tiller, whistling and looking at the scenery. Because of the rains there was a waterfall at every turn. Some fell from a great height, glassy as they came over big rocks, thunderously foamy as they hit the river. Others were mere threads of lacy spray glinting through the trees. There didn’t seem
to be much in the way of rapids, just a few shallows somewhat swifter than the rest.

When we reached the village we helped Kai unload our raft. The cruise people had already arrived, tied up their canoes and were standing waiting on the wet beach. The Frenchwoman with the Lacoste cardigan was tip-toeing around trying not to get her shoes dirty. The rest of the party wasn’t far behind, joking and laughing from canoe to canoe.

Kai and Kim gave some packets of powdered kava to a Fijian waiting on the bank. He didn’t seem very chiefly; quite young and wearing a striped rugby jersey. But he acted in a chiefly manner: accepting the kava graciously, conducting us up the steep bank and pointing out things of interest on the way. A bure under construction, he told us, was going to be a future village hall. It was the only bure in the place.

He led us proudly to some toilets in wooden huts: one for the women and one for the men. His pride was justified. Inside each rough hut was a sparkling clean flushing toilet with several rolls of toilet paper lined up on a cross-beam. He held open the door to the ladies as each one went in.

The village houses were on mounds climbing the hillside. There were frangipani trees awash with blooms, torrents of orchids, misty fern trees and, behind and above, a mauve blue mountain soaring up through shreds of cloud.

It reminded me of mountain holidays I’d had in Fiji as a child: the cataracts of greenery, the hush of altitude. The ‘in’ place to go was Nadurivatu Rest House, 820m above sea level. To reach it you took the rough King’s Road on the northern side of the island and came inland from there, climbing higher and higher, up above clouds which spread a billowy coverlet around the Rest House. Hidden parrots cried with an echoing sound as if from inside bathrooms. There was a log fire in the evenings and novel garments like scarves and pullovers — a British home away from home. People sat in groups on verandas sparkling with droplets of mist wearing riding habits, tennis clothes, golf gear, having tea or drinking cocktails.
Some stayed in isolated pairs. Honeymooners, my mother called them. I wasn’t quite sure what honeymooners were but I decided they had a kind of illness. They had to be left alone and went everywhere leaning on each other as if that was the only way they could keep upright.

The village Kai took us to wasn’t as high and cold as Nandurivatu, but it had that tingling altitude feeling. He showed us into a tin house: walls hung with tapa, floor covered with fresh mats, white curtains at the windows tied back to reveal the gauzy mountain view.

They lined us up cross-legged at the back of the room, obviously in preparation for a kava ceremony. But first Kim gave us a talk on Fijian politics. He spoke English fluently with an American accent and American gestures. ‘You guys have no idea how difficult it was for us Fijians after the coup.’ He said he admired Colonel Rabuka and the Fijians understood why he did what he did. ‘Our chiefs had to save the land for the Fijians.’

By that time Rabuka had become less of a defender of native land and was advocating a say for Indians but Kim didn’t seem to know about this. Or perhaps he knew but didn’t care. Rabuka was his hero and whatever he did was right.

Later coup leader Speight, who’d spent most of his life abroad, didn’t gain the same unqualified respect. Even Rabuka questioned his motives: ‘Speight says he wants to help the Fijians. Let him say that in Fijian’. Rabuka’s coups were bloodless whereas Speight’s soon led to bloodshed. When the local TV station called him a ‘two-day wonder’ and scorned his claims, his gunmen stormed into town, wrecked the station and shot a policeman four times in the back. During Rabuka’s coups the media was behind him, the radio his mouthpiece.

But smooth or messy, coups had the same result: economic slump, drop in tourism, unemployment. Kim seemed to want to impress these on his listeners. He approved of Rabuka’s actions but had suffered because of them. Things had been hard. For a long time he’d had no work and now he was paid half the amount he used to get. ‘Do you guys have any idea what I earn?’ He bitterly announced the amount in American dollars. Surely
he’s not angling for tips, I thought. Something Fijians are said never to do.

The young man in the rugby jersey sat down in front of us with a kava bowl. Kim gave a rapid run-down on the procedures of a kava ceremony which was followed by the brief ceremony itself. I knew from all the times I’d been present at the ritual on inter-island trips with my father and from the long description in the guidebook that this was about the most whirlwind version of the event you could ever hope to attend.

Nevertheless there was a tense silence when the Frenchwoman refused to drink from the coconut shell of dishwater-like liquid offered to her. In the long list of ways you could offend a Fijian, this was one of the worst. Even my mother, who hated kava and said it tasted like Phenol (a powerful germ-killing detergent that went white when you added water), always drank it. An embarrassed Kim hustled everybody out to a place where their lunch was waiting. Kai told Gay and me to stay in the house. White-water rafters had a different schedule to the others.

After a few minutes, some Fijian women appeared from a side door bearing plates heaped with food. They urged us to eat and didn’t take anything themselves even though there was an enormous amount for two people. But we knew why. It was the Fijian custom to treat guests in this way. On no account should one gobble up too much of it because later, back in the kitchen, the people serving us and maybe several unseen members of the family would eat what was left.

When we’d finished Kai appeared and led us down to the beach where we helped him unfold our raft and held it flat as he blew it up with a foot pump. Gay and I put on our life jackets but Kai didn’t bother with his.

We lay back in the raft and floated down in green deep silence. There was just the occasional trill of a bird, or gurgle of water over a rock or a log. Sometimes there was a mild rushing sound when we came to ‘rapids’ and we would be agreeably twirled around like a leaf swirling down a gutter.

‘You know I don’t really call this white-water rafting,’ Gay said in a lazy, unresentful way to Kai.
‘River too full,’ he explained. ‘When river down plenty white water.’

We certainly had the right weather for this trip, I thought. Gay was probably thinking the opposite, but she seemed happy enough.

After a while the silence was broken by the others passing us in the motorised canoes. They shouted friendly jeering remarks. ‘Some like it the hard way’ and similar comments. There was a light rain and most of them had on their oilskins, pointy hoods up, so they looked like a group of garden gnomes.

A couple of Fijians passed us on bilibilis — roughly made bamboo rafts they load up with produce and discard when they get to the river mouth. One of the excursions offered bilibili trips to tourists. I suppose if there had been any takers that day Kai would have been in charge of them as well.

Back in the truck Kai sloughed off his dreamy river silence and became chatty. ‘See those men in the cemetery,’ he said. ‘They’re prisoners. That’s all they do. Clean around the graves.’ He slowed down so we could look.

The prisoners leaned on their shovels and waved to us. They were all smoking. ‘Free cigarettes,’ Kai said enviously. The cemetery looked an almost merry place. Some of the graves had canopies like a fourposter bed, ribbons fluttered at the corners and the mounds were piled with bright belongings and offerings.

‘That’s all they do,’ said Kai again. ‘Clean the cemetery.’

He showed us the new jail: low buildings grouped around a compound in a valley overlooking the sea. And, right in town, the old jail. Devils’ Island-style. An ancient slit-windowed fort surrounded by a monolithic wall, green-slimy at the base and topped with rolls of rusty barbed wire.

‘The old jail too full,’ Kai explained. ‘So they build new jail. People like jail. Plenty food. Satellite television. Last week two men let out. They say we don’t wanna go. We wanna stay. Guard say you can’t stay. They punch the guard. Now they back in jail.’

Kai sighed as he nosed his truck into the narrow winding road that led upwards to the South Seas Private Hotel. The next day was our last in Suva.
We started our final tour of Suva with the markets, a feast of colour and sensations. Some of them sad: dead turtles, live crabs, birds crowded in crates. Some of them surprising: stalls piled with pirated video tapes, a mountain of kava root as high as a house, bags of spices as brilliant as paint. It was clear people weren’t here just to stock up on food but to prowl around, to hang out, to meet friends, to taste delicacies on the spot, to drink kava at long tables. Nearby was the Nabukalou Creek where fishing boats tied up to deliver their catch to the fish stalls. The creek ran beside Cumming Street and under a bridge where it joined Waimanu Road. It was here that I stood on August 15, 1947 and watched history march by. I duly recorded it in my diary: ‘It’s “India's independence day” today. Daddy took me to the butcher’s and when we were a few chains from home down came the procession. They went yhay ya yahying past us and we just had to stop daddy had to get out of the car and walk home with the meat while I watched the procession. It was fun!’ How lightly and mockingly I describe the beginning of the end of the British Empire.

After crossing the creek Gay and I followed Victoria Parade along the storefront to the other side of town where the Grand Pacific Hotel stood abandoned and boarded up. We’d heard it was going to be renovated as government offices. Its days as the most luxurious hotel in the South Pacific were over. Still majestic but a ghost. It was difficult to imagine the lively
glamorous place it once was. Built in 1914 by the Union Steamship Company, its design recalled an ocean liner. The bedrooms opened on one side on to wide deck-like verandas looking over the parade or the sea and, on the other, on to balconies overlooking the foyer and lounges. Even though there were few tourists in the Forties it was always full of guests: planters from other islands on business trips, military top brass and planters’ widows — like the one who told us the stories about the cannibals — agreeably whiling away their remaining days. Balls and parties were constantly held there. At night it was always lit up, velvet curtains knotted back, music playing, couples revolving in windows like figures on a magic lantern screen.

After the ghostly Grand Pacific Hotel, Victoria Parade became Queen Elizabeth Drive and swept past the hill topped with Government House, looking much the same as in colonial times. It had the same immaculate lawns, the same gatehouse with a guard in a magnificent red, white and blue uniform, the same fresh cream paint on its pillars and curlicues. But something hideous had been added: a black satellite dish that obstructed an entire side of the building.

We followed Queen Elizabeth Drive half-way round the peninsula to its tip: Suva Point. Now deserted, it was once an animated ‘beauty spot’.

‘The Point’ everyone used to call it. They flocked there for evening strolls and Sunday drives. Although I enjoyed the ritual of these family outings to Suva Point, I could never quite understand its attraction. It was stony and bleak with a lighthouse and a wide dark-streaked beach. A long rope of surf on the horizon marked a ship-hungry reef. From it protruded the small black tooth of a wreck and the humps of Nukulau and its twin island Makuluva.

Maybe it reminded the English of England with its far-away tides and flat wet sands. Or perhaps people liked it because things happened there: groups of dolphins arched in balletic leaps, seabirds plummeted for fish, sometimes a whale surfaced and blew a plume of water through a hole in its back. Yachts racing from Suva to Nukulau swooped and skimmed. Once we saw a water-
spout: a marine tornado. The whirling funnel-shaped cloud veered and spiralled, tapering up from a patch of churning water, widening towards the mass of storm clouds above. It seemed to suck up the sea into the sky. My father told me this was just an impression; the water inside a water spout was fresh. The tornado was corkscrewing down into the sea, not upwards. ‘Matchsticks,’ he said. ‘A boat caught in that would be matchsticks.’

But mostly people came to Suva Point because it was the ‘in’ place to be. They came to see others or to be seen. It was like the evening and weekend ‘passegiata’ in a Latin country: everyone in dressy clothes sauntering up and down in pairs or groups, laughing and talking loudly, looking over their shoulders to see who was watching and who was interesting to watch.

Soldiers strolled arm-in-arm with girls whose flirty skirts twitched around ochre-painted knees. Major Willoughby Tottenham with his swagger stick under his arm squired Mrs Willoughby Tottenham with her ear trumpet under hers. Bruce Southwick walked by the side of Maureen Southwick, leaning his hand on the delicate nape of her neck bared by the Suva Point wind. Most of my schoolmates and their parents were there. Some of the bigger boys broke away and formed their own group, fanning out on to the windswept rocks and dun-coloured sand to collect flotsam, fly kites and have fights. But mostly we stayed in family cliques. Parents stopped to talk to other parents while the children eyed each other and kicked the grit with their pinchy shoes.

Over the years of promenading at ‘The Point’ our family evolved. At first there was just my father and mother with me, quaint and squeaky voiced, ambling between them. Then came the ‘perambulator’, pushed by either my mother or me (men never pushed prams in those days), with Gay sitting up inside it like a miniature monarch surveying the populace from her carriage. Later she took her first steps, helped along by the three of us. These gradually developed into an early chubby-legged version of her strumpet strut. We were then a complete sauntering family.

My most vivid memory of Suva Point was a hurtful one. Why are the sharpest memories always the most painful? Happy
memories stay with you, of course, but they swim around in the back of your mind, a warm sensual blur. Painful ones crouch there ready to spring up cut-glass clear, every word remembered, every gesture etched on the brain.

We were walking behind a soldier and his girl. She had a tiny waist and her hair in a ‘snood’: a net bag that sometimes enveloped the lower part of a Forties female hairdo. It was worn as protection from the wind or as decoration for the evening and its trim varied according to the occasion — sequins for night and ribbon for day. Hers had a blue bow and through the holes of the net her pale gold curls sprung free here and there. She turned her head restlessly. More locks escaped and jostled on her neck. Every now and again she would look back over her shoulder. My father craned his gaze out to sea but darted little looks to meet hers. My mother slowed her pace. We had to hang back and let the distance increase between us and the couple in front. The girl jumped up on to a half-buried piece of sea wall where she balanced as if on a tight rope, the breeze whipping at her skirt, one hand resting on the shoulder of the soldier, the other held out, something balled in her fist. The wall came to an end and she jumped off. She and her soldier quickened their step and merged with the other strollers.

My father bent down and picked something up. Small and white. A crumpled-up handkerchief. ‘That young lady dropped this,’ he said.

My mother gave a quick sidelong look at it and then gazed aloofly ahead.

‘I should go after her,’ my father said, giving a couple of timid laughs. ‘I’ll say: “Hey Miss. You left something behind.”’ He waved the handkerchief.

My mother kept looking ahead with a twisted little smile. ‘Do that would you? Like to see it. She’d just think: silly old fool.’

Her words hurt me like fiery rapiers. I looked at my father with his faltering grin. Old? A fool? Usually she went on about how clever he was: a barefoot self-taught boy from the dusty goldmining town of Kalgoorlie, who studied accountancy by
correspondence and came top of the state in the exams. ‘A clever man like your father,’ she was always saying. So why did she call him a fool? And a silly old fool at that?

In a way I knew why. That is, now I know. Then I would have sensed it, understood enough to soon forgive her hurtful words and know that my father would, too. He and I were protective of her and knew why sometimes she lashed out with cruelty. It was through fear. Terror of loss. She was afraid of losing my father as she’d lost so many before him.

My mother’s memories are almost as clear in my mind as my own. Perhaps this is because she talked to me so much. She was always telling me tales of her past, usually the same ones, going over them again and again, polishing, embellishing. Beads of memory. A necklace she hung round my neck for me to keep.

Some of the beads were more like heavy stones. Her thirty-year-old German father dropped dead at the table when she was three. I wove a picture in my mind’s eye and it stayed with me as if it were real. The long table with the immigrant family — four children and an Irish wife — him slumping forward, his Hanoverian nautical cap falling from his head, his fair hair stirring with his last breath.

Then she lost her mother. Not through death but through abandonment. Penniless after her husband died, my grandmother became a maid on a country estate and put her children into a convent run by sadistic nuns. When my mother had a sore foot they put a big boot on it to make it hurt more. I saw this poor toddler with the heavy boot, limping and lonely, the nuns around her with crooked fingers and scary eyes like the witch in Snow White.

Her beloved brother, Hermann, when he was seventeen, went off to fight in World War I. ‘France isn’t bad,’ he wrote in his last letter home. The next day he was killed at Ypres. We had a photo of him as a soldier, standing straight and strong. My imagination used it to lie him dead in a French meadow, his drab uniform heavy in the grass, his rifle by his side, his limbs, so newly formed, so fresh and perfect, buckled and limp.
A few years later my mother lost her brother-in-law. His death gave me the most vivid image of all. Drunken and violent husband of Peggy, the oldest child, he came after her when she fled from their farm to a hotel in town, ‘Open this door Peg,’ he pleaded outside her locked room. ‘or I’ll blow my brains out.’ I saw the scene as clearly as if I’d lived it: the country pub with the drinkers carousing below, the open gallery with the hotel rooms leading off it, Peggy, her hands at her mouth, looking down at her husband’s shattered head.

Then came the happy memories. The pretty beads, light and sparkling. My nice-looking, highly salaried father: a story-book prince courting my mother. Her society wedding. Newspaper cuttings. A wistful face under a veil low on the forehead, white-stockinged legs, a short waistless dress: a creation from Paris — crêpe de chine encrusted with moonlight sequins. A caption under one of the photos read: ‘The bride was like the doll on top of a Christmas tree that everybody wanted but nobody else could have.’

Gay and I played ‘brides’ with the wedding dress for years. The moonlight sequins weren’t really like moonlight, more rainbow or mother-of-pearl, changing colour as you turned them this way and that. Then the dress began to perish. Sequins and bits of cloth fell away until there was only a small yellowed and dimmed piece left. Then that, too, was lost. But not in my mind. The doll on top of the Christmas tree stayed glittering there for ever.

Then the memory necklace became ugly again. My mother lost her son. A loss that dragged on for nine years. But here her memories and mine become one. I’m not sure where mine begin and hers finish. He died when I was nearly four but my mother always said I was much younger. It was as if she didn’t want me to have my own memories. ‘But anyway dear — it wouldn’t have been nice for you to grow up with a brother like that.’ A brother like that. Geoffrey. The doctor had crushed his head at birth with a pair of iron forceps. Yet his head seemed perfect. He smiled when he was happy, laughed at jokes and funny films. But did I remember his smiles and laughter or did
my mother fashion this memory for me? Or was it only from photos? There were snapshots of him over the years, always held on laps, always with an intelligent smile. The same smile is in the last one — an expensive hand-painted studio portrait with yellow added to the hair and blue to the eyes — taken just before his death. Nothing seems wrong, except he’s a big boy of nine and he’s sitting in a pushchair. As well as the photos there was a ‘Baby Book’ with a baby floating in a bed of roses on the iridescent cover. At first quite a lot is written inside it: the names of the people at baby’s christening, the presents he received, the date of baby’s first tooth. Then there is baby’s first word — blank. Baby’s first step — blank. The rest of the baby book is empty.

After his death come memories I know are mine — of my mother crying. But I wasn’t really there. Just looking. Holding back. Do I want to be part of all this? My mother was still in bits. I’d see her small white hands shake, her pretty mouth tremble, then twist. I’d shrink back in dread from the tears. These were memories I didn’t want to see repeated. Nothing must make her cry.

Maybe my father felt the same. That was why he looked on indulgently while she flirted with other men but didn’t complain when she swatted him down at the slightest urge to stray.

Perhaps the reason he was smiling with such relief in the photo on the deck of the Goonawarra is because he was leaving the brutal, gaping rent in our family behind and taking us across the waves, our faces to the wind, to a new life in a magic land. Fiji. It’s not surprising it was here I found my place in the universe — part of this proud family parading at Suva Point. When Gay came we were healed and whole: mother and father and two healthy, chattering, striding children. Look everyone. Here are the Thomsetts, such a normal happy devoted family, out for their evening stroll. Nothing should endanger them. Even a small, crumpled handkerchief.

Suva Point was the spot from where you saw the island of Nukulau best — better than from Suva Harbour or any other places along the coast. I would peer at it hard to try to make out its buildings or individual trees.
Nukulau featured a lot in conversation. Not only was it a social place — for picnics, outings, boat races — but it had a history. Back in the mid-nineteenth century it was the home of a wily rascal, John Brown Williams, US Consul, who continually found ways to make money for himself in the name of America. When his house on Nukulau was burnt down by a cannon being misfired during Fourth of July celebrations, he blamed the Fijians for the damage and the looting of the wreckage. Setting a wildly high sum for compensation, he held Cakobau, as ‘Tui Viti’ (King of Fiji), personally responsible for payment. During his fourteen-year stay he dogged Cakobau with claim after claim, backing each one with a menacing visit from an American warship. Finally, a captain threatened to carry Cakobau off to America if he didn’t sign a document recognising the debt. He signed. This became one of the main reasons for seeking British colonisation. They could have Fiji if they paid off the money he owed.

Williams wasn’t the only rascal around. Beachcombers and settlers from the four corners of the Earth were greedily buying up land — sometimes from owners who weren’t even aware they’d sold it — and ‘punishing’ any Fijians who stood in their way. Like similar whites in the US, New Zealand and Australia, they felt killing the natives was part of clearing the land. Mary Wallis writes of beachcombers going on shore to ‘shoot savages as though they were so many monkeys’.

It was also to save Fiji from men like these that Cakobau ceded his country to Britain, whose Queen, he felt, would ensure justice and order. ‘If matters remain as they are,’ he said, ‘Fiji will become like a piece of driftwood on the sea and be picked up by the first passerby. The whites who have come to Fiji are a bad lot … Of one thing I am assured, that if we do not cede Fiji, the white stalkers on the beach, the cormorants, will open their maws and swallow us.’

Soon after cession came the indenture of the Indians and Nukulau was used as a quarantine station for the new arrivals, where they ‘were herded like pigs’ and ‘given rice that was full of worms’.
The buildings were still standing when I lived in Fiji, but only just. Some of them had fallen down and the others were ramshackle, occasionally used for Scout camps and by Johnny Pender for his boys’ sailing club. For a while in the war the Americans took them over as storehouses and the Fiji Times & Herald complained as usual: ‘now that we have lost Nukulau, where will the stressed Suvasiders find relaxation?’ They seemed to relax there anyway: ‘Recently a young lady who went swimming at Nukulau had her panties, scanties, stolen.’

In 2000 Nukulau was used as a prison for Speight. Photos in the papers showed him smiling through the bars, giving his supporters a wave. He seemed happier in prison than he was in the full flush of the coup and strangely relaxed for someone awaiting trial for treason, punishable by death.

It was on Nukulau that I had the best holiday of my life. Why my mother let me go there I could never figure out. The war was still on and it was no longer considered a holiday place. My mother, who didn’t even want me to play with half-castes not far from my backyard, in this case let me go away with a family of them and their Fijian relatives to a deserted island for two whole weeks.

Perhaps she was worn out from looking after a sick baby. There had been a dengue fever epidemic in Suva and Gay had come down with it. Often children don’t survive the disease and my parents were stricken with worry. I was also paralysed with terror to see this smily chubby little person grow thin and raw with fever, eyes blank with delirium.

Later, in the Solomons, I caught dengue and malaria and although malaria is the more feared, dengue is a more horrifying experience. With dengue you feel so bad you want to die, whereas with malaria, although the fever is higher and the rigors (uncontrollable convulsive shivers) more violent, no sooner do you reach the I must-be-dying stage than the fever ebbs away, leaves you quite perky, and stays in abeyance for two days until the parasite releases another wave of toxins into your blood.

In Fiji they were proud there was no malaria. The coming and going of troops between Fiji and the Solomons was seen as...
a danger. Malaria-carrying mosquitoes could be lurking in their packs or clothing. We were told to be vigilant. On the walls of the school and the post office were posters of the anopheles mosquito illustrating its unique habit of flinging its back legs in the air as it sucked your blood. If you see one, the posters said, report it immediately.

Gay recovered from the dengue and started to smile, sit up and eat again but my mother stayed distraught. Perhaps she only heard the invitation to Nukulau — from Maureen Bentley, a schoolfriend of mine — with half an ear. She’d just come out of a wrestle with death. What was a touch of the tar brush compared with that? So she let me go. I couldn’t believe my luck.

We were taken over by open launch and left there. The island was wild and empty except for a demented Indian and his herd of goats. The house we stayed in was abandoned and open to the elements, its timbers washed and polished by the weather. There were no doors, windows or furniture. We slept on mats on the floor and ate with our fingers and I helped find and prepare the food.

Fishing started at dawn with all of us fanning out over the lagoon in dugouts, hauling in crabs, lobsters, reef fish. At low tide we dragged our heels through the sand to disclose and capture tiny shellfish — ‘pipis’ and ‘kies’. I wore the same sunsuit for two weeks, swimming in it and letting the sun dry it on me like Fijians did with their clothes. Maureen and I explored the island completely, every sandy cove, every rocky islet, every cranny of every banyan tree. We caught brilliant little fish in our hands and kept them in a rock pool, giving them names and visiting them every day. We also adopted some of the goats but kept clear of the goatherder who we feared with his matted hair, scabbed legs and one milky eye that rolled in his head independently of the other. In the middle of the island was a dead tree we claimed as our ‘house’, its smooth branches and roots became seats, beds, archways.

But it was the nights that left the most cherished memories. First the driftwood fire and guitar music on the beach: the fish wrapped in leaves and cooked in the embers, the crab
meat mixed with coconut milk, curry powder and ginger. We’d lick the leaves and suck our fingers. Then we’d go on to the veranda for ghost story time. Gentle Bernard told the most flesh-creeping ones. His ghosts were everywhere. They took many forms, half-animal half-man, headless warriors, walking skeletons. They breathed on his neck with their animal breath, brushed his cheek with their bird wings, crossed his path in the night, waited for him behind doors in empty houses. His ghosts were sometimes not even dead. A friend or a relative from a far village would come and sit by him at night and fill him in with what was going on there. Like Fred in the Solomons, he was in touch with a universal consciousness that spread above and around him like a tangible web. I feared his tales but enjoyed this feeling that we were all joined and immortal, animals and people, the dead, the living, the godly and the ungodly.

While we listened to his stories we ate tamarinds, the black sticky insides of pods that hung in sheaves from the tamarind trees. Their unbelievable sourness gave us perverse relish, like Bernard’s stories. The moonlight made a cracked path across the water. Two low red stars bobbed above the reef where Mr and Mrs Bentley gathered eels.

The two weeks seemed like two years. When I returned and came up the garden path in my salt-stiff sunsuit, with my straw hair and bag of shells, collection of crab backs and pebbles with rainbow whorls, I had this strange fear that everyone would have changed beyond recognition. It wasn’t quite like that, but nearly. My mother had a new perm and a red neck. Gay had completely recovered and ran towards me, bright-eyed, pink-cheeked, her arms flung wide for a hug. She jumped up on to me, her soft face on mine and my love for her hurt like a stitch in the side.
THE MOST BEAUTIFUL ISLAND OF ALL

The trip to Taveuni was the start of the most eagerly awaited part of our holiday — island hopping. Although Suva was a cherished place full of memories, Fiji wasn’t just Suva. Fiji was hundreds of islands.

Several times a year my father and I sailed off to various island groups. We both loved the sea and ships but were bad sailors and suffered agonising bouts of seasickness.

‘I was sick as sick as sick,’ goes a diary entry. ‘It was terrible! I was sick 6 times. I’ve never been so sick before except on the “Matua” when I was sick 11 times. Well I had no lunch and no tea. I went to sleep after the sixth sick.’

My mother, although she had the stomach of a hardened mariner, hated boats, waves, sand, ocean. She tried to avoid sea trips as much as possible, whereas my father and I leapt at every opportunity. W.R. Carpenter’s had a fleet of ancient little vessels for visiting their plantations and collecting copra from villages and private planters. My father went along whenever he could. Ostensibly he was representing the company and keeping an eye on things but in fact he welcomed any excuse to set sail somewhere and any opportunity to get away from Tui Johnson. I always knew when we were going on another trip because of the special excited grin he wore when he came home from work. He couldn’t wait to see my delight.
Fiji was a wonderful archipelago to sail through. Officially there are 320 islands but some say that if you counted every river islet, every tuft of greenery protruding from a reef, there would be at least a thousand. You can’t sail for more than a few hours without sighting one, sometimes several. Some would be groups of palms with a curl of surf nearby, others conical mountains rising sheer from the sea, still others had a range of scenery: saw-tooth crests, fleecy slopes, palm-studded coast. Nearly all had creamy beaches and lagoons of liquid sapphire. Island smells drifted out on the land breeze: vanilla, nutmeg, frangipani. Some islands we’d be stopping at, others not. But all were enticing. Their secrets would unfold as we approached them: the bays, coves and cliffs define themselves, the water change colour, the villages appear, the people spill out and grow and grow as they waited for us.

There would always be children to play with, a baby to cuddle, an old person with a strange story to recount. Once we even saw a shark caller, up to his neck in water, calling the sharks. They are said to come led by a white shark whose life is spared while all the others are killed and eaten. Sometimes we’d happen on a feast, a wedding or some other celebration and be honoured guests.

The children were always cheerful — not moody and picking fights like my schoolmates. A Forties study of Deuba, a typical Fijian village, mentions the untrammelled happiness of Fijian children: ‘We have never seen a parent thrash a child, and have rarely seen a child in tears. Nor do older children noticeably bully the younger … Parents are indulgent and dislike seeing their children miserable. When not in the gardens they are generally playing in the water … they go where they will and return when they please. The result of all this is to produce a physique that is probably not rivalled by the young of any race, and a personality distinguished by its constant cheerfulness and a refreshing freedom from inhibition.’ No wonder I appreciated them as playmates.

In those days villages were an extension of the surrounding vegetation. The trunks of the coconut palms were used for corner posts and roof beams, the husk from the nuts was made into
sinnet rope for lashing the beams and posts together, the fronds became thatch and woven walls.

The hardwood dilo tree was used for making the craft that lay on the sand or bobbed in the water. There were dugouts — a single hollowed trunk — for lagoons and rivers. There were outriggers — a dugout with a stabiliser joined to it by poles — for the open sea. They were all sizes. Some of the outriggers could take several people and had thatched houses on board. Some of the dugouts were so small they could take only a child. Children had no fear of the water and quite tiny ones could be seen boating around a lagoon on their own. Often they would paddle out to meet us, circling our shabby schooner and looking up at it admiringly.

I also revered the boats we travelled on, however aged and rusty. When I saw one waiting for us at the wharf in Suva, her rattling and shuddering would thrill through me. I relished the thick paint, the polished brass, the knobs and bolts, the wheelhouse with its instruments, the caulked decks, the doll’s house cabin, the way the bilge sloshed and trembled in the scuppers as we pushed away from the wharf.

Once out to sea, the clamour of the engines distorted people’s voices and the wind whipped off syllables. I’d lie on a top bunk, watching wave reflections dancing in speeding ribbons across the ceiling and listening to my father and the captain talking sea talk outside my window, their words unintelligible: a comforting murmur taking me across the water on a new adventure.

I saw each trip as a story.

‘Dear diary,

Daddy and I left at about 9.30. We got on to the Komowai, Carpenter’s ship (It’s only small) and we were ushered into a jolly little cabin with two bunks and rubber mattresses and white sheets. In the corner was the funniest flat cupboard with brass hooks inside it.

Soon the boat started and we slowly went outside the reef. It got rough so we went up on to the top deck. It’s nice and fresh up there and there’s a place where the Fijian steers and two soft couches and a door leading into the captain’s cabin. The captain is a brownly-
faced fattish man with crinkly hair and tiny feet. The engineer has skinny legs, clompy shoes and cheekbones like wings. I felt a bit sick but not very.’ First the setting: the exciting new domain, the ship. Then the supporting cast: the crew, who would lead the story and its heroine from landfall to landfall.

