THE TRICKSTER
Fathers belong to us and to others, but mothers are ours forever.

*Marshallese proverb*
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Some would like to tell us that the first two living things were worms; fat, fleshy, spineless worms that grew and grew and grew until their house was pushed as high as the sky and as wide as the ocean.

We all know that this is a myth and that the first being was Lowa.

Lowa lived on the great sea. To the south, further than time could tell, was a coral reef island, and to the north the living sea was bordered by a swamp. There were no plants, no animals, no humans. It was the beginning.

Lowa began to talk to his great hammock the sea, on which he had lain and lazed languorously for all time. Maybe he was bored, maybe he knew it was the beginning; he talked and it is not for us to know what was in the mind of the creationary force. We know the words. Lowa said ‘islands appear’, and islands appeared. He said ‘see the reef’ and any eyes that were hovering around at the time would have seen the reef. ‘See the land, the plants, the birds,’ and lo and behold, Lowa saw.

A great white seagull, a magnificent bird with the gift of flight as well as loveliness, flew up into inner space and the choreographed caper, gambol, leap, skip and ballet of her wings pushed up the sky. A pirouette, an extra spin and the clouds were teased from the canopy.

Lowa was glad, but not finished yet. ‘See your gods,’ he added as his climactic command. Four gods appeared in the land he had created. Iroijrilik took up his position as Lord of the
West, Last in the North, Daymaker in the East, and Mr South admired themselves and each other from the four corners of Eb, their new and magical island home.

Lowa saw that all was complete and rested.

Creation is without a doubt hard work and from the exertion a blood boil developed on Lowa’s leg, slightly towards the back of his omniscient right calf. Lowa saw it and was not so glad. Unable to resist the red inflammation, he prodded it experimentally. He had no mother around to tell him to keep his hands to himself, so the prod was followed by a poke, a pick, a scratch, a gouge. Pop, out came Wulleb and Limdurianig. Lowa maintained that he was not surprised to see his son and daughter.

Limdurianig soon produced two sons of her own, as if to prove procreation was not the sole province of man. Lanej and Lewoj were two strapping boys. Being of the direct bloodline — blood boil — of Lowa, they had great power, and before Lowa departed to the above and beyond he named them Lord of the Sky and Lord of the Island Centre.

With Lowa gone, the lads spent a lot of their time in the night sky lording it with the stars and the occasional starlet. Limdurianig was the first mother to wait up all night for the kids to return home. Wulleb was worried about his nephews for another reason entirely. He believed Lanej and Lewoj wanted to kill him. Whether they did or whether they did not... well, who knows how rumours start and get around.

Limdurianig and Wulleb would sit awake all night worrying their separate fears like little beads. There was no peace on Eb. In the end Wulleb was so sleepy, so exhausted from sitting warrior-like in anticipation of star-backed vengeful relatives, that he toppled. He fell from his upright squat. He fell, further he fell. From the island of Eb created from the words of his father, he fell. From the land, the plants, the birds, down, down he fell. He fell to the deepest land, he knew not where. It could have been the Carolines, perhaps Kiribati.
Wulleb rather enjoyed the island where he finally came to rest. It was his temporary resting place one could say, for he stayed only a short three months. The local inhabitants were free and easy, and, immediately recognising Wulleb’s ascendancy, were kind and courteous. He was a fine figure of a man and had no need to boast of his closeness to the right calf of the Creationary Force in order to receive respect. The black feathers in his black hair were from the pluckiest Ebese chickens; the crown of flowers of pink and puce, mauve and purple, was of a vivid beauty surpassed only by the brilliant burgundy blooms inserted through the holes in his upper earlobes. As for his lower earlobes, they could only be described as the envy of every man around, stretching as they did fully to his masterly shoulders.

Wulleb took to examining his unblemished brown skin daily. The sores and scabs and scars of his new — ill-fed — brethren were a discomforting sight, reminding him of his bloody birth. What was birth? Limdurianig, his sister, had gone to the ocean side of Eb and simply returned with Lanej and Lewoj, so birth was pretty much a mystery which, when he tried to boil it down, always returned to Lowa’s boil. Wulleb’s flanks remained firm, his calves compact, his skin steady and pure as that of a newborn child. Not a glimpse or glimmer of a corpuscle.

Yet he did almost, but could not completely, fail to notice the tree growing out of his forehead. It was a fine stout tree of which any man would be proud — if it grew by his house not from his head.

Soon enough the tree split his skull and out came two boys named Letao and Jemliwut, as adventuresome a pair as he’d ever seen. He confided to his newly sprouted sons the threat of their cousins and recommended they venture forth and conquer the sky. Letao and Jemliwut surveyed the dark heavens and the glittering consorts of Lanej and Lewoj and saw the glory in the deed. They showed both courage and skill in
their numerous clashes; their spears with warheads of shark’s teeth flashing across the galactic sphere like streaks of lightning, their battle cries like accompanying thunder. Sweeping measures of sand thrown in the countenance of the enemy left swirls in the cosmos. Such an introduction to life!

Wulleb proudly saw the battles in the northern sky. Even today you see fewer stars there than in the south, attesting to the exploits of Letao and Jemliwut. Though they did not actually defeat his sister’s offspring, Wulleb welcomed the boys back, and to reward their bravery and loyalty, he took them triumphantly home to the milk and honey of God’s own country: Eb.

It was not long before Letao was angry with his father. It was most probably because Wulleb continually chastised him and warned him off his advances towards the Moon’s mistress. The Moon was a jealous type and took to hiding his mistress under a grass skirt as he journeyed between his wife in the East and his wife in the West — not a terribly plausible ruse as it was not only Letao who could discern the new shadows and reliefs on the Moon’s surface and conjecture on the supremely gorgeous face therein. Wulleb was a dry old stick to try to deny his son the pleasure of seeing her luminous quivering thighs as she ran from him giggling, coy, always just out of reach. Wulleb warned and Letao was angry.

Letao would never deny the ‘Mooning over the Moon’s Mistress’ episodes — he later made up enough stories of his sexual exploits that this unauthenticated hearsay has good company. Nevertheless, ‘Principle’ was his catch-cry the day he indignantly departed Eb and the cosy glow of his family.

The sight of Wulleb sitting cross-legged with Lanej and Lewoj, knocking back a toddy, laughing over old times and the stars they had known, got more than his ire bubbling. ‘Families have to stick together, no matter what.’ Wulleb intoned the gospel to the nodded agreement of his latterly irreverent nephews. ‘No, they don’t,’ thought Letao. And he left to show he was right.
He took with him a basket full of earth and the
determination to build himself a new home.

Letao flew over an awesomely spacious stretch of landless
ocean. The waves alone ruled the waves. The potential real
estate value for an immortalising earth-based home was obvious,
but as he turned back for a second reconnoitre he found hundreds
of islets where nothingness had previously held its station. Angry
and perplexed, he flew beside the puzzling jewel-like islands.
A bird squawked close by, and instantly determining it to be a spy
from the sky kingdom of his erstwhile relatives, he dug deep in
the basket of earth and threw a rock at it. The rock overshot the
jocular jet bird and plummeted amongst the islets, to later be
known as Bikar. And only with his hand in the basket did Letao
realise its want of earth. There was a hole in his basket!

In his flight up, and back down, the earth had escaped
through the hole. First a drop, then a dash, a sprinkle, a scatter,
a globule plonking splat alone, a last dribble... The earth for his
new home was wasted on these two chicken-feed chains of
islands. He threw the basket down in disgust, to a spot where it
became known as Kili.

The infuriating spy-bird was cackling with glee as it left
him. Yet as Letao looked to where the sun rose, he saw a chain
of potential. By the time he had turned to look in the direction
of the sunset he recognised the islands as an ingenious
playground. What fun he could have! In the end it was he who
was cackling with glee on that bright day.

He allowed the witnessing sun to name his uncontrived
creations. To the east, from where dawn crept, the chain of
atolls was called Ratak, sunrise; and the chain to the west,
where the shining light of the world daily came to rest, was
named Ralik, sunset.

Later, a coincidental passer-by named the two chains as
one: the Marshall Islands.
The Centre of the World

The throb of the 748 propeller aircraft felt as much a part of her as her rhythmic heartbeat and the intermittent kick and slide of the child in her womb; and it was all the more irritating for that: so regular, so insistent, so inescapable. Ten hours of it. Over ocean, over island, over atoll. On and on and on. It wasn’t called the world’s longest, slowest flight for nothing.

Travelling and the seventh month of pregnancy were never a good match she had been warned, but this was beyond any dire prognosis. As she shifted awkwardly in the cramped airline seat one more time, her husband caught her hand. ‘Relax,’ he squeezed her captured fingers, rings cutting into fluid swollen flesh. ‘Relax and you’ll feel more comfortable.’

‘Obviously,’ she almost snapped at the good-natured concern. ‘Okay,’ she smiled instead.

Okay. It is okay. It has always been okay. So she told the baby, focusing on its being within her as she’d been taught at the pre-natal classes. And so it had been: always okay. And so it would be. As soon as she got off that wretched plane.

‘We’re going to the Marshall Islands,’ Geoff had announced one evening on his return from work.

‘Where are the Marshall Islands?’ asked his wife, stirred by her ignorance and so forgetting to take exception to the assumed ‘we’ in his statement.

‘The Marshall Islands are in Micronesia,’ he said in his professorial voice. ‘Four to 14 degrees above the equator, 29 atolls,
1,152 islands in two chains, only 70 square miles of land in all, scattered over 500,000 square miles of ocean.’ He guided her over to the Gregory’s World Map on the kitchen wall to illustrate. Sure enough, there were two chains just above the equator, a series of dots surrounded by blue somewhere between Hawaii and home.

‘Oh look, Majuro the capital is right in the middle of the map. It’s in the centre of the world,’ exclaimed the excited wife.

‘Hardly,’ countered the less excitable husband, though the offer of a very good job counted for something in their lives, in their world.

And thus Joy learnt of the existence of the Marshall Islands and her future home, Majuro. Geoff had been right to assume the ‘we’ in the going: it was impossible to resist the thought of life at the centre of the world, even if it was only her map that claimed the right to such prominence.

There were delays and more delays — a fitting introduction to Pacific Time — before Joy boarded the aeroplane for the tortuous journey north. The child was conceived in the interim, conceived between the devouring of information on the Marshall Islands. There is little published on the subject, too little to devour for too long, thus the child could almost be said to have been inevitable somewhere between Louis Becke’s tall stories of the 1800s and the dry Census data of 1988.

Joy’s colleagues at the Dickson suburban library had joined eagerly in her search for mention of the elusive faraway isles, though the initial findings about when the islands were officially a Trust Territory of the United States, which told a horror story of atomic bomb testing and homeless irradiated islanders, somewhat dampened enthusiasm. So much for trust. The jokes about taking her *bikini* with her, and that they would be buying a Geiger counter for her return, were tinged with a sadness for the cruelty of the world. Joy would miss those friends, her community of concerned citizens, the recycling, bicycle-riding Greenpeace supporters, connected in their commitment to peace, justice and the earth’s way. Yet there was
pride in the fact that she would now be leaving behind Palm Sunday peace rallies and multicultural evenings to join the fray in a developing country. They, as a family, would join the phalanx of experts offering their all for the poor. It was icing on the cake, a gilt edge to their generosity, that the salary should be so astoundingly large. Along with the housing allowance and shipment costs, medical insurance, potential for per diems... After all, you don’t have to be poor to help the poor. Surely.

It was satisfying that her child would be born into this atmosphere of well-meaning goodwill, would develop within the context of Development, amongst brown-skinned baby brethren; rather a lot of them judging from the statistics, the Marshalls having one of the highest population growth rates in the world.

‘What is the hospital like?’ asked the pragmatist in the group, a fellow student from college days, a woman who had found libraries a little too stifling and stood on suburban lawns behind a Victa mower to earn her living instead of in a library behind a loans desk.

The hospital: new-ish, modern-ish. The locals had their babies there, so there was no reason to believe it would not be adequate for Joy’s needs. A good diet and a spacious pelvis would answer for the rest.

‘I admire your optimism,’ came from the uncompromising friend.

The tone of her friend’s voice was the last thing she needed to meditate on in the din of the pressurised cabin.

She shifted her bulk awkwardly again. The initial months’ enthusiasm had been hard to sustain. She supposed the silly despondency was hormonal. The buggers were scampering around in their unbalanced hordes, knocking her out of kilter. They thrived on remembrances from the past. Speculation of the future subdued them, as they would be subdued in the
future, once the child was born and had desisted breastfeeding. She would regain her lucidity, resilience, rationality, her self-possession, once oestrogen and progesterone met each other on terms of familiarity. By the time the foetus curling within her could spread its limbs and walk. By the time he or she could swim in the lagoon.

The lagoon — evocative of so much imagery — the crystal lagoon of picture postcards, the turquoise gem, the wash of inspiration to the poetic, the void left as an ancient volcano subsides.

    Slowly, stealthily, the volcano insinuates itself deeper into the languid ocean floor, the floor itself fatigued and unable to continue supporting the massive weight of the rocky leviathan; the survivors, a colony of coral polyps clinging tenaciously to their volcanic host, ascendant sun-worshippers recolonising ever higher in pursuit of a shallow sunny home as their host denies his hospitality and slinks away, down to the depths. Marine animals by the score attaching themselves to the convenient framework of genial polyps, and in their unity strength and mass to outlast the mammoth as it is finally submerged and inundated. Thus the limpid lagoon fringed with a circle of coral polyp reefs; thus the atoll.

    Darwin never put his theory quite like that but many, and Joy, could see the romance of land formation. Land being life, being potential, being joy.

Joy was named after an aunt and not directly in tribute to this pleasurable emotion of life-zest. Nevertheless her self-concept intrinsically incorporated her title. There was joy in Joy. Remembered joy to wrap around herself in the face of tragedy. Joy in marriage; joy in a profession steeped in words and letters and knowledge and the dusty indescribably satisfying smell of
books; joy in the chance to live in an exotic foreign culture; joy
in never having been lonely. Before.

Two days in Fiji, resort-riddled, coup-compromised Fiji. Two
days of loneliness. Not the isolated stab of emotion she’d
expected loneliness to be, but an open wound of distress. Now
they were flying further north through Tuvalu and Kiribati and
she just wanted to go home.

‘We are going home,’ reasoned Geoff. ‘To our new home.’

He was engrossed in an airport novel, thick and trashy,
emerging to offer up platitudes at intermittent intervals. Joy
stared across at him, at his solid intelligent profile, the arch
of his nose convenient for the necessary glasses, the slight
magnification of his left eyelashes dropping down to the wordy
page, the even more slight sucking in of the bottom lip as he
read, and his ear. Funny that in so many years of marriage she
had never noticed his ears in this way. Not the size, a nice size,
but the depth that she could see down, penetrating into his
skull. A gloomy depth, and nothing visible inside. Oddly
embarrassed, Joy turned away.

My God, there it was. Through the cabin window the
unrelenting blue of the Pacific Ocean that had been their
visible companion through all the hours, relented to a
magnificent jewel of an atoll: a string of green islands, the lime
edges of land plunging to deep blue and turquoise on their
ocean and lagoon borders.

Joy was breathless with the beauty of it. The specks in
the atlas were translated into fragile droplets of land, scattered
on the solid mass of water. If Charles Darwin had travelled in
the region on the Air Marshall Islands 748 instead of the Royal
Navy’s HMS Beagle, he would perhaps have posited some far
different theory of formation. It was hard to imagine each ring
evolving over millennia from below. Instead, it looked for all
the world as if great gobs of earth and mud and rock had been
flung from above, like more substantial chicken-feed: a drop,
a dash, a sprinkle, a scatter, a globule plonking splat alone, a last
dribble...
Reality washed up toward her in the form of a paper cup, then ebbed in a blur before any distilled water could pass her stuck-dry lips, leaving her stranded on a pinnacle of pain as high as a coconut tree.