On this trip the first stop was the village of Naroi on Moala, the largest of a group of three islands that closed off the southern end of the Fiji archipelago.

‘I woke up this morning with a steady feeling. We were there!!’ I lengthily and ecstatically describe the different shades of the lagoon.

‘I jumped out of bed, got dressed and woke daddy. After breakfast we got on the Komowai’s launch (I forgot to say that Komowai means Spirit of the Deep) I sat on the bows with my legs dangling over the side and we scimmed slowly through the water towing the dingys behind us. It was delightful sitting on the end of the boat with my toes in the cool water.

We waded ashore and we were ushered into a very coconut oily bure (boory). When they had finished loading copra onto the dinghys we were ushered out again.

Coming back we went over the reef and as the water was crystal clear I could see little blue fish with gold fins (I call them Cleos. Cleo was the fish in Pinochio) coloured coral, anemones and patches of silver sand.

When we got on board again Tetoka was there. Tetoka is Johnson’s house boy and his Koro (village) is at Matuku. Tetoka was out here for a holiday and he’s coming back to Suva on the Komowai.’

Tetoka must have gone to Moala to meet the boat so that he could guide it safely into his village harbour. This was often done in Fiji because of its killer reefs. Nearly all the islands had their share and nobody knew them better than the locals.

I continue with my account of sailing from village to village and illustrate my visit to Matuku with a painting of Tetoka at the bow of the boat, pointing out his home to me. There’s another of Fijians on the beach, bowed under the weight
of the copra bags, loading them into dinghies, the two-masted Komawai in the distance.

‘Dear Diary,

At about ten o’clock this morning Tetoka called me and said “Bedzy. Bedzy. My peeleech. My peeleech.” It had mangrove swamp sort of coming out of it like a “V”. It had a nice hill at the back and lots of well-thatched bures and wavy olive palms. No wonder he was proud of his home.

We went onto the island soon after that and into a large round bure which housed all of Tetoka’s relations. One of Tetoka’s newest relations was a lovely little chubby newborn baby with tight black curls all over his head and smelling of pleasant coconut oil. It was so nice and cuddly to hold.

There were some dear little girls and a few tiny boys, who took me outside and said “sisili! sisili nawai” which meant bath. I was rather puzzled but followed where they led me to a green brown bathing pool edged with ferns and coconut palms with a few scraggy little fowls running around it. One of them jumped in and said “lukumai. sa rana venaka” which meant “very nice come here”. But I smiled and said “sangi” which meant “no”. I played with them for a while giving them piggy backs. When we were going they gave me some wees, some guavas and a sweet smelling lei and gave daddy some yams and a chicken. Then off we went to the launch with me thinking what a friendly village it had been.’

But I had turned up my nose at their bathing hole. Once I wouldn’t have hesitated to join them. All the villages had one. If there wasn’t a natural pond or stream, a catchment for rainwater was dug, or usually two — one for each sex. A dip in the sea was for fun or for fishing but washing had to be done in fresh water with a thorough latherly soaping. Then the story comes to a close.

‘Dear Diary,

Today we went to another village. It was in the afternoon. It was a lovely day. All the trip has been lovely, aren’t I lucky? When we got there the copra wasn’t bagged so we had to wait till they bagged it. Tetoka climbed a tree and got half a dozen green coconuts which are nicer than dry ones because they are much juicier and sweeter. It was
growing darker and a multi-coloured sunset was sinking below the far turquoise horizon and still the copra wasn’t bagged. We hadn’t finished until the moon had taken place of the sun. We got in the launch and off we went. I sat near the engine and watched the goldy silver fosforus spring out of the black waves. We at last got to the ship and I snuggled down into my swaying bed and curled up under the bed clothes. We’ll be home tomorrow and school the next day aack!’

But long before my schooldays I went on an even more memorable trip — to Taveuni. And long before we went there we heard people talking about it. The pearl of Fiji. ‘Ah. Taveuni,’ they would say, nodding their heads in a way that made me envious. To them had been revealed the brightest coral, the lushest forests, the highest waterfalls, the rarest birds, the most exotic flowers. Some had even seen the legendary tagimoucia flower, the emblem of Fiji. Delicate and blood-red stemmed, it grew on the banks and islets of Lake Tagimoucia, hidden high in the island’s mountain spine.

Taveuni also had the richest soil and therefore the finest plantations. The wealthiest planters in Fiji lived in this area, the north-eastern part of the islands. Their land had been procured with a few beads and muskets before British rule and some families over the generations bought out smaller planters and amassed huge estates. They built themselves mansions, raced horses, sailed yachts, threw parties, sent their children to school in Europe. Some brought wives from their homeland but others married Fijian women. There are probably more people of mixed race in this region than any other.

When we lived in Fiji two of these families had almost mythical status: the Hennings of Naituba and the Tartes of Taveuni. The Tartes’ plantation took up the whole of the southern end of the island, Vuna Point. Although the Hennings’ main feifdom was at Naituba, an island not far away, they also had plantations on Taveuni.

In Fiji and the Solomon Islands ‘plantation’ always meant copra: the dried flesh of the coconut, used for making soap. The one we had in the Solomons was a rather sorry version; it had
been buffeted and decimated by war and climbed crookedly over hills and around rocky patches. A typical plantation was one grown with planned precision on a rich coastal plain from nuts selected to make uniform tall straight trees, each a mirror image of the others.

Our visits to the copra barons were social rather than business calls. W.R. Carpenter’s couldn’t have dealt with such large-scale production, it would probably have been handled by a washing powder giant like Lever Brothers. My memories of Naituba are sparse. Gus Hennings, the patriarch, sitting in a bamboo chair, his legs planted apart, his big red hand around a glass. Animals. Sugar-pink baby pigs, yellow-toothed horses, peacocks trailing the baroque splendour of their tails over the grass.

Later Naituba meant mangoes. Every few months Gus sent us a case of them. Not the usual kind with tough skin and a big hairy seed — although we found those delicious enough — but outsize peach mangoes with skin that peeled off like a glove and fragrant flesh around a smooth seed. They arrived in a white wood crate, secured with nails that squeaked as my father clawed it open with the back of a hammer. Inside, the three layers of fruit were carefully arranged, each mango wrapped in tissue paper and separated from the others with wads of straw. Through the frosty paper their sunset-red skin glowed.

Even if there hadn’t been the mangoes it would have been difficult to forget the Hennings. They were always in the news. Hennings giving money for the war effort, Hennings taking the Catalina, Hennings arriving from abroad, Christmas greetings from Elizabeth and Sophie Hennings on ‘Calling the Islands’, a radio program. Hennings following glamorous careers in Europe. ‘Once upon a time a young girl got tired of minding coconuts in the Fiji Islands and sailed for England with her sister Beau.’ There she found a job as wardrobe supervisor for the film *Great Expectations*.

We also visited Hennings on Taveuni. I remember a mansion on a hill and a swim at a high waterfall. On the same visit we stayed at the Tartes’, where I played with their little boy.
Daryl. Later I sent him a thank you letter: Master Daryl Tarte, Vuna Point, Taveuni. Their plantation was the most impressive I’d ever seen. It seemed to draw me forward, further and further into its hushed vastness, until I could walk no longer and stood there small and still. The perfectly straight, soaring palms went on and on, immaculate row after immaculate row. The sunlight fell in white shafts through their tops, in gold bars on their trunks: a green carpeted cathedral with a palm frond vault repeating itself to infinity.

Daryl Tarte grew up to publish a raunchy saga in 1988 based on four generations of his English pioneer family in Taveuni: ‘A dynasty exalted on one side by great wealth and political success and debased on the other by murder, lust and rape.’ He called it simply Fiji, maybe inspired by James Mitchener’s blockbuster Hawaii. His earliest ancestor arrived in Taveuni in 1860. ‘My God,’ he exclaims on his first approach to the island, ‘I never imagined it would be so magnificent.’

In spite of its beauty Taveuni wasn’t my favourite island. It was too big. For me a perfect island didn’t have roads and vehicles. It had to be one you could walk or paddle around, one where you could stand on a rise in the middle and be completely surrounded by the melting blue of sea and sky.

Patterson Brothers, who my father and I had sailed with to Taveuni, was still in existence fifty years later, probably the oldest shipping company in Fiji. The original Patterson was a beachcomber who almost lost his life when he laughed at a chief who, while ridding his head of lice in the traditional way of grinding them to death between his teeth, nearly choked on one that managed to escape down his throat. The furious, half-choked chief made a swipe at Patterson with his war club but he ducked and managed to escape. Patterson’s trip to Taveuni was no longer direct, which left us with a choice between two ferries: the Adi Savusavu which sailed at night, and The Spirit of Free Enterprise, which made a morning departure. We preferred the morning. It was a long trip — a day and a night’s sail: thirteen hours to Savusavu, a couple of hours there for unloading and then another
five hours to Taveuni. The shipping companies were in the old part of town. Mainly concerned with the day-to-day business of moving locals around, they didn’t bother with flashy premises, colourful brochures, inviting posters. The approach was always up a narrow wooden staircase with what seemed like excess cargo — bulging hemp bags, crates and drums — stacked on it. Then a dingy corridor with closed doors on either side, cluttered with tin filing cabinets and empty water coolers. Finally the office — when you’d found the one you wanted by reading faded little labels on the doors — piled with ledgers and bunches of dockets on metal spikes, the light filtering through the slats of the weather-eaten wooden louvres on the veranda outside.

‘Ah. Taveuni,’ said the woman who sold us our tickets in the gloom. ‘Beautiful Taveuni.’

The morning we were to leave the sky was livid, the rain ferocious, the palms across the road from the South Seas Hotel thrashed in the wind.

‘Perhaps the ferry won’t go,’ I said half hopefully, half anxiously to Gay as we were sitting having breakfast in the kitchen.

‘Oh no. They always go,’ butted in the Englishman who’d made love to the two Japanese girls on the Greyhound bus. He’d been chatting up an Australian girl in sawn-off jeans and an ‘I forgot to have children’ T-shirt who was cooking bacon and eggs. ‘I’m going tonight on the Adi Savusavu.’ His voice cracked with excitement.

Was he excited at the thought of joining his girlfriend in Savusavu? Or perhaps he was happily anticipating all the friends he was going to have: more and more friends to make up for those fifty near-friendless years in England.

One always stopped at Savusavu on the way to Taveuni, but I had only a vague memory of the town: a scattering of weatherboard houses around a richly foliaged bay. It was famous for its hot springs. In the Forties a little girl fell into one and was boiled to death. To check how she died they tested the water with a frog. It survived 20 seconds.
Tania stood with us as we waited for the taxi, looking through the glass louvres at the dervish palms and the slate-grey sea. Even the usually calm bay was ruffled with white-tipped waves. She shook her head with worry. ‘Bad, Bad.’

At the wharf we hauled on our straining umbrellas as the rain wooshed under them. The puddles were nearly ankle-deep. Plenty of vessels were in dock, small and large, mostly shabby. There was cargo everywhere, swaying above our heads, stacked in piles around us, some of it alive — crates of hens, a cow going up in a sling. The dock workers didn’t seem to mind the rain, letting it soak their clothes and lap around their bare feet. Shining and dripping, they directed us to *The Spirit of Free Enterprise*.

Very different to the cosy vessels I’d been on with my father, which shook like friendly puppies as I approached their berths, it was a towering black-mawed Ro-ro ship similar to the ones I’d crossed the English Channel on many times, putting me in mind not of myself as a child but rather of my own children vomiting in the icy fog. Foot passengers didn’t have a gangway but entered the vessel through the cavernous back entrance with the cars and trucks. The ship’s ticket office was a plank set across two drums at the mouth of the vessel where they checked our tickets and stamped the inside of our forearms with ‘First Class’ in purple ink.

All the notices on the walls were written in a language that looked like Swedish or Norwegian. So it hadn’t plied the English Channel in a former life but fiords and polar straits. First class was high up on the vessel, airy and encouraging. But it had a strange seating arrangement. The original chairs had been removed and replaced with luxury aeroplane seats which stood marooned in the middle of the vast carpeted room. Gay and I tried them but found them mysteriously uncomfortable. They had buttons to press to make them into recliners but these didn’t work and they stayed rigid on their metal stumps. We decided to do what some of the other passengers were doing — to use the rubber mattresses being given out by our Fijian stewardess and sit on the floor.
The Spirit of Free Enterprise was beginning to feel homely with our mattresses side by side and our belongings arranged on them — backpacks, books, my seasick pills, Gay’s walkman and Fijian music cassettes.

There weren’t many passengers. A couple of businessmen in tailored sulus and pens clipped in their breast pockets sat in the aeroplane seats and spread their knees with files. Also sitting there was an Indian mother with a gaudy bundle that was possibly a baby, two small boys and a dainty girl wearing bangles and a fluorescent ribbon in her topnot. A lanky part-European man restlessly wandered round the room pausing now and again at a window to look out at the heaving sea. A group of Fijian women with baskets of food and belongings had installed themselves on a mattress nest not far from ours.

It was now well past departure time and nothing seemed to be happening. The children had left their seats and were running round and round the room playing a riotous game that made the little girl squeal and her bow come loose and fall over one ear.

We joined the man pacing from window to window.

‘Hello,’ he said. ‘My name’s Hennings. Looks bad out there, doesn’t it?’

‘Hennings!’ I said. ‘Are you related to Gus?’

‘Yes. Indirectly,’ he told us Naituba had been sold to the television star, Raymond Burr, in the Sixties and was now owned by an American company. ‘But there are still Hennings on Taveuni.’

He worked at the Qamea Beach Club, one of the luxury resorts off the coast, and had a small farm. ‘There’s no money in copra now you know,’ he shrugged.

The three of us went out on deck to see what was happening. Shouts and clanking of chains came from the hold and an occasional vehicle lumbered across the ramp. Several people on the dock were standing round the back of our boat and looking at it in a puzzled way as if they were wondering if it was going to leave or not.

‘If I’m late for work,’ said Mr Hennings, ‘I’ll be in a fix.’
Two hours went by. We learnt a whole lot more about Mr Hennings and he learnt a lot about us. His desperation gradually changed to resignation.

At last the vessel gave a shudder and came to trembling rattling life. The ramp was pulled up and juddering white scum churned up between us and the wharf. Then a bang. A squealing rasp. A violent jerk sideways. We’d hit something! It was the *Adi Savusavu* tied up beside us waiting for its night journey. Lots of scuffling and running around, flying ropes, shouts, even giggles. Then complicated manoeuvres so the boat could reposition itself and curve round the *Adi Savusavu* and finally, after about an hour, leave the wharf.

Once outside the harbour the noise of the engines was drowned by the sound of waves smashing against the hull. They rose up in foam-flecked black walls. The spray and the rain came in blinding sheets. We hurried back inside, taking lunging steps to left and to right as if we were doing a dance routine.

To celebrate the ship’s departure the stewardess had made some coffee — terribly weak and tasting of Marmite. Mr Hennings gave us some biscuits to mask the taste.

The children had calmed down and had flopped across the seats, leaning where they could on various parts of their mother. The bundle, which was now opened up and proved definitely to be a baby, was installed on the floor on a pillow between two suitcases. One of the Fijian women near us was trying to be discreet as she transferred her breakfast into a plastic bucket. A woman was stroking her back while another held her forehead. I was all right as I’d taken two seasick pills but was beginning to feel drowsy.

After a couple of hours we realised we weren’t moving. That is, we were moving all right, but not advancing. The ship was rolling about in one spot. The communications system from the bridge to the car deck had outlets in the first class lounge. ‘Captain to Car Deck. Captain to car deck. Car deck to Captain. Car deck to Captain’, it kept booming. In between these appeals there were orders we couldn’t understand.
The stewardess went to see the captain. After a long time she came back. ‘We’re going back to Suva,’ she announced.

People repeated her words with varying degrees of disbelief and indignation. She told us gently that one of the trucks on the car deck had broken free of its chains and was careering around crashing into the other vehicles. There was no way it could be secured in these high seas. We’d have to go back into the shelter of the bay. So we did a wide, wobbling U-turn and steamed back towards the harbour.

Inside the bay we were met by a tug with a cargo lashing expert on board. After an hour or so of crackling loudspeaker messages and clanks and bumps from the car deck the tug chugged off with the expert and the seasick passenger. She’d decided she’d had quite enough of the trip already. As I watched the squat black tug head through the rain for the town I wondered for a second if perhaps she was very wise. But only for a second. I was delighted when we hit the high seas again.

It was getting dark. The stewardess fed us with chicken broth and rice and handed around clean soft pillows. Some people were already asleep and one of the businessmen was snoring loudly.

During the night Gay and I reversed roles. She was the coward and I was the brave one, although she insists she was being a realist and I was in a drugged foolhardy state because of the seasick pills. There had been panicky messages between the captain and the car deck all night.

‘I hardly slept a wink,’ she said the next morning. ‘I thought we’d go to the bottom any minute. Like that other Spirit of Free Enterprise. You remember what happened to it.’

‘The one in Rotterdam?’ Water had got in through the stern door and it had turned over and sunk before even leaving the harbour. Nearly everyone drowned. ‘I didn’t think of that.’

‘Well I thought of nothing else.’

‘I had a lovely night. Slept like a baby.’

My sleep wasn’t completely unbroken. I did wake from time to time, but in a dreamy contented way. The ocean rocked
me like a cradle. I felt myself advancing, a pin point in the night, across the Koro Sea through the middle of the islands, with them clustered around me in the circle that was Fiji. The mother Viti Levu, the father Vanua Levu and all the little ones that closed me in, protected me. The black void was still out there. Even coming closer — with the passing of the years I felt time was speeding up so much the planet was trying to spin me off into space. But the sheltering islands robbed it of its power, made it benign. They embraced time and slowed it down. They made me feel that no harm could come to me. Ever.

We reached Savusavu at dawn, ten hours late, with Taveuni still nearly a day away.
In Taveuni we stayed with Margaret Petersen — a part-European descendant of an old planter family — in her small wooden house on the northern tip of the island, an area known as Matei. A wide beaming face with hair in greying puffs over each ear gave her the look of a benevolent koala. She wore bedspread-size Mother Hubbards and greeted us with softly enveloping hugs. She reaped in people and animals: stray dogs (mostly females, because they were the ones people didn’t want), cats, children, even her daughter, Brenda, people said she had adopted. The same devotion went into her cooking.

Every morning we woke up to the scrape, scrape, scrape of Margaret making the lolo for the day’s meals. Sounds of childhood. Her lolo scraper was like the ones Sala and Pauline had used: a board with a handle ending in a piece of spiked metal held over a bowl. Half a ripe coconut was brought down repeatedly on the spikes until the bowl was filled with snowy curls which were then squeezed through fingers into a thick milky liquid.
Lolo had nothing to do with real ‘coconut juice’ — a clear, lightly fizzy treat for thirst found in green, transparently fleshed nuts that had to be picked from the tree. Children were usually sent up to fetch them, levering themselves up the palms with their skinny grasshopper legs. Ripe nuts were always collected from the ground.

After the scraping of the lolo Margaret started using it in the day’s cooking. First came our oven-hot breakfast rolls which we often ate in the kitchen.

Fiji kitchens. As a child, they were my favourite room in the house. The biggest, the most lively. As well as the activity of the ‘girl’ and her friends, there were always people coming to the back door selling fruit, sugar cane sticks or vakalolo: a pudding of mashed kasava, dalo and breadfruit, soaked in a sauce of caramelised lolo and rolled in coconut shreds.

Margaret’s kitchen was even bigger and more full of life. The walls went half-way up and then continued as wire-netting. Green light filtered through the foliage outside. All around the room were cupboards, bench tops and tables, giving ample work surfaces. Hens and dogs wandered in and out. Cats slumbered in corners. Children were everywhere, gentle, quiet, no bother. Some would be perched at a table doing homework — others huddled in a corner playing a tranquil game, others silently and smilingly watched the cooking. There were two or three stoves, often going at once, boiling and baking.

This early-morning cooking was for the preparation of roti parcels: Indian pancakes wrapped around a curry and lolo filling of vegetables, raisins and nuts. When they were finished, Margaret put them into cloth-lined baskets and took them to her airport snack bar where eager buyers were already waiting. Sometimes they’d be all gone by lunch-time when we came by, but she’d rustle up some other magnificent snack on her gas camp-stove.

The airport, an open-sided building with palm trunk poles holding up a peaked roof, was Taveuni’s social club. People went there whether they had a plane to catch or not. The main attraction was Margaret’s snack bar. Behind her on a shelf were round jars filled with livid Indian sweets, hunks of toffee, bubble gum
balls, liquorice straps, boiled lollies, sherbert rolls, sachets of curried seeds. As she cooked she was interrupted by little children with a few cents asking for things. She’d get down a jar, feel around for just the one tiny item they wanted, help them with the change, all with total good humour.

Opposite Margaret’s smoke- and steam-filled, lolly-lined kiosk, across a central area crowded with people sitting eating on the rough-hewn benches or wandering around, was Dolores’s counter, neat and office-like. Dolores was ground staff for Sunflower and Fiji Air. She also sold tickets, took bookings, weighed luggage. She’d just come back from working in Sydney, wore smart city clothes and said she was finding it hard to settle down again in Taveuni.

‘Missing the bright lights?’ I asked her.

‘Ah the bright lights,’ she smiled dreamily. ‘King’s Cross, Darling Harbour. All that.’

I had raved about those same city lights when we went back to Sydney in 1948. ‘We immersed into the gorgeous, gorgeous town. It was all sparkling and dazzling and shining and glittering with gold, crimson, turquoise, green, purple, yellow, blue and scarlet globe lights and tube lights. It was so beautiful. beautiful! beee-yoo-ti-ful!’

But my rapture soon evaporated and I started yearning for Fiji, a longing that went on for years. It was most acute in adolescence when the bewildering rush of sensuality and the aching for love intensified its loss. The caress of its balmy tropical air, its luscious colours, its warm-hearted people haunted me, obsessed me. I talked about it all the time to whoever would listen. A schoolfriend got tired of my babble and turned on me fiercely: ‘I’m sick of hearing about those niggers.’ So I went on about it in my diary instead. Everything was better there than in Australia. Even school seemed idyllic.

When I was fifteen my mother asked me if I’d like to go back to Suva. My father might be getting a new job there. I went wild with joy.

‘Oh yes, yes, YES!’ I said, bouncing up and down with every word and clapping my hands. Delicious waves of pure sweet giddy
rapture submerged me and soaked into me and dripped off me. “Oh yes. I love Fiji. I can’t believe it. Oh we MUST.”"

My mother warned me not to build castles in the air because the higher you built them the harder they crashed. And they crashed.

‘It’s all for your own good, dear.’ They’d decided against accepting the job because it was no place for a budding young woman like me. (Although this didn’t stop them from going to New Guinea and the Solomons — even more savage and tropical.) I was devastated. ‘I’m terribly and terrifically miserable. I just walked out of the house and died of sorrow and I’m still dead.’

It was unlikely that the cool efficient Dolores would have ever felt such hysterical regret. But I wanted to tell her that her love of the bright lights could have worn off. If she’d stayed in Sydney longer she would surely have started to miss Fiji.

Margaret worked at the airport until late afternoon and then came home to prepare our sumptuous evening meal. Everything she touched was transformed into a gourmet dish. We had fish and meat for dinner with fingers of fried dalo and bowls of salads, seafood starters and cooked desserts. The meat was usually pork or chicken, the skin gleaming and crackling with grilled marinade. The fish lay on a bed of leaves, plump, fresh and moist.

*Lolo* featured in most dishes. It was used in a delicate curry sauce for prawns, crab or lobster. Vegetables were simmered in it and dark dalo leaves lost their bitterness in its flavour. It was mixed with wild lemon or lime juice to make salad dressing.

The greatest triumph of *lolo* cooking was Palusami. It turned that regrettable European import, Spam (tinned bright-pink compacted meat-shreds), which had spread through the Pacific Islands and often replaced a healthy fish-based diet completely, into an exotic and tasty dish. Spam, tomatoes, onion and *lolo* were wrapped in tender leaves from banana shoots and baked. Delicious. Gay and I ordered it whenever we saw it on a menu. Margaret made an especially mouth-watering version.

We weren’t Margaret’s only guests. There was Eddie, the morosely handsome flight controller. He spent his days sitting in
the flight control tower at the airport and his nights drinking kava. He was always extolling the virtues of kava, or *yaqona* as it’s sometimes called.

‘With kava, you have no problem,’ Eddie would say. ‘Wives like their husbands to drink kava. Makes them nice, quiet, gentle. A Fijian on rum, even beer — a bad, bad man. Those rugby men in Hong Kong. When they won the Sevens. No kava. Only alcohol. Tore up the town.’

We’d already heard how the rugby men had gone crazy in Hong Kong. It was a legend.

‘Another thing about kava,’ Eddie said. ‘No hangover. I drink kava. In the morning I’m fine. Ready for work. Fresh.’

I wasn’t so sure about that. His room was next to ours with a basin just outside the door. Some mornings I’d see him hyping himself up for work by throwing cold water over his head accompanied by groans and determined splutters.

But there was a lot to be said for kava compared with some stimulants. In the Solomons, for instance, they made a much stronger brew from the stems of palm flowers. Bottles or gourds nestled high in the top of a palm, filling slowly with the sap from the flower stems which would then distil and ferment in the sun. The resulting liquid made men wild. But they didn’t drink much of it. Probably because making it was so lengthy and tedious.

What they were all hooked on was betel-nut. This turned teeth red and, in some of the heavy users, rotted them away completely. When I went with Gay — then a child of about nine or ten — on boat trips round the islands, she’d play cards with the crew and join them in betel-nut chewing. She’d balance the leaf that held the lime powder on her sunburnt knobbly knee, expertly taking a pinch of the lime with a bite of the nut. It was supposed to have a hallucinatory effect but it never did anything to Gay.

The other guest at Margaret’s was John from Queensland. He wasn’t a fixture like Eddie but was going to be there for a while as he was building a holiday house for a friend. Queenslanders are famed for their skills at tropical home building.
John loved his trade. ‘Wow, the wood here’s good stuff. Beautiful.’ ‘If only I could do the whole job without nails. Pegs and dowelling is what I like.’ ‘Fijians know what it’s all about. Do they let the rain stop ’em? Not a bit of it. That’s when they really get going. Don’t down tools like our lot. They love the rain.’

One day he took us to see the half-finished house beside the sea. He ran his finger along the grain of the wood to show us how fine it was and pointed out the immaculate fit of the floorboards. ‘She’s a beauty,’ he said.

Next door was a grand old plantation house on the edge of the beach overlooking the lagoon, its galvanised roof moulded into curves and points, wooden fretwork decorating its verandas. ‘We used to live in that house,’ Margaret told us later. ‘When my husband died I had to move to this one. I used to love looking at the sea.’

But she didn’t say it wistfully. She was never wistful, or gloomy or resentful. Always serene. She was such a relaxing presence presiding at her food-laden table you almost felt like curling up on her lap.

Before beginning our meal each evening, John, Eddie, Gay and I would bow our heads while Margaret said grace. She not only thanked God for our food but for the lovely day he’d given us. I used to think this applied to us but hardly to her; all she’d done was work until her bad leg hurt so much she limped. She even went to the airport on a Sunday and she never had a break from her guests. But she seemed the happiest of us all.

Every evening she had some anecdote to tell about the airport; who had gone away, who had arrived. One of the arrivals was a rugby man from the Sevens tournament fame, a native of Taveuni.

‘You should have seen the airport,’ said Margaret. ‘Crowds waiting for hours. All my food sold out. And when he arrived, what a commotion!’ Her shoulders shook with laughter. ‘Everybody wanted to touch him. A woman tried to kiss him and she nearly dropped her baby. Didn’t even notice it dangling down from under her arm.’ She laughed and laughed, her gammy leg up on a stool.
On the top of her dresser were piled letters and photos from previous guests. The young ones called her Aunty Margaret and passed her address around among their friends.

She was so renowned for her cooking that some guests staying at luxury resorts came to her just for meals. Even Martina Navratalova, the tennis player, had been there, her favourite dish being Margaret’s breadfruit salad.

But one thing was missing from her marvellous meals: fruit. Hard-hit by the cyclone, Taveuni, ‘the garden island of Fiji’, had all its fruit ripped off. We’d been shown photos of the gale. Seaside terraces were wretched craft amid furious waves. The main street was flooded. Palm trees were bent back like catapults, their fronds streaming.

It was a tradition in the islands to have pawpaw for breakfast and Margaret was always apologising for not having any for us. Then one morning she came in smiling from the kitchen, nudging her nephew in front of her. His hands were held before him, carefully cupped around a small, perfectly ripe pawpaw.

‘The only one in the garden’ said Margaret, ‘and he wants you to have it.’

I was fond of her nephew. He had a solemn forehead, doe eyes, a smile like a seraph and was always talking about school. He left a textbook on a window sill and I leafed through it. It was a primary reader, yellow with age and stained with the dribblings and playtime snack greases of generations of children. It told the tale of a European boy and girl, in clothes already out of date when I was born, who lived in a cottage on a European farm. The text was nearly obliterated by age-old scribblings. Our English friend who’d settled in Savusavu was right — they certainly needed schoolbooks in Fiji.

Yet schoolchildren and a preoccupation with school were everywhere. The adults all seemed to be making sacrifices so that relatives from remote villages could be educated. The buses were always full of schoolchildren with dilapidated satchels on their slight shoulders. Margaret said she sent her charges to the Indian school. Indian teachers were better. Fijians had a slight intellectual
cringe when it came to Indians. Rabuka excused his coup by saying they shouldn’t have the land just because they had ‘a little bit more brains’. A Fijian woman politician and academic said in the *New York Times* it was impossible to compete with a race that had thousands of years of civilisation. ‘When the first Indians arrived in Fiji in 1879, my grandparents were just ten years from eating each other.’

The Fijians love of education, however, wasn’t just due to competition with the Indians. It was there long before they arrived. In the early nineteenth century, whenever missionaries opened up a school in a village, people flocked there — children, adults, even the aged. Unlike Tongans and Tahitians, who were quick to embrace Christian ideology but were unenthusiastic about the reading and writing offered along with it, the Fijians were initially reluctant about the religion but eager for the learning. Cakobau, when still a man-eating renegade jeering at the Methodists’ prayers, proudly took Mary Wallis to see the school in Bau with its rows of industrious scholars.

The bus stop, where we saw the schoolchildren spilling out and climbing into the buses, was outside the only shop in Matei. A wild west shack with a vast tin awning, it was known as the ‘Supermarket’ and was also a post office and a chemist. Indian clothes and Hawaiian shirts hung from the rafters like flattened parrots. Boxes of tapa and tins of food were stacked here and there.

The most fascinating part was the chemist section in the back. Pure Forties. All those awful ‘opening medicines’: Eno’s Fruit Salts, Carter’s Little Liver Pills, Milk of Magnesia, and that abomination, castor oil.

Europeans in colonial Fiji had a fetish for laxatives. It was as if they wanted to be pure white inside as well as outside. ‘Your father,’ my mother said on one of the rare occasions she criticised him to me, ‘is only interested in food. Going in. And coming out.’

Advertisements for purges in the *Fiji Times* appeared daily and unfolded like mini horror serials. ‘Don’t feel drab, gloomy. Are you jolly bad tempered? Make everyone miserable? Your digestive wastes are accumulating and your system is absorbing them.’
There was always a catchy title: ‘So fat her husband was ashamed.’ ‘Too fat for her uniform.’ ‘She couldn’t bend.’ ‘Greasy and pimpley.’ ‘Slack. Always tired.’ Then followed a text with sinister ‘retained fermenting food wastes’, ‘clogged organs’, poisons in the system.

Laxatives were even a patriotic necessity. ‘She keeps smiling on the home front. From waking up in the morning, heavy headed and sour, this woman has experienced a miraculous change.’

Castor oil didn’t need advertisements. It was an accepted part of life like flour or salt. Everyone had a bottle somewhere. Evil stuff. Deep yellow, heavy and viscous, it flushed you out with irresistible violence. My father saw it as a cure not only for constipation, but for bad moods, tiredness, aches and pains, even disobedience. ‘What you’re going to get, my girl, is a good dose of castor oil.’

This use of castor oil as punishment went on after Fiji, even when I was seventeen in the Solomon Islands. By then my father had changed towards me. The easy-going companion of my childhood was gone. He couldn’t handle teenagers. To be a parent of a female teenager in those days involved daunting responsibility. It was like sitting on a powder keg. She had to be steered away from trouble, kept in mint condition for a good marriage but at the same time encouraged to allure. Too shy to talk about such things with me, he took refuge in suspicion. This was conveyed with the slightest of oblique comments, but they hurt. Why couldn’t he see he could trust me? Didn’t he realise how idealistic I was, that I embraced the virgin bride ballyhoo, that I was frightened of sex anyway?

Gay, still a child and less complicated, was now his clear favourite. She was his tomboy helpmate, went everywhere with him on the plantation and was also useful as a check on my dangerous urges.

‘Can I go out with Ken, Daddy?’ (He was a nineteen-year-old stockman from a neighbouring plantation.)

‘Yes. As long as you take Gay with you.’
‘She’s not coming again is she?’ Ken would say, glaring at a defiant scabby-kneed Gay with her fishing gear. He had a beautiful body but a droopy face. I wasn’t in love with him but pretended I was because I wanted so much to live a love story. He wore mirror sunglasses and everything rolled up: his shirt sleeves rolled up to his shoulders, his shorts rolled up to the tops of his thighs. One day Gay swung her fishing line and hooked him in the ear. To calm him down I said I’d try to get rid of her. I somehow persuaded her to go back home and Ken and I stayed out alone until nightfall.

When I got back, a furious mother was waiting for me. ‘Your father’s been pacing up and down like a caged lion. Drink this.’ It was the heftiest dose of castor oil I’d ever swallowed and left me limp as a rag. Now I think that maybe they felt it might even have had abortive properties. Perhaps it wasn’t just a punishment. But it was the last dose. Castor oil suddenly seemed to go out of fashion.

Not in Taveuni. In 1997 it was still stocked in the supermarket. Surely the quaint old companies that made these laxatives had long since gone out of business? Perhaps they were part of a huge supply some planter had put by and then donated to the shop.

In the store I consulted the bus timetables. I was hoping to track down another painful memory. It happened on the Hennings’ plantation when my father and I were bathing in a waterfall. Margaret had told me some Hennings were still working part of an old property on the other side of the island near a tourist attraction called the Bouma Falls. I felt that had to be it.
We went to the Bouma Falls with Bill and Charlie, down-market tourists like us. Bill was a young American from Los Angeles who came to Fiji for a holiday because ‘if you fly straight westwards from Los Angeles it’s the first place you hit’. Charlie was a small grizzled Scotsman probably about seventy with a sprightly gait and a wicked eye. Since his retirement he’d made a hobby of travelling the world and parking himself with relatives. ‘Hello. I’m Charlie. Your long-lost uncle!’ He had relations in the Far East, Canada, South Africa, New Zealand but not in Fiji, so he was staying in backpacker places. ‘Never go anywhere without my whisky and my porridge.’ He tapped his thigh to show he had a hip flask but there was no sign of the porridge.

There were other passengers waiting at the ‘supermarket’ stop: several schoolchildren and an old man sitting on the post bag.

It was the usual Fiji bus: battered and rattling, with open sides and hard seats, but this time there was no rain and the tarpaulins were well rolled up so as you went along you felt part of the glorious countryside. The road had been badly damaged by the cyclone but this didn’t worry the driver. Chunks of missing road, deep pools of mud, rocks, fallen trees, were all the same to him. He flew across them, splashed into them, skidded around them and kept on going. Fast. I soon got used to it, felt safe in his hands and gave in to the joy of the wind in my hair, the sun browning my arm and the lush scenery flying by. Also, nobody
else seemed to be worrying. The other people were happily joggling around admiring the view or talking to their fellow passengers.

We passed several coconut plantations, their crooked trees hung with vines, their perfectly planted lines broken with invading saplings, the carpeted cathedral gone for ever. Here and there were small tin driers — a bit of pipe to hold the fire, a copra rack above it and a piece of galvanised iron for a roof. These showed where Fijian families worked a corner of an old plantation.

Margaret had told me about this reduced copra farming, widespread in Taveuni. She did the same thing herself. ‘See that little foal,’ she pointed to a baby horse outside her window, swinging its head delicately over the grass between its widespread front legs. ‘She helps me get the nuts.’ She explained how she worked her strip of old plantation with the foal and her mother. Bags were slung over their backs to collect the fallen nuts, which were then husked, the meat gouged out and laid in pieces in the sun to dry. In wet weather they were smoke-dried in a small tin shed like the ones we saw along the bus route. Copra ships still did the rounds and everyone got a few dollars for their half-dozen or so bags.

The Bouma Falls area had been made into a national park with croton-edged walking tracks, thatched shelters for picnickers and a reception bure with posters of waterfalls on sale. The steep track up to the falls had steps, hand rails and lookout spots with benches. The main fall was the first one we came to. Its pool was wide and deep. On its banks were changing cabins made from boughs and a rustic barbecue. All the light was concentrated in the sleek blade of the waterfall that flashed down from a pinnacle jutting out of a high black rock face.

Was this where it happened? There was the same deep swimming hole, spectacular cascade, flat stone for jumping off, ancient tree behind it. But there was no rope. Still, this could have rotted away years ago.

Swimming in a mountain stream was a special treat for my father and me. Usually we swam in the sea where the temperature
of liquid and air was the same. You went from warmth to warmth. The fresh water that sprang from the cool peaks had a bracing effect, making children jump and squeal and adults fool around in a childish way.

The rope was tied to a tree branch so you could grab it, walk back along the bank, climb on to the flat rock, swing out over the water and land in the middle of the pool. We took turns.

I was so eager for my turn I flopped in, swam ashore, squirmed up the bank and stood skinny and shivering beside my father, still adjusting himself on the rope.

‘Look at you,’ he said. ‘You’re cold. You’d better go and put something on. Your teeth are chattering.’

‘No. No. Only my teeth are cold.’ Not for anything would I get dressed and end the game.

The idea was, I’d catch the empty rope as it swayed back after my father had swooped off to the middle of the pool. This time he swung out, his knees drawn up, reached the middle of the pool and missed the split second drop-off. His face was turned towards me and the first warning sign I had was his look of fear. Then the rope was coming back, with great speed and with him still on it.

I cowered against the tree growing behind the rock. My eyes didn’t leave my father’s face. His look of fear changed to one of surprise. Then disbelief. Then fury. He slammed into me with steely muscles and wiry leg hairs. The knobbly bark of the tree cut into my back as my small bony body was squashed into it. His elbow hit my temple as he grabbed a branch to stop himself from falling back into the shallow rocky part of the pool. His toenail scraped my foot as he groped for purchase on our launching pad.

His furious face was close to mine, male and leathery. ‘Why didn’t you MOVE?’

With Gay, Charlie and Bill, I inspected the main Bouma Fall. This must have been where twelve stone of muscly man came crashing into my childish frame. I imagined my father swinging like Tarzan across the bright sword of water.
Charlie sat on the flat stone and watched the rest of us swim, or rather gambol, around the fall, gasping and puffing out water. Tingling and pleased with ourselves after the dip we pushed on up the hill, Charlie leading the way. There were two smaller waterfalls and a lookout over what seemed to be a deserted plantation. Far below you could see broccoli trees and tiny star heads of palms, broken and misted with creepers and other vegetation.

At the very top of the hill was a ruined house. It was so thoroughly ruined there wasn’t much more than the foundations left but from the size of these you could see it had once been grand. I wondered whether this was where the original owner of the plantation had lived, perched on top of the mountainside threaded with falls, to look over his domain with the hundreds of workers toiling below.

We were now on the eastern side of the island, the opposite side to Matei. Past the plantation was the sea and the blue mounds of Qamea, Matagi and Laucala. I thought of all the millionaires there sipping their cocktails from hollowed-out pineapples and coconuts. Perhaps Mr Hennings from The Spirit of Free Enterprise was serving one of them.

The water around the islands had a dark taffeta shimmer which showed the presence of reefs. This area was a paradise for divers. The favourite spots were tantalisingly named: Rainbow Reef, the Golden Dream, the Great White Wall, Blue Ribbon Eel Reef, Yellow Grotto, the Pinnacle. I admired the divers with their complicated equipment and their passion for their hobby and envied them the wonders they would see. I’d read that the greatest of underwater experiences was night diving when the coral bloomed to feed off micro-organisms and its colours were at their most brilliant. Also there was that tropical marvel — phosphorescence. Any prow cutting the night sea would send up these silent fireworks. Just a toe or a finger trailed from a dinghy would turn the black water into a fizzing silvery streak. But this was nothing compared with its fabled wonders under the ocean. Fish with crowns, manes and moustaches of it would swim.
around you. It sparkled along your limbs as you moved. It illuminated caverns and grottos. But I knew that it wasn’t for me, especially night diving. Snorkelling was adventurous enough.

The three luxury resort islands were owned by Americans because an enraged King Cakobau had banished the original islanders for supporting the Tongan Ma’afu, his rival at war. He then sold off their islands to whoever wanted them.

Ma’afu was almost as illustrious as Cakobau. He was a step ahead of him in that he’d been a Christian all his life, had never been a cannibal and had more sophisticated ways of fighting and governing. He took over the whole of the Lau Group, the island chain that hemmed Fiji in from the east. His kingdom had more smoothly working structures than Cakobau’s and many chiefs admired him. But they were also jealous and suspicious. When the question of cession came up and unity was needed, most of them decided to stand behind ‘that old savage’, as Ma’afu called Cakobau, even though many considered him a deadly enemy. But it was probably a case of preferring the devil you knew to the one you didn’t.

Ma’afu didn’t manage to conquer Taveuni. He was beaten in a canoe battle off the beach at Waiyevo, where we’d landed from The Spirit of Free Enterprise. He fled and most of his warriors were cooked in ground ovens and eaten with breadfruit.

Taveuni was equally resistant to Christianity. When many western chiefs had converted and Cakobau was toying with the idea, Taveuni kings were vigorously opposing it.

Mary Wallis writes of the terrifying experience of Dr Lyth, doctor by profession and missionary by zeal. Summoned by the king of Taveuni to treat him for an illness, Dr Lyth, after prescribing some medicines, began to talk about religion. ‘The king at once became furious, and seizing the doctor by the skirt of his coat, held him fast while he called for someone to bring him a club. The queen rushed between them, telling the doctor to run. He made his escape, leaving the skirt of his coat in the king’s hand, fully expecting to be followed and murdered.’ But the king simmered down and later returned the coat tail with his apologies.
This monarch succumbed to his illness and his son Tuilili, who, in spite of his lilting feminine name, was even more scary and erratic, took over. ‘He is one of the greatest cannibals of Fiji,’ Mary Wallis wrote. ‘His licentiousness is of the very lowest order.’ She describes a scene with the missionaries Lyth and Williams. Tuilili didn’t agree with something they said so he picked them up, one in each hand, and threatened to bash them together like cymbals. ‘Both are small men and he almost a giant.’

Later, at tea time, he calmed down and even became affectionate. He thrust his share of bread and bananas into their mouths and gave them warpaint-besmeared hugs. But in spite of his occasional loving ways Tuilili soon made life impossible for the missionaries in Taveuni and they had to withdraw.

Cakobau and Tuilili helped in each other’s wars. ‘On Monday Thakombau arrived with a fleet of sixty-six large double canoes and sixteen single ones.’ These were the famous *druas* or war canoes — mighty feats of marine architecture with planks so carefully caulked and lashed together that from the outside the hull appeared to be a single piece. They could carry more than a hundred men and sail vast distances. The swiftest was the *Ra Marama* built in Taveuni as a present for Cakobau. A replica now takes tourists on visits to Nukulau and it also gave its name to the old government yacht we’d chosen for our cruise. Mary Wallis describes the festivities after the arrival of Cakobau and his men: the great feast with heaps of turtles, mountains of taro, fences of kava, the procession headed by Tuilili and his sons ‘waving their fans on high, and kicking up a great dust with their trains of sixty yards in length’ followed by a host of heavily armed warriors. Tuilili presented Cakobau with a hundred whale teeth and ‘the multitude dispersed with yells and shouts and firing of muskets’.

The missionaries couldn’t have stayed away from Taveuni for long because their presence was just as marked there as anywhere else in Fiji. Little white wooden churches snuggled among the trees and at Waiyevo an old Catholic Mission on a hill was famed for its choir. Everyone flocked to hear it on Sunday — locals and tourists alike. It was one of the attractions we missed...
out on, as we did on the spot where the International Date Line passes through the islands — so you can stand with one foot in today and the other in tomorrow — and the old Tarte plantation at Vuna Point. Run by family descendants, coconuts replaced by vanilla and cocoa, it is now a tropical guest ranch with horse riding, cattle mustering, fruit bat watching and trekking.

Apart from our trip to Bouma Falls we didn’t leave Matei. There we had all we needed: beautiful beaches, forest walks, friendly people, Margaret’s social club at the airport. The Coconut Grove Café.

At first, I avoided this because of its guidebook description as ‘the home of Ronna Goldstein and her well-mannered Doberman, Gracy’. I didn’t like the idea of the Doberman, well-mannered or not. But I was so attracted by her ‘best fresh fruit shakes on Taveuni’, I braved Gracy, who turned out to be so mild and affectionate she was almost soppy. The fruit shakes were not only the best but probably the only ones on Taveuni. We sipped them sitting on her terrace cradled in the tops of palms leaning over the beach. From here we had a sweeping view of the lagoon and its three small islands filing one after the other towards the horizon. Only the last one had a name: Honeymoon Island. This we planned to visit because we couldn’t come to Fiji without doing a spot of canoeing.

Further to the right was a bigger island rising from the sea in a perfect cone. Here an American was planning his piece of paradise. The top of the cone was going to be shaved off for a place to perch his house. It seemed it was going to be palatial, because he had already built his boatshed on the mainland opposite the island and it alone was as big as a hotel.

Ronna had a well-worn sexy look and wore her hair scraped on to the top of her head in a streaky blonde bunch. She had an ecstatic way of speaking. ‘Oh you’re sisters! How wonderful!’ On her low table were photo albums for visitors to flip through. The photos were mainly of Ronna at Taveuni parties in sundresses and stiletto-heeled strippy sandals with frangipanis in her hair bunch and smiling people around her holding glasses in the air.
We went to Ronna’s for a fruit shake nearly every afternoon. She ran her little guest house with panache, organising Indian Nights, Lovo (ground oven) Nights, even a Full Moon Night where people were invited to picnic in canoes on the quicksilver water. Food was served with tropical touches: home-baked banana bread in flower-decked baskets, fruit shakes in long glass tankards pierced with pineapple crescents, peanuts in varnished half-coconut shells.

The only time we missed out on Ronna’s was the day we went on our canoeing expedition. We hired canoes and snorkelling gear at The Dolphins, run by Scott, an American, and his wife Lalita, a young Indian woman with a perfect oval face and prettily shaped arms full of bangles. ‘That lagoon is huge,’ she told us. ‘At low tide you can walk for miles. Look. You can hardly see the edge of the reef.’ She pointed at a white snaking thread almost on the horizon. ‘Scott goes surfing out there.’


‘Oh. It’s dangerous all right. But Scott knows what he’s doing.’ Her eyes ran lovingly over Scott who was out of ear-shot rummaging around in boxes at the end of the room. ‘You know he’s nearly fifty. He doesn’t look it does he?’

I had no difficulty in agreeing. Tall, fair and Germanic-looking, Scott, in his brief bathing trunks, had a magnificent body.

He came over to us loaded up with snorkelling gear: flippers, life jackets, reef shoes, goggles, snorkels. Except for the reef shoes I disliked such equipment; goggles pulled at your hair, flippers hobbled you, lifejackets tended to flap up in front of your face and stop you seeing anything, the ping pong ball in the end of the snorkel didn’t work. It was supposed to form a stopper when under the water and be light enough to let air in when out, but the only time I’d used one it worked the other way round. Stuck in when it was out of the water. Popped out when it was under. In both cases I couldn’t breathe.

After we were fitted out, Scott took us to a map table in the middle of the room. ‘Here’s how you have to navigate,’ he
said. ‘You skirt the first island here, then you keep in the lee here, then you cross here, then you take this passage here, then you anchor the boats here. DON’T drag them across the coral. Then you drift across here for the best snorkelling.’

The snorkelling part was marked with lines of little crosses. I wondered how deep the water was.

‘There’s a terrible wind today,’ Scott said as we stepped outside. ‘If you feel you’re not going to make it, just bring the boats back and there’ll be no charge.’

I felt I should be nervous but wasn’t. The wind had blown the rain clouds away and sunshine was pouring over us. Nothing could go wrong on such a day.

In the boat shed Lalita picked us some bananas which had escaped the cyclone because they’d been ripening there when it struck. Their densely yellow skins were taut with fragrance and hinted at delicious concentrated banana tastes within.

The outriggers weren’t like the ones I remembered from past island days — made from hollowed-out trunks and lashed together with sticks and coconut husk cord. These were nifty fibreglass models painted in peacock colours. Scott pulled ours across the grass as effortlessly as he would a child’s toy, then slid them into a sheltered bit of water near some mangroves.

He and Lalita stood on the shore and waved us goodbye as we glided through the stilt-legged shrubs and into the wide stretch of lagoon. There we came out of the shelter of a headland. The wind hit us, blowing us back towards the shore. No more gliding. We had to paddle at cake-mixer speed to get anywhere.

‘Look. We haven’t moved,’ said Gay after about an hour of furious work.

‘Yes. We have,’ I said. ‘We’re nearly at the first island.’ I may be a wimp but I’m not a quitter.

Once in the lee of the island we dropped our paddles and flopped back in our boats. It sheltered us nicely. Thickly covered with bushes and worn away by the water at the edges, it was perched on a column of earth and rock. Here the water was as smooth and clear as glass. We hovered over a turquoise, emerald
and azure world teeming with life: fish like rainbow shadows and darting jewels, coral in clumps, platforms, sprays and shelves, indigo starfish dotted across silver clearings, anemones languidly waving ribbon arms, transparent crustaceans scratching up puffs of sand. It was bliss bobbing there and gazing down, but finally we plunged back into the wind. The further we got from the coast, the more wildly it blew.

‘I think we’ll have to turn back,’ said Gay, lying her paddle across her knees and her head in her hands. The lee of the second island had given us practically no shelter or respite.

The reason and finality of her words dropped like a stone into my thoughts, all dancing and straining towards Honeymoon Island. Gay knew the sea. She had spent years in the Solomons when I was only a city-dwelling visitor and she knew tropical waters, small craft and how to gauge their possibilities.

All the reason was on her side and there was none on mine but I was madly intent on getting to Honeymoon Island. ‘Look. We’re nearly there.’

‘Nearly there? But it’s still so tiny.’

‘It looks tiny because it is tiny. That’s a really small island.’ I said this only to persuade her to continue, but it turned out I was right. Honeymoon Island wasn’t as far away as we thought. Nevertheless, it had taken us four hours to get there.

Like shipwrecked sailors, we threw ourselves panting on the beach. The island was so small it took less than a minute to walk around. It had a handkerchief beach, a pile of smooth rocks at one end, a bump of a hill in the middle topped with two frail trees winding lovingly around each other. (Were these the honey-mooners?) We stood on the hill in our swimming costumes, our sarongs flying behind us. The wind ruffling the water hid its shallowness so we seemed marooned in the middle of a deep ocean, miles from anywhere. Our island.

In the warm quiet shelter of the rocks we opened up Margaret’s roti parcels and Lalita’s bananas and slowly and relishingly ate them.

This time the snorkel worked. I left off the life jacket and floated lazily through coral forests with fish like parrots
skimming through their branches. Sometimes one would come up and stare right into my goggles, opening and shutting its tiny round mouth. Others would line up in front of me like chorus girls: a graceful flip to one side, noses, fins and tails in perfect time, then a shimmering flip to the other.

Coming back was easy. The wind was now behind us and we hardly had to paddle.

‘Oh. How worried we were,’ said Lalita when we got back. ‘What a battle you had to get out there. We thought you’d never make it. Scott nearly went in the launch to get you.’

What a terrible defeat that would have been, I thought.

The next day was our last in Taveuni. We went to have an after-breakfast fruit shake at Ronna’s Coconut Grove Café. I was feeling miserable, not only because it was the last day but because I’d had a shock when I looked in the mirror that morning. An unrecognisable face looked back at me. One with a blubbery protruding mouth like a collagen implant gone wrong. I’d slathered myself with sun cream on our lagoon expedition but I’d forgotten my lips. They were two vast blisters.

I was cooling my lips in the fruit shake when two ladies dressed in long floral caftans stepped out on to the terrace closely followed by Ronna with hibiscus-festooned breakfast trays. No longer young, they had aged in an admirably elegant way as if, with the years, they had honed and improved their most graceful attributes. We soon got talking and found out they were American researchers from Hawaii. They were so interesting I forgot about my lips. One was doing research into old whaling vessels and the other was registrar of the Hawaiian Academy of Arts. She had a portfolio of photographs of paintings done by Constance Gordon-Cumming, the travel writer who had visited Fiji in the 1870s and had Cumming Street in Suva named after her. They were watercolours typical of the times: everything delicately detailed and elongated in a romantic way. Fijians with slim limbs and white turbans struck Byronic poses on sugarloaf rocks. Palms with thistledown tops towered above bure roofs that soared four or five times the height of their walls.
Canoes with high curving prows clove lacy surf. There were several paintings of the sacred island of Bau — seat of Cakobau and his descendants — with intricate depictions of temples and chiefs’ houses hung with long chains of white cowrie shells.

The registrar said she’d arranged to go to Bau because she’d been fascinated with it all her life: ‘Such a tiny island and such power.’ You have to have special permission from the Ministry of Fijian Affairs. She’d obtained her permission and had bought the finest kava root she could find to take with her. She waited hours on the Bau landing but the launch that was to take her across the narrow strip of water to the island never arrived — a very bad case of ‘Fiji time’. ‘I’ll just have to go on dreaming about it I suppose,’ she said.

Ronna overheard us tell the American ladies we were leaving that day. ‘Oh no!’ she wailed. ‘You’re not leaving!’

Although it cut into our budget, we’d decided to get the plane to Nadi because we had no time to fiddle around with ferries. Margaret made us our last meal at the airport on her gas burner. I thought how much I’d miss her: her tranquillity, her laugh, her masterly meals.

The plane was already waiting on the runway like a cheeky bird. It was frighteningly small and painted all over with pink, blue and orange tropical motifs. Dolores told us to get on the scales as she needed to weigh not only the luggage but also the passengers. We seemed to have put on a lot of weight but she said not to worry — the scales didn’t work properly.

A last hug from Margaret and we climbed on board. I was surprised to see two young Fijian boys sitting in the cockpit playing with the controls. What do those kids think they’re doing? I thought. Then one of them welcomed us on behalf of Fiji Air. I realised they were the pilot and the co-pilot.

‘You’d better have a good look at the view as soon as we get up high,’ said the childlike pilot. ‘It’s clear over Taveuni. After that, cloud all the way.’ He gave one of the controls a bang as if it were a broken coin machine.
We roared down the runway like a demented lawnmower and then were airborne in a swooning circle. The control tower and the outline of Eddie inside. Margaret waving. The sea and its swirls of coral. The three islands. Then we hit the cloud and churned through it with bumps and buffeting that made Gay and me sit on the edge of our seats, grip our bags and look straight ahead. We didn’t dare catch each other’s eye; our terror could slip over into panic. The only other passengers were two couples from one of the luxury resorts wearing beautiful leis and tense expressions. Before us was more cloud; behind us was Taveuni, shrouded and gone.
Our next journey was a cruise through *Blue Lagoon* territory: the Yasawas, an island chain that formed the western boundary of Fiji just as the Lau Group hemmed off the east. My childhood was haunted by *The Blue Lagoon*. Everybody talked about the film to be made in the Yasawas — where the bluest of blue lagoons in all the Pacific was to be found — and the beautiful eighteen-year-old Jean Simmons who was in Fiji to star in it.

‘I’ve seen her. I’ve seen her,’ my father announced one day. ‘I saw her in Morris Hedstrom’s. She’s certainly pretty.’

‘Oh,’ my mother said, smiling a small tight smile. ‘I hear she has thick ankles and they have to be careful how they film her so you can’t see them. Did you notice the thick ankles, dear?’

I can’t remember what my father answered but as far as I was concerned they were of no account. The important thing for me was if someone was pretty or not pretty. And, as my father had said, Jean Simmons was certainly pretty. I knew this because, not long after, I saw her myself. I was so astounded and transfixed when she appeared beside me to read the post office notice board that every detail has stayed clear in my mind to this day: the toffee-coloured eyes, the smoothly tanned skin, the even white smile, the long dark wig swinging in her hand. Her own hair was sun-flecked chestnut, curling close and neat to the perfectly shaped crown of her head. I decided she wasn’t quite as pretty as Maureen Southwick but she outdid her in aura. Maureen
Southwick was a banal *kaiviti*, she was married to a department-store chemist and all she did was garden. Jean Simmons was English and a film star. The tops.

Then there was the romance of the story she was involved in. Two orphaned children shipwrecked on a desert island. Growing up alone in paradise. Then falling in love. A legend that had fascinated generations. The story of ‘Paul et Virginie’. Two pure souls evolving far from civilisation in a setting of absolute, unspoiled beauty.

It went on fascinating. There was another *Blue Lagoon* film in the Eighties with Brooke Shields, also shot in the Yasawas, and then *Return to the Blue Lagoon* in the Nineties, filmed in Taveuni. The three films were mediocre. But who cared? *Blue Lagoon* or *Holy Grail*, *Titanic* or *Tarzan*, it’s the legend that counts.

I was also excited at the thought of a film crew and film stars installing themselves in Fiji because by that time I fancied I was quite an actress myself. A foolish friend of my mother’s had seen me as the witch in *Hansel and Gretel* at the Town Hall and told her, in front of me, that I was incredibly talented, had ‘a great future’ in store for me and must be sent to London to be trained. So I was going to be an actress — like Greer Garson appearing out of the mist to Robert Donat in *Goodbye Mr Chips* or Maureen O’Hara slithering around the gargoyles in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* or simply Jean Simmons swinging a long black wig from her fingertips.

The wonderful acting year came after a grim one: 1945, when the war ended and school began in earnest — proper school with real, sometimes terrifying, teachers.

I still have the class photo for ’45. I’m in the front row, sitting cross-legged, my eyes sullenly on the ground. Everyone is in uniform, the boys with white shirts and dark shorts, the girls in dark dresses with white Peter Pan collars. My uniform is completely different — a weird one my mother thought up. I’d come back from a trip with my father a fortnight after school had begun and perhaps the regular uniforms had run out. In any case, I hated the one I had to wear. It consisted of a white boy’s shirt
with a boy’s necktie (but the boys didn’t wear ties) and a pleated skirt with straps over the shoulders: my mother’s version of a school tunic, probably inspired by Enid Blyton books or Sydney private school uniforms.

Judging by the range in shades of our faces, there were just as many mixed-blood children as white, most of them somewhat bigger and older, which was to be expected as presumably they had had no schooling until then.

There was a plea earlier in the Fiji Times ‘for greater opportunities for part-Europeans’ saying that ‘the lack of educational facilities open to them gave them a sense of inferiority’. Such conditions were ‘a blot on the Government’ and should be improved ‘in its post-war plans’.

So now at last something was being done for them. But the ones around my age hadn’t missed much. What we were given during the war could hardly be called schooling. I never noticed any of them lagging behind because there wasn’t much catching up to do. As far as I can remember, most of them, like the Europeans, had somehow learnt to read and write.

Our faces varied in hue but our hairdos all have the same severely structured look: the boys slicked, flattened and short, the girls mostly plaited or full of clips and bows. I had everything. Two tight plaits looped up and tied with ribbons, my fringe pulled to the side and fastened with a clip, then to fix any other wisps which might still escape, a small black tape bow in the middle of my hairline. There were no shaved heads, however, so this was before the kutus got to us.

Kutus, or head lice — ‘motorised dandruff’ the New Zealand soldiers called them — raged through the school in 1945. We were all terrified of getting them as it meant shame and disfigurement. First there was the weekly inspection in the ‘kutu room’ with the steel ‘kutu comb’. To reduce their public humiliation, offenders weren’t informed immediately on discovery but later by secret summons in the playground. They were then confined to the kutu room until their parents came and took them home. There was always a crowd of kids outside the
window, standing on tiptoe or hopping on the spot, to see who was inside. A day or so later the marked ones returned. Nothing was done to hide the boys shaved baby-bird heads, but the girls were allowed to wear strange mob caps like those worn by French revolutionaries. I was one of the few children not to catch kutus, so my mother’s fierce hairdressing sessions must have willed them away.

This was also the year of the operations: tonsils, adenoids, appendix. These were more in the girls’ sphere than the boys, who tended rather to break limbs, an altogether inferior predicament. The most enviable operation was the appendix because it left you with a scar. It also led to extravagant boasting. My friend Rosalind Simpson said hers was so long that the hospital pickled it in a jar and put it on display.

I was thrilled when I heard I was going to have my tonsils out — they weren’t as good as an appendix but at least they were an operation — and excitedly packed my bag for the hospital with new pyjamas and toothbrush. The Fijian anaesthetist had grey springy hair at his temples and stood behind me with the chloroform bag. As he lowered it he gently stroked the side of my face and murmured ‘There, there’ in a deep velvet voice. I’d never known such tenderness, merging with a voluptuous conquering drowsiness. But that was the end of the enjoyable part of the adventure. I awoke feeling I had a double-edged sword jammed down my throat and opened my mouth to say something to my parents sitting by my bed but no sound came.

‘Don’t worry dear. The doctor said you’d feel fine in a couple of days.’