Reality did not invade the delivery room again for some time. The tide was coming in, the waves crashing from sublimely soaring heights, crashing inexorably against the reef, the coral rising up to meet, to tear, to break…

Go with the waves, breathe with the wind.

The coconut of her body had been sucked dry, great gulps chugged from its prim mouth, the dark unseeing eyes a witness to all, the triple indentations of anthropomorphism used and cast away. Cast against a stone. She was splintering along the deep fissure of pain; the chord of survival severed, ruptured; she was fractured in two. The twin halves of her coconut body were thrown to the chickens and dogs, the moist fecund flesh to be pecked and mauled from within. Nothing wasted. Nothing left. Nothing left to fight for. Down, down.

Push down.

A dark tuft appeared, an almond orb. Her desperate mind screamed: I’ve given birth to a coconut.

The pink, fleshy, perfect baby was placed on Joy’s breasts. Its piteous, kittenish squawk delivered her to the concrete world of the hospital room.
Limokare was a good woman. Throughout her pregnancy, and it was not her first, she had eaten only the food her husband or father brought: baskets of fish, sea birds and rats, the flesh so good for the child, and each bite without the fear of witchcraft that sustenance from any other source could carry. They all knew about poor Lina from across the lagoon. She had ravenously and foolishly devoured the coconut crab her jealous cross-cousin had brought and her child was born as stiff as the dead crab’s claw.

Nor had Limokare left her family house after sunset. Beneath the thatched roof the child within her was safe from the evil ghosts and bad spirits that would surely beset him or her on the paths and by the ocean when the moon cast his deathly pallor over their beautiful island.

Her family had a jewel-like weto — parcel of land — on Woja island in the biggest and loveliest of atolls, Ailinglaplap. Daily she crossed from the house on the ocean side, through the breadfruit grove, passed the taro pits, to bathe in the gentle lagoon, her heavy body rocking rhythmically with the tide. Each evening Grandmother never forgot to massage the strained muscles that supported the child through the day, as Limokare beat the mats clean, prepared the food and cared for her mobile progeny. Grandmother’s soothing hands eased the ache and calmed her flesh at the end of each long day.

Yes, Limokare knew she had done everything custom demanded. Which is why she was so convinced that the baby
born that peaceful sunlit day had a right to her lineage. Her relations would not call it a baby; her eldest son, Lokam, shrilly told her to kill it and throw it away. Crippled and deformed children were buried beside the birthing hut by rights. But not her little Tobolar. His eyes had gazed into hers, sending her hand to catch the emotions surging in her throat, that place of all feelings. His rounded mouth had mewed in greeting and she gave him milk, filling his little round belly. She wanted Tobolar to live.

Tobolar did live, and he thrived under Limokare’s care, and the glare of public scrutiny. In the first days all the people from their island community came to see the strange child, and when word spread of the armless, legless green baby with his clever little face, outrigger canoes appeared from across the lagoon bearing distant relatives, nosey neighbours and the great Iroij of Ailinglaplap himself.

‘Very strange indeed,’ quietly murmured the kajur, the common people. ‘Very strange indeed,’ loudly remarked the Iroij, their king, in his unmistakably powerful voice.

Tobolar simply smiled from the safety of his mother’s arms, the contented, happy smile of one who knows his destiny.

Soon enough the call of daily life, and the needs of surviving in the delicately balanced world of ocean and island, removed attention from the worthless good-for-nothing freak. If he had proved strong and nimble and courageous at birth, if there had been the hope that he would grow to be a great fisherman, or navigator, or skilful craftsman or canoe builder, if it were possible he would grow to contribute to society… but no, Tobolar was a brief entertainment. Mirth was welcome, then work took the community away again.

In the peace that followed, Limokare did her best to make her son’s life good. Every morning she scoured the ocean side for koba, bamboo, that may have drifted in. The plant did not grow on Woja but was perfect for weaving; perfect for
weaving a basket for Tobolar to lie in. Slowly she assembled the material and created a hanging cradle. In it she would rock the baby to and fro and sing him long melodious chants.

Producing the basket would have been a lot easier if a plant with long pliable leaves could be found on their atoll. So Tobolar told his mother. Tobolar was barely three months old at the time and babies in Woja usually didn’t talk until after they could walk. The legless Tobolar would never walk, so Limokare was not overly surprised by the turn of events. Surprising were the wondrous things he had to say, for he talked almost exclusively about an imaginary tree: not like a pandanus tree with its angular knotty branches, not like a breadfruit tree thick as a canoe hull, but a tree with a trunk taller than anything Limokare’s eye could see on her weto and beyond. This tree had so many parts and so many uses. Its trunk, no bigger than a human body is round, would be perfect for holding a roof over the family’s head. Its leaves, which grew in a canopy atop the soaring shaft of wood, would also offer shelter to the family when fashioned into a firm, functional roof, or would offer a soft resting place as a mat beneath them, or, when woven, could be used in so, so many ways. Yet the crowning glory of Tobolar’s mythical tree was the fruit: a small green nut that hung in the shade of the palm leaves, a small green nut full of nutrition and sustenance. How to extract and prepare the goodness was told in great detail. And much more was said.

Tobolar talked and talked on and on about this tree. Limokare listened as a mother should to the babbling of her beloved offspring. If her family thought she was crazy, muttering incessantly with a babe too young to mouth the most rudimentary ‘mama’, nothing was said. Not until she buried the baby alive. Then they knew she’d really fallen out of her tree.

Limokare buried little limbless nutty Tobolar beside her window, a piece of thatch that swung outward to allow light and air inward. It created a scant square of shade beneath itself and that was where Tobolar had told her to bury him.
One day he’d said: ‘the time has come for you to bury me’ and Limokare decided this was the statement from her precocious son that she was not going to accept without question. She cried, remembering her defiance of the social custom that demanded she bury Tobolar beside the birthing hut, and was reminded of the difficult time that followed; all the cruel laughter. She had not gone through the ridicule to bury him now.

Tobolar did not want his faithful mother to weep and tried to reassure her with soothing words, to remove her fear and doubts and her unwillingness to bury him alive. For him it was not death, but rebirth. ‘I came into the world to be eaten and worn and used.’ For some reason Limokare did not find these words soothing.

He told her how valuable and useful he would be if only she’d follow his instructions. ‘Now I am an oddball with eyes and a mouth. Yet I have the potential to be great, to offer life to many. My children and grandchildren by the hundreds will hold the future of our islands. I can be a saviour. Bury me and I will return. I promise you.’

‘How will you come back?’ sobbed the sceptical parent. She’d seen many people — adults, the aged, children — die, and none had returned no matter how hard those left behind mourned and chanted.

‘I will come back as the tree.’

Limokare buried Tobolar under her window and tended the earth as he directed from his position of interment. As the last sod of dirt was to fall on his bright eyes, he whispered: ‘Wait. Be patient. I will be small at first, but I will grow with your help, as I have in the past.’ Limokare felt deep within her throat that this child had come to their world for a good reason, so, choking back her fear and the well of loneliness, she covered over the loquacious mouth, and softly patted down the earth. There was silence.

‘She was hearing voices,’ community voices were heard to say.
‘She killed the crippled child to bring silence into her own crazy head,’ diagnosed the medicine woman. ‘If only we had more bark and roots and juices from different plants to make uno, medicine, to cure the sick and the ill-fated, then perhaps she need not have appeased the spirits with the death.’

‘About time she buried the monster,’ said the voice of her eldest son, Lokam, a voice less shrill without jealousy.

Limokare’s soft speech went unheeded in the babble of dismissals of Tobolar. They said, ‘We won’t see the likes of him again’; ‘Tobolar is gone forever’; yet over and over, if you cared to listen, you could hear her whispering: ‘He will be back.’

Days passed, the sun rose anew for each. Nights stretched forward and the moon progressed from his generous wife in the East who fed him well, to his unlovely wife in the West who starved him, and back to she who cared for him attentively; from being a full fat moon to a sickle to full once more he waxed and waned. And thus Limokare watched the passing of the months.

The ground beside her window remained dead despite the shuffle of time, the watering of her tears and the beckoning of her melodious songs. All but hope was gone.

Tobolar was a good son. Tobolar was an honest child. One morning a diminutive green sprout, a leaf folded around itself for comfort, appeared before faithful eyes. Limokare watched as the leaves opened to the warmth of her gaze. In their delicate pose they looked like the wings of a flying fish.

As Tobolar had promised, he grew and grew and people came from even further than across the lagoon to marvel at the new tree. He was named ni, for he was the first coconut tree.

Limokare sat beneath his shady palms and wove mats from some of the leaves. To any who would listen — and there were now many — she taught the names of the numerous parts of her son and the many uses to which they could be put. Every part made life easier, especially the milk in the nuts. The milk she had suckled into Tobolar’s rounded belly was now in the
crowd of nuts that grew to resemble him, and was loved and
drained into the eager mouths of new babies.

Limokare counted their blessings: the food, drink, oil,
medicines, clothes, wood, houses, the many gifts from Tobolar;
gifts to the people of the world. And she was thankful. He had
just one last request to make of her.

One day he asked her to strip some of the first coconuts
and to throw the husks from the ocean side of Woja. The dry,
fibrous coats did not look to be fitting tribute to the gods for
such bounty as the coconut tree, yet they were eagerly received
by Iroijirilik, the Lord of the West. With them he made sennit,
a strong twine, which he then gave to his sons, the birds, to carry
upwards. Their joyful, playful flight back and forth across the
firmament wove the sennit into a net that was named the sky.

If anyone should doubt this history, let them watch the
rain fall in drops like tears, separated by the strands of the sennit
net above. And let them look at the top of each and every
coconut. Can they claim not to see the little face with nose and
mouth and two eyes?

Many thank the gods that Tobolar was born to the good
woman Limokare who had love enough to live with the
wonderment of a nut that spoke.
At the conclusion of the Tobolar legend, Rosina chuggalugged her drinking coconut in one queen-sized suck. Joy stared at her own partly shaved but still hairy nut, and sure enough, she could make out two depressed eyes, a stubby nose and a gaping mouth. Earlier the nut’s ‘mouth’ had been expertly gouged open by Junior’s immensely long nail overhanging the thumb on his left hand. Joy had found herself arrested by the sight of many a long fingernail. Now it was a question she need not ask.

Junior had then, duty fulfilled, returned to the group of men beneath the pandanus trees. The segregation at the cook-out was complete, providing at least one component of cultural recognition with the Australian barbecue situation. Geoff was over there, sitting on the extended arm of the pandanus, the alien. He looked very different, and not only because of the colour of his skin: though a lover of beer, his gut had simply not achieved the local pregnant proportions. It was loud over there towards the shore; talk, beer, laughing, abdomens rippling with mirth, contracting with the birth of new jokes. Perhaps they were joking about the party — a welcome party for Geoff and Joy, six months after their arrival. Marshallese Time. The chuckles would spread.

The men were actually discussing the relative comforts and unsurpassed privacy of the higher pandanus branches for romantic dalliances. Which could have explained the silence of the wives inland under the coconuts. Each had ascertained the trajectory of menacing nuts above before taking her place on
the woven mat, in silence. Joy had been told silence was okay by their way of thinking, which was just as well: there had been a lot of it. Other than the ubiquitous Marshallese Time, this was the only cultural tip she’d managed to pick up, and still the silence had not felt like a natural part of communion; just as the clockless haphazard timing could sometimes feel like nothing but an excuse. Joy felt ethnocentric, oversensitive, and alone.

Due to Marshallese Time, so they said, Joy and Geoff hadn’t even been met at the airport. The long flight from Fiji, over Tuvalu and Kiribati, terminated on the tendrilous stretch of land called Majuro. There was ocean to the right, lagoon to the left, and though for dry-mouthed moments she could not see it, a runway width of coral between. Across the burning tarmac she and Geoff eagerly trod to be greeted by Immigration and Customs officials. The bustle on the other side of the one-hall building revealed no more personal welcome. Joy had to be content with the ‘Yokwe Yuk’ sign and her memory that yokwe was hello and love.

A congregation of hotel minibuses became their only hope. Geoff decided on the Hotel Majuro, feeling somehow that the name established credibility. If there had been a plane flying out, Joy would not have been on it, but she would have been tempted. Instead she was struggling through a jammed bus door too narrow for her girth, to see her destiny.

The only word to adequately cover the overall impression of the hotel was the colloquial ‘sleazy’. It was directly out of a Graham Greene novel; the staircase alone was the perfect backdrop for an alcoholic CIA agent meeting with a collusive informant. No such shadowy figure lurked: there was no room with all the kids hanging off the rails, tumbling down the stairs, chipping off what paint remained.

Joy counted each step in the ascent past filth, flaking walls and unintelligible graffiti. Thirty-five stairs to climb in a country where any building above the ground floor was a rarity.

A woman in what could euphemistically be called the lobby was very friendly with her toothless smile, and mildly
apologetic that the electricity was off. ‘Power outage’ was the muttered mock outrage. They did not ask about amenities; Joy deliberately neglected to ask about room service, having gained the impression from the furnishings that the request would result in a prostitute being sent to the room. She just wanted a bed to collapse on and led the way down unlit corridors, Geoff dragging suitcases along the tiles behind. As she flung open the window to let some fresh hot air into the hot room, the sun glanced off the tin roofs of the shanty dwellings below, blinding her to the ocean view. It was a room with a view if only you had the right perspective.

In a final movement for the day she allowed herself to fall amongst the broken springs of the bed. The heat settled on her like a blanket. It was like having an afghan rug thrown over you on a hot summer’s day. Then, maybe she just had afghans on the brain, having seen the white man walking a blond, long-haired Afghan hound as they left the airport. She’d read that mercenaries, missionaries and misfits came to the islands, but on this strange sighting wondered whether the locals lumped them altogether as Crazies. And where did that leave her and Geoff?

Geoff said he was not a crazy misfit. He was hungry. He said there were no prostitutes. Room service or not, he was going out for dinner.

Ignoring his insensitivity till another day, she allowed a brief twinge of curiosity to ask, ‘No prostitutes?’

‘Sex here is free.’

Rosina was a Queen. Her arrival had precipitated a degree of activity beneath the languid coconut tree. Women bum-shuffled to the left and right to allow her sufficient room to gracefully recline her ample regal largeness next to their equally expansive frames. The guest and her child too enjoyed a shady share of the woven mat. Upon them Rosina bestowed a special
yokwe and an insincere ‘forgive me, I’m late’. She had been well educated in Oklahoma and knew of the foreigners’ hang-ups with their Timex and Casios, and was not above catering to their misplaced irritabilities over punctuality.

Joy had not been, at the time, irritable, merely confused. The invitation to the welcome party from the Office of Planning had specified 3 pm, and when six crawled around to find the company of Geoff’s co-workers posing in anything but party positions, she’d variously wondered if the festivities had not yet begun or if, in her cultural insensitivity, she had completely missed the focus of the function. She kept a keen eye on the cow and boa, by the looks of it beef and chicken, sizzling over a half oil drum, hanging onto the thought that perhaps that was the sole point of it all: food.

Rosina bought with her some of the conversation and merriment that Joy had previously associated with both ‘welcome’ and ‘party’. Her reputation had preceded her. After the first week of work Geoff stated emphatically that Rosina the typist ran the office. With equally admirable efficiency she’d launched into the coconut fable, her dark eyes sparkling with humour. As she spoke, the noble woman coiled her luxurious black hair into a becoming knot, fluttered her hands down her attractively gaudy mumu, and slapped the legs of her near companions who wholeheartedly enjoyed the rendition of a tale they must have heard a thousand times before.