But I felt worse. The area where the tonsils had been was badly infected and I could eat only jelly for weeks. At least this served me well when I went back to school, as I’d become so emaciated I attracted nearly as much attention as Rosalind and her leviathan appendix.

In the school photo Mossy Frisby and his henchmen dominate the back row, arms folded like all the boys (the girls had their hands in their laps), and, from their elevated position, they seem to lord it over the class. Which they did. Once again,
I was selected for special treatment. The fact I joined the class some time after the others, in an eccentric uniform, didn't help matters. It created a diversion when the only way you could hope to escape the notice of Mossy and his boys was to keep a low profile.

On my first day, I came back into the classroom after playtime and immediately sensed something had been done to my desk. Mossy gave nothing away and was as inscrutable as ever, but a couple of the others gave it furtive, amused looks.

Old, filthy and probably dating from the first days of the colony, our desks were arranged one per child and not two or three joined together as was sometimes the case. The bench and desk formed a united block, so that an angry teacher could slide the whole offending unit — child, seat and table — to any part of the classroom he wished, even out the door if necessary.

Each desk had an inkwell, kept filled with watery, deeply staining ink. We supplied our own wooden-handled pens with packets of changeable nibs or, if we were lucky, fountain pens.

These were marvellously messy to fill and usually involved spraying the back of the child in front. It was rare to see someone who didn’t have ink splotches somewhere. Below the flat inkwell and penholder part was a hinged sloping desk face which acted as a lid for a compartment where we kept our books, mouldy playtime snack remains, shells, stones, small pets, whatever. The outside surface was gouged with years of penknives and pen nibs into a rippled chaos of graffiti. This tortured, greasy lid looked particularly hateful when I came back from the playtime break.

As I’d been the last to choose my desk it was in the worst possible place in the classroom — right in front of the teacher. If something had been done to it I had to find out what it was before he came in. On no account should I create a disturbance. He tended to punish everyone who was involved — victims and villains alike.

I opened it. At first I couldn’t see much wrong, there was a frog sitting there but I didn’t mind that because I liked frogs and often handled them. I wasn’t surprised because in Fiji little
animals were always turning up in unexpected places. The only odd thing was that it didn’t move when I opened the desk.

Then I understood. The frog didn’t move because it couldn’t. Its four legs had been cut off. Its eyes were turned back to look at me, its sides moved in and out with short rapid breaths. Someone screamed. No it wasn’t someone. It was me. I was screaming and running with the frog to the window. Through its fine warm skin I could feel its tiny organs palpitating under my thumbs. Still so alive and yet so useless. Leaning out as far as I could, I slid the little maimed body under a clump of grass to hide it away from the world and my mind.

Mr Strong, our teacher, came in just as I got back to my desk. My screams had stopped but were still ringing in my head, stinging my throat. He knew something had been going on around my area of the room and gave me a glare which was the expression which came to him most easily, as if he couldn’t envisage looking at a child in any other way.

I can’t remember a thing Mr Strong taught us, I can only remember his punishments. Much more of his time must have gone into elaborating these than into planning his lessons, droningly read from battered notes or books, his constantly down-turned eyes giving us a chance to get up to all sorts of silent mischief. Not for long. A slight slip up and then came the stabbing glare, the triumphant pounce, the elaborate unfolding of the punishment.

He fashioned cardboard cones as Dunce Caps which he made us wear while standing on one foot in the corner. Except there were no corners. It was a strange round room, rather like a bandstand, just inside the gate and some way from the main school building. I liked it because there were so many windows — all paneless and most with sea views. This lack of corners didn’t discourage Mr Strong. Instead, he blindfolded the child to stop them enjoying the view and gave a terrifying bark if he saw a tired foot nearing the floor.

He was fond of writing messages and putting them on children’s backs. ‘Ferocious animal. Don’t come near.’ ‘I’m a liar.’ Then there were the lines. You had to stay back after school and
write out penance for your sins. The same thing line after line, page after page: ‘I will not forget to bring my sports tunic to school on Tuesdays’ (several hundred times). Mine were spelling mistakes. In spite of my avid reading I was a terrible speller and filled reams of paper with my corrections. Mr Strong grew bored with this and decided on more spectacular measures. I was always spelling the word ‘with’ with an extra ‘h’: ‘whith.’ He took a large piece of cardboard and wrote ‘with’ on it in tall letters, threaded string in the corners and around my neck so that it hung on my chest like a shameful breastplate. He told me I had to keep it on all day and even when I went home to show it to my parents.

My humiliation was acute. The grubby string and signboard with its ridiculous word round my neck was like a pillory. Even though it had been put on me with ceremony in front of the class, I couldn’t bear anyone to look at it. At playtime I skulked in the bushes behind our bandstand classroom so no one would see me. During class I leant forward, the sign hidden by my desk. After school I waited until the others had left then plunged into the nearest, roughest short-cut. There I ripped off the sign and threw it into a stream. I watched it soggily bump over the stones and disappear around a bend, the string writhing after it. For weeks I didn’t invite any children home, in case they told my parents about the incident.

But that was nothing compared with the humiliation that was to come. Mr Strong had a hierarchy, a pyramid of punishments. At the top of the pyramid was the Strap. The Strap was not so much a strap as a strop: a razor strop, a thick piece of old hard leather that barbers used to sharpen their cut-throat blades on. It had a loop on one end so that it could be hung on the wall beside the blackboard as a reminder, a warning. A gallows on a hill.

Girls didn’t get the strap. It was reserved for the boys. Just as only men went to war, only boys got the strap and, like the war, it was a test of bravery. The way you reacted to such a beating could mark you for the rest of your schooldays and even beyond.
There was tremendous psychological pressure in the build-up to the ceremony. The culprit was rarely hit on the discovery of his misdeed. Strap-giving was usually performed at the end of the day and the person informed he was going to get it had to wait until then. Lessons wound down five minutes early to make way for the event.

Mr Strong would unhook the strap and test it with a couple of light flaps on his palm. His hair was thin and vaguely gingery and his eyes had a sore look. He was always dressed in white: open-necked shirt, shorts or long trousers with sharp creases. The whitening on his shoes was brushed on so heavily it overflowed on to the edges of the soles. Unlike his muscled red forearms and ruddy neck, his face was pale and full of old pimple scars which gave his complexion the appearance of uncooked tripe. When he brought the strap down in its whistling fast descent, the muscle on his forearm sprang up and his tripey cheeks shuddered.

As was fitting, Mossy Frisby got the strap the most often. But the impervious way he took it helped enhance his reputation and swell the ranks of his followers. One whack, two whacks or three, they were all the same to him. He held out his hand as nonchantly as he would if washing it under the tap, his pink-rimmed eyes looking unflinchingly into the pink-rimmed eyes of Mr Strong. To survive a three-whack session in this way must have taken incredible self-control. Most boys crumbled after the second one and could hardly walk after a third.

A few years later I made the terrible error of reminding one of the boys of his days with Mr Strong and the strap. I was at boarding school in Sydney, fourteen and starting to get silly about boys, except that there were none around to get silly about. Marilyn, a friend of mine who had the makings of what was then known as a glamour puss, was even sillier than I was. Once a month we had a ‘free weekend’ and spent it prowling around looking for boys. And never finding any. Until one day opportunity knocked.

‘I met Marilyn and went to the pictures to see “The Dutchess of Ohio”. At interval we found that we were sitting next to an
awfully handsome boy. Marilyn, being the nearest, was making the beginnings of a line for him. When she got up to get some sweets she accidently-on-purpose tripped over his foot and they both smiled sweetly at each other.

When we sat down Marilyn was going “Oh! Yum! Yum! Isn’t he terrific!” Then to my surprise and Marilyn’s amazement, he kept looking at me all the time. I said to Marilyn, “I think I know him.”

“Yes. He looks like an awfully nice boy I knew in Fiji — Max Pickering.”

“Oh? All right then. I’ll ask him.”

“No, Marilyn. Please don’t. I — er — wouldn’t be sure.”

All through the picture I feverishly clutched hold of her arm to stop her asking him. Then when we came out he was just in front of us and Marilyn said “Shall I?”

“No. No.” I said and clutched hold of her coat but she wriggled out of it, leaving it in my hands.

I was absolutely horrified and tore off in the opposite direction. I walked up and down outside a sweet shop until Marilyn came rushing up. “You stupid galoot,” she hissed. “It WAS him.”

“What?”

“Oh!” she said, stamping her foot. “IDIOT. It WAS. Go after him.” I turned and saw his dark head atop broad shoulders disappearing among the crowd. “He waited for you. Go on!”

I hesitated and then tore after the diminishing striding figure. At last I reached him and tapped him on the back. All I could do was puff and pant and gasp “Max?”

He gave me that lovely shy smile of his and we had a nice talk about old times until stupid fool of a me went and brought up the subject of Mr Strong. This is a terribly sore point to touch Max on, I’m afraid.

Let’s carry ourselves back five years when I was nine in 3rd Class — into that little classroom with the one wall and all the rest was a round rotunda, summer house sort of building with a muddy wooden floor and a roof supported by ten long slender poles. Framed in each archway between the poles was a lovely fascinating real life
picture. Here a bit of the sparkling blue Pacific Ocean where the ships and cutters glided lazily. Here a bit of wide sweeping green playing field where the frogs squatted in little bogs left by the rain croaking languidly. Here a gully and Mrs Beaty’s fowl yard with her washing flapping gayly above. From where I sat you could see a bit of the main building with the old whetherboard verandah leaning grogglily at an angle. Bruce McMillain used to sit behind me and poke me with his ruler and blow kisses at me from behind his journal cover.

This day Milton Osborne was strutting down the aisle and gave Max a friendly(?) hit on the ear. Max returned him with a wooshing punch in the stummick. Mr Strong seeing his darling pet (Milton) being thus treated by Max, called him out and gave him a walloping of a strapping. All the girls bit their lips and dilated their eyes. Max took it like a man, then, when he sat down, one great big incriminating tear squeezed out of his eye!!

Well, evidently he was terrified I was going to dig up the awfull episode because no sooner had the words “Mr Strong” left my lips when, with a “Er. Well. Nice to have met you,” he dissapeared. I wonder if I’ll ever meet him again. Don’t suppose so.

Marilyn was absolutely crazy over him and on the way to Wynyard she blew me up for not introducing her and blew me up for not asking where he lived and blew me up for not going up to him before and blew me up for bringing up Mr Strong.’

Strangely enough, there isn’t the slightest hint in this account that I’d suffered the same humiliation from Mr Strong as Max had. I’d managed to lock it away. It had never happened. After all, it couldn’t have — Mr Strong never gave the strap to girls.

‘I don’t care if you are a girl,’ he said one day. ‘The next time I catch you reading under the desk it’ll be the strap for you.’

I read constantly under the desk — book after book. What else could you do in Mr Strong’s boring lessons? Also, by process of elimination, I was no longer right under his eye. As naughtier and naughtier kids were slid into positions at the front of the class, I was gradually pushed towards the back and near
a window. There, I could relatively safely read a book and, when
tired of this, gaze out at the view or the chameleon in a tree just
outside. It was always there, brown when on a sunny branch,
green when in among the leaves, hardly visible except when it
opened its orange-lined mouth to catch insects.

I wasn’t the only one who read in class. Most of the boys
did and one brought a ‘rude’ book to school and passed it
around. It was called Love Me Sailor. Nearly everyone had read it,
or at least extracts. Its cover and some of the pages were missing,
those that were left were fingered and curly. I’d read part but
couldn’t make much sense of it.

There was one sentence which stuck in my mind and set me
ruminating: ‘He threw the bucking woman on to the bed and
fumbled with his belt.’ Now why was she bucking? Horses bucked.
My father said Mrs Willoughby-Tottenham looked like a horse.
Could the bucking woman look like Mrs Willoughby-Tottenham?
No. Instinctively I felt this was impossible. And what about ‘he
fumbled with his belt’? Belts held up trousers. If you undid the belt
the trousers came down. So that was definitely rude.

Mr Strong hadn’t managed to catch anyone with Love Me
Sailor although he sensed its presence like a shark will sense its
prey in waters miles away. He pounced on secret readers but
found only comics and innocent classics. The boys were duly
strapped and I was given a warning but you could tell he was
sniffing around for a more significant find.

I didn’t take much notice of his threat, feeling it was an
empty one. He’d never strap a girl. I continued to while away my
time in another world either outside the window or between
the pages of the book on my knees.

Then one day shark and prey came slipping my way
without me realising. Love Me Sailor had been doing the rounds
again and Mr Strong was after it. The book flipped from lap to
lap and landed on mine, on top of the one I was reading, just as
his pasty face loomed above me.

‘That’s it.’ He seized both books and my arm and
propelled me to the front of the class. Like Max, I was to get it in
the heat of the moment. Perhaps he was afraid he'd change his mind if he didn't act at once. At least I didn't have the torture of mulling over what was going to happen to me. He whipped the strap off its hook and made an abrupt sign with his head for me to hold out my hand. My hand! I had just a second to think. No, not my hands. They made toys and dolls clothes, planted flowers, painted pictures. Anywhere but my hand. Then it came. At first it wasn't so much pain but a sharp sudden breathlessness: a cold buzzing in my head, through my neck and down my arm. A fainting blackness all around except for Mr Strong's huge shark-belly face swimming above me and the staring eyes of my classmates. My hand seemed no longer there. Just a bloated limpness, a floating separateness. I was shrunken with shame, weak with outrage. My hand. I had to hold it out like an offering. And you hurt it. In front of everybody.

I trailed dry-eyed back to my desk and hid my wound. After school and on my way home, safe and alone in the short-cut, I finally looked at it. Red, distorted, the fingers curled inwards over the swollen palm. The welt left by the strap continued across my wrist and up my forearm, thick and exactly strap-shaped with a rounded end.

Towards evening it turned blue. My parents mustn't see it. Not that they wouldn't be all for me and against the teacher but the shame would be too great. I felt it as an awful stain. It was like the fleur-de-lis on Milady's shoulder, only a thousand times worse.

Mumbling that I felt sick, I went straight to my room and climbed into bed. My mother took my temperature and I actually had one which I was pleased to see had gone the next morning. I didn't want to hang around at home and risk discovery. For the next week I avoided my parents as much as I could, always keeping my arm pressed into my side when I couldn't. The bruise went from blue to yellow to brown and finally faded.

Somehow, I didn't hate Mr Strong. He seemed almost unconnected with it. It was like a disaster that had befallen me from nowhere and I had to forget quickly. Hating Mr Strong
would remind me of it. There was no question of it waiting on my pillow to keep me awake at night with the slaughtered cats and other horrors. The slightest suggestion of it being there and I willed it away with all my force. I didn’t forget but tamed and controlled it. That’s why I was able to tell the story of Max and Mr Strong with such lightness.

There were some bright spots in 1945. There was May 8, the day the war ended. Mr Brock, the headmaster, rushed into the classroom to announce ‘The war’s over! The war’s over!’ His voice squeaked. We spilled out into the playground with the other classes and held hands in an large circle. A photo was taken of us from the balcony of the Girls’ Hostel opposite but it has now faded away to a sepia whisper.

The Fiji Times the next day wrote of people dancing in the streets, amazing for a race ‘not inclined to give way to emotion’, but caution was urged and we were reminded we were still at war with Japan. This also came to an end with the thick blacked-in headline, ‘ATOMIC BOMB’ that smeared our fingers. They described it as if it hadn’t yet happened: ‘The mighty ATOM Bomb equal to 20,000 tons of TNT will utterly destroy Japan.’ It didn’t quite do that but the Emperor surrendered and the war was finally and completely over. On the radio the Governor gave a speech, ‘Time to Rejoice’, the National Anthem was played and churchbells rang, car horns hooted and whistles blew, all over town.

At the end of August there was a thanksgiving service held in Albert Park attended by the Governor in the most spectacular of all his uniforms — glittering with medals, frothy with plumes. The relatives of those lost in the war were massed on one side of him, we children on the other, singing hymns. I shouldn’t have been there as I had chicken pox and was still in quarantine. My classmates behind me whispered and pointed at the scabs on the back of my legs.

A few days later there was a Victory Parade, the Governor once again in his best uniform. Every possible soldier-like person was on the march. Not only returned soldiers, but the Home Guard, firefighters, Cubs, Scouts, Brownies, Guides, nurses,
lifesavers, policemen and cadets (wearing man-sized helmets that made them look like little Martians). Brigade after brigade marched by. They swung their arms, lifted their knees and looked rigidly ahead, bathed in cheers.

At the Governor’s side sat Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, distinguished World War I veteran. A student at Oxford in 1914 when war broke out, he was refused service in the British army because of the colour of his skin, so he joined the French Foreign Legion where his many feats of bravery earned him the coveted Medaille Militaire. ‘Please do not mention my wounds to my people,’ he wrote from hospital in France. All he wanted was for them to send him his pipe and razor strop. There is now a statue to him in Suva, suitably monolithic, of green-dusted copper. Sleek trunk-like legs soar up into a stylised sulu and tailcoat, forming a vast pod-like torso that tapers to a small sad face.

As far as we were concerned, as war heroes the Fijians were second to none. The paper was full of their exploits. ‘Fijians Trounce Japs’, ‘Gave them a damn good hiding’, ‘The finest jungle fighters in the world.’ The Fijian was put across as a paragon of soldierly devotion. ‘His training enthralled him’, ‘From the hour of his enlistment his one desire was to learn how to fight.’ In fact, they didn’t take to military life immediately — disliking the long marches because they missed going barefoot and often returning with their boots slung round their necks, resenting their helmets because wearing them meant they had to cut off their long hair, an essential part of their mana. Nevertheless, they were crack sharp-shooters and riflemen and unrivalled in jungle craft. The Americans were so impressed they sent groups of soldiers every six weeks to train under Fijian commandos. A war correspondent called them ‘death with velvet gloves’.

The two most famous Fijian World War II heroes were Viliame Lomosalato, Fiji’s last recorded cannibal, and Sefanaia Sukanaivalu, who was awarded the Victoria Cross.

Lomosalato decided he’d humiliate the enemy in the traditional Fijian way by devouring the first Japanese he killed. His officers tried to restrain him but he wriggled free and, with
a pocket knife, cut off a piece of flesh and ate it. He was then fired with superhuman courage, firing repeatedly at the enemy with his Tommygun and calling for the grenades he lobbed at them in a continuous stream. The eating incident was forgiven and he was decorated for his bravery.

The Victoria Cross was awarded posthumously, once more with a crowd-filled, Governor-attended ceremony in Albert Park. Sukanaivalu had been hit by enemy fire while rescuing wounded companions during a battle in a Solomon Island swamp. When the report of his bravery was first delivered by the Governor to the Great Council of Chiefs, a mistake was made. It stated that ‘this gallant NCO then called to his men to try and get to him as he was in a very exposed position.’ The report should have read ‘called to his men not to try and get to him.’

After every ceremony there were the salutes. The Empire Salute, the Royal Salute, the Victory Salute; sixteen guns for this, nineteen guns for that. There was a fireworks display at Laucala Bay, near Suva Point, with the starry explosives sent up into the air from boats and the beach full of children afterwards looking for the tiny parachutes that had brought the debris safely down to the ground.

All these festivities and celebrations made my last days with Mr Strong speed by. And then, on November 26, the Qantas Empire Airways flying boat, Coriolanus, took off from Laucala Bay on an experimental flight between Fiji and Australia, via Noumea. Among the seventeen passengers was the Thomsett family, the children with high fevers and mountainous throbbing arms from smallpox vaccinations.

At Noumea we were put to bed straight away and were brought warm milk by a French maid. She chirped and bubbled and filled the room with Frenchness. When I asked her what the lovely smell was, she flicked her slight wrist under my nose and whispered ‘Parfung!’. Outside it was raining heavily, but the tropical rain fell on glossy cobbles and through its thick mist I could see the wrought-iron balconies on the buildings opposite. Wrought iron, cobbles, ‘parfung’. The Three Musketeers. A Tale of
Noumea was my first real taste of France. I realised it wasn’t just a place that existed in books but one I suddenly knew I’d visit.
The experimental flights couldn’t have lasted long because we came back to Fiji about three months later not by plane but by boat. I had a miserable trip. Our vessel had spent the war as a troop ship and hadn’t yet been altered. There were no cabins but two immense dormitories with tiered bunks — not just in twos, but threes and fours, arranged in the middle of the room as well as along the sides. Men were in one dormitory and women in the other and the few passengers slept dotted around among the ghostly metal frames of the bunks. Inside and out, the ship was painted a dull rust red. The portholes were blackened. But the worst thing was the smell. Molasses. Usually such cargoes went from Fiji to Australia rather than the other way but there was no mistaking what it was. A nauseating heavily sweet smell which, when combined with that of the bilge — sump oil and stagnant sea water — guaranteed immediate seasickness. I lay vomiting in the sinister dormitory most of the voyage.

My father was not with us as he’d come back earlier to work. My mother, in spite of her hatred of boats, quite enjoyed herself on this, absolutely the worst sea voyage I’ve ever made. It was because she’d found a friend. Rather an unusual one. A Fijian. But a special Fijian it was all right to be friendly with: Adi Marisela Savanaca Tanebeka, wife of Ratu Savanaca Tanebeka, ruler of a vast ‘province’, Macuata, which included most of Vanua Levu and all its northern offshore islands. In colonial speak, a chief
of a province was referred to as a prince. So this made Adi Marisela a princess and therefore more than acceptable as a friend. She and my mother slept in adjoining bunks, head to head, and girlishly giggled and whispered together before they went to sleep. Every morning they went up on deck with toddler Gay to meet the Ratu and have a stroll. My mother said it was a disgrace they hadn’t put any deck chairs up there for people to sit on. It was very hard on Ratu Savanaca Tanebeka because he had only one leg. This intrigued me. One morning I dragged myself up there to see for myself, but I was disappointed. His missing leg had been replaced by a wooden one covered in hide.

My mother and Adi Marisela stayed friends until we left the islands. She always came to visit when in Suva and pressed us with return invitations. Thinking of this friendship and how my mother’s personality fitted with a Fijian one — fun-loving, talkative, with a certain languor — I feel that if it hadn’t been for the prevailing racism, she would have made many Fijian friends. At that time racism often sprang from simple conformity — not quite a fashion perhaps, but an encouraged mode of behaviour.

I never encountered any racism at school. Boys’ ‘gangs’ were mixed, girls of all colours played together. Out of school was another matter — European mothers had different ideas. They vied with each other in giving lavish children’s parties, birthdays mainly, but also fancy dress balls, Christmas parties, picnics. For whites only. With media coverage: ‘Forty-nine little children sat down at a gaily decorated table complete with Snow Man and parti-coloured paper bows and all manner of dainties dear to the heart of kiddies.’

With the war over these parties increased, as did weddings. I read the descriptions of the brides: ‘Honeton lace’, ‘thirty yards of tulle’, ‘a coronet of orange blossom’, ‘picked out with seed pearls.’ One bride waited all through the war for her beloved to return, putting aside the pieces of parachute silk he sent back from the front so she finally had enough for her wedding gown.

Apart from the excitement of the brides in the newspaper there was that of the visits of the ‘war brides’: Australians going to
join their GIs in America with a stop-over in Fiji. Two magnificent liners — the *Mariposa* and the *Monteray* — carried them across the Pacific Ocean to their loves. My friends and I would rush down to the wharf to watch them arrive. The great white liner with its huge vase-shaped prow would edge into port, rows of minute far-away war brides hanging over its rails. They would come tripping down the long gangway and we’d make whispered comments about their clothes. I was old enough not to expect the brides to be still in their wedding dresses, but was endlessly intrigued by dressed-up ladies: their little gloves, perky hats, gored skirts, padded shoulders, platform shoes. They represented an unattainable state. I couldn’t remotely imagine myself looking like them. Nowadays there’s not so much of a gulf: clothes are often both unisex and uni-age. But then little girls were fascinated with dressed-up young women — especially ones as glamorous as the war brides. We dogged their footsteps. They crowded into the souvenir shops to buy trinkets for their new in-laws in America and took photos of one another leaning on palm trees like Dorothy Lamour in *Road to Morocco*.

School in 1946 was an improvement on ’45. Once again, I came back after term had started but this time I had a proper uniform and Mossy didn’t take much notice of me. He had a new victim, a small sandy boy called John Cummings. My first love.

Our new teacher was a refreshing change from Mr Strong. Mrs Higgs. Florence Higgs. Flo. She sparked with imagination and we immediately took to each other. Mr Brock, the headmaster, fired with the post-war reformatory spirit, announced improvements were in store. Gone were the bad old wartime days when because of makeshift buildings and lack of teachers, kids could even get away with fishing in class. (The Boys’ Grammar — for high school-age boys — was in a broken-down hut near the seashore and the story went that during class one of the boys unhitched his fishing line from his desk and hauled a flapping, gasping cod into the classroom.) Now, classes would be smaller and new useful subjects introduced. Hindustani and Fijian would replace French except for those likely to be going on to university.
I was offered the choice between Fijian and Hindustani, mysteriously choosing the latter. Perhaps I felt I already knew Fijian well enough or maybe I was attracted by the Hindustani books: brightly illustrated with lotus flowers and many-armed goddesses. Classes were given by the excitable Reverend Deoki, who leapt up and down in front of us for an hour and then left, panting with exhaustion. The only words I retained were barakat, a boy, and ghora, a goat. Or maybe it was the other way round.

In the new curriculum, many formal subjects would give way to ‘cultural and creative activities’. This suited Mrs Higgs as she adored dramatics, had a ‘Children’s Theatre’ on the local radio and was planning two super productions at the Town Hall. One was the play Hansel and Gretel and the other was The French Wedding, a song and dance variety show. We spent all our time rehearsing for these, or making costumes or posters to advertise them.

In the 1946 class photo I look a very different girl to the one of 1945. Smiling happily, wisps of hair escaping, arms folded (we all had them folded), not cross-legged but braced against a grassy bank next to Mrs Higgs.

The boys are behind us further up the bank. John Cummings, my first love, is recognisable as a Mossy Frisby victim, being dressed differently to the rest. He’s wearing a khaki shirt while the others are in white. Unlike me, he doesn’t seem miserable because of it. His head is typically cocked to the side and he’s smiling — although a little warily.

His smile was always wary. When he looked at you with his striking green eyes he did so with his head craned away to one side and his gaze shyly sliding down across a freckled cheek. His smile was always there on the ready but held in as if he had a secret that burdened him and couldn’t be let out. He did have a secret and a heavy one but I didn’t learn about it until forty-five years later.

Sometimes his smile showed so much pent-up merriment it had a cheeky charm. Perhaps it was this that made me fall in love with him, or maybe it was his kindness. He picked up things I dropped, was always sharing his playtime snacks with other
children, was tender to animals and insects and when I was at the pencil sharpener, he turned the handle for me.

In fact, I think it was at the pencil sharpener that my love for him first blossomed. This was a meat-grinder-like object clamped on to the teacher's desk with a transparent receptacle for the wood shavings and a stiff handle you turned to sharpen your pencil. I always pretended it was stiffer than it was so he'd leap up and turn it for me. While he did so, I would gaze at his long lowered lashes and the curve of his neck. Another part of him I was always looking at were the backs of his knees — sturdy and agile as he ran around the playground.

Love at ten is a lot like love at any age. For one thing I was always wanting to be near him. Whenever he was at the pencil sharpener I went up and stood next to him even if my pencil hardly needed sharpening. At playtime, although he played with the boys and I with the girls, I never let him out of my sight. When we flew our kites I broke the rules and let mine sway and flirt around his.

Kites were the craze. With the war over, balsa wood and coloured tissue paper came back into the shops and we could make proper kites again, instead of makeshift ones out of newspaper and sticks. The girls' had tasteful colour blends — pink and mauve, turquoise and blue — and long tails with many bows. The boys had small nippy ones in red, black or white with short streamer tails. They were 'killer kites' with a spike protruding from the top of the frame and the first few feet of their strings dipped in glue and crushed glass. If you had a high wind and flew your kite skilfully enough you could either pierce your opponent's kite with your spike and bring it down, or better still cut through their string with yours so it would blow away and be lost.

Suva Point was the perfect place for flying them — always a brisk wind and wide sands to run over. The girls' big pastel-tinted kites languidly dipped and looped in their corner of the sky away from the boys' whizzing, dive-bombing midget ones. But I couldn't resist letting mine stray towards John's. He gallantly kept his string away from my frolicking tail and was
just as clever at avoiding my kite as he was at chasing the other boys’ and cutting them to ribbons — except for Mossy Frisby’s.

I was careful, however, to make this iron filings behaviour of mine seem accidental and have nothing to do with affection or interest. No one must know I cared for John Cummings — otherwise my dreadful past might surface. The girl who kissed boys. Mossy and a few others knew about this. I could imagine him jeeringly telling John — forcing him down in the dust and making me kiss him. Such a thing was too terrible to contemplate. So I was careful. When Mossy knocked John down I was expressionless. When John picked things up for me and turned the pencil sharpener handle I didn’t thank him. I did absolutely everything to be his partner in *The French Wedding*, but when I finally was, I kept a poker face.

‘*Nous sommes venu vous voir*’, we sang at the opening of the show. ‘We have come to see you’: the first words I learnt in French. But I had no idea how they were written on the page. ‘*Noosoms venoo vooVWAAA,*’ we howled and that’s how I saw them in my mind. The bride and groom stood decoratively in the middle and the wedding guests, an equal number of boys and girls, lined up at the sides waiting to do various solo items and chorus dances in costumes vaguely Bavarian rather than French. How blissfully happy I was to be dancing with John, who galloped merrily, head on the side, smile reined in.

The bride was the beautiful Jeanette Chalmers, quite newly arrived, with pale and flawless skin. She had a strangely mature face — a miniature womanly countenance framed in a cloud of curls as black as the arched brows and luxurious lashes of her blasé eyes. The dress she wore was the envy of all the girls: shiny satin and misty tulle with a long train that curved around her feet. Her brother was the groom.

Jeanette’s parents and mine tried to get us to be friends. We were invited to each others’ homes but we didn’t really hit it off and these plans came to nothing.

There was, however, one very significant exchange. As on all occasions when important things were said to me in my life,
I remember the surroundings with total clarity. We were at her place, sitting on a wide veranda. Giant ferns and dwarf palms in pots elegantly sifted the sunlight, the floor was buffed to a cool sheen. I was sitting there, cross-legged, looking up at Jeanette. She was in a wicker armchair, one leg slung over an arm.

‘Do you know how babies are born?’ she asked.

I stared at her, but not in surprise. Children were always asking one another what people did when they got married and how babies were born, but until then I hadn’t stayed around to hear the answers.

This was because I had been given a book called *The Cradle Ship* that had made me wary. I’d seen it knocking around other children’s homes and realised when it was sent to me by an aunt that this was no ordinary book. When it arrived I flung myself on it with joy as I did all packages of this kind. Now the mail was functioning again I was often sent books from Australia. I’d rip open the parcel and plunge my nose between the pages. Nothing smelt better than a new book did then. It must have been the pine sap in the glue and something in the solution that glossed the illustration panels. I loved the smell and the delicately painted fairy pictures but I couldn’t make sense of the text.

It was about two children whose mother had just had a baby and they wanted to know how it had got there. They kept asking people but were fobbed off with tales of gooseberry bushes and storks or simply told to run off and not be rude. Finally their sweet and beautiful mother said she’d tell them. But she did so in a roundabout way which took up the entire book.

First the whole family had to get into the cradle which sprouted wings and hovered in the air. Next she herself grew wings and turned into a fairy. They then floated over a place called Babyland where they stopped every now and again to interview trees and tree fairies, flowers and flower fairies, bees and animals on the facts of life. But nothing was very clear. There was talk of fluttering seed babies, humming birds thrusting long beaks down flower cups, animal fathers with little grains they gave the mother. Then finally, near the end, some genuine
information begins to immerge. A hare says she not only hatches her eggs inside her body but her baby bag is there as well. The fairy mother admits that her baby, too, grew in a silken bag under her heart.

So that was something I did learn. That Nurse Morrison didn’t pluck babies from the sky and that Gay had been inside my mother. But I still had no idea how the father’s little grains got to the mother’s egg or how the baby emerged into the world. This made me uneasy. I felt that if the book skirted around such things perhaps it wasn’t a good idea to know about them. Perhaps such knowledge could be painful. So when groups of children started asking each other questions of this nature I sidled away.

This time I was a captive audience.

‘Well, do you want to know?’ asked Jeanette, settling back in the chair, her leg still slung over its arm. From under the lacy edge of her panties a vein coursed tiny and blue down the inside of her pale thigh.

I watched the vein and the white leg and didn’t reply.

‘Well,’ she said. ‘You know the man’s thing?’

I don’t think I’d ever seen a man’s thing but I’d seen a little boy’s thing and some statues in a book. I nodded.

‘And, of course, you know the woman has a hole.’

I nodded again.

She crooked two fingers of one hand and joined them as the hole. The index finger of the other became the ‘thing’. ‘Toink Toink.’ She made the appropriate gesture. ‘The man’s thing puts some stuff like custard inside the woman and this grows into a baby and the baby comes out the hole.’

I stared.

She unslung her leg, jumped out of the chair and skipped across the veranda and down the steps into the garden.

This conversation — although you couldn’t really call it one as I didn’t utter a word throughout — I decided immediately to forget. The facts were too awful to cope with. So I pretended I didn’t know how babies were made until I let someone enlighten me four years later at boarding school.
There was a big turn-out when *The French Wedding* was finally put on in the Town Hall. The Bavarian costumes were now combined with the Italian setting on the old cracked curtain. I was faint with excitement — the make-up, the hot lights, the rows of people staring at me leaping around with John Cummings. Noosom venoo vooVWAAA. A microphone stood in the middle of the stage and, as we danced past it, the VWAAA made a shrieking tinny sound. Then the applause, the curtseys, the bows, the flowers. Oh to be an actress!

I had dreams of starring on stage with John. Sometimes he was by my side as the leading man to my leading lady, taking the final bows to frantic applause. Other times he was in a velvet-lined box on a gold chair looking admiringly at me perform.

I dreamed all sorts of other dreams as well. Sometimes quite banal — John in his pyjamas, going to bed with a book in his hand (like me, he was a frenetic reader). I dreamed I saved him from Mossy Frisby. Or he saved me from Mossy Frisby. That we invented humiliating situations we lured Mossy into.

In real life the bullying only got worse; the kicks and cuffs in the playground, the duckings in the swimming pool. Sometimes Mossy held John’s head under so long I’d think he’d never come up. Then one day Mossy actually knocked him out. Completely cold. He lay there like a little dead soldier.

It was John’s punishment for being defiant. On the way home from school the boys had been playing with pop guns or ‘potato guns’ as they were often called. Mossy had no ammunition left and John had plenty: a nearly intact green banana used for gouging out slugs for the gun.

‘Gimme that,’ ordered Mossy.

John took no notice, carefully carved out some banana with the nose of the gun and fired the pellet into a tree.

‘Gimmee I said.’

With sudden irritation and a pink face, knees stiff with anger, John shouted: ‘Go hang!’

Mossy looked almost surprised. ‘You can’t talk to me like that.’ The next minute John was flat on the ground. I’d hardly seen it happen.
Even then caution was foremost in my mind. In my dreams I would have rushed up and cradled his head in my lap. But I didn’t move. I stayed looking on silently with a group of other girls until John’s friends — the wiry Johnny Kerrigan and the portly Robert Lester — came and helped him to his feet. But the sight of him lying there inert must have given Mossy a fright because his torturing eased off.

No sooner was the performance of *The French Wedding* over than rehearsals began for *Hansel and Gretel*. I threw myself into being the witch — painting my face green, talking in an evil sneering voice, making my broomstick out of a knotty branch and twigs and my pointed hat out of cardboard and glued-on black fabric. The audience applauded wildly. I took a special bow. My dreams had almost come true.

There seemed no end to the extraordinary things that happened to me in 1946, culminating in prize-giving at the end of the year when I received two prizes. One, which would now be thought shamefully elitist, was for ‘the Most Popular Girl’, a boring book called *Miss Billy* and the other was for ‘Best Pupil’. John was a much better scholar than I was and should have been given the prize, but maybe as this was the year of ‘creative and cultural activities’, I had been awarded extra marks for my performance as the witch and for the posters I painted for the shows.

The prize-giving was at the Town Hall with the Governor resplendent in front of the usual Russo-Venetian scenery. In my nervousness I forgot my curtsey (something the prize winners had practised for hours). I remembered it as I turned to go, then, twisting back to do a swift one, tripped off the step. To stop myself from falling I took wild uncontrolled strides down the rest of the steps and then down the aisle, unable to stop until I’d rushed past my seat and had to walk back to it, amid giggles. But the giggles were friendly, exhilarating. I ended the only year in my life in which I enjoyed school with the dawning realisation of yet another vocation — that of a clown.
The next year all the excitement went out of school. No Mossy Frisby. No John Cummings. They had gone down to the sea front with the other boys to start high school. There must have been a secondary section at our grammar but, for some unexplained reason, the girls in my class were left mouldering in primary. And for the next year as well. That’s why John, even though he was only six months older than me, was two years ahead of me at Sydney University.

For the first time I resented being a girl. Until then I had seen myself as supremely lucky. I didn’t have to go to war. I could wear pretty clothes when I grew up. Be a bride. Now I had a glimmer of my future as a Fifties teenager and young woman. My education was going to be watered down, domesticated, my choices limited. The boys were by the sea learning French, preparing for university, regardless of their aptitude. Just because they were boys. And I was left on the hill doing specifically female subjects, newly introduced into the all-girl class: home nursing, mothercraft, cooking, sewing. The ‘creative and cultural activities’ were no more. Mr Brock seemed to have lost interest and Mrs Higgs had left.

Not that I didn’t sometimes enjoy myself. These new activities offered opportunities for fooling around, for living out my new vocation as a clown. Except for sewing. I already knew how to sew and didn’t feel like hemming handkerchiefs and
pin-tucking petticoats which I took so long over they grew grubbier and grubbier. My dislike for these frazzled objects was increased by the fact they were destined for my ‘hope chest’. We were encouraged to make embroidered nighties, pillow slips, handkerchiefs, and put them away for that hoped-for great event: marriage. I didn’t like the word ‘hope’.

I saw myself as being restricted, formed into somebody I didn’t necessarily want to be. I was being hobbled. ‘The girls can never beat the boys in the long run.’

The tone of the Fiji Times & Herald of the day was shamelessly macho.

‘The education given to girls at present is not suitable for them,’ went a letter to the paper not long before the changes were introduced. ‘After leaving school, girls usually take to household duties and therefore their education should embrace such subjects as might prove useful to them, e.g. cooking, sewing, etc. In this manner they can hope to become successful wives and not by studying politics or over-burdening their minds with unnecessary subjects which do not concern them. I am etc, A future husband.’

But mostly the sexist jibes were made in jest. The joke column, ‘Flotsam and Jetsam’, thrived on the picture of the bird-brained woman with no object in mind other than to use her femininity to trap the hapless man into a lifetime of misery.

‘Bright young thing: “We plan to get married as soon as he asks me.”’

‘Better to have loved and lost, than to have wooed and now be bossed.’

‘Definition of a wedding. A funeral where you smell your own flowers.’

‘Tobacco: God’s compensating gift to man for having created women.’

“Are you keeping a hope chest?”

“With a chest like mine there’s no hope.”

But hope for what? As far as I could see, it was the wife who got the raw deal. If she wasn’t lucky enough to live in a place like Fiji, marriage meant a lifetime of housework.
Joke: ‘My wife insisted on having a girl for the house. Although I’ve always been satisfied with the way she does the work.’

My father was quite enlightened for the age. A believer in education for girls, it was thanks to him that Gay and I went to university.

‘Why’re you wasting your money Ern?’ asked a friend. ‘They’ll only get married.’

‘I want them to have a full and interesting life,’ answered my father.

When I was at university he eagerly questioned me about the things I was learning and said that if he’d been able to go there he’d have done philosophy. ‘Lovely,’ he said in a yearning way. ‘Philosophy must be lovely.’ Near the end of his life he met Hannah Arendt in a London hotel where he was staying. Nothing seemed to have thrilled him more than the book she’d given him with her dedication in the front. But he not only respected women’s intellectual capacities, he believed they shouldn’t be saddled with all the household chores. He did most of the shopping for food and took charge of the washing-up on Pauline’s day off.

Nevertheless, he had a favourite macho joke he brought out at social gatherings. ‘A wife is like a car. It’s not the outlay. It’s the upkeep.’ He’d laugh his ‘sh sh’ laugh and rattle the change in his pocket, pleased with his manly contribution. My mother didn’t mind. She liked to feel pampered and costly. But I disliked it.

He had a collection of jokes. A shy man, he’d scatter them round to hide behind. ‘Tomato sauce. You squeeze the bottle. Nothing comes. Then a lot’ll.’ I liked that one.

Having nowhere else to unload my new frustration and resentment, I took it out on my teacher, Miss Clements. I nicknamed her Clementine. Poor Clementine. With my new confidence gained from the triumphs of the Higgs year — talented actress, top of the class, most popular girl, class jester — I decided my role was to give her hell.

‘You’ve been a wee menace all day!’ is the inscription in the bubble that comes out of her mouth in a picture I drew in my
diary. In another, she is sliding me and my all-in-one desk across to the lower class. ‘A girl who is always interrupting deserves to be in Standard Five!’ (She taught the last two ‘standards’ of primary together in the same room. In ’47 I was on one side, in ’48 on the other.)

I wrote a vitriolic jingle about her just before I left Fiji, ‘Ode to Clementine’:

_In the far off Pacific, on the island of Fiji_
_Is an old schoolhouse and a waving palm tree,_
_At the end of the schoolhouse is a gloomy classroom_
_Stocked with sober pupils and as silent as a tomb._
_There's the buzz of a hornet and the scratch of a pen,_
_Of those poor little girls learning six times ten._
_At the end of the classroom where it's rather dim_
_Is a big brown table and a person rather grim._
_Her body's like a lamppost, her legs are pink and fat,_
_Her arms are like lolly sticks what's funnier than that?_
_She wears two red earrings and bright bangles you know_
_And has a nice big bunyan on each fat toe,_
_She roars like a bull and wails like a preacher_
_This person is I spose you know my very awful teacher._'

Apart from my largely exaggerated trials with Clementine, there was another longer, blacker shadow that hung over my last two years in Fiji. The dentist. Children’s teeth were beginning to show the results of the binge on sweets and chocolates that took place just after the war. Not only were the Suva shops full of them, food parcels now came from relations in Australia trying to make up for the years we spent cut off by the nasty Japs from all those ‘dainties dear to the heart of children’. I describe a Christmas package (with the usual frightful spelling): ‘crammed full of goodies, ginger chocolate, aniseed balls, liquorice, mazipan, mashmallows, bullseyes, peppermint cherries, maple sugar, almonds, peanuts, cashiers, boil lollies, humbugs, jubes, sugared pineapple.’

You always knew when someone was going to the dentist after school. They had a distracted look that turned into one of fear as the day advanced. As you approached the dentist’s surgery
you could hear the screams, faint at first and then louder. Not continuous but in spurts.

The waiting room had two posters on the wall. One of a healthy tooth and the other of a decayed one. Cross sections. The healthy one had a pink cushiony gum, cheery little veins running from the root, well defined molar crest, sleek sides. The unhealthy one had a pouchy red gum, brown and black caves of decay, the root deformed by a yellow bag of infection. I would try to look at the floor or the healthy poster but my eye was continually drawn to the unhealthy one. But anything was better than looking at the door where any minute the dentist, Dr Ramlaken, might appear.

I would have liked to describe him as a villain with corkscrew eyebrows and hair in his nostrils, but he was as handsome as a prince in a Bollywood film. His pencil moustache, long eyelashes and swooping hair at the temples gave him an actorly look which didn't go with his white coat, rust-stained at the wrists from ancient sprays of blood.

He never spoke. Whistling, jerks of the head, winks and gestures were his only means of communication. These always followed the same pattern. He'd put his head round the door, stare until he caught my eye, give me a slow wink and beckon with his finger. To my anxious inquiries as to what he was going to do to me his only answer would be a whistled tune and a raised eyebrow as he screwed the drill head into his drill. I'd lie there, feet up, head back, in total terror.

Suva had electricity but he didn't bother with it. His drill didn't need it. Driven by a pedal, slowly pumped with his foot, it was the oldest type you could get, even then. It's a well-known fact of dentistry that the higher the speed of the drill, the slighter the pain. Instead of the brisk whine of such machines today, this had a jangly growl. The drill head had to be changed frequently — with a wink and a smile. When I asked him how many more heads we'd have to use before it was over, he lied, holding up two fingers when there were five, five when there were ten and so on. What sweet relief when he turned from the drill and, whistling, mixed the paste for the filling. Then I knew it was over.
But I wasn’t a child who let things get her down. I tried to forget Dr Ramlackan from one visit to the next and my jousting with Miss Clements was superficial. There are hints in the diary we even quite liked each other. She chose me to help her decorate the Town Hall for the fancy dress ball and, one afternoon, at my request, we put on a play. ‘I was a snake and a monkey, Roz was a monkey, Wendy was a crocodile and a monkey, Rosemary was a head monkey and an ordinary monkey, Anne King Irving was an Indian Boy and a monkey.’ I was still mad on theatricals and although this was the only time we did any at school, I did plenty in my spare time.

Roz, Wendy and Rosemary were my special friends and we put on concerts and plays at one another’s houses. Roz (Rosalind Simpson of the giant appendix) had red hair — not the sandy type like Mossy Frisby, but the deep red of an autumnal maple leaf worn in looped-up plaits. Her freckles were the same shade, so thick you could hardly see the pretty elfin face behind them.

We had a strange relationship. From my diary entries you’d never guess we were friends. I describe her at Wendy’s birthday party: her too-long green organdie dress, matching bright green socks, enormous bow in her hair and ‘long skinny boney legs with polished freckles and shining red hairs’. I do, however, end the insulting description with: ‘But you can’t help liking her sometimes.’

Wendy was English: bluebell eyes, snowy skin, buttercup hair worn short, smoothed and clipped back. Everything about her was clean and neat. The contents of her school satchel had a newly minted look. Even her paintbox was unsmeread. Her home, her room were orderly and full of things you weren’t allowed to touch. The family flaunted their Englishness. She and her parents stood to attention when God Save the King was played on the radio. There were pictures of Winston Churchill on the walls including an embroidered one picked out with antique buttons she and her mother collected.

Wendy, Roz and I had been friends for years but Rosemary was a recent arrival from Australia. ‘The girl McFarlane came
today,’ I report. ‘She is in form 2.’ A few pages on, I describe her demotion to our class. ‘I met Rosemary looking very forlorn with her books all bundled into her little thin case. She said she had to go down into my class (those terrible people at the school made her) I said I would try and get her a nice seat.’

The demoted Rosemary was therefore older than us and fully developed. Hers was the first mature female body I’d seen in the nude. We went to Nukulau for a school picnic and shared the same changing shed and I was amazed at how different she was from me. She was a thin girl and it wasn’t noticeable in clothes. But now I saw them. The breasts. The pubic hair. Breasts I’d glimpsed before, down ladies’ fronts; but the hair was a surprise. Hers was purply pink from a lathering with mercurochrome, probably to treat some mild skin rash. But I thought it was to treat the hair — that it shouldn’t be there and such a treatment would remove it.

Rosemary was naturally interested in boys — proper grown up ones, not little ones like John Cummings — a fact I referred to with scorn. ‘Flirty Rosemary had her hair up in a la Popodor style. She talked about how much the Americans in Australia loved her and so forth. “And Oh” she said rolling her eyes heavenwards and clasping her hands in a dramatic attitude. ‘And Oh. They simply adored me. There was one man there. I was his sweetheart. And he was handsome. Whew! Whew! He was beaut! He was bonza! and he thought I was the preddiest girl he ever saw”.’

How dull and childish Rosemary must have found us. ‘After tea we had a concert, with nursery rhymes by Gay, poems by me and Wendy and then we had a play, and we all dressed up. Red Riding Hood was the name of the play. It was lovely fun! Then Rosemary said she was going to do an item. She sang the flirtiest song, something about “But I knew dear, somebody else was gizzing you”. After this they trooped happily home and I went straight to bed.’

I think I wrote unflattering things about my friends to make my diary seem secret and forbidden. A home-made cover with protruding flaps padlocked together wasn’t enough to protect it, I was continually finding complicated hiding places:
under a loose floorboard, in a hollow tree. Wendy and Roz also started keeping them and did the same. We either created elaborate games to find the hiding places or simply clawed the diary from its owner’s hands, straining to read what was written there and, if it was an insult, rained the offender with thumps.

In any case, my diary was highly unreliable and although full of virulent descriptions of friends it was as heavily censored as the letters filled with oblong holes my parents received during the war. Everything had to be light and happy and babyish. No real anger or sorrow was ever registered there.

And sorrows I had in plenty. Mainly because of my pets. There were no vets and vaccinations, baits were laid regularly throughout the town to kill any strays, gardens were seething with ticks, there were no fences to keep animals off the roads. Their lives were short and tragic.

Once I spent all night lying on the floor of the back veranda beside my dying kitten, stroking him and weeping. He wheezed as he breathed and his fur was hot. He gradually became cooler and his breathing quieter. Thinking he was getting better, I drifted off to sleep, my arms around him. When I woke I started stroking again. But what was this? No longer a kitten but a hard wooden toy. Four straight stiff legs, a rigid head. Cold under his dulled roughened fur. This shocking event I never recorded.

Another cat, Pussy, lived long enough to feature in the diary. I have pictures of him playing with a ball, sitting beside the family group, chasing a mouse.

Pussy got spectacularly run over and I was shaken for days but his death was given only a casual passing mention: ‘Michal had the sweetest little black kitten with white paws and a pink bow round its neck for a present for Gay and I. It is sweet! Mummy excepted it because our old pussy died three days ago.’

The black kitten we called Smokey and he lasted less than a month. I couldn’t find him one day and looked for hours, desperately calling his name and praying in my head. Dear God. Let me find Smokey. I’ll make my bed every morning. I’ll never tease Gay again. My arms were criss-crossed with scratches from
parting bushes and pulling down branches, my fingers full of splinters from searching on top of beams under the house. At last I saw white paws peeping from a bush. Delighted relief. Smokey, darling Smokey. I pulled him out and cradled him, my face nestled in the fluff of his neck. Then something wet, slimy on my cheek. White foam oozed from his mouth. His dead eyes stared. I had a total loss of appetite and fits of sobbing for two days. ‘Smokey picked up a bait and died. Boo hoo!’ I flippantly write.

I made a cemetery for the pets and for any other dead creatures I came across: a squashed toad on the road, half a mouse. The graves were planted with flowers and bushes and crosses with the names of the departed.

Absent from the cemetery was the most beloved pet of all: a parakeet Pauline’s mother gave me for Christmas. Brilliantly plumed in green, red, turquoise and yellow, he would sit on my shoulder for hours, from time to time gently nibbling my ear. I would take him to Suva Point on our Sunday drive and walk with him along the seafront, the envy of my friends. At picnics he would sit on the edge of my plate, nip up tiny pieces of food and roll them under his nubbly tongue, looking at me with a cocked head and inquiring beady eyes — bright as a Quiz Kid eagerly waiting to be peppered with difficult questions. Once he became drunk after downing a neglected glass of beer: dancing crookedly on the tablecloth, hopping and clawing at the side of his head, giving trilling little squawks. He loved to have his head scratched and would become drowsy with bliss, sometimes falling fast asleep upright on his frail red legs. When I came home from school he’d be waiting for me in a bush near the gate.

At night he slept in an aviary with empty crumbling perches and rusty netting. One morning he wasn’t there. For days I desperately wandered down roads and along tracks looking for him, calling his name. My heart would leap at a glimpse of him out of the corner of my eye. Then a sinking feeling as I realised it was only a flower stirring in the wind.

‘Never mind darling. Cocky’s happy somewhere,’ my mother comforted. ‘He just flew away. Back into the wild.’ I so
wanted to believe this but couldn’t. His wings were clipped so he flew only short stretches close to the ground. The hole in the aviary had been made by some brutally tearing creature, not by a small bird. But the diary version of events is the same as my mother’s.

Not only are the deaths of animals censored but the shortcomings of parents. The terrible evening my father behaved badly lived on in my head, but not on paper.

A radio production of *The Christmas Carol* was to be broadcast on Christmas Eve and I was chosen to play Bob Cratchit’s daughter. We had several rehearsals. Mr Haden, the Minister for Education, was a splendidly cackling Scrooge. I was thrilled. Acting in public again. And on radio. *Appointment with Fear, Biggles, Paul Temple*, all the exciting dramas I listened to, were going to be at one with me, the Cratchit child. The same waves. The same world — the recording studio with the man in the glassed-in box, the red light indicating we were on the air, the microphones on stands with their hoods marked ZYX, the sound effects man. He flapped a book briskly on a plank for the patter of children’s feet, he wriggled a piece of tin to make thunder, he crushed up paper, ball by ball, to create footfalls in the snow. I never wanted the rehearsals to end.

Christmas Eve came. We were all nervous but the play went smoothly, even the Cratchit boy was much better than usual. I’d complained about him: ‘I have to work in with a huge fat boy called Robin Thomson. He never comes in at the right time and he speaks in a lazy voice when it should be bright and a happy one when it should be sad.’ But on the night he got it right.

There were about ten minutes of the play to go. The door creaked. Something was badly wrong. The red light was on and entry strictly forbidden. Everybody turned to look, the actors still keeping to their roles but anxious nevertheless. The door was opening. Slowly. A swaying, grinning, red-faced figure entered. My father. His gaze woozily slid around the room, pausing on the looped garlands above the microphones, the tinsel hanging from the ceiling.
‘Chrishmush,’ he said, beaming.

The sound effects man flapped one hand at his mouth and made dampening motions with the other. A female arm appeared around the door and pulled at my father’s sleeve. The technician in the glass box looked stunned above his instruments.

‘CHRISHMUSH,’ he repeated loudly.

The technician came to life and gestured like an angry monkey in a cage.

My father saw him and made a benevolent ‘I’ve understood’ sign. But he took no notice of the pulling at his sleeve, came even further into the room and stood there smiling and swaying. I turned away and stared at the microphone, shame and rage curling up my insides.

This was the second occasion I’d seen him drunk and it was the last. The other time wasn’t as bad because it was only in front of me and my mother. He was sitting at the table and started to swing like a pendulum from side to side. With each swing he gave a whoop and went a little further down. Finally he fell off his chair and rolled under the table.

This is what I was now terrified of, as I stood there staring at the microphone, the cast around me reading their parts in tense altered voices. What if he fell over?

In the diary my father is whitewashed: ‘At last 7.15 came and off I went in the car to the broadcasting station. We were all on tenderhooks and very nervous specially me. burrrrr. After that daddy called for me and we went to Lou’s (Aunty Dolly’s). Aunty Dolly gave me some Kola and Ginger Pop and then put me to bed in Uncle Bob’s big soft bed. I’m so excited. Xmas tomorrow.’

Because of all the parties my parents went to I often drifted off to sleep to the sound of ladies’ squeals and shrieks, the boom of masculine laughter, clattering sounds and bumps. Some people had pianos and they’d gather round them and sing. We had a pianola that played itself, the music unrolling on a perforated sheet, the keys moving as if played by a ghost.

When not at parties my parents were off to the ‘watering holes’ as they were called: the Defence Club, the Fiji Club, the
Metropole Hotel, the Grand Pacific Hotel. Sometimes they held balls and my mother would wear a long dress and a rhinestone necklace and my father black trousers with a satin stripe, a stiff white jacket and shirt front, a black bow tie and a red cummerbund. She helped him with the cummerbund. He'd hold one end on his stomach, then slowly twirl towards my mother who held the other end some distance away. As he turned, the sash encircled his waist until he reached her arms where she laughingly tucked it in.

My mother was always talking about the parties and the people there. The ones she liked: ‘lovely person’, ‘charming man’, ‘sweet girl’, and those she didn’t: ‘upstart’, ‘ne’er-do-well’, ‘nicompoop’ for men, ‘trollop’, ‘flibbertigibbet’ for women. I knew she’d borrowed some of these expressions from her Irish mother who was renowned in our family for her vivid language. Heavily made-up eyes were ‘two burnt holes in a blanket’. A big sloppy kiss ‘sounded like a cow pulling its foot out of a bog’. My mother bending over had ‘a bottom like a camp oven’. But it was only my grandmother’s metaphors my mother emulated, otherwise she and her sister Mary disapproved of her and treated her like a wayward child: ‘Stop that nonsense Mum’, ‘Get your coat on Mum’, ‘No you can’t have any more money Mum’. No more money or she’d gamble it away before the day was through, on horses, dogs, whatever was going.

When there wasn’t a party my parents went to ‘the pictures’ and usually took me. The curfew was lifted. Matinees had come back — morning sessions for children with cartoons and films about little girls wanting to become ballet dancers or detectives with dogs who solved crimes. I’d go along with Gay but found it all a bit babyish, even for me. I preferred the more adult stuff of the evenings. But my father was embarrassed by kissing on the screen. He’d wiggle about, keep looking away, laugh nervously. If he suspected there was going to be a lot of kissing in a film, he’d leave me at home. Nothing made me more frustrated. I was sure I was missing out on a superlative experience and would spend the time they were away in enraged sobbing. No mention in the diary, of course: ‘Mummy and daddy
went to the pictures. I stayed with Pauline and made two little mats. One for Gay and one for me.’

To miss out on something was one of my greatest dreads. Jealousy gnawed at me when my mother at last accepted an invitation from Adi Marisela to visit Macuata and I couldn’t go because of school. It’ll all be lost on those two, I thought. Gay was too young to appreciate the adventure and my mother disliked sea travel. I wanted to explore every corner of Fiji, every island, every mountain and, without an invitation from the chief, Mathuata was impossible to visit. A once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. There is even some resentment in my diary: ‘Mummy wants me to draw some pictures of her going over to Naduri. These things happened about a month ago yet mummy is still telling us about her adventures at Mathuata.’

Then Jean Simmons and the cast for Blue Lagoon came to Fiji and started filming in the Yasawas. My father went there on a copra-collecting trip. All I wrote was: ‘Daddy said he’d never seen a lagoon so blue.’ But unlike Macuata, I didn’t feel the Yasawas were a lost cause. I was determined to visit them one day.
The tall ship *Ra Marama*, our yacht for the Yasawas, was waiting for us at the jetty, graceful and serene, her sails furled, her prow slim and high. I couldn't believe I was going to travel on her. She seemed the province of millionaires. Yet it was the cheapest of the Yasawa cruises and run by Fijians — sleekly and well so far, with no sign of the ‘Fiji time’ everyone talked about. The shiny blue mini bus arrived not a second late. No Mother Hubbard and *sulu* for the lissom hostess, but a figure-hugging sea-blue uniform that showed a glimpse of dazzling leg as she climbed back on to the bus. The driver was also smartly uniformed and beside him, facing us, was a big soot-black man with a gentle pensive face in a navy and white striped T-shirt, who said his name was Boassa and that he was in charge of our trip.

Ethnic buildings at the wharf housed a snack bar, a souvenir shop and a reception area for the various cruise ships. The souvenir shop was packed with tourists. ‘Hey you guys,’ shouted one of them in front of a coconut husk mannikin. ‘Dig this neat human head.’ He beckoned with his tin of Coke to his friends and they gathered round guffawing. They were all dressed alike — tent-wide shorts, saggy T-shirts, back-to-front baseball caps, sockless, gaping trainers with the tongues sticking up. Slurping tins of Coke or beer, constantly letting out snorts of laughter, they were throwing themselves into a wild holiday.

At a word from Boassa, we all filed out to join our cruise ships. The rowdy group, drink tins waving, trainers flapping,
shouts and chortles ringing out, branched off towards a more distant jetty where a small boat was moored with a sign saying ‘FUN CRUISES’.

Our group was more subdued. While crew members served us pineapple cocktails on deck, Boassa asked us to introduce ourselves and to memorise one another’s names as we were going to be like a family for the next three days. There was a quiet German couple, three young New Zealand men travelling together, Lars, an androgynous-looking Swede, and Eva, a squat German girl who’d lived in London for years and was now completely Anglicised.

As we were a bit slow at becoming a family, Boassa and the crew warmed things up by playing us guitar music. The crew could sing American and Fijian songs and also climb masts and deftly secure ropes, cook and serve delicious meals and instantly memorise all our names. Fijians have a phenomenal memory for them and often can’t understand those who haven’t. Later one of them helped me over a reef and I thanked him, asking him his name. ‘Look Patsy,’ he said, ‘we’ve been together two days and you still can’t remember my name. I don’t forget yours.’ He gave a smile, however, as Fijian severity always has a hint of playfulness.

There was only one woman in the crew, young with a happy face and a dainty neck, who didn’t seem to be confined to womanly duties and was at ease with the men, being neither flirtatious nor withdrawn, meek nor prickly. But it was difficult to gauge the position of modern Fijian women with regard to their menfolk.

In cannibal times they were extremely subservient. Not only did they cater to their husband’s slightest need in life, they were expected to do so after his death, being ceremoniously strangled at his funeral to ensure they’d be his cook and cleaner for eternity. Mary Wallis told of one devoted wife in a Christian community who begged to be allowed to do things the old way. Strangle me, strangle me, she pleaded. Her husband had been dead three days and would be getting thin and weak because she wasn’t with him to prepare his meals. She was inconsolable when they refused.
In the Forties I had only two widely differing couples to go by — the mutually devoted Adi Marisela and her Ratu, Sala and her brutal boyfriend. During the war Fijian women’s responsibilities changed. With most of the men away fighting, they took over in the villages: tended fruit and vegetable gardens, cut firewood, built houses. There was a woman village chief, a woman town crier, many conducted church services. One became so confident she left her village, went to Australia and trained as a pilot.