Silence fell again at the conclusion of the story. Coconuts were brought to full lips, minds contemplated little Tobolar and good Limokare.

Rosina broke the hush with a disparaging laugh. ‘And since the Americans tested their big bombs here, we have had more armless, legless babies. Perhaps it has nothing to do with radiation, with fall-out. It is tradition, our past.’

Several of the women rolled about the mat with laughter.

Very quietly from her corner, Joy ventured to ask, ‘And have there been any more babies who have spoken at three months?’
Rosina’s mouth retained its quirky smile though her eyes were cold when she returned a surprised ‘no’.

‘We only have the jellybelly babies,’ quipped Junior’s wife.

What was Joy to say: confess that her child, the three-month-old so innocently sleeping in her arms, spoke to her? Drowning in a fear of lunacy, she grabbed at the lifeboat in ‘belly’.

‘Belly, belly’ all the time. During the first months in the Marshalls, as she hauled her stomach around in the heat, it was all she heard. ‘Belly, belly.’ It made her very self-conscious about the pregnancy. Getting into the communal taxis, the rounded words were whispered back and forth. Her 30 cents entitled her to a ride and the touching hands of every woman over the age of 20. Her body, her belly, the coming child, had become as communal as the taxi. She had wished for a car to escape the attention, though even then she would have been warned against driving in her expectant state — too much exertion, too exhausting. Though surely lugging the weight around in the heat on foot could hardly be deemed less of an effort. The only answer was confinement.

‘Belly, belly.’ The constant cry had continued when she reappeared on the street without the huge belly. Child in arms, white skin alone distinctive, she then realised the shout was a marker for her race. For someone insecure in their white supremacy, it was intimidating.

Now, to redeem herself, she asked Rosina the meaning of the name that was caught in her wake wherever she walked.

‘Belly, belly!’ Oh, they laughed.

‘It is not rude,’ they assured as one.

‘You are different, the little children are amazed, they call out to you RiPalle, RiPalle, white person.’

‘RiPalle,’ enunciated Joy, thinking, amazed: ‘They are not different. I am different.’

‘It was the name our ancestors gave the first white people to come to our islands,’ continued Rosina. ‘And really, it has
nothing to do with the colour of your skin. It means person who is clothed, who is covered. The foreigners came in trousers and shirts and dresses.’ She pulled at her mumu. ‘Very different. We wore so little.’

The well-covered Christian women found humour in everything.

‘Ah, but it is better than living in Kosrae. Ahset, ahset.’

Maybe it was their accents; Joy found a lot of what was said obscure and was becoming embarrassed by all her own questions. At home, people had come to the library to ask her questions. To be put in the opposite role was disconcerting. She didn’t ask for ‘ahset in Kosrae’ to be explained. She didn’t ask any more questions. But she didn’t know how else to learn the rules.
She knew she had been home for too long with the baby the morning he asked her if they could go out. He wanted to look at a pandanus tree. It was not a usual request from a three-month-old.

At first, taken by surprise, and being a good mother concerned with her child's education, Joy tried to think where a likely tree was situated. Daniel chattered on in the silence, explaining that he had heard mention of the pandanus so often yet could not imagine how it would look.

Upon consciously realising that the child's babbling was comprehensible, Joy chose to ignore the whole incident, putting it down to inter-dependency, over-bonding, oppressive isolation within a foreign culture, and the genetic legacy of Great-Uncle Roy who, the family joked, heard the voice of Zeus in his institution room.

Daniel was cranky for the rest of the day. When Geoff got home from work, burdened with bureaucracy, he reassured her that the baby's bad humour could be attributed to teething. Father and son gurgled at each other in unintelligible syllables. Joy neglected to mention the child's unexpected question, though the next day while they were out shopping she did point out an angular-branched pandanus.

She was rewarded with a 'thank you' from the car safety baby-capsule.

This did not make Joy feel overly thankful, but on reflection she did feel positive about being able to give an
answer to Daniel’s precocious questioning. It wasn’t so easy with the other inquiries she encountered on the road.

There was only one real road in Majuro, a long road to be sure: one ribbon connecting the islands and beaded the southern crescent of the atoll. ‘The longest road in Micronesia’, 30 miles from Rita to Laura. The American World War II codenames for the two furthermost islands had weathered the years with more endurance than the road itself. At the turn of the millennium it manifested itself as a collection of ruts and lagoon-deep potholes.

Joy had not travelled its length more than twice. Laura, at the rural end of the spectrum, was to her an entrancing dream for rare Sunday picnics, a near-pristine beach of near picture-postcard quality. The modern world crept closer, yet there in Laura coconut, breadfruit, pandanus and taro were merely endangered species, not extinct as in her sister Rita.

Joy more often headed down the road in the direction of Rita, though to apply the word ‘down’ could lead to misconceptions. Majuro was flat. As flat as a pancake, as flat as a jaki, sleeping mat. As flat as a coral atoll. The one trap to any intrepid cyclist was the bridge rising a full 20 feet above sea level. That bridge connected the bizarre urban islands to the relatively salubrious home island of the RiPalle community. Joy imagined some wit originally naming it Long Island.

Once a week she and Daniel exited their Long Island residence in their new twin-cab pick-up, the Majuro car of choice, and turned Ritawards, towards the overcrowded refugee camp-like islands, in search of unexpired groceries.

Here she would encounter all the questions and her incipient paranoia. About the shops (and there were not many), upon the paved sidewalk (and there was not much), ageing Marshallese shuffled their timeless way oblivious to the New York Stock Exchange, September 11, the Middle East situation and the machinations of their own parliament, the Nitijela. Backs bent with age and work untold, gnarled hands
from which once love flowed like balm — these gentlemen and gentlewomen stopped before Joy and the elfin-white baby with a gracious yokwe, yokwe. Love indeed washed around her. Initially. And then it came: ‘Where are you going?’ Only a few phrases of the language had been memorised from the Handy Guide and this was one. It was unmistakable. Cheeks smiled ‘etal nan ia?’, the pronoun ‘you’ dropped for further intimacy.

Where are you going?

They didn’t know her and yet they had the impertinence to monitor her movements. There was no privacy in this overpopulated, overcrowded shanty town posing as a capital city. So there was always an element of defensiveness in her reaction, in her curt replies, for, after all was said, there were so few places for her to be going. Maybe her interrogators were interested, but Joy was intimidated. How much more preferable were the steadfast, unanswerable ‘belly, belly’ of the multitudinous anonymous youth.

A sound could be heard in the distance: the jarring of cultural discord as two civilisations met in the street. The pleasant in the pleasantry lost, significance found where it should not be. In the parlance of the street the offending question held as much weight as the perfunctory English ‘how are you?’ A reply beyond ‘fine’ would be met with surprise by the Australian inquirer, just as ‘oceanward’ was perfectly satisfactory to the friendly indigenous Marshallese. It was merely — and simply — a fixed cultural exchange. Yet to Joy it was like a conspiracy. They asked, and acted as if they already knew her answer. It was like a secret everyone was in on, except her.

Oh, what Joy would have given for a genuine ‘how are you?’

Sometimes it was hard to believe six months had passed since their arrival. It could have been yesterday. It could have been a lifetime ago.
An embarrassed and unlikely Junior, their welcoming delegation from the Office of Planning, had appeared at the Hotel Majuro not long after themselves, apologies meandering amongst excuses and welcomes from his 40-year-old lips. Still weary-eyed the next evening, they’d been invited to dine with Geoff’s departing predecessor, wife, and a group of pale-skinned people receiving salaries from international agencies. The overall impression, remembered, was of displacement, of a shifting of ground, beyond that attributable to the 2,000-mile journey. It may have had something to do with the actual company of development aid personnel being so far removed from those in her imagination. Why and how she could not really say, as only the vacuum cleaner was clearly recalled. Not the machine as such; the incomprehensible reference to it.

Predecessor and wife, a generation older than Geoff and Joy, had not been happy — were urgently eager to leave — thus wife felt justified in riling against the ills of the country. Unbelievably high unemployment amongst the youth, terrible situation, and still she could not find good help. None of the girls could tell one end of a vacuum cleaner from the other. So wife, an active reformer, had attempted to set up a training course for household help. To no avail. ‘Lazy’ was her sole analysis.

Joy innocently blundered into a major faux pas by commenting over the nods of the other women that the local dwellings she had seen so far looked quite rudimentary, definitely without carpet, so, perhaps, the young women weren’t really motivated to learn skills that they — all eyes were upon her — perhaps did not need.

Predecessor and wife were to be spirited westward to become successor and wife in the island state of Kosrae where ‘ahset, ahset’ would invariably background their lives. A century before, when sailors used the island for food, water, women and song, their dissatisfaction at any of the above would ring through the palms: ‘Oh, shit.’ The dual sounds inevitably
classified the foreigners, as they still do. Two more ‘ahsets’ were out of Majuro.

Geoff and Joy moved into their bungalow which had a lovely second bedroom for the baby. Beneath the window-sill a portly chicken made her nest and laid one egg day by day. Then she sat by day, by night, ever present, devoted, brooding. Joy watched motherhood and said it was a good omen.

It was a pity the thirteenth egg hadn’t hatched.

Daniel could not understand his mother’s harking back to omens. Letao talked to him, he talked to his mother, nothing could be more natural. He’d never read the Child Development books, so how could he know he was pre-empting himself? Joy, for her part, really tried to contain her shock. Many a mother would like to claim a deeper communion between themselves and the product of their womb, and she did consider herself to be as well bonded with her child as the best of them. Interpretation of happy–sad–hungry cries had simply gone a step further. Daniel just happened to have very good English, and a smattering of Marshallese. And he spoke a lot of nonsense mostly, like any child.

He had this imaginary friend, Letao, and Letao had a lot of adventures; Daniel was playing with his imagination to create fantasies. Under normal circumstances she would sit Geoff down, catch him over dinner, and discuss the advisability of a sibling to give Daniel companionship — a substitute for his self-made hero.

Daniel wouldn’t have been too keen on a sibling in actuality, not after the stories Letao told of his brother, Jemliwut. Judging from these, being on the receiving end of such a close relation was not a fun proposition.

Jemliwut came to Daniel’s attention in a less than direct manner, as a side issue to the continuing argument he was
having with Letao about the possession of his body. Letao had asked Daniel to vacate his corporal self as he had need of it. Daniel was, understandably, reluctant to do so and found many an excuse for his hesitation.

One aspect he was genuinely unsure about was why Letao wanted his body, which, at best, could only be described as a dumpy, wobbly body. His mother delighted in his face when they played the mirror game, showing almost imbecilic elation when he smiled at his neckless reflection. He was neckless nonetheless.

In boyish eagerness he’d asked Letao about his ugliness. Letao told him the truth: though an accomplished liar, he had long ago made it his policy to invent only when necessary. He explained about Daniel’s neck.

It all started one day when he and Jemliwut, his big brother, were playing on the reef. The tide was out, so the flattened coral stretched many yards to the lap of the waves. Jemliwut suggested they try some spear fishing. He hopped from foot to foot, spear in hand, eye and mind on the school of fish circling tantalisingly close. Letao caught him off-balance with his less than subtle trick of oiling the reef. Jemliwut slipped and hit his head.

By the time Jemliwut could shake the stars from his vision, Letao had run nimbly towards the interior of the island, passed the fringe of coconuts, and disappeared from sight. Angry and sore, Jemliwut followed, only to have his attention distracted by the most enticing pandanus fruit, hanging ripe and ready. It would be an easy climb out onto the branch, and the reward: succulent pandanus keys to suck. Once again he was caught off-balance — when the branch broke off. He tumbled to the ground and hit his head. Letao changed back from being the pandanus tree and laughed.

He said Jemliwut joined him in laughing at the joke. Jemliwut was probably a bit soft in the head by this stage, Daniel reasoned.
When Jemliwut regained his sober composure, his little brother had gone again. Up to more shenanigans and impersonations it was rightly supposed. For his last piece of mischief Letao bent over and made his anus appear like a rain catchment hole in a coconut tree trunk.

Jemliwut searched high and low for him, calling, berating, ready to do him some damage for all his dangerous tomfoolery. Exhausted and thirsty, he came upon a rain catchment hole in a tree trunk. Unsuspecting of his fate, he stuck his head in to sip the cooling water, only to see the water level sinking from his lips’ reach. He thrust his head in further and again the water swam just out of reach. And again he pushed his head in. Letao could take no more and clamped down. Jemliwut struggled and quivered in the realisation that he had been quite literally caught in another of Letao’s pranks.

Letao did release him eventually, but by then the section between Jemliwut’s shoulders and head had been squeezed permanently to a smaller diameter. He had a neck.

Daniel shuddered slightly at the conclusion of Letao’s tale. He’d quite missed the point, which was the point of all creationary myths — and rather feared that he would have to go through Jemliwut’s ordeal to gain a neck.

Letao skipped and gambolled as only a disembodied spirit can. Through his unseemly giggles he reassured Daniel that, though lacking them previously, from that time forth all people had necks, and that his would surely emerge as he matured from baby to child.

Letao told him so much, not all of which he could make sense of. Even his analogies could be more confusing than enlightening. Like the time he was talking about his body, the body he had lost. That body was covered in tattoos as perfect as the markings of an angel fish. For one who had never seen an angel fish, it was a difficult picture to imagine. Then there was the
pandanus tree: a tree with keys. It made little sense. That’s why he had to ask for his mother’s help.

Joy was dreaming it all, of course. Yet, somehow, not even the most vivid dreams of her hormone-ransacked pregnancy could compare. The 200 elephants slipping into the muddy waterhole, shopping in the biggest mall in the world, carrying all the while a 20-kilo suitcase, nothing had the realism of Daniel and Letao. Daniel her darling baby and Letao the loquacious lesser god. Maybe she meant surrealism.
Letao had a mother too. He was not the child of her womb admittedly, coming as he did from Wulleb’s forehead when the tree cracked it apart. Lijobake was, however, the woman he called mother. Not that she was a woman as such.

Letao’s mother lived on the remote and lonely northern atoll of Bikar. She had chosen a most beautiful place to live, a veritable sanctuary for sea birds and her fellow turtles. Lijobake was a goddess of them all, and goddess of the sea. On her back was the most lovely turtle shell ever.

Wulleb suggested his boys go off to visit their mother, his wife, sometime after his useful suggestion to go off and conquer the stars. The promise of a gift of magical turtle shell was enough inducement to see his sons, Letao and Jemliwut, sailing out of Eb in their latest model outrigger canoe.

Jemliwut was an excellent navigator, taking note of the remaining stars (those who’d survived their war) by night and the sea and bird life by day. One frigate bird in the distance told a tale as useful as that of a sextant. All the while Letao lolled light-heartedly at the bottom of the canoe, eyes closed in cheery daydream, seeming oblivious to their position somewhere without sight of land in the vast ocean.

When his older brother berated him for his indolence, Letao claimed he was in fact working very hard, using a new method of navigation. Lying with his cheek to the smoothed wood of the canoe he could feel the wash and wrangle of the waves against the hull. Each swell, each wave, every change in
current, every turbulent surge told a story too, contributing to a well-structured novel. Following the patterns Letao said he would guide the way, which he did rather successfully to Jemliwut’s chagrin.

A thick darkened cloud appeared on the horizon. It was not the harbinger of a storm but a chattering mass of sea birds dancing above their favourite eatery and playground, Bikar.

The brothers were eager to arrive after their long journey and the survival rations of jenkwin and mogan. There’s only so much preserved and fermented pandanus and breadfruit a god can bare. Yet their landing was delayed when they discovered the beach beneath the crowd of birds was as dense and black with life as the sky above. There were turtle eggs warming, baby turtles crawling nowhere, parent turtles benignly overseeing the annual regeneration of their species. To thrust an outrigger canoe amongst them would cause havoc and panic, and the boys did not want to risk the wrath of their Great Mother the Immaculate Turtle, Lijobake.

They pulled their craft onto the shore of a sheltered islet across the lagoon, resting it just above the high-tide mark of broken shells and sea litter. From there they would swim.

The turtle assemblage was once more in sight when a sizable wave met them in a surge from the shore, carried the sons along and deposited them back in the centre of the lagoon. Strong swimmers both, Letao and Jemliwut retraced their path, stroke by stroke. But again the wave, or her sister, forced them back from their goal. Jemliwut struggled back, again and again. He felt alone as Letao had disappeared from view amongst the immense surging waves.

Letao was not amongst the waves but beneath them. As each wave threatened his forward progress, he dived. Avoiding the wave’s crest, he kicked downwards till he could clutch the colourful coral heads. The coral waited, horns and hands outstretched as if to aid his quest. Wave crest distant, Letao surfaced in her calm trough for breath, to dive once more when
the threatening volume of water regrouped and attacked. Countless times Letao met the eyes of startled reef fish in the depths of the lagoon. His success was counted upon his arrival. It was Jemliwut who was nowhere in sight.

Lijobake recognised Letao at once by his richly tattooed torso, yet she asked him his name. She’d sent the waves to question his strength, she sent her words to question his genealogy. He answered both well.

With joy they acknowledged each other as relatives, and with sincerity dripping in her limpid round eyes, Lijobake regretted that her eldest son Jemliwut did not wish to visit his ageing mother. Letao saw fit not to disillusion her on this point, making no mention of the mysteriously high waves on the calm lagoon surface and Jemliwut’s failure to pass them. He was his mother’s son.

To celebrate his arrival, she said, Lijobake fetched him a bowl of pandanus juice, an unusual luxury as the extraction is laboriously long, and the key, the fibrous knob-shaped yellow fruit, is normally sucked directly by the one with the thirst, to the detriment of his or her teeth. The thick juicy sludge had an odd taste and, surreptitiously, Letao looked more closely at the offered bowl. It was crawling with maggots.

Over the rim of the bowl the sun glanced off Lijobake’s magnificent and terribly magical shell. He realised that rewarding gifts do not come to he who bites the hand that feeds him. He kept drinking.

Lijobake was satisfied and let him into a secret. He was not to worry about jenkwin and mogan again; for, if he hungered on a journey, he had only to say ‘when we get there the food shall be ready’, and it would be; any food or drink he named. Letao was certain maggoty pandanus would not be on his list but thanked her for the tip anyway. Desultory chit-chat, buwebwenato, stretched on into the evening. Letao sat on his impatience until finally, close to dawn, all expectations were requited with the ceremonial presentation of a fist-sized cup of turtle shell.
fine, and richly warm in hue, sensual to caress. Coming from his mother’s shoulders it was fraught with power. Letao prepared to depart with his prize, and as a parting gesture Lijobake handed across a second piece of shell for the unfortunate Jemliwut. Letao immediately recognised it was of lower quality, coming from lower on her back near her tail. Less magical power for bumbling Jemliwut, sniggered his satisfied sibling.

Like a child Letao wanted to play with his new toy. After tossing Jemliwut his lump of shell, he single-handedly pulled their outrigger back into the lagoon and demanded they journey forward at once. The protests of Jemliwut — ‘we have no more food stored, where have you been anyway’ — continued long after they’d negotiated the pass and were out in the open ocean. Jemliwut’s stomach had taken over the complaining with loudly audible grumbles when next land was seen on the horizon.

‘When we get to Utirik the food shall be ready,’ spoke Letao confidently into the wind.

And sure enough, it was. Jemliwut expressed amazement between mouthfuls of raw fish, roast breadfruit and succulent young coconut, *iu*. That they should travel on and field-test the magic powers was agreed upon with alacrity.

The atoll of Likiep was next to act as host playground to the incorrigible Letao and his brother. As the highest palms became visible, Jemliwut decided to test his magic powers. Rubbing the turtle shell lovingly, he shouted: ‘When we get to Likiep the food shall be ready.’

There was no food. To get a simple drinking coconut they would have had to climb up a palm.

Letao was thrilled that his powers were so obviously greater than his brother’s and had trouble disguising his high
spirits. He jauntily suggested they catch some fish to eat instead. Jemliwut mutely followed along the beach to where only a group of men stood fishing.

The men were rightly indignant when the two strangers turned up and one demanded fishing rods so they could catch fish, in Likiep’s community waters no less. In no uncertain terms the highest-ranking fisherman told Letao to beat it, get lost, nick off, make tracks, vamoose, withdraw, take his leave, and his mate too.

Letao, though impressed by the command of language, cursed the speaker soundly. When a fish bit the man’s line only moments later, his feet became fixed to the rocky coral ledge he was standing on, his body became stiff, his arms solid and heavy. He looked just like a *kone* tree. Letao turned to his companions to politely request a fishing pole. Their denials brought the same fate. A splendid forest of *kone* trees sprouted from the shallow water.

*Kone* trees bear no edible fruit, so the hunger for food felt by Letao and Jemliwut was not appeased by the little episode. The hunger for power felt by Letao was temporarily sated, still it was probably best for the little boy they next ran into along the shore, that he offered no resistance and gladly handed over his fishing rod.

Letao caught enough fish to fill a pandanus leaf basket in moments and asked the lad to run off and bring the firemakers. The blank look he received made him worry briefly that his foreign accent was unintelligible, and then think more surely that the boy was unintelligent. Jemliwut intervened and asked the boy to bring twigs of dry wood, for that was what Letao meant.

As the dry branches chafed and irritated each other, small flames danced mischief between them. A fire was born. The local child not for a moment removed his eyes from the miracle. Fire had never visited his island before, not in its crackling tongues of flame nor on the tongues of storytellers. He was entranced, enslaved.
The ‘priests’ of the fire were very busy digging a hole, warming stones, and creating an oven in which to bake their leaf-wrapped reef fish. This done, and it being dreadfully rude to eat in front of others, they invited the speechless boy to join them in eating.

He bit warily into the crunchy convict fish and an indescribably wonderful taste flooded his mouth. Until this point his whole diet had been uncooked, his whole life raw.

Stomach replete to the point of engorgement, a benevolent mood settled on Letao. The kid’s face was such a picture he decided to give him the dying embers of the fire. He piled the hot coals and some dry leaves into the pandanus leaf basket and handed it over. The boy ran off immediately, guarding his treasure. His family would be so thrilled.

They were indeed amazed when he set the hot basket before them, beneath their thatched roof. Mother listened breathlessly to the concept of cooking; father bent over the basket, his breathing deep with awe. He blew out a low whistle of admiration and the embers burst into animated life. They leapt, they danced, they flirted with the dry thatching and ran off together in a blazing storm.

The family, and the stunned child, watched their home burn to the ground.

From then on all people had fire, all people ate cooked food, and the wise ones feared the mocking flames.

Letao could not help but laugh at the result of his generosity. He was exhilarated — carefree in his bountiful magical skills. His mother, the Great Turtle, had given him such power through her shell piece (or perhaps in the maggots — if the first two beings were indeed worms, the powers of that family could be phenomenal).

But she’d forgotten to give him the gift of wisdom. She had not dipped his head into the great font of godly kindness.
'Lady. Lady.'

Joy froze. So this was the next step. The anatomy of delusion: the gods begin talking to you through the burning bush, the innocent offspring and the like, then they trumpet at you from on high. The squeaking had sounded more like a pipe, a tin whistle, than a trumpet, but any voice-like utterances when alone give cause for concern.

It was mid-morning. She was alone with Daniel, trying to write a letter to a friend. The letters from home were fewer and shorter, her friends unable to see how the routine of their lives could interest her in that faraway isle. Her letters back said the same. She was at home looking after a baby, and that amounts to the same thing — give or take a touch of insanity — as for any and every mother; it doesn’t matter where you are living, arctic or tropic.

The sun was beating down, the humidity was closing in. All windows and louvres were open to their full extent though no air stirred in the room. Such was Joy’s valiant but unequal ideological battle with the air-conditioner.

‘Lady, why haven’t you done your dishes?’

That mobilised Joy. At points through history the gods have seen fit to take an inordinate amount of interest in the female gender’s sins of domestic omission, but any local deity would surely be well up on the inadequate water catchment system for the atoll and the consequent severe limitation on hours water flowed from household taps. Joy believed, perhaps
erroneously, that unwashed breakfast dishes were not a unique phenomenom in her area, so did not feel it could be her guilty conscience addressing the matter. And it was, truly, hardly worthy of the breath of higher beings.

It took a while to find the huge blue eyes staring over the dining room window-sill.

‘Leaving dishes is dirty. God doesn’t love dirty people.’

It was the strange daughter of the strange people next door. Obviously a family with a missionary zeal against physical and moral filth. Obviously a missionary family.

The waif-like six-year-old showed herself more fully at the screen door. Her blond hair fell loose and her eyes were indeed huge. And round. And vacant. They looked in without animation or curiosity, but saw everything. Joy could not help but be reminded of a child from some ‘Exorcist’ type movie. It seemed ridiculous to be worrying about her own angelic-looking child when the neighbour’s kid appeared so manifestly possessed.

The child did not move, did not go away, so Joy was forced to ask her name.

‘Philippina’ was lisped back.

Joy assumed her father was a Philip who aspired to immortality through his children, to date four daughters. It is unfortunate, though schoolchildren are not likely to hold with this view, that Ancient Greek is no longer taught. Overwise Joy would have immediately been aware that the name was a compound of love and pain, harking back to the time when a godly person could, for the love of god, truly rejoice in punishing their sins with pain. Hurry to the Little Chapel of Self-flagellation.

It was no coincidence that Philippina’s father’s name was Chuck, and that he was contemplating translating the Bible into Marshallese from the original Greek edition. Nor that Philippina was a solitary youngest child forbidden from playing with the ‘dirty’ local kids, and a great diviner of sin.
Philippina’s mother would never be guilty of Joy’s sins of slovenly living, would never have heard the flat condemnation of a couple of cornflake bowls. Philippina’s mother was busy in the home. She rarely emerged, but when she did she was as neat as the proverbial sinless pin with a voluminous coiffure that, thought Joy reflecting on her own ponytail, could only be professionally set. How unlikely this was could only be judged with the knowledge that of the two, and only two, hairdressers on the island, one was a Filippino transvestite and the other a RiPalle who sported a parrot on his shoulder. Though both were excellent in their trade, they were hardly the types to inspire confidence and devotion in a missionary lady. Mother and father were as mysterious as child. And child was not budging from behind Joy’s screen door.

Unaware of six-year-old etiquette, let alone the mores of the possessed (Daniel excluded, of course), Joy was at a loss. She did not want the prying puritan in her house, so she suggested they go for a walk on the beach. The baby needed airing anyway.

The beach was not far. It never is in Majuro where the lagoon or ocean, or usually both, is always within sight. Philippina had been virtually standing on it the whole while she was at the back door.

The eldest led the way, baby Daniel cradled comfortably in a sling across her breast, his senses peeled in anticipation of visual and olfactory stimulation; the younger followed as if a shadow. Until they passed out of sight of the houses, around a slight bend in the shoreline. Then the little girl swooped like a gull, up and down, pecking and foraging amongst the, unfortunate but usual, disposable nappies, beer cans, pair-lost rubber thongs, general rubbish and the fortunately occasional dead piglet. She was not a pre-eminent tropical beachcomber in the making, but a faithful shell collector. Amidst filth was beauty. The human population threw out its refuse and the sea threw up its own castaways: the delicate, the dainty, the fine, yet durable, former homes of sealife. The wealth of the ocean
was unending even in this shell-shocked lagoon, polluted beyond wonder.

As far as Daniel in the sling would permit, Joy joined Philippina in sifting through clams, cones and cowries, the candy pinks, milk whites, chocolate browns, jaffa oranges, fondly choosing the least ravaged. Many shells ran away in anthropomorphic fright, to the giggles of all three. The best shell specimens could be found nestled amongst the coral several feet below the lagoon surface with the aid of a mask and snorkel, or in the local shop near the Assumption Church, but to these collectors many a treasure was found in the trash. Hands were full on the return trudge along the shifting sand.

Until they came within sight of the houses.

Philippina ducked under a rabble of juvenile coconut trees and carefully placed her day’s gain under a particularly sheltering palm. Joy peered over her shoulder to see a plenteous hoard of shells, large and small, the return of numerous outings.

‘You don’t want to take them home?’ she asked, the innocent of the two.

‘Of course not. They are heathen objects. Heathen.’

Joy was mesmerised by the pile of heathen objects and did not see the girl evaporate into her home.

‘Heathen’ was not a word that had entered her conscious or unconscious mind when Geoff had suggested they work in a foreign country. They would go to the Third World, to an Underdeveloped, Developing Country, to the South; not to a heathen unknown. The people would be Christian or Hindu or Buddhist or Animist or Ancestor Worshippers, Agnostic or Atheist, Mormons or Bahai; but they would not be Heathen. Nothing was like she’d imagined.

As she lovingly lay Daniel on a rug, sleep having rhythmically invaded his body with every step home, she could feel the sizable Triton on the bookshelf eyeing her. It was just the sort of shell a bothersome god like Letao would lurk in: a trumpet shell.
Seized by passion and horror at the potential evil, yet unable to handle the offending object — heathen — she poked and jabbed at it with the broom until it toppled to the ground and was unceremoniously swept from the house. With an effective hockey-style shot, the trumpet was sent jolting over the step and under a creeping pumpkin vine, its silken peach mouth gaping at an impish angle.

On the bookshelf the silhouette of the shell’s triangular resting surface, a darkness against the background of collected dust, mocked her return indoors.

God does not love dirty people.

Maybe she needed the help of the great monotheistic God in her fight for her child. The rest of the nation had evidently taken refuge behind His monolithic shoulders. There were more churches of more denominations here than she’d ever known existed. The Marshallese flocked to church. And little wonder, with Letao taking them for such a ride in the past.

The buckets and wipes, the Ajax and Pine-o-Cleen, were given no rest. Joy’s frenzy gathered up dust and grit and grime and consigned it to the filth underworld, though Joy suspected immediate reincarnation would be its reward and consequently wondered how ideologically unsound it would be to get in a regular cleaning lady.

The energy of the spring-clean was hard to sustain without the forced remembrance of Daniel’s sweet voice: ‘Letao did this, Letao says that, Letao will…’ The kid was caught in hero worship. Yes, cleanliness was next to godliness. Renewed scrubbing, renewed vigour.

Daniel called her while she was finishing off the bathroom. He was very hungry. Letao had been on and on about some of his antique antics, while remaining coy about his more recent history, despite Daniel’s many questions.

Once Daniel was satisfied, at least with his mother’s milk, Joy retrieved the beautiful trumpet shell. She was unsure how she could ever have suspected it with its languid vanilla
slice markings. Just as she was unsure how she could ever have thought this was only a dream.

Geoff did not notice how close he was to godliness when he returned from work that evening. His reflection in spotless benchtops and squeaky sinks stared back unseen. He closed all the windows and louvres and turned on the air-conditioner. He had not acclimatised. Nothing was as he had imagined. Geoff was not having a very good time.

That day had been dreadful. He’d woken in the morning with a feeling of dread, and sure enough the day was full of it. For a man of Geoff’s combined intelligence and good fortune, this was a unique experience. In the past he had liked his work, each morning had been accompanied by a whistling song. Joy had once revealed it to be annoyingly off-key and optimistic for such an early hour and this had, contrarily, generated a sense of pride in the song and thus a daily gutsy renewal. Joy was now probably relieved at the cessation of the tuneless ritual, but hadn’t mentioned it. Her days started so much earlier than his, since Daniel’s enchanting annexation of their lives; their timetables too briefly coincided and they mentioned too little to each other.