But the war also brought something that chained them to their womanly role: wool. Mrs Willoughby Tottenham, Mrs Storck (Maureen Southwick’s mother) and other members of the ‘Fiji Patriotic Knitting and Sewing Circle’ called for volunteers to teach Fijian women how to knit. With the help of Lady Maraia Sukuna — wife of Sir Lala — they set up knitting bees all over the country. Balls and balls of khaki wool flooded into the islands. ‘Every woman in Fiji is now busy with a pair of needles,’ boasted the Fiji Times & Herald. Balaclavas, socks and jumpers were turned out in hundreds to keep soldiers and air-raid victims warm. Fijian women could chop wood and give sermons but in between they had to knit.

The report made in 1944 on the village of Deuba criticised Fijians’ sexual relationships — similar to ours today. Frank and egalitarian, either sex could make the first advance. Parents were unconcerned about the affairs of their unmarried daughters which were with long-term boyfriends and usually ended in marriage.

Fijians were religious, ‘excessively’ modest, but not puritan — unlike the writers of the report who said sexual freedom might bring the natives happiness but ‘may not encourage the sublimation necessary for mental development’. I was later fed this idea as a teenager and young woman: that love and desire when assuaged could be destructive. Lovers became lethargic, almost idiotic. A virginal girl was vital and radiant whereas a non-virginal one was dull of eye and mind. The lucky Fijians were evidently never befuddled with this Victorian claptrap.

During a pause in their singing, the crew served us a lunch of seafood and salad in foil-lined baskets decorated with hibiscus.
Then came plates of fresh fruit. At last. Slices of deep-gold pineapple, slivers of honeydew melon, fragrant chunks of mango. The Ra Marama sped across the calm sea, a light haze like a voile curtain protecting us from the full heat of the sun and softening the outlines of the islands on either side.

We were sitting next to a care-worn looking Englishman who’d been introduced as being in charge of a luxury cruise ship, the Reef Escape. He pointed it out to us, moored off an atoll: glassed-in staterooms, swimming pool, air-conditioning.

‘I’m not going far with you,’ he said gloomily. ‘Have to see some village people about leasing land. Could go on for weeks. They love negotiating. I’ve brought Jo over there to help.’ He nodded towards a gnarled elder chatting with the crew. ‘And of course I’ve got plenty of that.’ He waved towards a pile of kava root bunches. This plunged him into further gloom. ‘Don’t you believe a thing they say about kava being a great drink, harmless, all that. It’s just as bad as anything else. Worse. Makes the circulation slow down. Even stop. They get gangrene. Limbs fall off. Kidneys pack in. Dreadful stuff.’

When I told him I lived in Paris he cheered up somewhat. ‘Paris! I know Paris. Gay Paree. Rue de la Paix. Moulin Rouge. Eiffel Tower.’ He looked wistfully across the water at a large island that was beginning to define itself into forest, crenulated mountain tops, village-fringed beach. ‘I certainly wouldn’t mind being in Paris right now.’

We were going to make a short stop to let him and Jo off and then we’d continue under sail to the next island where we were going to spend both nights of the cruise. The Ra Marama had too few cabins to sleep us all.

‘You’ll like it. Very nice spot,’ he said. ‘All the beach blown away by the cyclone but a very nice spot. It’s looked after by a fine fellow. His wife just died. Royal blood. One of Cakobau’s pecadillos. You know — illegitimate son. Must be about sixty now. Been working for us for the past few years. Builds the bures, looks after the gardens.’

I wondered whose son he could have been. There were two prominent Cakobaus in Fiji when we lived there — both of an
age to have been his father: Ratu Edward and Ratu George. They were as nearly revered as Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna. With him they had flanked the Governor at official ceremonies in their Saville Row *sulu* suits, like him they’d been educated at Oxford, fought in the war (World War II in their case), became distinguished statesmen.

The Englishman climbed into the dinghy with his negotiating assistant and bunches of limb-devouring kava root and chugged away across the jewel-green water of the lagoon, waving to everybody on the *Ra Marama*. We waved back.

Then we properly set sail. The crew scurried up the masts, heaved at ropes. Windlasses creaked, sails cracked free. In no time the thick yellow folds were filled and billowing. The three New Zealanders had climbed down into the heavy net that hung from the point of the prow and were lying there, as if in a giant hammock scudding across the waves. The constant banter they kept up together — almost a secret language — was whipped around and away by the wind. The haze shredded in the sky showing wide patches of blue. I chatted to Boassa saying how it was a shame thatched *bures* always turned out to be tourist resorts and Fijians now made their own houses from tin and cement. ‘Oh. Oh. Patsy,’ said Boassa in his deep rum-caramel voice. ‘You won’t find a Fijian building a *bure* these days. If a Fijian builds a *bure*, everyone in the village says “He must be a poor man”.’

The demise of *bures* can be traced back to the war. Especially for those in and around Suva. The colonial administration said they were dangerously inflammable and if there was any bombing or shooting, they’d go up first and set European homes alight. Sheets of corrugated tin were given out free to Fijians.

We were approaching our island, its sheer mountains copper-tipped by the sun. Small *bures* began to appear and a bigger one the cyclone had blown down, the walls caved-in, the roof lop-sided. A *lali* shed defined itself, and an open-sided construction made from rough poles and leaves.

Cakobau’s son was waiting on the beach. He didn’t look like Ratu George or Ratu Edward, but like Seru Cakobau, the cannibal king. The same craggy Easter Island face, finely chiselled
mouth, long lithe build, the same weary, all-knowing eyes. But whereas Seru’s eyes no doubt owed their expression to an excess of bloody battles, of feasting on human flesh, of sparring with missionaries fighting to save his soul, our host Cakobau’s was probably due to having to welcome a new load of tourists every three days.

Grave-faced and courteous, he helped the ladies out of the dinghy on to the beach — or what was left of it. All the sand had been sucked away by the giant tide during the cyclone, leaving bleached coral and oval white stones.

The streamlined organisation of the Ra Marama cruise again became apparent. The crew sprinted ahead of us with huge bags of equipment and by the time we reached the bure they were neatly furnished with mattresses, sheets, pillows, bedside tables. They had sand floors and small paneless windows.

Our bure had a black spider the size of a scull cap on the ceiling.

‘Gay! Gay! Look at that spider!’

‘It’s not going to hurt you. It’s only a tarantula.’

But she knew what I was like about spiders and before I could go on with my usual stuff about how, in any case, I’d have a heart attack if it crawled on me, went off to find Boassa. Even she didn’t feel like dealing with one that size. I waited outside on the stony beach.

My fear of spiders began in Fiji. I’d seen plenty just as big in Australia but I was never afraid of them. The first fright I had was when I was sitting on the toilet in the Denison Road house and saw one on the back of the door. It was an outside toilet like the one in Waimanu Road but without the bat-infested arbour connecting it to the house. I felt vulnerable and fearful perched over that foul black pit and the spider — hairy, large and poised to jump or run at lightning speed — suddenly intensified and symbolised my fear.

‘Sala! Sala!’ I shrieked. I knew she was just outside hanging up the washing.

‘Yes, Bedzy. Wasamatter Bedzy?’
'A spider! A spider!' As if she knew exactly where spiders put themselves in toilets, she opened the door just enough to reach in her arm, unseeingly feel for the spider and seize it.

When I came out she was stepping lightly around the garden, tilting her head from side to side in time with her step, the spider still in her fist. Its legs protruded between her fingers and she picked them off one by one: like daisy petals, ‘He loves me. He loves me not.’ Then threw the remains into a bush. I felt pity for the spider. But only briefly. Many others appeared on the back of the toilet door and I always called for Sala to remove them. Later when Sala was replaced by Pauline I got her to do it as well. But she didn’t dismantle them like Sala did. She took them up gently and let them free to run off somewhere else. Probably back to the toilet door.

By the time I was a teenager in the Solomons my fear of spiders had reached hysterical proportions. I would think of them in the plane going home for the school holidays and work myself up into a lather of dread. They were scarier than the Fiji ones. Genuine equatorial jungle types. Walnut-sized body. Horned head. Furry rugby-player legs. They crawled into our Quonset hut house at night. Before getting into my bed I’d inspect under it with the kerosene lamp. Once its glow caught something round and white. It moved fast towards me. A mother spider with a huge bag of eggs. I yelled. My father came rushing into my room with his gun, which, like most Solomon planters he kept beside his bed. ‘What the HELL,’ he roared when he saw it was only a spider.

I have improved since then. But am still fairly scared. Boassa soon appeared with Gay and then disappeared into the bure. It shook as he lunged about inside it.

‘Aren’t you two ready?’ he asked as he came out again, job done.

‘Ready?’

‘We’re going snorkelling. Everyone’s waiting on the beach.’ We hurried into our swimming costumes marvelling at the
non-stop organisation of the trip. Of course. Snorkelling. We’d been told about it but had forgotten.

On the way to the superior part of the reef in the dingy Boassa gave us an ecological talk. He said that Fijians were now doing everything to protect their natural heritage. All over the South Pacific the most beautiful coral in the world was being destroyed by industrial pollution. Each person must do his bit to protect it. Never step on it. Never litter the ocean. Fight for a cleaner planet.

We plopped off the side of the dinghy one by one into the crystalline water. To see the reef properly we had to dive quite deep. The sky was now fully blue and the sun’s rays pierced the sea and waved around us in curtains and streamers of light. Boassa came by like a great turtle and tapped my shoulder to show me a black and white snake sleeping in a crevice, the pearly decorated home of an octopus, a giant clam. I had perfected my snorkelling technique and was now at ease swimming below the surface, inspecting the reef face. What I didn’t like so much was the fact I was out of my depth. I’d never been a strong swimmer and both the beach and the dinghy seemed far away.

Lars and Eva, who were also weak swimmers, had been given a buoy to come back to when tired. I hung onto it with them and dived from there for some time. Then I came up after a dive to find them gone. They were far in the distance either side of the buoy splashing their way towards the dinghy where the others were heading. My thin cries across the water didn’t reach them. As Gay was a strong swimmer they probably supposed I was one as well and didn’t really need the buoy.

The only thing to do was swim for the beach. My chest was bursting, my sight blurred by the time I got to the shallow part of the reef that fringed the coast. What bliss it was to lower my legs to the ground. Oh No. I mustn’t. Coral. I’ll break it. Too bad. I couldn’t swim another stroke. Crunch, crunch, went the coral under my reef shoes. A massacre.

The others were landing from the dinghy further up the beach. I strolled towards them, calm and unpuffed, as if taking a
different route had been just an idiosyncrasy of mine: I’d wanted a moment to myself, a really good swim. Guilty about destroying the reef, I didn’t reveal my desperate lunge for the shore. They might have guessed I hadn’t been too careful with the coral.

The showers and toilets were in a clearing circled with freshly planted garden beds. The toilets were the same pristine ones we’d had in the Navua River village, the showers were fed by a mountain stream.

After showering and dressing we all gathered for dinner in the temporary pole and leaf structure. Mattresses were laid around on the sand and the food arranged on a long low table. Then guitars and packets of powdered kava were brought out. A slight attempt was made at a kava ceremony but it was clear that the main aim was to drink it. In large quantities. After the first couple of bowlfuls it didn’t seem such a bad drink and I went on with it, like the others. My tongue started to feel enlarged and numb and my eyes heavy. I half sprawled on the mattress.

‘There’s a big difference between your parties with beer and wine and our parties with kava,’ pointed out Boassa. ‘Your parties get noisier and noisier. But ours get quieter and quieter.’

The rollicking songs of earlier in the evening had merged into gentler tunes. I was rather quiet myself and my tongue and cheeks were strangely numb, as if I’d been swilling out my mouth with novocaine. It wasn’t like being drunk, or even sleepy, just a feeling of slowness. I eased myself further down on the mattress so that I was in a near-supine position behind Gay and Lars who were chatting together in a normal lively way without any kava effects.

This put me level with Cakobau’s son who leant back on his elbows so he could talk to me. Talking was an effort but I asked him about his work on the island. He said he’d brought the water down from the hill with a system of pipes he’d worked out himself. He’d plumbed in the showers and toilets and built the *bures*. What he liked best was designing and planting the gardens.

‘Do you? Me, too. I love gardening.’ I’d sensed he was a similar gardener to me. There were square gardeners and round
ones. We were round ones. Not a border was straight, climbers had to arch and not go out at right angles, paths had to wind, trees be planted in circles.

He dropped his rather stately way of looking and speaking and became animated: ‘You wait until you see the fruit and vegetable garden. Very big. Very beautiful. We’re going there tomorrow.’

‘Did you do it all yourself?’
So we were going to do some gardening. I wanted to hear more about this but he suddenly changed the subject: ‘You married?’
‘Yes.’
‘Where’s your husband?’
‘In France.’
He paused, his handsome mouth pensive. ‘Why isn’t he here?’
‘He’s working.’
‘Ah working.’ He paused again, thought about this, then said gravely, ‘I’m single.’

I wondered if I should say something about the death of his wife. I was just about to do so when he said abruptly, ‘I love you.’

I moved from my sprawl into a semi-sitting position. It’s my wanton lounging on the mattress, I thought. That’s why he said that.

‘I mean it,’ he said, sliding himself further along to pursue me behind Lars and Gay. ‘Tonight when everyone has gone to bed. You come and meet me. Near the toilets.’

I didn’t know what to say. I’m always tongue-tied when someone makes a pass, even more so these days when it happens less often. Luckily the main guitar player was calling for song suggestions. I sat up straight, moved along to the edge of the mattress. Gay and Lars lounged back into the empty space and Cakobau was cut off. ‘My Darling Clementine,’ I blurted out, not sure why. Maybe I was thinking of Sala’s boyfriend, his flattened crinkly hair, his hefty watch, his song repertoire. It must have
been an old Fiji favourite because the guitar player swung effortlessly into the song. Putting on an engrossed look, I jiggled my foot and tapped my fingers on my knee in time to the music. Cakobau put out his bowl for some more kava.

I was surprised at his declaration. It was not only unexpected, but seemed impossible. I’d always assumed that white women were unattractive to Fijian men, or all island men for that matter. The mixed-blood children at school always had European names and therefore white fathers. It was never the other way around. Although I suppose there were many reasons for that.

When I was a teenager and then a young woman in the Solomons I never felt the slightest flicker of sexual interest coming from the islanders. Sometimes they weren’t even sure I was female. Once when I’d just arrived home on the plantation for the holidays and was at the far end of the garden in shorts and shirt, one of them, Jackie, who was standing beside my mother at the other end, pointed towards me. ‘Man or Mary, Missus?’ I heard him ask. Now I knew that this idea I’d kept for so long was a mistaken one.

‘You know,’ said Gay on our way back to our bure. ‘You encouraged him a bit. Asking all those questions about his garden.’

‘I don’t see why you can’t ask someone about gardening without them saying they love you and want to meet you near the toilets.’

The bure had a doorway but no door. We lay on our mattresses looking across the beach of stones, glowing like giant sugared almonds in the moonlight, at the sea and the Ra Marama lying at anchor. During the night, something quite heavy half-slid, half-crawled over my foot. I gritted my teeth and lay there. Nothing was going to make me move out of that bure before daybreak.
'You’ll have to cover them up,' Boassa was walking up and down the deck of the Ra Marama, inspecting us lined up on the seats near the rail sipping our morning pineapple cocktails.

‘Cover what up?’ asked one of the New Zealanders.

‘The legs,’ Boassa lowered his voice.

‘But they are covered up.’ He gestured towards the women in the group.

‘No. Not just theirs. Yours, too.’

‘Ours? You mean blokes as well?’

‘Yes. This is a special traditional Fiji village. Modest dress. Men and women. Legs covered up.’ Boassa drew himself up, impressively monumental, like the occasion we were embarking on.

The three New Zealanders went off to look in their backpacks. ‘Can’t guarantee anything, mate,’ said one of them.

Another found a pile of *sulus* he’d bought as presents and distributed them to the men, including Lars.

‘I can’t put that on,’ Lars said, giving Gay and me a wink. ‘It’ll hide my beautiful legs.’

When we were dressed to Boassa’s satisfaction we climbed down the ladder into the dinghy. Theatrical mountains made a semicircle around a perfectly curved bay and lagoon. Boats bobbed with dreaming fishermen aboard. Children sent up little flurries at the water’s edge. Peopled strolled along a wide white beach.
We were met by the chief. A proper silver-haired, *sulu*-clad chief. Not a young man in a football jersey as at the Navua River village. Boassa made a long speech in Fijian and English as he presented him with the kava root. He said how pleased we were to be visiting such a beautiful and famous village, how delighted we’d be to join him in the kava ceremony later.

Then came a tour of the village. First stop a meeting-house *bure* built in the old style on a flower-decked mound, the only one still standing. The villagers obviously didn’t want to be considered poor men and had built their houses of mouldy cement blocks and tin.

Near the meeting house was an obelisk that Boassa explained had been erected to thank God for delivering the village from the measles epidemic in 1875. I wondered if this meant they’d escaped the measles altogether or whether it was to thank God for finally calling a halt to the dying. An even greater scourge than the diseases brought by Oliver Slater and the crew of the *Argo* in 1800, the measles killed one in four Fijians.

King Seru Cakobau had been invited with his two sons, Josefa and Timoci, to Sydney by the Governor there to celebrate the Cession of Fiji to Queen Victoria. They caught measles, but were carefully treated by Sydney doctors and were better by the time they got back to Suva. But they were still contagious. A meeting of chiefs from all over the islands was called to discuss the significance of Cession. They took the measles back to their villages so that every corner of Fiji was infected. Several of the chiefs died and their subjects perished in thousands. In Taveuni the population dropped from 20,000 to 4000, in Ovalau from 1500 to 450. It would have been a miracle if the Yasawas had escaped. Perhaps the obelisk was more of a peace-offering to God than thanks.

After the monument Boassa led us along a neat path to the church. In Fijian villages it was amazing just how trim the paths, the grass verges, the village greens always were — as if they’d been clipped with manicure scissors. It had been the same at Margaret’s in Taveuni. Maybe it was because the hens were allowed to run
wild — a good system, even though you had the bother of hunting for the eggs under bushes and in flowerbeds.

White people’s hens in the Fiji of my childhood were always cooped up in fowl-runs which were soon pecked dry of every blade of grass and probably every worm. The hen-run on Waimanu Road was different. It had a big grassy area where they could run free.

There we had two sorts of hens — normal reddy brown ones of undistinguished breed and my father’s prized White Leghorns. They had been left by the previous tenant. ‘But you’ll have to be careful of the rooster,’ he warned my father. ‘He’s a nasty devil.’

Viciously protective of the hens, it always picked a fight with my father when he visited the fowl-run. Striding up and down with a gimlet eye and shuddering red jowls, it would dare him to come nearer. A kick in the ribs didn’t deter it. It would hurtle back, partly airborne, feet pushed forward, its long spurs pointed like daggers at my father’s shins. More kicks. Flying feathers. Squawks. Sometimes my father would run out with the cock after him, slamming the hen house door in its face only just in time.

Then one day he lost the battle. The rooster got him. It evaded the kicks and plunged its spur into his calf, nearly ripping it from the bone. Yet it was allowed to live, being such a precious possession.

Another day it nearly got me. This was because of the particular layout of our hen run. The grassy part where the fowls were allowed out from time to time was separated from the rest of the garden by a six-foot-high wall topped by a terrace. The birds with their clipped wings couldn’t fly that high so they were effectively hemmed in. Even so, it was only the russet hens that were let out there. The White Leghorns had to stay in the main bare hen run and be fed grain. My father used to get me to help him in the sorting operation.

‘Now you stand here at the door,’ he said. ‘Let the brown hens through, but if you see a white one, push it back with your foot and don’t let it out.’
'What about the rooster?'
'Don't worry. He's locked up in the roosting shed.'
'You sure?'
'Of course I'm sure.'

It was a boring job. At first I was careful in my sorting but soon drifted off to dreamland, my hand limp on the door, my foot stationary for a brown blur, idly swinging at a white blur. Then suddenly one of the white blues became horribly clear. It wasn't a hen but a rooster. I met its terrible eye. Its legs were up in the air, its yellow rapiers pointing at me.

In a way, I didn't leave my dreaming state. As in a dream I raced up the garden. As in a dream I soared up the six-foot wall and landed safe on the terrace. Fear had given me, the most unathletic child in the school, superhuman strength and speed like a desperate mother who can lift a car which is crushing her child.

Nobody knew how the rooster escaped from the roosting house but in any case it was never let out again. Soon the grassy fowl run was regarded as a safe place, even enjoyable, because it was there Gay and I played one of our favourite games: 'Sleeping Hens.'

To put a hen to sleep all you have to do is tuck its head under its wing, rock it softly two or three times and then lie it gently on the ground. Gay and I would catch one, make it go to sleep and place it in a line of others. The winner was the person with the most sleeping birds. Even though she was only three or four at the time, Gay was an expert. She would carefully stalk a hen so it made the minimum of noise when caught — because if it squawked too loudly it would wake up the already supine birds and end the game. She would flick its head deftly under its wing and, with soothing chubby-handed strokes, calm it down and slide it to the ground, her baby face fierce with concentration.

I marvelled at the fact that as she grew Gay became a real live playmate, right there in my home. The big gap in our ages didn't matter. I gladly made myself younger to fit in with her. She took part in our theatricals and I dressed her up in my mother's
hats, high-heeled shoes and lipstick. I invented fairies and elves that watched over her and left her presents in rockeries and tree knots. The imaginary friends she’d invented for herself I accepted as real. A little girl called Doffa often joined us whose every whim I obeyed. I made room for her in the car, gave her extra sweets, didn’t play games she didn’t want to play. ‘Doffa always lends me her paints,’ Gay would say reproachfully, so I’d give in and lend her mine. Doffa had a sister called Joan Banner which meant even more sweets had to be given out, more room made in the car. Later there were visits by a lady called Mrs Dafonoshay who was also very generous with Gay. We’d have long conversations with these non-existant people.

But I wasn’t always all sweetness and patience, putting myself on her level. Sometimes I took advantage of the power of my greater age and knowledge and would deliberately scare her. My hands on her shoulders, I would pin her to a wall or a bed, stare into her eyes and say in a creepy voice: ‘I’m not really Patsy.’

‘I’m not reeeally Patsy,’ I’d repeat in an even more drawn-out shaky way, widening my eyes into terrifying witch-like orbs. The sight of the fear on her face made me fearful in turn. I almost believed what I was saying. Maybe I wasn’t Patsy. Maybe I was someone else. Then she would sense my fear which made hers more acute. Looking into each other’s eyes we’d both become so scared I’d finally let her go. The perverse pleasure this game gave me was hard to resist, although of course I’m not proud of it.

Cruel or kind, Gay couldn’t get enough of our games. On the rare occasions I didn’t feel like playing with her, she’d throw herself on the floor, pull her knees up to her chest and start up a loud monotonous chant. ‘I’m bored. I’m bored. I’m bored.’ She’d swing from side to side and yell louder and louder. She’d stop only if I played with her.

As Gay grew, she also became naughty. Just as I was fairly pliable and obeyed my parents, she couldn’t bear their authority. To be told not to do something drove her crazy. Her tantrums were frightening to watch. So much fury concentrated in such a small frame. They made my mother desperate. ‘Catch her Patsy,’
she would shriek as Gay leapt out of her way like a firecracker. I would eventually get her but hold her loosely so she could escape from my grasp. ‘Oh. She got away,’ I’d say lamely. This would increase my mother’s rage to such an extent she’d manage to grab Gay and lock her in a cupboard or the bathroom. She’d keep her there for hours.

I’d rescue her when possible. The cupboard I couldn’t do much about but when she was put in the bathroom it was easy to free her. An upturned bucket outside the window and I was through, easing her down into the garden. Then I’d hide with her in one of the many cubbies we’d built in bushes or under the house. I’d put her back in the bathroom just before a meal when it was likely she was going to be let out.

I’d have done anything for Gay and she for me. When we moved to New Guinea and then the Solomons and I was sent to boarding school we missed each other terribly. In her letters she counted the days until I’d come home for the holidays. She’d fill me in with what was happening on the plantation — how her baby goat was growing, ‘Daisy has a little uda’. We always talked about each other to anyone who’d listen. She went on so much about me to a little boy she played with, that when I finally appeared, he went home to his mother and announced in a weak, fainting voice, ‘I’ve seen Patsy.’

We copied each other. I, her babyish ways, she, my grown-up ones. When I lay stomach-down on the floor to read the paper, she’d bring her cardboard picture book and lie down in the same way. In a family photo taken just before we left Fiji, I, long-limbed and gangly, have one leg crooked slightly. She, short and rounded, has hers in the same position. I think one of the reasons why I draw myself as such a babyish creature in my diary is that I wanted Gay to enjoy the drawings and feel I was a little girl like her.

Of course, she gave up copying me long ago. And we don’t idolise each other any more. But the feeling is still there. It’s what makes us harmonious travelling companions. Also, we both have the same mixture of curiosity, laziness and energy. When she feels like lolling around, so do I, when I feel like getting going and
doing things so does she. I knew that sometimes she found the pace of the Yasawa trip a little fast for us but, like me, appreciated the trouble they all took to ensure we'd pack in as many experiences as possible into three days.

In the church Boassa seated us in the purple and white draped pews and told us how the village was organised: the chief, the sub chiefs, the *mataqali* (kinship groups). He explained that the people fed themselves by fishing and growing fruit and vegetables but needed money to buy building materials and pay school fees. They earned this by selling their handicrafts. The *lali* was used to call people to church and meetings, the conch shell was blown for all other gatherings.

‘Listen,’ he said, gesturing towards the purple and white draped windows. ‘You can hear the conch shell now.’

A strange underwater sound like the cry of a whale reverberated through the tree tops outside.

‘That,’ continued Boassa, ‘is to tell everyone you’ve arrived in the village.’

He took us to the beach where there was a long alley with palm trees on either side. Under each tree was a woman with her wares spread out before her: shell and seed necklaces, industrially printed *sulus*, a few carved objects, a small amount of *tapa*. Part of the coconut aisle had been swept away by the storm and nuts had been planted to give small new trees, only inches high.

‘They’ll all have varos inside,’ said Gay. A varo is a spongy ball which gradually absorbs the juice of the green nut, a sign the nut is trying to seed itself, to create a new tree. It shrivels away if the nut isn't planted. For us as children it was a rare find — like a pearl in an oyster. Gay was particularly fond of varos and grew wildly excited when someone found her one. ‘Vawo, Patsy. VAWO!’ She’d squeeze the friable ball so hard it would break into filmy pieces.

I knew we were both thinking of swiping a nut up out of the sand. Instead we bought necklaces and *sulus* in an absent-minded way, spending most of this shopping time gazing at the glistening bay and its perfect half-moon of white sand.
Groups of people on the beach had arranged themselves in small semicircles, half lying, heads together, engaged in long lazy conversations. I noticed a group of children, talking to two white girls, who were lying on the sand in a way which made them seem totally at home, as if they’d been there for weeks. Boassa had told us that some travellers found accommodation in the village. I envied them. That was the way to do it. Really get to know the people, instead of being a tourist rushing from meeting bure, to monument, to church, to outdoor souvenir market, to meke, to kava ceremony.

Just past the market Boassa showed me a house half-way down the beach, nearly at the water’s edge. An unusual position. It made it seem more like a boat, drawn up on to the shore and waiting to put out to sea again. It had a bure-type thatched roof but open sides. The cyclone had filled it with sand. Even sand-clogged and windswept it had something appealing about it. Like the house, the furniture was made of poles and sticks, some of the wood with the bark still on, the rest smooth and silver-grey. All sitting groggily in the hills and mounds of sand.

‘This house belongs to an Australian woman,’ explained Boassa. ‘She comes and lives here sometimes.’

The woman intrigued me. She could have been me. I thought of how, for years after leaving Fiji, I longed to come back. Or at least have a home there I could visit. When I was sixteen I made a promise in my diary. ‘When I grow up I’m going to save up a lot of money and I’m going right poste haste to Fiji and I’M GOING TO LIVE THERE TILL THE END OF MY LIFE (of course I’ll have occasional trips abroad but that would be my home) THIS IS A VOW. Signed P.’

I broke my promise. Instead I went poste haste to France and stayed there for the rest of my life. It wasn’t in my plans. I came from London for the weekend and just stayed on. I looked at the stranded, sand-filled, driftwood house and thought of my cottage in Normandy, bought with my inheritance — the money my father had made in the Solomons — cradled in a misty green valley with its fruit trees and oak half-timbering hundreds of
years old. And of our Paris flat, its view of the Seine and the Bateaux Mouches with their banks of arc lights, turning the buildings into alabaster. How far, far I’d come from Fiji.

The village men were waiting for us in the kava hall at the other side of the bay. This was clearly going to be a proper kava ceremony. They were wearing leis, anklets and armbands of leaves, grass skirts with sulus underneath. One of them waved the root around again and again in a large carved bowl called a tanoa. Giant white cowrie shells were tied by a long sinnet rope to the tanoa and stretched out before the chief. Nobody must step over the rope. It would enrage the spirits. One of the New Zealanders was chosen as guest of honour. He was served the first bilo, or half-shell, of kava by a half-kneeling, half-walking warrior. He had to clap once on accepting it, say ‘bula’, drink it down in one go, clap three times in thanks. The Fijians clapped back. One by one, we all followed this ritual.

Kava ceremony over, we were taken outside for the meke. The women were waiting there, wearing false tapa round their waists, long black sulus, white puffed-sleeved blouses, paper flower leis. Some of the men brought out musical instruments: bamboo pipes, miniature lalis. Mekes tell stories — of fights, hunting, love affairs, games of seduction — but they are quite restrained.

This modesty, almost primness, of the Fijians existed before the spread of Christianity. Mary Wallis writes how Fijians were shocked by Tongans’ dancing and found it obscene. She describes a Fijian meke: ‘Some of their movements were graceful, some ridiculous, but none which the most chaste might not witness. Every part of the body appeared to be exercised more than the feet. The figure of the dance was difficult but pretty. Could the Polka dancers of civilised lands witness this, they might learn modesty at least.’

The tralala, which came after the meke, was even more modest and probably not missionary influenced either. It was their own discreet imitation of white people’s dancing and was very easy to do. Just as well, as we were expected to do it with
them. There are few things I find more pathetic than grinning tourists in floppy beach gear joining in locals’ dances. At least this wasn’t almost impossible to follow like Breton reels or Hawaiian hulas, where each part of your body is supposed to move at a different speed from the other and, trying to keep up, you descend more and more into lumpen awkwardness. For the tralala, partners stood side by side, arms lightly around each other’s waists, and took little steps forward and back to the music. But in spite of its simplicity, I still wasn’t happy. Unconsoled by the beauty of the muscle planes of my young partner’s body and the gleaming smoothness of his dusky skin, I was glad when our shufflings ceased.