He kissed Joy affectionately. ‘And how was your day, darling?’

‘As usual. And yours?’

‘Dreadful.’

He counted himself extremely fortunate to have Joy and Daniel, his life-support systems. The baby was perfect, and his wife was coping so well, was so strong. Not like himself. He’d come from the hustle-bustle, dog-eat-dog city life to the laidback Pacific and was suffering from stress. He had so far, and for the foreseeable future, failed to adapt to the demands of the new job. The key to the problem was somewhere in there with the absence of recognisable demands.
Reality was slipping. Joining an international agency was applauded as a wise and somewhat lucky career move for an economist like Geoff. Assignment to the Planning Office of a new and emergent country could not have been more fortuitous. Majuro: the happy hunting ground for intellect-flexing and name-making. A reputation made and the sky — or Geneva — was the limit. All while really helping people. Geoff did not subscribe to all of Joy’s causes but he was not excited by exploiting the world. But his work wasn’t as he’d imagined from the words-on-paper.

The Planning Office in this new and emergent country did not offer that which his dreams demanded. On the first day it did not offer pens, paper, any physical means of support. In retrospect, it was a wonder Junior ever found them in the hotel, the system was so inefficient. His safeguard was this belief that it was inefficiency. To even entertain the thought that anything happening, or more precisely, not happening, within those four walls, was deliberate would be devastating.

His colleagues were genuinely friendly. Rosina in her authoritative way kept the telephone lines uncut and the office open, and Junior kept the pencils sharpened. Their leader kept a high profile in the community, driving up and down the one and only road. Geoff could not understand a lot of their jokes but laughed along anyway, like at the hilarious welcome party they got around to throwing six months late.

As the ultimate defence he had clung to an apparent directive to prepare a plan on the ‘Economics of Fisheries in the Future’. The country had a mere 70 square miles of land, but with the 200-mile EEZ — Exclusive Economic Zone — there were well over 1.5 million square miles of fish-filled ocean. Fisheries seemed logical. Fisheries seemed big. Fisheries remained a vast frontier with a few individual men harrying the edges in their outboard motor boats. Plus, as Joy pointed out, with the astronomically high consumption of canned tuna in this ocean-locked country, fisheries seemed sensible.
It hadn’t been easy. Data, statistics, information, all were negligible, each fact to be tracked down assiduously. It had not been fun.

That day Rosina had been in a spring-cleaning mood — it was in the air. After dusting the antique computer, she had turned her scrutiny to the filing cabinets, the piles of papers in the bottom drawer receiving critical attention. Such a mess of paper was obviously unloved, unused, unuseful, unnecessary, unwanted, and in the bin.

Geoff restrained his horror at this sacrilege to the written word and silently retrieved them. He should have let them be: trash is trash.

Unused indeed was a slick 1997 ‘Planning Report on the Economics of Fisheries in the Future’. The inch-thick document had obviously been painstakingly compiled. He could have written it himself. Five years later he was well on his way to having written it himself. In the intervening years nothing had been done about all its gorgeously formulated recommendations. Pessimistically, as a broken man, Geoff believed for all the action it would generate now, he might as well copy the excavated report parrot-fashion. Perhaps he should. Perhaps he would. But he wouldn’t.

Joy comforted his depressed shoulders as he told his tale of woe. In the retelling, Geoff was unwilling to put his experience in any more broad a context than the one regrettably, totally inefficient office where documents could get lost, buried, forgotten. If only they had an internal library.

Joy the librarian shook herself hard. Of course: she would track down this self-styled creationary god Letao in the public library.
Information is power. This could well be the motto of the Marshall Islands — if those who knew of the axiom ever saw fit to share it with the rest of the population. Gossip abounds; information is bound. Knowledge is the key and no-one wants to let the whole mob through the door and into the cookie barrel. Keep it to your breast. Ignorance — in others — is, after all, bliss.

When Joy hummed ‘information is power’ to herself, she was imagining a far more innocent scenario of seekers searching, discovering solutions to the puzzles in their lives, her indexes guiding their minds through the labyrinth of books to the prize: information, knowledge, power. Joy had loved her position in the library as custodian of knowledge.

Letao made claims about himself, affected outrageous postures in her child’s mind, but she was heading to the public library to discover who the charlatan really was. And thence, a way to oust him.

He was in the index, to her undeniable relief.

Joy took pride in her self-knowledge and believed herself to be no surrealist wool-gatherer. Her imagination — island-crazed or otherwise — though up to the occasional fanciful chimaera could hardly have fantasised a grandfather, father, mother (turtle of all things), brother and self-centred imp; not a whole family. Doubt did amuse itself in the recesses of this weighty self-concept nonetheless, and thus the relief. She sighed. Thankfully Letao was, or had been, in someone’s mind other than her own, real.
Joy did not recognise it as problematic relief, for which is easier to dispel — the imagined imp or the possessive forgotten god?

The morning had been well-nigh perfect. Geoff had been pleased to leave her the pick-up for her excursion. ‘About time you got out more,’ he’d smiled. His figure was still standing by the road 15 minutes later, the smile fading fast. One of the decrepit communal taxis did finally come and two large women moved themselves across the backseat to allow him room. His briefcase fitted snugly between his knees and chin. Joy was standing at the kitchen sink washing the dishes in a bowl of stored water (Philippina’s eyes were everywhere) and waved tentatively to her departing husband. He did not see her. He would rave about the wonderful cultural experience that evening, and it would make great copy for letters home, so she didn’t waste any sympathy.

Daniel was excited about the excursion and gabbled away, claiming he remembered other trips to her library when he was in her womb. He was becoming as prone to exaggeration as Letao.

As she gathered Daniel and his accessories up out of the car near the library, a bent ageing woman shuffled through the dust by the road. She glanced up from under her eyebrows and asked the inevitable ‘where are you going?’ Joy was pleased to be able to answer naturally and truthfully: ‘To the Alele.’ ‘Ah! Alele!’ the matriarch muttered. It was a satisfying exchange on both sides.

This woman may, perhaps, long in the past, have seen an alele. To the young people of Majuro the word signified the Library and Museum, yet originally the term was attached to a small woven bag into which all things precious to the family were placed. At its inception it was hoped all things precious to the culture and country would be placed in the Museum,
Library and Archives, the two-storey yellow building near the High Court. The Alele was an alele with capital letters and a great capital expenditure. The traditional culture wasn’t surviving very well under the onslaught of the cash economy and even greater capital expenditures on ‘progress’, so it was comforting to the politicians to have the Alele to point to in times of identity crisis. There are our traditions. There is our culture. And there was Letao.

He was under folktales. Joy could see a family of folk sitting around a fire patching a quilt, or quilting a patch, or whatever folk engaged themselves in, while quipping tales of Letao and Jemliwut. Folktales: it was so parochial. But she wondered how many mothers in Kin-Kin and Imbil look at their sturdy offspring and dread the ‘mythical’ bunyip out the back in the bush.

Letao pranced his way through several volumes of Micronesian tales and myths, creating, destroying, getting up to mischief. He was safely aeons away in a pre-literate age, each adventure passed and amended from mouth to mouth till numerous versions of his ascent, and one rumour of his death, existed. None of the stories matched in flamboyance the embellished heroics that had passed directly from Letao to Daniel and on through Daniel’s mouth to Joy.

Then there was the one extraordinary and extremely disconcerting reference in which Letao popped up in Oklahoma. In Joy’s feminist view it was an inane and insulting little urban myth, of Letao coercing sex from a group of washerwomen by a river. He threatened to use his magic to block out the sun to induce them to partake of his mythically large mythical member. But it was not only the subject matter that was disconcerting; it was that this reported appearance was in the 1950s. 1950 was not light years away. It was within written history. Within living memory. She was on his trail.

She knew little of the terrain — the available literature on the Marshall Islands had been so limited in Australia — but
here was a room, a closet-sized room admittedly, full, very full, of information specifically on the Marshall Islands and its surrounds. The local librarian was helpful in finding material and emboldened Joy to ask about this Letao hero, quite the patron of the Marshalls. ‘Do you believe in him?’ was her naive searching formulation. ‘Oh, no,’ laughed her informant, ‘I’m Protestant.’

Still, she settled Joy in the room, regretting that no-one could borrow and take from the library any books from the Pacific Collection. Joy in turn settled Daniel, with a throwaway ‘Watch Tower’ to rip and tear, chew over and digest, and set herself the happy task of poking and prying through shelves, filing cabinets and open cardboard boxes, not knowing what she was looking for but eager to find.

The first thing she discovered was that Geoff was right, as usual. There were traditionally no prostitutes, not by the western definition; it was not Letao alone who was preoccupied by sex. One source stated emphatically that ‘if possible every man attempts to have slept with every girl on his island’. Consequently the two genders were prohibited from speaking and touching in public, for, went the reasoning, what else could the motivation for such contact be if not sexual interest?

The first white men to appear on the scene were much enamoured of this state of affairs. To say the whalers and traders took advantage would be overstating the events in the prevailing climate: they simply joined the cultural experience with enthusiasm. This led to one local theory that they came from a white tribe that lacked any women. The deprived gentlemen had to travel far to join with the women of the Ralik and Ratak chains of islands. And the male native population did not always view this favourably. Not much had changed.

Yes, as Geoff said, sex was free. If the cost of syphilis was not taken into account. Syphilis everywhere, an epidemic, old people with eaten-away noses, newborns infected in the womb. And one day very soon AIDS would call in its debt.
AIDS the killer, the indomitable virus that knew no boundaries. All she had to do was tempt Letao out of his present form, whatever that may be, into a manly manifestation, lay the bait in a heavenly honey-thighed maiden, and infect him with the deadly virus. It was a thought.

It was a thought that was arrested. Her eyes had alighted on a faded photograph in a tattered journal, the ‘Deutsche Kolonial Zeitung’. It was the type of photograph that filled one with a sense of nostalgia for a past era never known. Maria Brandau was dressed in Sunday white, a waisted gown with lace collar; young Heinrich toddled before her in his sailor suit, arms outstretched to balance against a rocking horse. The backdrop was a coconut grove, it was Jaluit Atoll 1894.

Maria’s eyes were gentle and knowing, gazing fondly at her son. And her name was familiar. Joy returned to the dusty box of ten minutes previously and was unaccountably thrilled to find her memory correct. Amongst the documents from the period of German colonial rule was the handwritten journal of one Maria Brandau, subtitled ‘The Diary of a Colonial Officer’s Wife’.

Joy’s German comprehension had suffered over the years since her grandparents insisted she learn it on the long summer holidays with them. They had stuffed her with ‘Der Struwwelpeter’ and handed down hand-woven memories of the farm in Brandenburg. Now she squinted at the correct, legible hand of Maria and laughed at the contemporary relevancy of her hundred-year-old comments. There were the ants. They were a particularly virulent and aggressive species, the mother claimed, making coordinated attacks on the defenceless Heinrich whilst he slept. With an adaptation of the age-old defence of the moat, peace was had at last by standing each leg of the child’s cot in a tin of water. The unavoidable swim demoralised the ants and they departed in search of easier prey. The ants in Joy’s kitchen were in for a surprise.

The months turned with the pages and stopped. A different hand, an unproclaimed commentator, wrote that
Maria and Heinrich were, sadly, no longer amongst the Jaluit community. Their souls had departed, taken by an illness of unknown genesis.

A century later Joy indeed found it sad. She flicked back through the pages in search of some indication of the approaching fatal destiny.

‘Vorsicht!’ Maria almost shouted a week before the blankness of paper and death. ‘Vorsicht! Das Böse ist hier. Das Böse ist hier unter uns.’ Be careful. The evil is here. The evil is here among us.

Joy shivered. She may be obsessed but Maria Brandau was not referring to the ants. This had Letao’s fingerprints all over it.

The agitation, the distress, had in no way diminished in the half-hour it took to get to Geoff’s office, itself a distressing sight with its bare floor, bare walls, bare desks and its atmosphere bare of all fresh air. It was, furthermore, also disappointingly bare of Geoff.

‘I told Geoff I’d pick him up after work,’ she explained to Rosina. It was 4.50 pm, ten minutes before close of business, and Rosina alone graced the government office. Daniel wailed plaintively on her shoulder. He knew something was wrong.

‘He is at Finance.’ Rosina’s bejewelled hand waved toward an identical low white building steps away. ‘But you must sit. You are not well.’

Joy was already sagging into a chair. Rosina imperiously took the weight of Daniel from her and clucked like a majestic mother hen. ‘What is wrong?’

‘Just my period,’ Joy improvised quickly.

Rosina gave her a knowing, comforting smile, affirming the bond of women worldwide. ‘You know, of course, it’s all because of Letao,’ she chuckled.
Geoff arrived in time to pick Joy up off the floor and take her and Daniel home. ‘I’m not sick. I don’t need to go to the hospital,’ she protested the whole way, though she wanted to scream her terror.

They know! They all know Letao has possessed our child!

Joy did not actually have her period. Calling forward menstruation was merely a cover-up for her dishevelment. But if she had been menstruating she could have blamed Letao, for it was in fact he who cursed women with their monthly bleeding.

The first woman’s head, or rather pudendum, onto which this curse was laid, was from Kiribati. She was much like Rosina, truth be told; a woman of chiefly lineage who knew her own mind and the value of a good argument.

A certain Marshallese chief was forever being provocative and belligerent so the I-Kiribati dame decided to taunt him in return. She claimed that, beyond any doubt, there were more birds belonging to the land of her lineage than his lineage holdings had porpoises. Though it was true, the old geezer could not allow himself to lose face to a woman and he summoned Letao’s assistance. Letao was rather bored at the time and was more than ready to accept a chance for devilment. He agreed to help the chief.

He waited until the night before the official counting of birds and porpoises, when the moon was new. By the crescent moon’s dim light he crept to the woman’s household and, as she slept, sliced off a piece of her genitals. It was perfect porpoise bait; when it was thrown on the reef, thousands of porpoises danced into the area of the Marshallese chief’s lineage. There were now far more porpoises than the wench had birds.

The I-Kiribati woman did not care about the counting, for when she woke she found she was bleeding. The fishy smell of mortified flesh filled her nostrils and she felt very, very sick.
It’s strange, the moderns said: even now porpoises come ashore at the time of the new moon. And all women bleed at this time of the month.

It is just as Rosina told Joy: Letao was to blame.
Wulleb: Oh, my youngest son Letao, I recognised you almost immediately though I have not seen you for this century and you appear to have misplaced your body with its most beautiful tattoos. I am an old god but I can still vividly recall the ceremonial drums beating as I marked your chest in a design to rival the regal angel fish. I had an incomparable artistic talent, if I do say so myself. And you, the son of my forehead, showed so much bravery as you gained your tattoos, casting off the mat from your face to reveal your mouth not contorted in pain but smiling in glee. Yes, a true son of mine. We had such adventures in those great old days of time gone by. It is sad to see the world so changed, and that you now must come to me in the form of a trumpet shell.

Letao: Oh, great father of mine, great father of all things, direct in blood boil of Lowa who created the world. Oh, master of the universe, you are not old, you are in your prime, so show no regret for the past: the future is ours.

Your eyes have seen all, for I have indeed mislaid my most wondrous and well-fitting body and alas I mourn. Yet, it is a comely triton, this shell of mine, with most exquisite supple markings of some distinction. A woman of my acquaintance has likened this trumpet’s design to the decoration of a vanilla slice, a most delectable item itself. Oh, magnificent father, you have perhaps not ventured on a vanilla slice in Eb, for it is a far-off French pastry with a creamy sugar roof streaked with scallops of chocolate lacework. It tickles my imagination that a woman
should covet this logo, should crave this sweet image, could be 
tempted to lick my coat with eager tongue, devour my vanilla 
slice being. Ah! In a good mood, I even believe this woman 
would appreciate the irony of my only having recently taken for 
myself this form of a trumpet shell.

Wulleb: I know nothing of this irony ado, of this Parisian 
cuisine, or any of this perversity, but I see that not everything 
has changed. You, by your words, are still finding time to play 
with women though our world and livelihood are in crisis. Look 
around you, unworthy son; look at Eb, the island of the gods, 
and be thankful that you have foolishly forgotten to protect 
your bulky bordello body and have lost the fine frame I, from 
my body, gave you. Your puny squat shell is able to crouch at my 
feet and that is all the room I have left in this shanty-town 
refugee camp that was once my palm-fringed palatial haunt. My 
Eb! My memory of once glorious Eb has ebbed away with the 
tide of time. See around you, son sprung from my cerebrum, see 
the spectres, the spirits, the ghosts and minor gods of place and 
nature who have crowded into every space. We are over-
populated! We are overcrowded! The spirits are many but our 
spirit is weak, sucked dry by the prim, puckered lips of 
missionaries. They have hounded, herded and ignored us from 
trees and wells and coral outcrops. We may no longer recline 
upon the crown of the coconut tree assured of the protection of 
a consecrated boundary of logs beneath us. Our brethren who 
formerly observed life from the wooden pillow have been 
starved from their post, ungrateful man neglecting to send the 
first bite of the meal their way. Oh, forgetful ingrates of the 
human congregation! I cannot remember, though my faculties 
are faultless, the last pandanus celebration those men danced 
and chanted in my adoration. ‘Oh, God Wulleb, increase our 
crop.’ So I don’t. Let them eat rice. It is a travesty since Snow 
came to the Marshall Islands.

Letao: Snow, my rightly peevish father? Not that I could ever 
contradict your Knowledge, oh God who made History, but did
not snow come only recently, that day in 1954 when snow fell on the atoll of Rongelap for the children to play in? 'Twas not real snow to be sure, merely radioactive fallout from the awesome creationary Bravo Shot hydrogen bomb the adolescent American nation was itself playing with. Yet, besides, and in conclusion, though let this not be a contradiction, that was a brief few decades since and our spirit brothers and sisters have hastened hence in horror beginning quite a hundred years before that — a hundred years being but a twinkle in thy venerable eye, yet substantial to the weak short-lived humanity...

Wulleb: Obsequious observance never did suit you, son of the Great Turtle Mother, Lijobake. And yes, I said Snow and I meant Snow. The undistinguished doings and dealings of lesser humankind do not deserve my notice, for the most part. But the missionaries came in their ‘Morning Star’ to my jewel-like island Ebon in 1857 and disturbed My Father’s plan of play and plenty. This Missionary Snow translated their father’s teachings into the Marshallese language and the ghosts have been flocking, like his animals the sheep, to Eb ever since. Now the people cut their hair and cover their breasts and count their dollars. They place the words of their new Lord, who has taken off with our name and is called Anij, on something called paper, some mighty substance Lowa in his wisdom failed to create. And they place pieces of this paper covered in other-godly words inside many bottles, and they hang these bottles around their shabby dwellings, and our friendly spirits are scared off and forced to migrate West to Eb. Every John, Dick and Henry is here. We need our territory back. We need belief — in Us. And you think of women!

Letao: I am humbled before you, yet I promise faithfully as the devoted brother of Jemliwut that I came to Eb this day to speak precisely on this matter. I need your guidance, greatest of fathers, for I too have observed our people finding new gods, Budweiser, Coca-Cola and Jesus Christ, and I, unworthy as I am
before you, but more than worthy as thy son, direct from the bloodline of Lowa, yes I, Letao, intend to bring the people of our islands back to worship with their souls.

Wulleyb: You speak wisely, my enterprising offspring. I am great but I am old. Your brother Jemliwut, the source of my pride, continues bravely in his untended uot tree in Majuro as an example to the feeble spirits hereabouts who lack his great virtues of patience and perseverance. His job is there, so you second son Letao are our remaining hope as saviour. Yes, Letao, you are the shell for the job.

Letao: The shell, dear dad, is a problem. I have come to ask your advice on it today. I returned to the playground of my creation, which they have now called the Marshall Islands, after a great adventure, to find a regrettable and untenable state of affairs. I appeared in many forms before many women and they laughed at my requests. Laughed! None of them knew me! My ‘name’ is known about the place; in fact-bland stories of my past are taught in elementary school, in amongst the deeds of other ‘heroes’. I am captured in their minds with Billy the Kid and with the television there now, with a bunch of ridiculous Ninja-fighting turtles — no disrespect to my mother implied. I looked about in fear and saw our people lost from their culture, trembling far from their traditions. I must, I will, bring them back. But, without a body, it is no simple task.

Wulleyb: I was wondering about that, squatting shell speaking with my son’s voice. What happened, where is that fine body?


But what I need now is a new persona and in Majuro I have searched far, and as wide as is possible on that thin strip of sand. Now I need your counsel. But let me first complain of my ill-fated attempts to find a body that you should better appreciate the difficulty of my endeavour.
Wulleb: As you say, son. Speak, I have always appreciated a good fairytale.

Letao: The Mormons are an excellent place to begin then, All Hearing Ear of my parent.

On returning to my created land, amongst the plethora of Christian denominations that now haunt every locality in Majuro, my attention was immediately captured by the Mormons. Their full name has a substantial and influential ring: the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints. But more importantly, as you can well sympathise, I found attractive the fact that they are the only, the one and only, sect to eschew monogamy. I was a kone tree at the time — there is no-one around like me these days, so I was safe from being felled to make a canoe, one of my greatest adventures I recall — and a group of men took to sheltering beneath me when it was hot and their wives were asking too often why they were not out fishing. There they perfected the art of bwebwenato, they chattered and gossiped at amazing lengths without any actual information being passed. Yet it was from them I learnt of Joseph Smith, a man with an admirable depth and breadth of vision; a human who created his own religion. Can you imagine — more like that and we all, God Father, would be redundant! The stories he told of Atlantic crossings by ancient Jews, of the dead man Jesus flying to them in America hundreds of years later, of revelations — heavenly bwebwenato — recorded on gold; such creativity! His followers were not content with his audacious statements and have come to make elaborate justifications, always a mistake. Don’t muddy religion with logic, I say. Let them think the truth is something to look forward to in the Afterlife. No need to justify the taking of more than one wife even in the afterlife, after all. My idle informants debated the concept of polygamy and were surprisingly disdainful. One nagging voice was enough, they agreed. Frail mortals!

I hastened to the chapel and found myself a convenient Mormon body to appropriate. I had found my niche. Anyone
gullible enough to convert to a man named Smith would only need to take one step further to myself. From this base I could take over the Marshalls, Micronesia, the World!

I was duped, my Father of Wise Counsel. The leaders, the ‘Elders’, were pimply youth and aged men all, with no mind to taking a wife to themselves, let alone taking some other man’s wife. The former soul of my new body had left without a fuss and I found myself on a bicycle. It is a contraption, a devilish invention of torture causing legs and arms to fly in unimaginable directions. The vengeful pedal of the bicycle gripped my foot and would respond to no threat or entreaty or chanted spell. It flung me viciously to the ground. The last straw, father, the last.

When you have finished laughing, old man, I will continue my heroic saga.

Wulleb: Continue, courageous son. I can see that your human’s bicycle was as mighty a foe as a shooting star. I laugh for no reason. Continue.

Letao: I continued down the road in the form of a hermit crab, scrambling safely through the potholes. The bicycle whirred its wheels in glee, imagining some kind of victory. My Latter-Day Saint and his pimple-faced partner were given an air-conditioned car to travel in after the nasty bicycle incident and the metal frame of the evil instrument was relegated to a back shed. Mysteriously, the shed was soon broken into and the bicycle was thrown to a rusty graveyard in the lagoon. I am not a merciful — or neglectful — enemy.

And I am not an arrogant uppity god. I can live and learn from my mistakes, and survive. I learnt that I needed to learn more. I needed to learn all the intricacies of modern life — to get wise, learn the ropes, to pick a few brains. Just as Jesus the Christ did.

Wulleb: That name! Every spectre prostrate at my feet, begging an indefinite lease on a quiet patch of Eb, spits out the name of
that usurper who is depriving us of our sustaining souls. He who is shepherd of men is fleecing us in our own pastures. Every Christmas when they celebrate his birth amongst them, when he was an insignificant child not yet a year old so not acceptable as a member of any civilised code, every December 25th, more of my valiant gods are forced to seek refuge. Celebration? Annihilation! I would send you to deal with this menace if he were not already dead. Sthput on hallowed babies in stables.

Letao: Your words are true, if not in the Revised Oxford Dictionary. Sthput on babes. I was never a babe, father of full-grown boys, and while knowing you would never deprive me of any advantage, I need now the experience of innocence, of kiddiedom. The God of the Christians caused himself to be born as the child Jesus, into the humble home of a carpenter, and look at his success. Learn the way of humanity as an inside trader — that was my first lesson on my return to the Marshall Islands.

The search for a carpenter was formidable. Finally I found a 17-year-old youth who had completed a six-week carpentry course in the Youth Options Program. His 15-year-old consort was heavy with their first construction. Perfect. I gazed down from the crown of the only coconut tree in a 100-yard radius to survey my new home. The girl was smothering groans of labour in a plywood lean-to, leaning to a plywood shack. Close by, beer cans, disposable diapers, plastic bags and a foul smell nested in a trench with a lone banana tree. Just as close by were the shacks of neighbours. The wails of countless children and poverty drowned my to-be-mother’s pain. Welcome to Mosquito Town.

I fled. Do not judge me, always-father. I only prove my discernment by finding no fancy for an infancy in that. Along the road was Demon Town, but not a demon in town to commiserate with me. They are here in Eb. Inhumanity roams alone amongst the churches.
Wulleb: It was a fine idea, child, but we gods cannot degrade ourselves to such levels of destitution. Impecuniosity is no example to set. So what was your next plan for our salvation, ingenious son taught of his father?

Letao: No new plan, pop. A fine idea is a fine idea forever. If a child could choose his parents — for there is no question that I must return as a Him — he could do no better than the next couple I fixed upon. Father-to-be owned a few buildings, thus a close professional affiliation to carpentry, and mother-to-be was of the best, yes my always-father, the best blood. To be King of Heaven and a King of Earth was the fate that awaited me. The hospital room was replete with international doctors: my to-be-body’s physical safety was assured. And lo, my throat sang with the emotions gathered there — metaphysically speaking at this stage of my metamorphosis, you understand — for introduced into the scene of steel and sterility was an old crone, a national treasure well versed in midwifery and the ways of old, as taught by your sister Limdurianig. Such a sign of triumph to come!

As the young woman moaned softly, the old crone repeatedly smeared her contracting belly with the oil of a coconut, chanting as rhythmically as her hands in massage. ‘You have pains, pains from the north, pains from the south. Woe, woe, woe. Speak, speak, speak. Womb, womb, womb. It comes, the pain.’

It came, a personable-looking little human. I was well pleased. He, me, we, were wrapped in a coconut fibre mat, soft and warm, and told: ‘Grow grow, spring up, spring up, become always bigger than the fish in the water. Grow, increase.’

Grandfather-to-be took the umbilical cord to throw into the ocean, thus ensuring the child’s fishing prowess, and grandmother-to-be took the placenta to bury deep beneath a rock lest...

Wulleb: Okay, I know all that. What you’re saying is, it was all perfect. So why, clever boy, are you now here asking advice of
an old-man-who-listens-to-tall-stories, in the shape, comely as you say, of a triton?

_Letao:_ It is painful to tell, but it must out. Grandmother-to-be whisked me off to a Condo in Hono.

_Wulleb:_ Sorry? I am a with-it old man, I am hip to the jive and the _jepta_. But what, pray elucidate, is this ‘condo in hono’.

_Letao:_ Forgive me, I forget that flawlessly sublime Eb, here out west of the end of the world, is without French pastries and street-talk. The phrase in question makes reference to a dwelling on another more ‘civilised’ island. The defenceless baby, with me in its body, was put on a jet and taken to live in a condominium in Honolulu. The family wanted everything to be right and would not risk allowing the bloodline to develop in ‘the Majuro environment’. They meant the mess. It would have been a pampered existence but my destiny must begin on my atolls.

_Wulleb:_ Made of earth stolen from me when you flew off in a huff.

_Letao:_ On our atolls.

_Wulleb:_ And so it is now, at this point in your heroic narrative, that you come to feel you require your great father’s advice?

_Letao:_ You see all.

_Wulleb:_ And you speak rightly. A fine idea is a joy forever: a baby you should be. You must learn the modern way to overpower modern evils. Remember the bicycle! Are there no more babies?

_Letao:_ There are many babies, father-of-few. Too many babies. Six in a home, twelve in a home. I have seen too much of it now. Anonymity is all I would gain in such a household. Deep sigh, for my spirits are low. Maybe we should recall the source of all, Great Lowa, to advise us?
Wulleb: Haste is the downfall of youth, Letao. Lowa may rest. There is another kind of baby.

Letao: Only the 'belly, belly' RiPalle babies of the barbarian foreigners.

Wulleb: The clothed white men brought us the curse of Christ. It is a right and just balance that all should be restored in this guise. There must be many to choose from.

Letao: An enticing thought, yet I quaver still. I can feel the resentment against the intruders, the white men who sit at the right and to the left whispering in darker ears, holding the keys, deciding, directing, dictating.

Wulleb: Sitting to the left and to the right in key positions of power. Of power, Letao. They are there, quibbles or no. If it would make you feel safer, find a RiPalle born in the islands — bridge all possibilities. That is my considered advice to you.

Letao: Brilliant advice! I am stunned by the simplicity yet ingenuity. I must find a white baby born on our atoll's coral sand. I bow and blow my trumpet to your wisdom.

Wulleb: And I accept your praise.

Letao: Just one tiny thing more, a mere technicality in the wider scheme: do you by chance happen to know some spell, some chant or potion, a piece of witchcraft, to oust an overly possessive soul from its body?

Wulleb: Your mother, Lijobake, was always the keeper of such minutiae. For this second time I send you off to receive her magic.

Letao: A second piece of advice of great weight, thank you father. Only when I was first released, oh, I mean when I first returned from my great adventure abroad, I travelled to visit her on lonely Bikar. The beach heads were bare. Sea birds screeched overhead but the turtles were not to be seen. When I saw the amount of turtle meat in the supermarket refrigerators
on Majuro, I felt too timid to search further for my Great Mother Turtle.

_Wulleb_: Come to think of it, I haven’t seen my wife for a while. I wonder when she’ll be back from shopping...

_Letao_: So you see, little Daniel’s tenacious, supercilious soul just won’t let go, and any potion...

_Wulleb_: Little Daniel?

_Letao_: And my contact with him has had the most unfortunate side-effect of enabling him to communicate with his mother, an obsessive woman who has already blamed me for evil in what they call the German times, events for which I can make no claim, so any spell or chant or...

_Wulleb_: Letao, listen to your father-who-knows-all, which is a lot more than you think. To solve your problem, use just one thing: trickery. It is after all what you are best at.
Letao was pretty much sick of the piddly tricksters of the modern world. Small-time crooks and con-men who gave a crafty cheat a diminished status that Letao, as Grand Trickster, hardly deserved. And the Pacific was full of them, swarming to a fertile paradise they could muddy and pollute with their insipid, lame schemes to get-rich-quick and then skedaddle. No schemes approached the ingenuity and daring of his countless, recorded and unrecorded, triumphs. After all, who could forget — if they ever got to know — that unexampled collaboration with the American military when they met in Eniwetok those short decades ago, after the fireworks they called war had fizzled? Many had forgotten, more was the pity, and the Marshalls were stuck with short-sighted sycophantic swindlers jumping on bandwagons and gravy-trains. They called themselves businessmen, the most obvious con barely concealed in their favoured euphemistic title.