Back on the Ra Marama, sailing on the small brisk waves, sitting on deck eating delicious crayfish salad washed down with guava juice, I felt restored. After lunch there was a choice between snorkelling and fishing. Gay and I chose fishing. Snorkelling meant being put out in the middle of the sea on an invisible reef. We both had in mind the Australian story of the two divers who were forgotten by their diving party. They popped up after their dive to find their boat disappearing and finally perished. We imagined coming up after a long deep reef inspection to see the Ra Marama, her straining sails carrying her away. ‘Where are Patsy and Gay?’ ‘Oh. Down in the cabin getting changed, I think.’ ‘Fine. Full speed ahead.’

The female crew member also chose to fish. She helped us with the lines, hooks, bait. Gay didn’t need any help as she is an expert fisherwoman. The skill required to know exactly when a fish has opened its mouth around the bait to the right extent to plunge the hook into it with a jerk of the line, I don’t seem to have.

Even when Gay was very young she was good at all types of fishing: line fishing — either standing on the reef or from a boat in deep water — or underwater with a spear gun. Wherever she was, she hauled them in.

I was so hopeless I even had my photo taken in the Solomons with a groper. This was a big impressive fish for a photo, but no self-respecting fisherman would ever be seen with
one. Inedible, slow moving, they fell on your line. If you were unlucky enough to pull one in, you threw it back. But not me. I had my photo taken with it. At least it was a fish.

Gay hadn’t lost her touch. The fish were piling up beside her — mostly reef varieties, they were smallish with beautiful colours and markings. Some she was told to throw back as reef fish can be poisonous. Locals are infallible in their judgement and if you follow them you’re safe. As usual I had nothing on my line.

The snorkellers returned and we turned around and sailed back to our island. Going down the path to the showers I passed Cakombau’s son, driving poles into the sand with easy powerful strokes.

‘Building a new bure?’ I asked to show I wasn’t unfriendly. He didn’t pause in his rhythmical banging at the pole. ‘Our bure,’ he said, a slight smile on his classy lips.

No hard feelings there, I thought. Good.

Later, with Boassa, he took us all on a visit to the main garden. He was right to be proud of it. A miniature Shangri La. Hidden between two mountains, it was verdant and lush and perfectly protected from storms. I now understood why we were able to have an abundance of fruit with our meals.

Boassa turned it into an educational experience. He took us to some pointed sticks poking out of the ground and taught us how to break open coconuts. At the end of the nut are three little holes that seem to make up a face — two eyes and a mouth. You have to bring the nut down with force on to the hole in the mouth position and it will split open. We all tried. Some managed and some didn’t, as it’s not easy to remember which hole is the mouth. He had a bag full of things for us to plant: pineapple tops, pawpaw seedlings, nuts beginning to sprout, mango seeds.

Later, during dinner, he distributed certificates marking the occasion. Mine reads: ‘Certificate of Participation. To: PATSY.’ Over a shadowy outline of the Ra Marama, the text continues, ‘who has participated in the Tropical Garden Nursery and Tree Planting Program at Liku, on the island of Waya, Fiji’
Islands. Recipients assisted in the planting and cultivation of local flora, used extensively in villages throughout the Manumuca and Yasawa islands. Most of these tiny island villages, with an average population of just 200 people, maintain an environmentally friendly lifestyle far removed from twentieth century technology, the local flora providing a traditional source of food, housing material and ceremonial attire.

‘Signed: Ratu, Master.’

Our dinner that evening was a feast. A *lovo* meal. *Lovo* cooks had come over the mountain from a village on the other side of the island and had been working all afternoon preparing the *lovo* oven. First they dug the deep oblong pit, then made a fire in it they kept feeding with wood to build up a quantity of red-hot embers. After that they piled in stones and mixed them with the live charcoal. The food, wrapped in banana leaves, was placed among the stones with more on top, then it was covered with earth and left to cook until mouthwatering, falling apart and succulent. There were clams, lobsters, pork, chicken, Gay’s reef fish, palusami, greens in *lolo*, dalo, sweet potatoes.

Everyone was in an expansive, appreciative mood and Boassa’s hoped-for family feeling was beginning to blossom. By the time the meal was over and the kava drinking session began, a party was well under way. The moon was full, the night was clear, the *Ra Marama*’s rigging hung like black cobwebs against the pale sky. Not only did the Fijians sing and play the guitar, the others did as well. Gay and I even sang *Tie Me Kangaroo Down* in our terrible voices. The New Zealanders knew a lot of funny ballads. Lars came up with a Swedish song which had a chirpy refrain full of strange squeaks and hoots. ‘OK Lars,’ one of the New Zealanders said when he’d finished. ‘They’ll have to lock you up again tomorrow.’

That night I slept well in the *bure*, soothed by the sighing of the small waves on the stones. If anything crawled over my feet, it didn’t wake me.
'I’ve been waiting the whole holidays for this,’ said Eva. ‘And I’m already sick of it.’ She scowled at the postcard brilliance of the scene before us.

We were on Beachcomber Island (real name, Tai), one of the most popular spots in Fiji. It wasn’t far from Viti Levu, the last stop on our cruise, and could be walked around in ten minutes. Tourists were brought there in hordes by shuttle boat, resort launch, speedboat, cruise ship, private yacht, seaplane, helicopter.

Like many coral islands, it had a ‘micro climate’, staying serene and sunny when other places were cloudy and soaked with rain. Water sports of every kind were on offer.

As we lolled on the beach, a paraglider appeared in the vibrantly blue sky suspended from his parachute of linked rainbow sausages. A group of Japanese divers walked across the sand in carefully matched outfits, the colour combinations of their watchbands and diving canisters an exact echo of the mauve, lime-green and sherbet-pink of their wetsuits. Out at sea were rows of windsurfers, sails like bright fingernails slitting silk. From time to time a snorkeller’s head appeared. Every kind of craft possible bobbed here and there at anchor, including jet boats, pedalos and a deep-sea fishing vessel with tiered deck and giant rods.

Yet, according to Boassa, it was relatively deserted. Only day-trippers were allowed as the resort was closed because of
cyclone damage. We’d seen the extent of this on a walk around the island.

For such a small place there was a wide choice of accommodation. A vast thatched building with a forty-bunk dormitory, sand dance floor and huge bar catered for those with limited budgets, while bure-style lodges of varying degrees of luxury, dotted among gardens or edging the beach, were aimed at more up-market guests. The bures facing the sea, the most luxurious, had been the worst hit by the storm. Their facades had been blown in. Brocade cushions, richly counterpaned beds, porcelain baths were buried in brutal swirls and drifts of sand. Verandas and roofs had been torn off.

It was hard to believe in cyclones on such a calm sunny day. The three of us lay on the scorching sand, baking our bones, letting our minds grow vague. In a way I could understand Eva when she grumbled about the sun. Not that I was tired of its longed-for dazzle, but I’d grown used to the softer-hued, subdued Fiji. It suited my nostalgia. This glittering tourist brochure I had to share with everybody. I was jealous of it. That possessive feeling again.

Lars strolled up and sat down beside us, his blond hair glistening with drops, his towel around his neck. ‘So this is it. Last stop. I’d like to go on. See the Blue Lagoon.’

‘So would I,’ I’d managed to get to the Yasawas but would never see the bluest lagoon in the world. Site of the ultimate tropical fantasy. My father had been there and I hadn’t. I’d missed out.

‘Costs too much,’ Lars tilted his fair Swedish face to drink in the sun.

Turtle Island (Nanuya Levu), where the first two Blue Lagoon films were made, was bought in the early Seventies by an American millionaire. The resort he built there claims to be ‘the South Pacific’s most beautiful and exclusive paradise’: 14 bures on 14 private beaches. Guests are limited to English-speaking straight couples only. Drinks and activities are included in the price so they can ‘forget about money’. That is, once they have paid $640 a night for their stay.
During the Speight coup in 2000, some of his supporters decided to reclaim Turtle Island for the Fijians, saying the original deal of land for a few muskets didn’t count. Armed with machettes, they held some guests hostage for a couple of nights, but finally gave up the idea. ‘Honeymoon Britons Flee Nightmare’ went the newspaper headline. So much for ‘heaven on Earth’, as it’s described on the Internet.

But Blue Lagoon or no Blue Lagoon, I didn’t want to leave the Ra Marama. I felt I could have gone on and on, visiting island after island, sleeping on deck like I used to in the Solomons, listening to the creak of the ship’s timbers and the sighing of the sails. For although I found cabins appealing as a child, I grew to envy those who slept on deck: you didn’t get so seasick and I longed to drift off to sleep with my cheek brushed by the sea breeze, drowsy eyelids closing on stars.

But even if I had been able to stay on the Ra Marama exploring the Yasawas, there was no time. We had only three days left in Fiji and I wanted to see Levuka — the old capital — again. It was on the Suva side of Viti Levu and the Yasawas were near Nadi so we’d have to get the plane.

The last stop on this trip, Levuka, was also the final voyage we made before we left Fiji in 1948. Rich clear paints from a new paintbox are used to illustrate it. On the first page of the voyage there’s a picture of our sailing ship, The Viking Aboy perched on giant turquoise waves, on the next, one of my father and I sprawling on slanting bunks with green faces. We’d been to Levuka many times before. It wasn’t a long journey but nearly always rough. In spite of this, I was always eager to go. It was a place of events: the Sir Walter Carpenter cricket cup, the soccer carnival, rugby matches, regattas. Even during the war it was a swinging place. ‘Levuka is proving a most enjoyable spot for the army,’ went a newspaper report in 1943. ‘We have heaps of soldiers every week.’ It refused to fade away, clinging to its identity as a British stronghold. Even its Empire Day celebrations were said to be almost as grand as ours in Suva.
Empire Day, 23 May (Queen Victoria’s birthday), was a solemn occasion. At school we spent it in an orgy of patriotism. First came assembly in the main courtyard around the flagpole, where we would listen to speeches about how we were the empire builders of the future and, as keepers of a glorious heritage, we had to set an example of righteousness, self-sacrifice, endurance and ‘strict obedience to lawful authority’. The Union Jack would unfurl from its mast and we’d salute it, dusty sandalled feet together, backs straight, chins high. In shrill or croaky voices we’d sing *God Save the King* followed by Rudyard Kipling’s *Recessional*.

> ‘God of our fathers, known of old,  
> Lord of our far-flung battle line,  
> Beneath whose awful hand we hold  
> Dominion over palm and pine —’

To close the ceremony the headmaster, Mr Brock, would lead us in cheers for the Empire. Hip. Hip. HooRAH. Then we wrote essays about the achievements of colonial rule, did crayon drawings of the daily life of children in other parts of the Empire, joined our teacher in the rallying cry ‘For God, Duty and Empire’.

Mrs Willoughby Tottenham complained in a letter to the paper that Empire Day was falling off, it wasn’t celebrated in the fervent way it was before the war. But I thought it was fervent enough and Levuka’s Empire Day was rumoured to be even more so.

These efforts of Levuka to remain an important place were understandable. It was the first European settlement in Fiji, founded in the 1830s by a sailor from Massachusetts, David Whippy, as a *bêche-de-mer* trading post. He was a deserter in reverse — deserted by his ship. It put him down there and never came back for him. Into the small settlement flooded debtors, runaway sailors, blackbirders, escaped convicts, derelict Australian goldminers and all manner of shady adventurers and opportunists. They were after the Fijians’ land and their women: resulting offspring being called ‘fruit salad’. Most of their time was spent brawling and drinking cheap gin or a back-shed brew distilled from sugarcane: gunbarrel rum.

‘Rum soaked Levuka’ was a town of fifty-two pubs, built along a flat strip facing the Koro Sea on the volcanic island of
Ovalau. It was rather like Suva was later, the town on the flat waterfront, residents on the hills behind. But in Levuka the seaside strip was only one or two streets wide and the mountainside was so abrupt there was no question of building roads or paths. The houses were reached by long flights of steps. The ones on the flat, lining Beach Street, were a hastily thrown-together slum. A visiting lawyer likened them to shanties from some Australian goldfield, ‘furnished as if they were in England’.

Looming over Levuka was an extinct volcano, home of ferocious hill people, the Lovoni tribe. Even Cakobau was unable to quell them. They regularly descended into the town to attack the residents yet nothing could be done to punish them. They refused to pay taxes levied by Cakobau and when a chief came to discuss matters, they hacked him to pieces.

Hill tribes were always a problem. They hated coastal people, Christianity and Cakobau. Those in Viti Levu, especially in the Sigatoka area where the Reverend Baker had been eaten, were against him and refused to sign the deed of Cession. They’d been right to refuse, they claimed, because what did it bring? The measles. British witchcraft aimed at killing them off and Cakobau was to blame. They went on a rampage.

The new colonial government hastily put together a Fijian army wearing white picket-edged sulus and armed with rifles, who complained that mountain men didn’t fight fairly. ‘They run backwards and forwards so they are difficult to hit.’ But enough were hit to put an end to the war. Governor Gordon pardoned the survivors and told them to return to their villages. He’d won them over completely and later ‘was received in a fashion which I’d never seen elsewhere … All the folks inclined their heads to the left shoulder, and as I passed them, sank down in a slanting position like a row of ninepins.’

Gordon didn’t have to bother with the hill people of Ovalau. The Lovoni tribe had been finally tricked into submission by Cakobau a few years before. This was one of the scandals of Fijian history and was told to Gay and me in full when we visited Levuka.
Not only were the hill tribes cleaned up just before Cession but Levuka as well. With the news that annexation and British justice were on their way, the outlaws, rascally blackbirders and other undesirables melted away. By the time Gordon came there in 1875 he found a changed place: ‘We had imagined it was still the haunt of uproarious planters and white men of the lowest type … instead of which we find it a most orderly and respectable community.’

Levuka didn’t last long as the dignified capital of the new colony, as its shore-lining cliffs stopped it expanding and it needed a better harbour. The Suva area was offered to the Government by the collapsed Polynesia Company and an expert sent from England described it as the perfect location: ‘One of the prettiest in all Fiji.’ That was the end of Levuka. ‘A heartless desertion,’ claimed an early issue of the Fiji Times & Herald, which ‘in the manner of dignity and social consequences may probably have the effect of making Levuka rather dull for some time to come’.

In the Forties it was fighting off this dullness with all its might. Levuka was such an ‘in’ place to go that even my mother braved the sea and small ships to get there. On our last trip she seemed to have an extra reason for going. A man. For some time she’d been talking about him. ‘I’m a terrible flirt, I know,’ she used to say. I was never quite sure what this meant but I knew it had something to do with smiling sweetly at a man and then laughing wildly at nearly everything he said. ‘He’s so dashing. So cultivated,’ she said of Captain Fruen. ‘Has a little red beard. He wants us to have a trip on his private yacht.’

Finally one was organised. The family was invited to sail with him on The Viking Ahoy to the Easter Racing Carnival. We’d live on board during the four days we were there.

Once again in my diary is an excited account of preparations for the voyage: the packing the night before, the getting up early in the morning. Then the description of the main character in our adventure. ‘Off we went, down to the wharf … Captain Frewen came at last with the rest of the passengers. He is a very lardy dardy man with grey hair, ginger goatee and a swooping mostatche.’
He writes plays and snippos or something and always reads long, long, long chapters out of books to you. He sort of floated out of the taxi and said “Ah! Mrs Thomsett and charming daughters” and then shook hands like a wringer.’ Later there is a further description. ‘We had a nice tea and Captain Frewen talked about “when ai was in Egypt” or “when ai was in England” or “when ai was in Palestine” and he asked if the tea was “Coffay? Coffay?”’

These are his only two appearances in the diary. I mostly seemed to do things with my father and Gay. ‘Very early this morning Daddy, Gay and I got up, rolled our bathers in towels and jumped onto the warf. We were going to the Levuka freshwater swimming pool! We creepity-creeped through the slumbering town until we came to the baths. It was the most delightful place with evie trees, rocks and ferns surrounding it. It was all nicely concreted in and had two lovely lemonadey water falls gushing into it.’

This was the same pool mentioned in the paper not long before. The Township Board was urged ‘to use the best means in their power to keep the bathing pool, known as the falls, for persons of European descent’. The tar brush must not be dipped in the lovely lemonadey water.

Judging from the blue sky and sea painted in my diary, it was perfect weather. Yet it was March and still the cyclone season. Gay and I, on our trip back to Levuka in 1997 at the same time of year, weren’t so lucky.

The first drops of the fresh wave of rainy weather started to fall just after we left the micro climate of Beachcomber Island. The crew were serenading us with Isa Lei, the farewell song, and we all had to take refuge under the tarpaulin at the back of the ship. Running and laughing, bent over their guitars sheltered against their chests, they hardly let this interrupt their song.

‘Isa Isa,’ they sang (in Fijian),
‘My heart was filled with pleasure
From the moment I heard your tender greeting
Mid the sunshine we spent the hours together.
Now so swiftly those happy hours are fleeting.’

And wetter as they flew. By the time we reached the Sandalwood Inn in Nadi the rain was drumming on the roof
of the van with the same deafening force it had on the night we first arrived.

Inside it was warm and cheery and we were welcomed like family friends. There was the usual socialising group sitting around in reception, one of them a Fijian woman about my age. She remembered the Suva of the Forties well: the American soldiers, the patriotic *tralalas* at the Town Hall, Nurse Morrison’s.

‘Nurse Morrison’s got burned down in a fire, you know.’

‘A fire!’ I saw Nurse Morrison running out with singed hair, a baby under each arm. Frantic mothers in their nighties. Fly screens turning red hot then melting in the flames.

Behind the counter the owner of the hotel, a Fijian, was taking bookings. One call seemed to make her annoyed. ‘As you like,’ she said crisply and put down the phone.

‘What a rude person,’ she said to me. ‘When I told him the price he said he was sure the Raffles hotel was cheaper and hung up.’

A few minutes later he rang back to say he’d changed his mind and she answered, ‘Oh terribly sorry, but the rooms have gone.’

‘They haven’t gone at all,’ she said to us with a confiding smile. ‘I just didn’t like the way that person spoke to me. If he’d been polite and had said “I’ll just check with the Raffles”, things would have been different.’

Ah. That was good to see. Tourists weren’t just business. They were people and if they weren’t up to scratch they were shunned. The smiles of the staff were genuine.

We were given a big room with several beds for only the two of us. It led directly on to a garden with wire-netting sliding doors that buckled and shook all night as if a hundred demons were trying to get in.

The next day was no better. The little plane from Nadi to Suva bounced around like a ball on elastic slapped by an invisible bat. The one waiting to take us to Ovalau was even smaller, with only two passengers other than us: a pair of military men, one white, the other a Fijian. In spite of its minute size, the plane
needed a lot of attention, not just refuelling but what seemed worryingly like repairs. We talked as we waited.

The soldiers were from different armies and had only just met. The Fijian was with the SAS — the elite British commando unit. It recruited quite a few Fijians. George Speight’s right-hand man during the coup was a former colonel of the SAS.

‘A Fijian can’t get a better job than the SAS,’ he confided. ‘Good life. Terrific pay.’ Not like the war years when the Fijian troops were paid only a fraction of the earnings of white soldiers: two shillings a day. Yet such was his willingness to enlist that a soldier would pay someone three shillings a day to tend his gardens while he was away. But perhaps it wasn’t willingness so much as obedience. The chiefs were having a valiant village contest. The more men they sent to war the more glorious they were. ‘My chief never tells me to do something,’ said one Fijian we met. ‘He asks. But when he asks I do it.’

The white soldier belonged to an Australian peace-keeping force in New Guinea, where some sporadic warfare was going on.

‘Yeah. I just sit there on this hill,’ said the Australian. ‘And one lot comes down from one side of the valley. And another lot comes down from the other side. They take a few shots at each other and then they all go home again.’

The Fijian laughed. ‘Easy war. Home to dinner every night.’

‘What about you lot,’ said the Australian, jerking his chin towards him with a grin. ‘In the old days you would’ve had each other for dinner, eh? That’s what you did then. Eat each other, eh?’

The Fijian gave a forced small smile. ‘Yes. Those were the old times.’ His look suggested he’d often had to respond to crass references to his ancestors’ cannibalism. Fijians must have felt similar on such occasions to me when my mother started out on her Hanka Singh and the Eggs or Kissing Boys story.

We arrived safely on Ovalau but still had several miles to go to Levuka: a long ride round to the other side of the island in a typical Fiji bus full of village people and schoolchildren. The
driver had a T-shirt advertising a brand of grog. This was the name now most commonly used for kava, usually referring to the packaged powdered type, drunk unceremoniously, mixed in buckets and downed in mugs.

He drove with the same nonchalance and wild speed as the one in Taveuni. The scenery was lush rainforest with mostly volcanic black-sand beaches. On some the receding tide left wide flat stretches, ideal for the rugby and football matches we saw being played there.

In Levuka we were breaking our rule of staying in Fijian-owned places as we’d chosen the Royal Hotel, the oldest there, the only survivor of the fifty-two pubs of the early days. It had stayed in the hands of the same colonial family, the Ashleys, over the generations. As far as we could make out, the present-day owner was in a wheelchair and lived in a small flower-garlanded house in the garden. Otherwise the hotel seemed to be run by the young willowy Fijian girl in reception. She moved sinuously around like a swan on its pond, renewing the hibiscus arrangements daily in all the public rooms, giving orders to the kitchen, appearing at the desk whenever we needed her.

‘You are so beautiful,’ she said to us after a photo-taking session with her in the garden. This disarming flattery, part of Fijian politeness, was mentioned by Mary Wallis: ‘If you wish to be noticed, you must come to Feejee, where many pretty things will be said of you, such as, “She is like the face of the sun”, “She is the root of all that is good,” and even, “She is a god”… A Feejeean will never be outdone in compliments.’

Maybe being told we were beautiful was only part of a social code but it was heartwarming nevertheless. And our hearts needed warming. The hotel was sad, empty and full of ghosts. Yet it was still grand: long, two-storied, with dozens of windows facing the sea or the mountains, louvred verandas, dark-panelled lounge, a bar as big as a concert stage with a view across an empty sports oval.

How different it must have been at the time of our visit in the Forties, filled with people who had come to the Easter Racing Carnival. Someone would have been playing the piano in the
corner with others grouped around singing sprightly Forties songs:

‘Maizy Dotes and Dozy Dotes an liddle Lamzidivey,
‘A kideldy divey too, wouldn’t you?’
This translated, when sung slowly, was:
‘Mares eat oats and does eat oats and little lambs eat ivy,
‘A kid will eat ivy too, wouldn’t you?’

What a clever song I thought it was. Or my father’s favourite, *Abdul the Bulbul Amir*:

‘I’ll raise a bunyan on his Spanish onion,
‘If I catch him bending tonight …’

Or my mother’s:

‘Darling I am growing old.
‘Silver threads among the gold …’

Not such a sprightly one, hers.

They would have all been singing, laughing, talking, shouting: ladies in piqué cotton sundresses and peep-toe shoes, men in long white trousers and sweaty shirts. Occasionally there’d be a bang as someone fell over.

Our bedroom was also phantom-filled — from even further back in the past. Each sea-facing room had a closed-in veranda annex with a table and armchair. These were designed for ship’s captains (who, it was said, found the port by following the floating empty rum bottles) so they could sit there and keep an eye on their vessels lying at anchor.

But the most ghostly of all was Levuka itself. It was so like some deserted Australian or American gold-mining town you expected tumbleweed to blow through it. Posts holding up tin awnings sagged, weatherboard fronts bulged with moisture, painted signs were faint with age. Yet there was something touching about them. The shabby little buildings, holding one another up, seemed to be saying ‘Look at us. We are History’. There were a few that impressed. The hundred-year-old Sacred Heart Church with its Gothic coral-stone tower, topped by a green neon cross to guide ships into port now that the rum bottles were gone, the Marist Convent, rambling but perfectly
I go on to describe the garden with its walks and arches, nooks and crannies filled with china gnomes, rabbits, dogs, birds and elves and said we then sat on the veranda and, through strong binoculars, watched the white boats racing on the blue water.

Now the sea below was empty and grey. We could have done a tour of ‘the colonial homes in the hills behind the town which still display their elaborate English gardens’, but opted for one on the flat with Henry Sahai, an elderly dapper Indian. He would never forget the day that Prince Charles spoke to him on
his visit to Levuka in 1970 to celebrate Fiji’s independence. ‘I was a taxi driver at the time. “Taxi driver,” he said to me. “That must be a jolly nice job.”’ He showed us the Council House bure where the prince had spoken to him and the Cession Stones to mark the Cession of 1874 that the prince had visited.

It seemed that only historians were at large on that bleak rainy day. A young man with a folder was noting something down near the stones. He told us he’d come to Levuka to write a thesis on the influence people had had on Levuka and now he’d changed it to the influence Levuka had on people. ‘A fascinating place. The longer you stay, the more it gets to you,’ he assured us.

When Henry took us to the lawn where Cakobau signed the Deed of Cession, a louvre went up in the house nearby, the only surviving building of the original governor’s complex. A friendly face popped out: ‘Hi!’

‘Ah. You must be John Bennett,’ I said. ‘Sanna Sachs Deutch told us to get in touch.’ She was the gracious registrar of the Honolulu Academy of Arts we’d met in Taveuni. Hearing we were going to Levuka, she’d given us the address of a fellow researcher.

‘Oh you know Sanna do you!’ He joined us. ‘Come on, Henry. Let’s show them the museum.’

The museum was in a rejuvenated trading store with a high pediment above the veranda with ‘Morris, Hedstrom Ltd.’ written in Twenties graphics. Morris and Hedstrom were Levuka Public School old boys who’d teamed together and made good. They had a much bigger and better store in Suva, built of stone and concrete and painted white, with a Venetian-like colonnaded arcade along one side mirrored in the Nabukalou Creek. It was one of the sights of Suva. A Pacific Grand Canal.

Sir Maynard Hedstrom was a venerable old politician when we lived there. He’d always shown disdain for the Fijians, claiming they were so low on the evolutionary scale that their lands should be put on sale to Europeans who could make better use of them. It was all very well, he said, for the Government to protect the rights of the natives but it shouldn’t allow them ‘to hinder and obstruct the natural development of the Colony’. Luckily for the Fijians, the Colonial Office refused his petition.
The museum was meagre: some native clubs and forks similar to the ones we’d seen in Jack’s Handicrafts, pieces of crockery and water-worn demijohns from shipwrecks, old guns, a sitar, a World War I gas mask. But there we met yet another historian whose enthusiasm gave these motley objects a glow of interest.

Not all residents were enthusiastic about Levuka. The next morning we asked the girl who’d said we were beautiful if she could suggest things to do in the town. She paused some time before answering, leaning on the reception desk and gazing out across the hibiscus-decked entrance hall, through the glass louvres to the misty, spray-hung sea.

‘Lonely, lonely Levuka,’ she said slowly. ‘There’s nothing to do here.’

‘Nothing?’

‘You could go and see Epi.’

‘Who’s Epi?’

‘He’s from Lovoni village. Takes people on trips there. You’ll find him in Café Levuka.’

The café had an Indian barman with long silver fingernails, heavy make-up and a frangipani behind his ear. With a flutter of his hand he introduced us to Epi who was holding up the bar and seemed glad to meet us. As we all needed lunch we sat down together and ordered palusami.

‘Yes, I can take you to Lovoni.’ His neatFeatured face and slight mountaineer build gave him a child-like air that contrasted with his deep sonorous voice. ‘The only trouble is, my truck’s been slipping badly in the mud.’

‘No, better not risk it.’ I didn’t want to end up a white cross on the edge of a ravine.

So Epi told us the story of the Lovoni tribe and what Cakobau had done to them.

In those days the village was heavily fortified with fences, ramparts, trenches and moats. It was attacked many times but always resisted. Then one day in 1871 Cakobau sent a missionary bringing a message of peace. The heathen priests watched him
coming. The most respected of them, a dwarf, was overcome by the mana of the lone approaching figure. He told the braves to welcome him and put down their weapons. The missionary read from the Bible in Fijian, told them they were the lost sheep of Fiji and that Cakobau had invited them to a reconciliation feast in Levuka.

No sooner had they started feasting than they were surrounded and captured. Cakobau sold them as slaves to any planter who wanted them. The dwarf priest and two warriors were bought by an American circus and toured America in a sideshow called ‘Savages of the South Seas’.

John Thurston, a Taveuni cotton planter who became governor after Gordon and had always acted in Fijians’ interests, saw to it that the land was given back in 1878 and the scattered Lovoni people reunited.

‘So the Lovoni people have survived,’ said Epi. ‘Still the strongest. We were tricked but we’re the only tribe in Fiji that hasn’t been beaten in war. We’re the only people who can go into other villages wearing hats.’

After leaving Epi, we went to see the Ovalau Club. The first private club in Fiji, founded in 1904, it was a wooden-louvred monument to drinking like the Defence Club in Suva where my parents had spent so much of their time. Sometimes I went with them there on a Saturday afternoon. In the toilet was a notice: ‘Flush for major, not for minor.’

We’d seen the Defence Club again during our few days in Suva. It hadn’t changed at all since the Forties. Neither had its noise. You could hear it from a distance: a deep roll of bar talk humming through the air that soared to a climax as we drew near and faded to a purr as we walked away.

The Ovalua Club also hadn’t changed. It had more charm than the Defence Club, having mountains as a backdrop, a garden with a white picket fence and a gate with ‘Ovalau Club’ arching over it on a white wooden banner.

We were told that behind the bar was a letter from ‘the sea devil’ Count Von Luckner. He was famous in World War I for
raiding and sinking allied vessels in the South Seas in a German ship disguised as a Norwegian one. He even had a Norwegian brand name sewn on to his underwear. The gentlemanly letter was to thank a planter for the unsuspected use of his home and larder by his temporarily shipwrecked sailors. He was later captured by the Fiji Constabulary at Wakaya Island not far from Ovalau.

But it was difficult to get near the Ovalau Club. A deep trench had been dug around it by the Public Works Department, which was working there with picks and colourful wheelbarrows. So we looked at it from afar. In any case, I knew it well. It was where I lost Gay.

After the regatta my father told me to mind her while he played snooker in a back room near the bar. I sat on the veranda reading and she wandered around the garden picking flowers. Then suddenly she wasn’t there. I stared at the garden — everything fixed, not stirring, with sharp crystal edges. The flowers stared back at me: ‘Why look at us? We don’t know anything,’ The picket fence. Animal teeth. Space had devoured her. I’d never see her again.

‘Daddy was nearly frantic,’ I wrote in my diary. ‘And so was I. We tore all over Levuka looking for her. Daddy even got the police out after her. She was nowhere to be found. After a while, daddy came up to me, blue with franticism. “I’m going back to the boat you wait here.” and off he rushed. I waited and waited imagining the most awful things about what had happened to Gay. At last I saw daddy coming back. He had a smile on his face. “She’s found,” he called out. She was on the boat! SHE HAD WALKED ALL THE WAY FROM THE CLUB TO THE JETTY!! Just to give mummy a bunch of flowers!’