Geoff was equally unimpressed by the crop passing across his desk — passing briefly for ill-considered rubber stamping, the Planning Office having naught to do with planning. They dressed themselves up as West Coast Waste Experts and sold a gorgeous ‘double win’ situation that could almost have won Letao’s approval save for its transparency. Joy’s husband rested his distaste and criticisms on more moral considerations: it was simply, his Greenpeace conscience told him, outrageous to dump trash in paradise. They had enough of their own floating with the disposable diapers in the lagoon, interjected Joy with a rare note of sarcasm.
Geoff continued his tirade undaunted.

‘Non-toxic waste, they say. The Americans are being buried under their muck but here the evil-smelling mass can offer the poor natives homes. Litter to land-fill. Only 70 square miles? Make it 80, non-toxic, square miles. And even if it is accidently toxic, who’s to mind? After all those nasty nuclear bombs in the northern atolls who’d notice a wee bit extra radiation and contamination? And the icing on the cake — sorry the frosting — is $60 million too much to pay you to take this harmless refuse off our hands, lands, consciences? They get rid of unsightly waste, the Marshalls get land, money and a warm glow for helping in the brotherhood of nations.’

The splutter of rage almost suffocated itself only to be ignited in one last fluid eruption.

‘By the way, wanna take 25 million used tyres? They’re just sitting around Washington State right now but we could have them over in a jiffy — for land-fill, perhaps an artificial reef. Come to think of it, you could burn them to create electrical power. Is it a deal?’

Joy unfortunately laughed. The concept was so obviously ludicrous. The documents Geoff was reading at the office were fairytales — make-believe easily swept away by clear and rational minds in the government.

‘Fairytales? You’re the one living in a fairytale with all your myths and legends. You go on about Letao, you know all about him. So what do you expect from a country with a trickster as Patron Saint?’

Joy had told Geoff about Letao.

Having thought about the merits of a full, explicit and uncensored confession, she had rejected any such heart-to-mind outpouring as unthinkable. The spiritual (Letao) and the rational (Geoff) were not destined to intimacy. Until one evening when Geoff actually asked a question.
Let it not be imagined that Geoff was an insensitive husband: Joy was initially attracted to him for his inability to cater to the machismo. Waste disposal, a new job, a new country, a new culture, a new baby, any number of excuses existed to turn Geoff inward on his own stresses and to swaddle concerns about his wife’s equally new life. Joy asked questions of him because she was a woman with thirtysome years of tuition in enquiring of others. Geoff asked his question that evening because he was suddenly interested in her silence.

It was a mid-week evening and Joy was as comfortably settled on the cane sofa as any body can manage — the association with the old method of punishment in schools being less than coincidental. She was beginning to wear plain-materiaded clothing more and more to avoid conflict: the green frangipani-floral lounge covers had miraculously achieved a pleasing relationship with the pink cherry-blossom curtains and she didn’t want to push it. On the cane chair, in her plain clothes, she was reading stories about Letao. The librarian, as part of her helpful kindness, had photocopied a set of tales from a Micronesian collection of folklore. Only 25 cents a page.

There was one about fire, another about a canoe, the next promised to be about a traditional outdoor oven called an um. Some inspired artist had contributed illustrative pictures for the collection. Letao in his canoe was a handsome young chap, shells about his neck, gay flowers in his hair. In fact, he looked far from fearsome. So when Geoff asked his question, asked her what she was reading, she proceeded to tell him.

‘I suppose it tells you something about this lot’s mentality. A people’s creative imagination certainly gives an insight into their culture.’

On impulse Joy decided to argue the point.

‘You assume the Marshallese created Letao. Letao says he created the Marshallese. Maybe he did. He could still be around today.’
Geoff snorted. The moment for revelation came. And went.

After an awkward silence he asked if she was premenstrual.

For just that one instant before, disclosure had seemed possible. But no words would form to cover the unutterable. Can something that cannot be said, exist?

Letao would not disappear with word-play. And he showed no indication of leaving of his own accord. He’d settled in. Become one of the family, so to speak.

He joined in the routines, observed the mechanics of life in the twentieth century, and bestowed on Daniel ample running commentary to fully illuminate the deprivations the child would suffer in this ‘modern’ era. Story upon story upon anecdote glorified the noble days of old, when the ignoble was truly appreciated.

Now there was the microwave, so no-one needed Letao-given fire. Now there was the video on which to watch admirably bad beasties being fried in microwaves. Now there was the refrigerator, an ice-bound region to chill the soul. The ancient art of preserving breadfruit would be lost, sacrificed to the quicker, easier method of making it last. A new world of breadfruit would prevail: locked in and frozen; no longer to be buried in a pit to ferment for days, weeks, months. Poor Daniel would never experience that momentary nose-twitching horror as, unbeknownst, a neighbouring bwiro pit is opened and the stench of the preserved breadfruit teases the nostrils with its unique olfactory combination of vomit, faeces and teenage boy’s socks. How Letao had loved to watch the faces of the unwary as the banana leaf coverings were removed. But now there were electric freezers, electric beaters, electric stoves, electric hairdryers, electric computers. Now there was electricity.
Except when there wasn’t. The regular advertised and unadvertised ‘power outages’ filled Letao with delight. The household spluttered, stalled and lurched to a standstill. The RiPalles were left powerless in more than one sense. Yes, he’d gloat, gone were the days when a man could simply tie his hair in a topknot and be off to do what a man should do; those precious, holy days when man, and as many women as possible, were closer to God.

If the god Letao had a body, it would have literally bloated with gloat each time the power failed. Under these circumstances, he said, he did not want Daniel’s body, not anymore.

‘Letao wanted your body?’ Joy almost shook said body in horror. Naively she had imagined the intruder getting his kicks from dominating — not obliterating — her son’s soul.

In his charming, childish way Daniel restored calm. He assured her that Letao had abandoned the plan, though out of courtesy and dear love he refrained from enlightening her as to the most important reason for the turnabout.

‘I could not stand living with your mother,’ Letao had conceded when Daniel had himself asked.

Daniel had defended her with all the sincerity of his heart, knowing her to be the very best mother in the whole wide world.

And now that the pressure was off, he could more fully appreciate his mother and the joy of life. He listened to her stories with merriment and anticipation of his future. And he listened to Letao’s stories without having to wonder if he would forfeit his newly established foothold on the world for the advancement of Letao’s old world. He was a contented baby. Hardly ever cried, commented the neighbours.

As the child entered his fifth month of life, a cloak of complacency settled on that little bungalow built between the lagoon and the deep blue sea.
‘Are you a Christian lady?’

The question no doubt had validity in some quarters. However, with the question coming as it did from over her shoulder as she loaded the pick-up with groceries, Joy did not see fit to answer it. She gave the sunburnt-white evangelist what she believed was a withering glance and drove off. It was hard to tell if he was a crazy committed to God, or a crazy about to be committed to an asylum.

Except there were no mental asylums in the Marshall Islands; they don’t need one: the crazies are not Marshallese.

The white man with his shoulders hunching into a generic T-shirt was deflated by distance in the rear-vision mirror. His question inflated in direct proportion.

Was she a Christian lady?

Further down the road, not far from Joy’s least-detested supermarket, rose the most solid edifice on the Majuro horizon. It was painted an unfortunate shade of yellow, but it was the Catholic Church nonetheless. The impulse to pull into the parking lot in the banana grove beside the church was acceded to someway past the building itself, granting the youths on the basketball court full view of a U-turn verging on the dramatic for such a lackadaisical country.

The Madonna peered down in understanding upon mother and child as they crossed the threshold. It was cool inside to Joy’s relief.

It had been a bad morning. Shopping had been a disaster, even more so than usual. There were no fresh fruits and
vegetables; well, none to speak of; but plenty to write home about. It was difficult to know whether to laugh or cry at the broccoli stalks. Two weeks before, the green leafy crowns were on the turn to burnt yellow. Joy had been tempted to buy a bunch for salvaging. A week later all yellow had been shaved off by the management and it was sorry broccoli. Now, unbelievably, the verdant vegetable made a final, one hoped, appearance divested of all bushy branches, their proud crowns slowly whittled away, stems left for sale. At the same price per pound, it was nauseating to notice. The expiry dates on the dairy products were equally wondrous: one really had to admire the audacity of the shopkeepers.

There was really only one commodity in good supply on the island. God.

So, was she a Christian lady?

Joy knew a lot of Bible stories and parables and could remember a few moral tales, all the legacy of enforced Sunday School attendance. She avowed resistance to the indoctrination in retrospect, from about the time institutionalised religion was caught up in the stampede to condemn all institutions, but, truth be known, she’d really enjoyed those Sunday mornings. There were favourite stories: baby Moses in the bulrushes, Jesus in the manger. Suffer the little children to come unto me.

Already at bedtime in the Long Island household, ‘The Cat in the Hat’ and ‘Possum Magic’ had made way to a stream of heroes from the Holy Land. Philippina would have approved. First, of course, came Daniel in the Lion’s Den, a more than ever pertinent tale. See, Daniel got out alive and well. As an inspirational rejoinder, the boy David slew the three-metre giant Goliath with a sling and the Grace of the Lord.

Letao did not mind being compared to a lion or an alarming, unbeatably large enemy but he did take exception to the tone of the stories Daniel’s mother was telling the
impressionable child. Stand up and be counted. Fight for what you believe in. Win against all odds. Heretical stuff.

His Marshallese babies had a longer, happily more acquiescent tradition. It was said, and Letao offered himself as an eyewitness, that some time back a certain man provoked the wrath of his Iroij. He was immediately put to death in a guerilla attack on his household. Two wives hung around mourning, cluttering the landscape, so the chief ordered them to wade into the lagoon, kneel, and place their faces in the water. They did so. And continued to do so until they drowned.

If only Daniel’s tenacious soul could be more directly influenced by such conventions.

‘Good morning,’ came a voice from the after-gloom; a comfortable old English church voice with a New England twang. A woman followed the voice into visible light. On sighting she did indeed appear to be an egg sandwich and scone maker from way back, only partly disguised in a floral mumu.

‘Good morning,’ Joy replied over Daniel’s bleating; it was as if someone had just pinched him.

She was invited ‘around the back’ for a pot of tea without much ado.

‘You look like you need it,’ the nun explained as the pot drew.

Daniel quietened in the new and interesting rectory surroundings, while Joy was more than normally quiet. She was having trouble feeling natural in the presence of what she now knew to be a nun. She’d been brought up in the Protestant tradition where women worked behind the scenes organising the jumble stall and making tea for the diocesan council, not in the front lines of obedience and celibacy.

The tea was poured into cups with saucers and the atmosphere brightened. A Good Woman is after all a Good Woman.
'You don’t wear habits anymore?' Joy asked in the hope of launching a theological discussion.

‘Oh, no. Wrong climate. And they would look silly in the outer islands. That’s where I am, just came into Majuro for a spell. Wonderful out there: people of such simple faith. They have no worries with life. Like with this Global Warming business, with the sea level rising up to inundate them. World conference upon world conference but they stick to their homes two feet above sea level well knowing that God has promised that The Flood would be the last. The world will end by flame not flood. It’s a joy.’

Fire or flood? Joy circled on the end of her own little world. ‘Would you call them superstitious?’

‘We all cling to odd superstitions — out of habit.’ The Good Woman chuckled, perhaps at her pun, but hopefully not.

‘Old ways? Old gods?’ Joy pursued them through the rectory.

‘They remember stories. Fairytales now.’

‘And real belief in it?’

‘They believe what they see on the video. Fast cars, guns on the streets, and, thank God, good always triumphing over evil.’

‘Does the Church still believe in exorcism — if someone’s possessed — old gods — devils…’ Joy felt intense and foolish when she should have been content to simply sip from the cup of human companionship. Jesus watched her silently from his perch over the door.

‘The Church still believes. But are not many of the modern devils of our own creation?’

The tea was sipped, then the servant of God did His bidding: ‘Is there anything I can help you with?’

‘Oh, no. The tea’s fine.’

‘You know where we are if you do need something. If I’m not here, the Father will be — a lovely man…’

‘Thanks.’

Sister Francene went back to her solitude having seen the bedevilled-looking woman and her infant to their pick-up.
The *mumu* was thrown off and she lounged back in her shorts contemplating the debris that floated into shore, God-driven and god-forsaken. Only the other day a crow-footed old woman had washed in from Florida seeking guidance. God had spoken: God had told her to travel across the sea to the Marshall Islands to enlighten the natives. To feed herself, He said, she must open a florist shop. God had neglected to specify any more details and the nuns weren’t of much help either. Really, God giving business advice to lonely divorcees — unsound advice, Sister Francene dared to think. Truly, it was amazing who was talking to whom.

Joy unpacked the steaming groceries and tried to consider the concept of exorcism, without much hope of concentration, as Daniel was on her back about the bloke nailed on the wall. Suspended on the cross, blood suspended from hands and feet and chest, Jesus had caught Daniel’s attention, as no doubt he was meant to. His sad, sympathetic eyes had hypnotised the child as his mother drank tea and gossiped of inconsequential matters.

It was difficult to fit Jesus in with Moses and David and Daniel’s namesake. He was part of the same story, but a lot, lot more. ‘The son of God, in fact.’

‘Like Letao is the son of Wulleb?’

‘No!’ Joy tried, searching in her memory of Sunday sermons. ‘Jesus came into the world to save us, not to play around.’

‘Why do we need saving?’

Joy didn’t feel like she’d sinned much lately either, but she persisted valiantly: ‘So we can go to heaven.’

That heaven business again. In the early days Letao had ranted about heaven and hell. Give your body up gracefully and you’ll be off westward to heaven, happy all the time behind a high wall, eating *malanga*, delicious mashed fish. Resist and it’s
to hell you go, to die over and over again in misery, and to eat
the most disgusting jibinebin, beche-de-mer. The prospect of
either eternal meal sounded nauseous to Daniel’s milk-fed
stomach, and now his mother was garbling out some Christian
dictum on their heaven. Heaven to the west, heaven above,
neither sounded like the heaven Daniel remembered, and it was
only months since he’d left there.

Joy punched the saggy bag of peas into the freezer, eyed
the sculptured ‘silly putty’ cheese and sighed audibly at the
icecream that no amount of faith would resurrect.

Evening; Daniel sleeps after the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

‘Do you think we should have Daniel christened?’ Joy asks
Geoff. She has related the question the crazy asked her that
morning and he was amused. She has not mentioned the nun;
she doesn’t think she is amused enough about that part of the day.

‘Christened?’ He turns the word over in his mouth,
searching for all the hidden content.

‘In a church.’

‘Offering Daniel up to God?’ It sounded like Abraham
preparing to sacrifice his only beloved son Isaac to the
Almighty. A lesser god getting his claws in for good was the
distinct alternative, unfortunately. Joy tried not to imagine a
17-year-old Daniel out on the town with Letao whispering in
one ear.

‘Well, yes. Water and god-parents and all.’
‘But we don’t have a church.’
‘I was thinking more of the moral considerations at this
stage.’

‘If you think it’s really important.’
She wasn’t sure about the christening but it seemed the
first step toward an exorcism. And toward heaven, of course.
Daniel was aghast at the ignominy of it: put on the floor with a slobbering group of self-centred, snotty-nosed babies; Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Mary over by the rocking chair. If it was intended that he should find a bosom-companion amongst this lot, he’d choose Letao any day.

Matthew suddenly looked very surprised and his mother jumped forward to discreetly blot out the chunderous mass on the rug.