The Ovalau Club was the last spot we visited on our nostalgia trip. Soon after, we left for Nadi where we had to get the plane the next day for the long journey via Los Angeles back to Europe. Nowhere was further away from Europe than Fiji.

In Nadi we ate downtown in a cheap popular café. It was full of locals, the Fijians in rugby jerseys, the Indians in football
ones, some of them with the names of European players written on their backs. Both races mixed at the tables. The atmosphere was lively and warm.

A middle-aged tourist couple in identical pale-blue nylon track suits hesitated outside the door, then caught sight of us and hurried over. Not only did they have matching outfits but matching heads: short-haired and pink-skinned with small features screwed up together as if pulled by invisible purse strings.

‘We came in when we saw the white faces,’ explained the man.

‘Yes,’ added the woman. ‘Do you know somewhere around here where there aren’t any blacks?’

Gay seemed to be having trouble swallowing her food. I directed them to the Sheraton, a huge luxury complex some distance away.

‘Well thanks, we’ll be off then,’ said the man.

‘They’re a surly lot aren’t they?’ said the woman, jerking her head at the clientele, then shuffling off without waiting for a reply. I hoped this meant they’d had some aloof reactions from Fijians. ‘You don’t like us. Then we don’t like you.’

We watched their blue nylon backs retreating through the doorway.

‘That’ll give them a good trot,’ said Gay.

‘Yes. And think of all the blacks they’ll meet on the way.’

Once again and for the last time we set off for the Sandalwood Inn. A high wind buffeted the taxi. Through the windows we could see palms bending against a livid sky, roofs trembling as if trying to break free. I got out first and Gay after me. I turned around to speak to her as we walked up the path and was amazed at how young she looked: the Gay of thirty years ago. Then I realised it was the wind blowing her skin back into youthful glowing tautness. I’d never seen such a phenomenon before — a meteorological facelift — and it scared me. There was something out of the ordinary about that wind.

Sure enough when we came into reception we found the owner, an anxious look on her face, with her ear to the radio listening to a cyclone warning.
'It’s going to be a big one,’ she said, twiddling knobs to hear better. ‘I hope you’ve confirmed your flight bookings. The plane’ll be full. People will want to get out of here.’

We had confirmed but rang again to be sure. That night I lay unsleeping, listening to the screeching wind as I’d done as a child during cyclone scares. What I feared most then was a tidal wave. I would think of it coming like a moving mountain across the bay, engulfing the Grand Pacific Hotel, breaking the king palms like matchsticks, surging across Albert Park, curling up the hill and scooping into our house, swirling its contents out to sea. Before I drowned I would see them all floating around me in the deep glassy water: my books, the dining table, my Raggedy Anne doll. But this time I wasn’t really afraid, just intrigued by the thought that our Fiji trip should have a cyclone at the beginning and another at the end. Like a pair of brackets. A parenthesis. It must mean something.

But it didn’t happen. The next day the wind had died. We found out that the gale of the evening before had been only a flick of the skirts of the cyclone as it changed route and twirled out to sea, exhausting itself somewhere in the empty ocean.

Before taking us to the airport our van driver called the cook, the gardener and a man who was fixing the lights to come and sing us the farewell song. Guitars appeared from nowhere. The cook was in his white overall. They lined up on the edge of the bandstand, their legs propped up to support their guitars. *Isa Lei.* Just for Gay and me.

> *Isa Isa, you are my only treasure,*
> *You must leave me so lonely and forsaken*
> *As the roses will miss the sun at dawning*
> *Every moment my heart for you is yearning*
> *Isa lei, the purple shadows fall*
> *Sad the morrow will dawn upon my sorrow*
> *Oh forget not when you are far away*
> *Precious moments from Fiji.*
The Fiji trip was over. But, like all real-life stories, it didn’t end neatly. It finished in a ragged way, trailing shreds and wisps behind that were tied off later. Or sometimes they didn’t get tied off, but hung there raw and disturbing like the one that came to haunt me on the plane home.

The flight back was the usual cramped, long-haul experience. Only worse. It was even longer than the Europe-Australia trip I’d done so often and my seat was in the middle of the cabin, squashed between Gay and a weatherbeaten, muscular man wearing a multi-pocketed sleeveless jacket stuffed with notebooks, pens, pencils, photographic equipment, energy drinks, survival tools. It shouted ‘journalist’. He soon let us know he was one: the big-time type who reported on wars, earthquakes and lost tribes. There was a spare seat beside him, giving him an even further dimension. Stretching his big scarred-kneed legs into this enviable space he regaled us with tales of his exploits as we lightly bumped into an endless night.

Across the aisle from Gay was a couple with a baby who soon started screaming. The father walked it up and down. He was small and scrawny and the child was huge. I idly wondered as I watched him pacing and patting how such a fat juicy baby could have sprung from such fragile loins. Then he bent down and said something to Gay.
‘Patsy,’ she said, turning to me. ‘This man wants you to ask the one beside you to move up a seat so we can all shift up and give him a place on the end. His wife needs more room. She’s pregnant.’

Already, I thought, before passing the message on.

‘Tell him to fuck off,’ replied the journalist.

Gay told the spindly father something in a polite embarrassed whisper which obviously wasn’t to fuck off, but nevertheless he directed a scowl at the journalist, who ignored him.

Determined to opt out of this bad atmosphere, Gay blew up her neck cushion, put on her mask and tried to curl up into a position that might induce sleep.

I was left unpleasantly wide awake, thinking how nowadays travelling long distances is just something you have to go through, like a trip to the doctor or the dentist.

Leaving by sea in 1948 was so different. My diary records the excited preparations that went on for days before, the parties and ‘send offs’ that were held for us, the farewell presents that were showered on us. Even the much-derided Clementine had a gift for me. ‘Miss Clements (I think I should call her Miss Clements now that I’ve left that school) gave me a parting gift of a lovely Fijian photo. Then she gave one of her smiles. She sort of sticks out her lips all round and shows the shiny part where there’s no lipstick, screws up her eyes into little balls and cranes her neck forward and shows the sinews.’

Then the great day arrived. ‘Off we drove in a beautiful red taxi which fortold adventure and exciting times ahead for me.’ The Rona, a rusty old vessel with a romantic and long since unused mast, was waiting at the wharf, promising a whole week of delicious adventure: of getting to know the other passengers, of deck games and engine-room explorations, of sea creatures in our wake, of luring horizons and heraldic dawns.

My school friends were waiting for me at the customs shed door, their arms filled with bunches of flowers and leis. Joyce Morgan, of the imaginary dolls and the geckos, was there. She was hardly mentioned in the diary, having been successfully weeded out of my social life by that time. But at school we’d
stayed friends. She brought her little sister Melva. They both had bunches of flowers picked from the bloom-hung gully where they lived and Joyce had made me a lei of pink frangipanis. Their voluptuous perfume enveloped me as she lifted her thin brown arms and put it around my neck. Perhaps it was hers that floated back to shore.

Gay stirred violently and pushed her mask up and awry. Her face was creased, her hair matted, a red mark on her cheek showed where the valve of her blow-up cushion had pressed against it. She looked at me with bloodshot eyes.

‘Have a nice sleep, little sister?’ I asked, stroking her face.

‘Great.’

The only thing to do was talk. Our conversation soon got round to what I often bring it around to: how Gay had a much freer and more sexually satisfying girlhood than I had because she was a product of the swinging Sixties and I came out of the uptight Fifties, meekly obedient to the dictates of puritan parents.

‘They were just as strict with me as they were with you,’ Gay insisted.

‘Maybe. But you didn’t get all these lectures about virginal brides and only one man in your life and all that stuff.’

‘Oh, didn’t I.’

‘But you didn’t let it worry you. You just had a good time and greased the door when you came home and told them lies about staying with girlfriends for the weekend. You never felt guilty about anything.’

‘Of course I didn’t. I just thought, they’re just as bad.’

‘What do you mean? Them? Bad?’

‘Yeah. They fooled around as well.’

‘Fool around! Them! I mean, Daddy had an eye for the girls. But he’d never have dared to do anything. And Mummy! I can’t imagine Mummy!’

‘What about Captain Fruen?’

‘Captain Fruen? You mean the one we went to Levuka with on The Viking Ahoi?’

‘Yes. With the little beard.’
‘But how come you remember Captain Fruen? You were only four.’

‘Five,’ said Gay. She reached for her mask and pulled it back over her eyes.

Questions jostled in my mind as I opened my mouth to ask. But I didn’t say anything, just stared into the night, feeling cold.

Levuka. The Ovalau Club. The empty garden with its cruel crystalline edges. Gay on her long walk to the wharf, a posy of flowers in her little fist. I tried to think of the other Levuka diary entries. My mother was hardly ever with us on our outings. Where was she? And what about my father? Did he seem distracted? What did Gay see when she clambered eagerly back on board, her bouquet held out in anticipation of my mother’s delight? No. It was unthinkable. Not my mother. The doll on top of the Christmas tree nobody else could have. Reserved for my father. Mummy and Daddy. The pure faithful couple. Gay must have remembered Captain Fruen from a later date when he became part of my mother’s reminiscing about Fiji. She didn’t actually see anything. She couldn’t have. Not our faultless family. But then again. Drink this, my mother had said. Drink this castor oil and let it flush out your sins. Because, of course, you’ve sinned. We all have.

On and on we went into the night and I let this ragged end of the Fiji story trail behind. Never to be tied off.

Later I went to London and then to Sydney to read all the Fiji Times & Heralds from 1941 to 1948. A kindly English gentleman in a shakily knitted cardigan helped me with the microfilm machine. ‘There you are my dear,’ he said. ‘Embarked on a lifetime of scholarship.’ Tattered and mildew-spotted, the old pages slowly cranked across the screen, bringing me back my childhood inside the white-lit box.

I found out what my friends’ fathers did. (I couldn’t have been interested in making such connections at the time.)

Rosemary McFarlane’s was a court judge and featured in a daily column. He fined an Indian for throwing peanut shells on the
pavement. He sentenced a Fijian to seven days imprisonment for ‘loitering with intent to annoy a female’. (That was interesting — apparently an example of a Fijian being attracted to a white woman. Another woman woke in the middle of the night to find a Fijian intruder ‘scantily clad and heavily oiled’ at the foot of her bed. But he ran away.) A Chinese was convicted of having a hot pipe and opium. All races were charged with bootlegging, breaching the curfew, offensive behaviour. Proceedings were demure. A witness blushed when he had to report how an employee ‘referred to the wife of an employer in terms which implied she was anything but anaemic’. He couldn’t even use the word ‘bloody’.

Wendy Cockell’s father was sanitary inspector to the Board of Health. He reported on a fly-blown milk van in which ‘every surface was black with blow’. In another entry he was overcome by gas when fumigating a plane and saved from certain death by a Fijian sanitary assistant.

John Cummings’ father was Captain of the Governor’s yacht, The Viti. If I’d known this during my lovesick days, I’d surely have daydreamed of us sailing together on the yacht with the Governor, lying on the deck under the stars, sharing our innermost thoughts.

Jeanette Chalmers, the little bride in Mrs Higgs French Wedding, must have been the daughter of H.R. Chalmers, General Manager of the Bank of New Zealand. There was also a Reverend Chalmers, rabid Indian hater (Fijians were slaves to the Indians and slavery meant extinction), but Jeannette’s house was too grand for a vicarage.

I discovered that Mossy Frisby hadn’t just appeared on Earth to annoy me like an evil genie sprung from a bottle. He had a family — siblings. There was an Elaine Frisby, a Bryan Frisby. A Maurice Frisby. No, that must have been Mossy himself.

It wasn’t just the jobs of my friends’ fathers that I hadn’t registered but much of the war. Only two details stayed in my mind as a child. One was a man in a concentration camp ‘with the smallest neck anyone had seen’ — the only description that
struck me among all the horrors in Ed Morrow’s report of the opening of the camps. The other was a German soldier during the liberation of Prague firing at the enemy with two children slung in his belt as a human shield.

But this world-wide destruction and slaughter was just a backdrop for the petty details of our lives. The juxtaposition of the horrific and the trivial was in every issue. ‘Jan 23, 1942. Japs attack New Guinea’ and, just below, Horne’s, Suva’s Fashion Centre: ‘This is your last chance to secure a bonny pair of “Wedgies”, the acme of foot comfort.’ The massacre of Babi Yar was near the news of a man charged with stealing a watermelon.

It all seemed so far away. It could have been the Napoleonic wars, the Crusades. Did I actually exist while all this ancient history was going on? But yes, there I was. The results for the Penny-a-Poke cards on the same page as the bombing of Italy by American flying fortresses. ‘The children’s drive swings merrily on.’ The lassies are still in the lead. There’s my father, the skilful bowler. ‘Club Championship Singles. Thomsett was persistently scoring by maintaining correct length and green — an excellent game.’ I could see him all in white against the glowing velvet of the green, the bowl as big as a cannon ball in one hand, a cloth to polish it with in the other, a little twisted smile under his white panama hat — a smile of derision at himself for wanting so much to win.

The general tone of the paper was one of smugness: of complete faith in our rightness, superiority and invincibility.

‘Poem to England.’
‘Shatter her beauteous breast ye may,
The spirit of England none shall slay.
Spirit supernal. Spirit eternal.
England.’

Other races — Kipling’s ‘lesser breeds without the law’ — should be grateful we deigned to offer them our help. We were teaching them what was good for them. The Fijians were being saved by ‘the gospel of work’. ‘It is only through work,’ went the speech of a government official, ‘that the soul as well as the body
of the Fijian can be saved.’ The Indians unfortunately worked too much. An editorial mentions their dangerous ‘urge for economic advancement’. But they, too, had reasons to be grateful. ‘The Indians in Fiji,’ said a letter to the paper, ‘should go down on their knees and worship this wonderful institution called the British Empire which has given them so much.’

Although Fijians were usually referred to in an admiring way — quiet, well-mannered people with a ‘natural sense of restraint’ but as soldiers, second to none — they were also often ridiculed. The howlers from Fijian exam papers were printed. ‘Describe a dust bin. A dust bean has more proteins than meat and still has the husk on it. Name the four digestive juices. Lemon juice, lime juice, orange juice and pineapple juice.’ Why print theirs and not ours? With our scrappy schooling, they would have been just as bad.

Fijian women were always referred to as maramas — the term they used to address European women. A couple of maramas took to their heels in fright when they found themselves in the midst of stretcher bearer drill. The paper found this very funny. Maramas never seemed to know what was going on, they squealed, they ‘waddled away’, they generally made fools of themselves.

The Fijians were often caricatured. A chief with Negroid features exaggerated to extreme ugliness, boiling a missionary in a pot, featured in an insecticide spray advertisement. A Hockey Tournament was called ‘The Gollywog Trophy’.

Gollywogs were the ultimate in ridicule. Yet they were everywhere. We all had one. Inspired by ‘The Nigger Minstrels’, a popular American singing team, they were easy to make: a black sock for the body, velvet for the cropped-off jacket, striped cotton for the bow tie and trousers, matted wool for the hair, buttons for eyes and red felt for the oversize mouth. I didn’t even consider they could be an insult to a race until the Sixties when some English friends came back from a year in Africa. The wife recounted how she’d felt embarrassed by her daughter’s gollywog. She pulled out its hair and unpicked its mouth so it wouldn’t
offend the Africans. This made me think of all the gollywogs in Fiji: sprawling on playroom floors to be picked up and tidied away by the ‘girls’, carried trailing by one leg behind us to functions full of Fijians. Without a thought for their feelings.

In 2000 new concerns arose. George Speight and his commandos stormed parliament and took it hostage. During the two-month stand-off Fiji was everywhere, in the English and French papers, even on French television.

There were reports of looting and mayhem. But in Fiji mayhem looked like a party. A gorgeous girl with hair perkily combed up and away from her head sat on a pile of stolen goods in the back of a truck, waving graciously to her friends like a beauty queen on a float. A little boy ran across the screen, a pile of boxes in his arms, smiling proudly at the camera as if carrying home his Christmas presents.

There were photos of Speight in the papers haranguing his supporters in the parklands of the Government complex. I pored over them. Things were changing fast in Fiji. People were dressing differently: short hair, no Mother Hubbards. George was wearing the traditional impeccably tailored sulu, white shirt and tie, polished thick-strapped sandals. But none of his supporters sitting on the grass around him were dressed in this way. I spotted a jean pinafore, several pairs of floppy shorts, lots of trainers, even a couple of back-to-front baseball caps. But how puerile to bother about the Fijian dress code when the whole country seemed on the verge of falling apart, of becoming an international pariah.

The French daily, *Le Monde*, pointed out the Fijian crisis had been too hastily read as a resurgence of anti-Indian sentiment. It was more than that. It was also Fijian against Fijian. The west wanted to break away and form its own coalition renewing a rift that had caused the ceaseless wars of the cannibal era. Democracy wasn’t a native flower. It had been planted by decolonisation and might not thrive on Fijian soil, with or without Indians.

Soon after Speight’s imprisonment tensions between Fijians exploded. There was rebellion in the army and some were killed. One officer was gunned down at his desk and died
slumped over his computer. Just like the old days. Fijians spilling other Fijians’ blood. But now it stained computer keys.

An interim government made the usual post-coup promise of a return to democratic elections. These were held a year later and Speight, even though he was in prison, was elected MP. Some of his supporters were also voted in. The Indians, however, won a good proportion of the seats, entitling them to nearly half the Cabinet slots. But Prime Minister Quarase waved this result aside. Chaudhry and his party would take no part in governing, he decided; it wouldn’t be ‘workable’. Democracy, that foreign flower, was trodden underfoot.

A few months later Speight wept as he was sentenced to death for treason. The new president commuted this to life imprisonment.

Land leases expired and Indians had to give up the land they’d cultivated all their lives. On a BBC program Fijians said they didn’t want the Indians to suffer, they were their brothers and sisters. But many Indians had had enough. Hundreds clamoured to be let into Australia and Britain. After all, weren’t they responsible for the mess?

It was the tourist industry that fared the worst. There Indians and Fijians stood side by side, fellow victims. ‘We all hate Speight,’ said a hotel employee when interviewed by the BBC. ‘This is what I’d like to do to Speight,’ said another, treading on a cockroach.

But now things seem to be picking up again just as they did after the Rabuka coup. My nineteen-year-old nephew went there recently on an around-the-world tour and said things were fairly normal with plenty of tourists around. He found Taveuni the most beautiful place he’d visited on his entire trip and the Fijians the kindest people he’d met. His first night in Fiji wasn’t very reassuring, however. ‘The town turns into a brothel at night,’ he wrote in an e-mail. ‘Was being followed by some hussies who were far too big to be women but also had facial hair! I was stopped by a friendly local, who was just chatting, “What is your name, where you come from, where you stay, you like Fiji, you want to make blow-job?”’
Was Fiji, with its upheavals and traumas, becoming seedy? Probably no more than when we were there in 1997. We’d never been out after dark and anyway these weren’t the kind of questions we’d be asked. Otherwise Fiji seems to have returned to being a happy and ideal tourist spot. It has once again arisen from the flames, the eternal phoenix.

Then the final knot was tied off. On one of my trips to Sydney I contacted John Cummings.

Getting in touch wasn’t easy. The thought of it filled me with a shameful dread. Many things had happened to John during these fifty years; our mutual friends had kept me informed. Some of them worked with him on *Honi Soit* during our university days. ‘*Honi Soit,*’ I note primly in my diary, describing my first day at university, ‘*means Evil Be evidently and is the University newspaper. From what I have read of the paper, the name seems to suit it pretty well.*’ By that time I had ceased thinking about him. The beloved John of my childhood was still intact but stored far away in the back of my mind. He could even have been the co-editor I was introduced to in the smoky ramshackle *Honi Soit* office that same day: ‘*a sandy boy wearing a mortar board and gown.*’ This same boy caught up with me on the drive as I was leaving. ‘*I met the co-editor who said in a sickly voice,* “Wither goest thou, beauteous one?” and I said “Home” and he said ‘*tis strange, so am I.*” But thank goodness he got a different tram.’

This could have been John; I would never have recognised the child in the young man. My first love, like my first South Sea island, was already a ‘memory apart’.

Later I saw his name in *Honi Soit* and connected it with the John Cummings in Fiji. He was described as having ‘a tightly furled expression and an inscrutable umbrella’. Did I connect this with the secretive sliding gaze of the John of my schooldays? I can’t remember. My memories of the man are vague — someone always in the distance, often wearing a long blue and white scarf. Those of the little boy are clear and sharp: his teeth clenched with glee as he dived his killer kite, his green eyes looking sideways at me as he sharpened my pencil, the habit he had of screwing up
his nose just before he was about to say something funny, the backs of his legs. I must have wanted to keep these memories intact, all part of the luminous cocoon in my mind that was Fiji.

Nevertheless my friends kept me up to date with the doings of my shadowy acquaintance from *Honi Soit*. I heard he’d become a librarian in a state library, that he’d married a beautiful girl and had three daughters, that he wrote book reviews. Then, about ten years ago, came some startling news. One of my friends, also a librarian, told me John had called his staff to his office and made an announcement: ‘From now on, you’ll call me Katherine.’

He explained to them he had embarked on a course of hormone treatment which would be followed by a period in hospital for ‘gender reassignment surgery’. So that was the little boy’s secret. He didn’t really want to be flying killer kites, wearing khaki shirts and running with the boys. He wanted to be a girl.

Later he wrote a book about his life, *Katherine’s Diary*. Friends sent me the reviews, the quotes. He had ‘desperately wanted to be female ever since memories began’. So when he looked shyly sideways at me from the pencil sharpener in that mysterious way of his, it wasn’t because he was secretly in love with me as I’d always hoped. He was wondering how he’d look in my dress.

News of Katherine now came to me more frequently than news of John had: Katherine in a backless gown at the launch of Robert Hughes’ (another *Honi Soit* contemporary) *Fatal Shore*, Katherine at an old boys school reunion outshining the wives, Katherine’s wife divorcing her.

After revisiting Fiji I felt like getting in touch. But when I’d dialled her number and was listening to the ringing of the phone I felt my open mind closing up, my palms sweating, my mouth becoming dry.

‘Hello,’ said a male voice.

‘Is that Katherine?’ Ridiculously chirpy squeak.

‘Yes, speaking.’ The voice was quieter, more womanly.

I told her I was an old schoolmate from Suva. Maybe she had memories of those times that would help me with a book I was writing on Fiji.
She had trouble placing me but seemed eager enough for us to get together. ‘I’ve been hanging around here all morning in my dressing gown. This’ll give me an excuse to put on something more dressy.’

By the time we’d come to the end of the conversation she’d decided what to wear. ‘Look, I’ll meet you at Newtown Station. I’ll be wearing a longish blue and green silk dress.’

Surreal, I thought as I put down the phone. When I came out of the station I couldn’t see anyone. Then I saw a car waiting just up the road, a dark figure behind the wheel. Craven fear again. In that car was John in a dress. But why be afraid of that? Bourgeois. Narrow-minded. Backward.

The car door opened for me, pushed by an invisible hand. I was meant to get in beside the dark silhouette. Weak with dread I fell inside. What’s that scar on her neck? I thought. Later I realised that this was probably where her Adam’s apple had been reduced and also that it was quite a faint scar. Why it immediately caught my eye, I don’t know. Then around the scar coalesced a matronly woman with discreet make-up and bronze-rinsed hair. Large green eyes, still clear and arresting, looked quizzically at me down a slanted-back cheek. The old John way of looking but even more wary, more suspicious. But why should she be suspicious of me? Of course, she should be. I was dead scared of her and she could see it. How ridiculous I was. I smiled. She relaxed. We talked.

Over a restaurant lunch we reminisced about our days at Sydney University. We’d been there when it stood alone as a citadel of learning, brimming with ideals and ideas. Many of our friends have become famous. The shared nostalgia brought us together.

We went to Katherine’s place for coffee. The area was chic bohemian, with small old houses done up in eccentric ways. Hers had a Moorish look with a closed courtyard, arched entrance, paved garden.

The living room walls were almost entirely covered with large framed photos or paintings of Katherine. They closed in on
me, smiling and posing on every side. But it was a very different Katherine to the one I was sitting near. In the pictures she was outrageously sexy and provocative, stiletto heels, glossy stockings, short or clingy skirts and make-up so heavy it was scary. I felt overwhelmed. Also it was hot. The windows were closed. I couldn’t breathe. My imagination led my thoughts wildly off track. She kept her windows shut because she was afraid people would attack her, throw bricks into her house, come in and beat her up. I can’t cope with this, I thought. It’s all too strange. I’m not up to it.

Probably sensing my disquiet, Katherine waved her hand to take in the walls. ‘I was much too flamboyant then. I know I shocked some people. Now I’m much more …’ She screwed up her nose as she searched for the word, ‘understated.’

I returned her mischievous look with a wan smile.

‘Look,’ she said. ‘There’s me in the Honi Soit days.’

I hadn’t noticed there was a John among the Katherines. He looked straight at us, not held back and wary: bright-eyed, sandy haired, long blue and white scarf.

‘Oh yes. That’s how I remember you,’ I said, my breath coming more easily, feeling reassured.

‘I used to wear that scarf so people would recognise me from a distance, so if they really wanted to see me they’d come up and talk. Otherwise they’d leave me alone.’

I liked that. I was feeling better and smiled more warmly. We started talking of our schooldays: of Mrs Higgs and her French wedding, of Johnny Pender’s sailing club on Nukulau Island, of the newspaper cornets of ‘hot peas’ bought from Indian vendors in the street and how delicious they were after a cold swim in the pool, of Mossy Frisby.

‘You know,’ she confided. ‘After I left Fiji, I used to dream of coming back and killing Mossy Frisby.’

This strong emotion encouraged me to confess she’d been my first love — a hopeless crush. ‘By the way?’ I added. ‘Do you remember me?’ I said it in a flippant way to show it didn’t matter if she did or not.
She slowly shook her head. ‘Can’t say I do. Patsy Thomsett. No. Anyway I was madly in love with another girl at the time.’

‘Oh really? Who?’

‘Jeannette Chalmers.’

‘The bride in *The French Wedding*?’

‘Mmm. Black curly hair and dark eyes.’

Jeannette. I thought of her sitting on her fern-dappled veranda, her leg slung over the arm of the chair, the small blue vein: ‘Toink, Toink.’

‘Look,’ said Katherine. ‘I have this for you.’ She placed a copy of her book on my knees, open at the dedication. ‘For Patsy, a friend whom I should have known for fifty years but have only just rediscovered. Love, Katherine Cummings 7.11.00.’

I looked through the book, pausing at the middle section with the pictures and studying each one. A lot of them were like those on the walls, including some even more daring: Katherine in black underwear with a woman called Madame Lash, Katherine in a mini skirt having her hands tied behind her back by a man dressed in tight leather.

There were two or three of John. One made me stop and gaze: ‘John aged ten with mother and sister,’ His small figure in the foreground is disturbing: dressed in a buttoned-up, dark suit with a handkerchief in his breast pocket, a tie and high white collar. A miniature man. His gaze is intense, inquiring, with a slight reluctant smile: an expression which says, ‘Why take a photo? You’ll never get the real me.’ Here was the face I knew and loved, the pre-hormonal one: the freshly etched features, the gentle child’s brow, the delicately defined chin and cheekbones. It had nothing to do with the face of John the man and Katherine the woman.

‘I have these to give you,’ she said, getting up again and bringing back a pile of large photos. ‘They were my father’s. It was when he was captain of the Governor’s yacht.’ She spread them in front of us. Glossy, sharply defined black and white, they reminded me of the photos at the *Fiji Times & Herald* office of the Royal Family at work and play.
'Oh Katherine, they’re beautiful.’
‘Have whichever ones you want. Have them all if you like.’
I couldn’t believe she was giving them to me; photos handed down by her beloved father, precious relics of the past. She hadn’t lost her generosity. I now felt good sitting in her living room, beside her on her couch, comfortably sharing our memories.

‘How bittersweet is memory
When one looks back
And sees one’s dead selves
Scattering the track.’ I wrote in my diary on the eve of my fifteenth birthday, illustrating it with little stick figures lying prostrate on each side of a winding path.

Our dead selves. Katherine and I were sitting among them. Hers all around us on the walls. But they didn’t close in on me any more. And mine were as light as chrysalides. I’d go on shucking them off one by one until I became lighter and lighter, dwindling to a mote in a sunbeam.

We looked at the last photo in the pile. It was taken from behind the Governor as he was borne by braves from the yacht to the shore. His platform is decked with flowers, his back is rigid British straight, his proud topee the focus of the picture. The palms on the shore lean towards him languidly, the sea around him sparkles, a village guard of honour — knee-deep in water — awaits. This was the old Fiji, the one that had lured me back, personified by the Governor on his hill, ruling his fairy-tale kingdom. Gone, like our dead selves. Gone, he and his kind. How unnecessary, how misguided in many ways. But what hidebound confidence. What style.
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Chapter 4
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Chapter 5
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Chapter 7
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Chapter 8
Fiji’s Times. Kim Gravelle, p.17
Fiji’s Times. Kim Gravelle, p.37
Life in Feejee. p.31
Life in Feejee. p.24
Life in Feejee. Introduction p.viii
Life in Feejee. p.226
Life in Feejee. p.224
Life in Feejee. p.62
Life in Feejee. p.409
Life in Feejee. p.322
Life in Feejee. p.48
Life in Feejee. Introduction p.vii

Chapter 9
Fiji’s Times. Kim Gravelle, p.106
The Struggle for Guadalcanal. p.3
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Fiji Times & Herald. 10 April 1943
Chapter 10
Life in Feejee. p.343
Broken Waves. Brij V. Lal. p.11
Fiji’s Times. Kim Gravelle, p.155
Fiji Times & Herald. 6 March 1943

Chapter 11
Deuba. A Study of a Fijian Village. p.22
Fiji Times & Herald. 9 August 1946
Fiji. Daryl Tarte p.48

Chapter 12
Frequently appearing advertisement in Fiji Times & Herald. 1941–46

Chapter 13
Life in Fiji. p.278
Life in Feejee. p.279
Life in Feejee. p.352
Life in Feejee. p.213
Life in Feejee. p.214
Life in Feejee. p.216
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Chapter 16
Fiji Times & Herald. 22 October 1943
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Fiji Times & Herald. 28 July 1945
Chapter 17
Fiji Times & Herald. 23 June 1942
Deuba. A Study of a Fijian Village. p.25

Chapter 18
Life in Feejee. p.246

Chapter 19
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Patricia Page was born in Brisbane, Australia, and moved to Sydney and then to the South Pacific. Here her father, Ernest Thomsett, worked for W.R. Carpenters and later ran copra plantations. After graduating from the University of Sydney, Patsy traveled to Europe twice. During the second trip, she visited Paris for the weekend and stayed for ‘the rest of my life’. There she met and married Alan Page, an English sports journalist and they had two daughters. She worked for the national shipping company and visited many exotic places. None of them replaced her fascination with Fiji, where she had spent seven years as a child.
Patricia and Gay, 1997