‘Luke isn’t eleven months yet,’ gushed a blonding woman excitedly as her almost-year-old offspring abandoned the support of her knee and tottered dangerously towards the rocking chair. Mary screeched as his nappy, closely followed by his bottom, plopped down on her head. She was only two months and not yet equipped with the skills to avoid falling objects, animal, vegetable or mineral. Her mother retrieved her, looking slightly aggrieved. Luke’s mother laughed as her offspring let go of Mary’s hair and tottered dangerously towards the door.

‘Aren’t you a little darling,’ clucked a greying woman in Daniel’s general direction. She was unaccountably in the small lounge room without a baby. ‘And what does your husband do?’ she asked in Joy’s general direction.
'He’s with Planning…'
Another planner! I know, you’re Gloria’s replacement. So devoted a woman. Tried so hard… We miss her so much.’
‘He’s still waking through the night, at 1 am and 5 am,’ sighed the once-pretty woman on the floor.
‘Have you tried letting him cry?’
‘Oh, I just couldn’t.’
‘You have to be strong. For both your sakes. There’ll be times you won’t be able to rush to his every need.’
‘Oh, no — I’ll always be there for him.’

‘Look at John. He smiles all the time.’
‘Such a good-natured baby.’
‘Content.’
‘No trouble.’
‘Imbecile.’ (Daniel’s silent contribution.)

Mark lifted his head from the ground. His outstanding trait was not his early walking, his good nature, his sleeplessness, nor his femaleness. With his neck bouncing around like that of the exasperating ornamental dog in the back window of the car ahead, his most notable feature was revealed: his chin. The mother of Mark tweaked that feature. She too had been endowed by nature with a weak chin, but the years and nurture had amply compensated with a double, and then a third. ‘I can’t say I place the name,’ she drawled in reply to a question from the hostess.
‘Oh, you know, the… the… the big-boned woman.’

‘Here’s Mine with the coffee and cookies.’
A Marshallese teenager sank to her knees to place the over-burdened tray on the table. Little fingers rushed forward
before mothers gathered up their mobile progeny. Adult hands helped themselves. Mine silently, and sweetly, melted back into the kitchen.

‘A real find.’
‘Only 15?’
‘Not at school? Lucky you!’

‘Let us give a minute’s silence to commemorate the recent passing of George Speri Sperti, inventor of Preparation H haemorrhoid ointment, without whom I know my life would have been a whole lot more difficult.’

There was indeed a moment’s silence.
A baby’s cry broke into the embarrassment.
‘Nice oatmeal cookies, you must give me the recipe.’

‘Just look how well Daniel and Matthew are getting on. There was definite eye contact.’
‘Joy, you must come every week, it’s great for him, he’s having such a good time.’
‘And there’s Sewing Circle on Wednesdays.’
‘And Bible reading on Thursdays.’
‘And, of course, church at MIST. You’re very welcome.’
‘Ho-ho, Luke’s got hold of the cookies. So precocious!’

‘These mornings are to get us mothers out of the house,’ the woman with the chins confided. ‘It can get very isolated. We can chat here and have a break. The babies are an excuse, it’s really for us not them.’
‘You can say that again,’ Daniel breathed.

How his faultlessly intelligent mother had got them into this, Daniel could not tell. Joy wasn’t exactly sure either.

She left the vibrating house feeling terribly inadequate as a mother: she did not have all the right things, she had not read
all the right books, she was still struggling with the last four kilos. At least she had the most gorgeous, good-looking, and most likely the most garrulous, child amongst the RiPalle population.

The satisfaction was mutual. The morning, though a farce to his way of thinking, had confirmed to Daniel that he had truly been blessed with an understanding and admirable mother. Most importantly, she was not silly.
‘How did your staff meeting go?’

Geoff was being obscure again. He sometimes mistook it for humour. ‘Did you discuss your weekly work schedule, nappies, feeding, washing, airing. How about pay and conditions and…’

‘It’s diapers not nappies.’

Geoff was as concerned about Joy’s admittance into the mothers’ group as he was of any new project. His was the initialising action and he felt responsible for post-execution evaluation.

Laura had appeared on their Long Island doorstep late one morning, having heard from her husband, having heard from Joy’s husband, that there was a new candidate for her weekly gatherings. She was a perfectly groomed woman, right down to her dainty pink toenails. The young baby in her arms was immaculate in overalls and pink socks. It was a vision; a veritable miracle for a mother of the very young; Joy considered she was having a good day if she was even dressed by lunchtime. Her mascara was going claggy in the bathroom cabinet and her face powder was turning to mud in the humidity; despite this she accepted Laura’s invitation to the mothers’ group. Philippina and Daniel, and not forgetting Geoff, had been her sole companions for far too long; she would risk the company of a paragon.

Behind whom the shadow of a capable, acquiescent local nanny could be seen if one cared to look.
'What’s MIST?’ Joy asked her husband as he persisted in his interest.

In the mood he was in, Geoff could not resist: ‘Water vapour, low-lying cloud, gorillas in the...

‘Oh, shut up.’

‘You’ll have to wear something a bit nicer today — and black,’ Geoff advised the following morning. ‘I’ll be back to pick you up at ten.’

The ilomej was big.

The mother of the government had died and the country took the day off to hold an ilomej and mourn her passing. This one woman had contributed so much: several Permanent Secretaries, a couple of Ministers, and a few wives to such titles. One womb had delivered up countless progeny for the Public Service and it was fitting they close their doors to mark its dying: to discuss the mother’s qualities and sacrifices and skills of negotiation, conciliation and power brokerage. Not to mention nepotism.

Absolutely not to mention nepotism.

Joy and Geoff and Daniel stood under the shade of a breadfruit tree with the Planning staff, escaping the sun if not the humidity. Junior, Rudi, Moses, Zedekiah, Ezekial, the whole mob was there in neatly pressed black trousers and white shirts, looking suspiciously like the mafia. Joy was glad Rosina was not around; she was still feeling edgy about her Letao comment and did not want to meet her eye.

But then Rosina appeared from the house beckoning them over. It was their Office’s turn to pay their respects. The Ministry of Education were filing out through the back door, the Ministry of Health were already pushing into the breadfruit shade in anticipation of their turn at 11.30. There was a discreet scuffle to retrieve zories, the ubiquitous thongs, that innumerable feet had kicked off at the door before entering, and
Joy cursed as she bent to unbuckle her sandals, vowing to remember the custom and buy a pair of flip-flops for the future.

As she stooped down the blood rushed into the vicinity of her brain, propelled by heat. Then the sharp sunlight was suddenly shrouded by four cement walls. Junior guided her to sit in an area on the floor and it was then, and only then, that Joy realised they had not come to pay their respects to the family. They had come to pass some last moments with the old woman herself. She lay calmly on a mat an arm’s reach from Joy.

Joy was mesmerised in the best position in the house: face to face with death.

Daniel was fascinated, and as the hour of speeches, prayers and hymns stretched minute by minute, his mother had to surmount the lack of western coffin walls obscuring the dead. She had to look, and appreciate.

She, the other great mother, must have been a small woman, left even smaller by cancer. She must have been a very old woman, yet now she was dressed as a youth, as a bride. The frills of a white frock edged their way over an equally white sheet, that gave way to a garden of plastic, silk, and barely alive real flowers of red, pink, fuchsia, crimson, rose, rust, apricot, orange, magenta, lilac, indigo, blue. Joy chanted the colours like a litany, a spider’s web thread connected to life.

Atop scarce grey hair lay a flower _wot_, and crowning it a purple and orange woollen ring of pompoms. Strands of pink, white and black plastic beads encircled her hen-skin neck. Quite the most bizarre touch was the imitation-pearl teenage earrings dangling from her shrivelled lobes.

Maybe not the most bizarre: a white handkerchief covered her mouth and nostrils. As her soul was hurrying toward eternity and the crowd wished it good speed in quavering song, Joy held the overwhelming belief that any minute the stubby eyelashes would flicker and the matriarch would irritably spit off the silly piece of cloth that was suffocating her. Death was but temporary. Magenta, lilac, indigo, blue.
When it came time to say goodbye the crowd seemed to know without being told. They shuffled forward shyly with gifts. Joy gave the bar of soap Rosina had advised her to bring when she phoned to say Geoff would be late picking her up. It was placed beside the old woman, amongst dishwashing liquid and laundry powder and pyramids of soap and matches. Geoff hastily lofted a dollar note towards the body in imitation of other visitors who’d arrived without cleaning aids.

The sunlight wrapped itself around them, breathing hot gusts of relief.

‘Do you want a drink, Mrs Geoff?’
‘Do you want a chair, Mrs Geoff?’

A chair and a styrofoam cup of sickly-sweet, blood-red Cool-Aid were duly delivered to a spot under a tree. With ship’s crackers and yellow cake. Joy juggled Daniel and the drink in her two hands until Geoff relieved her of the foodstuffs. The Director joined them, all jolly affability.

‘Why the soap and matches?’ enquired Geoff.
‘Can’t say,’ the Director stroked his chin. ‘Never really thought.’

The question went out from the shade and a group clustered in.

‘Old ways.’
‘Manit in Majol.’
‘Tradition.’

Joy, in her honoured sitting position, stared into a ring of belts and navels. The Marshallese are, as a race, short.

‘Geoff, good Dr Geoff, you will know our ways well. You have done a good job. You have helped us immeasurably already. Immeasurably. You cannot leave. The government will employ you when the United Nations project has finished. Yes, we will. You will stay with us a long time.’

‘That would be wonderful, sir, wonderful.’ Geoff’s ego shone brightly beneath adulatory praise.

Joy’s eyes were dazzled by the sun when they shot up at Geoff’s answer. They drifted back down to the littered yard.
'How could you? You complained all the way there about the latest stuff-up. And then you consider staying?'

The pick-up was as hot as hell; there may have been some significance in that. The engine failed to start.

‘No petrol,’ sighed Geoff. ‘Forgot.’ He clambered out.

‘No gas,’ he grinned to Junior and Zed.

For the duration Joy and Daniel evacuated to an area cleared by the latest group of government employees having the afternoon off. Daniel, the perfect child, was content to listen, quite intently, to the offkey chanting of a cluster of ageing women around the freshly dug gravesite. Joy never had got past the first few phrases in the language and the disharmonious jangle only served to irritate. A pity. They were chanting to clear the area of an evil spirit who’d come lurking.

‘I charm you away, disappear!
I charm, so that you will close your eyes and die,
Come on, die
Go die
I step on you and trample you,
I sharpen my spear and stab you
I fight with you, prepare yourself.’

They eventually got home. Really, the only good thing to say about the day was that Letao didn’t show himself.

‘It’s not so bad here,’ Geoff soothed his wife’s back as they lay in bed. ‘I’m needed. I can make an impact. That’s important. And the computer will turn up and it’ll be great.’

On and on he’d gone about the missing computer equipment, dispatched from Honolulu weeks before, missing in Majuro. The morning had been spent down at the big tin shed they called Supply with a couple of helpers, searching, making him late picking her up, though still within Marshallese Time for the ilomej. The things he and Wishery and Barmy had found: air humidifiers, obsolete car parts, lawn mowers. Lead-lined
plutonium boxes from the Trust Territory days, mis-sent in the first place, Kwajalain Atoll Missile Base in huge print over the packing case. But no computer.

‘It’s such a laidback relaxed lifestyle,’ he continued to her still-silent back. ‘Great place to bring up children.’

Her back, though it hadn’t seemed possible, stiffened a few degrees more.

‘Marshall Islands School of Theology,’ he whispered in a placating chant. ‘MIST. They hold an English language church service there.’

‘Oh, shut up.’
The Crab and the Needlefish

Slow and steady wins the race. The words are imbibed with mother’s milk. The hare and the turtle jump from the youngest child’s book as they undertake their immortal race: hare prancing, dancing, cocksure and vain, munching carrots, napping beneath haystacks, dashing toward victory; turtle all the while plodding forward, capable, sure, slow and steady. The young child is aghast at the finishing line. Nimble skylarking lovable hare has defeat thrown at him by a modest boring turtle sitting complacent in the winner’s seat. With maturity the child learns to identify with the hard-shelled combatant more and more, though perhaps never comes to love him. Floppy-eared, cotton-tailed hare is left behind in the sandbox, eternally mourned.

The hare and the land turtle do not take kindly to atoll living, but once upon a time there was a crab and a needlefish…

Lickitysplit, skip and dash, tak shot forward like an arrow. His long flute-like nose cut through the crystal water of the lagoon. Like lightning his lustrous body crackled forward. ‘Yeh,’ his toothy mouth shouted, quirky with glee and joie de vivre. Call him needlenose, call him needlefish, he did not care. He was tak and proud of it.

The sun shone as if he’d taken a new lover, and the world sighed happily, content to bask in their afterglow. The atoll of Ailinglaplap sparkled: it was a jewel; life vibrated in its lagoon and tumbled merrily on its many islands. Amidst the frivolity
a pathetic turban shell scratching ineffectually along the shore’s edge struck *tak* as the most humorous sight in a jest-filled day. In his benevolence he forgot to eat the hermit crab resident of the shell. Instead he playfully tipped the shell over to better share the joke with the stork-eyed crustacean. How vulnerable the crab looked.

‘And where are you hurrying, old friend?’ he laughed.

‘I am going to Jeh,’ the crab replied seriously, fully realising the importance of being earnest.

*Tak* did a backflip to better illustrate his mirth. ‘Jeh is on the other side of the atoll. You’ll never get there at your rate.’

‘It will take me a few days to get to Jeh,’ the little fellow conceded, as his front claw wrestled his fleshy body and its shell house back to the original journeying position.

‘Days! I’d be there in minutes,’ boasted *tak*, delighted that his pride in himself was so surely deserved.

‘Yes,’ muttered the hermit crab as he moved off.

‘I’m a better swimmer than you,’ the needlefish shouted after him.

‘Yes.’

‘I’m faster than you.’

‘Yes.’

‘I’ll race you slow coach, come on, race you!’

‘Yes.’

*Tak* desisted in his taunting momentarily. ‘Yes?’

‘We will race.’

*Tak* thought his long snout would fall off from laughing.

‘But not to Jeh. We will race all the way around Ailinglaplap. Next new moon.’

The hermit crab had climbed onto a fist of coral to deliver his speech. In the water, the needlefish did not have to consult any diary for dates. He’d be in the race. How he loved winning. He demonstrated how fast he could fly as a parting joke, and was off to boast to all his friends, and to plan the celebration feast, and to swim for joy hither and thither like
a fluted lightning arrow. ‘See you at the new moon,’ he threw back at the tiny crab, left seemingly stranded on the shore.

Om, the hermit crab, scratched and scuttled and soldiered on through the coming days and nights. Industriously, tirelessly he put reef pathways behind him, scurrying from Bekan to Katej to Mejajok to Bikar to Ennak and finally to Jeh. On each island he was welcomed and cared for by various members of his large family. On each island he told them of the race. And of how he would win it. The family was supportive, as only family can be.

In Jeh he attended the kemmen of his second cousin’s third-born, a little one-year-old cherub stuck in a delicate necklace shell. Family had come from near and far to celebrate the birthday and word spread amongst them of brave om’s coming race with the conceited needlefish. Family pride bubbled and boiled like a waiting lobster pot. Om would win, of that they were sure. That tactless tak would learn a lesson he would never forget.

On his journey back up the other side of Ailinglaplap, from Jeh to Mejil to Tobomaro to Airuk to Jabwan to Bouj to Enewe and back to Woja, the starting and finishing line of the coming marathon, his family rallied. Grave meetings were called in each community; the family was set.

The new moon hoisted its sickly sickle into the sky, trickling wan light into the dusk. Tak had difficulty locating om as he skimmed toward Woja, but eventually spied him poised on a coral boulder. The hermit crab called in greeting. The needlefish really hadn’t expected the crab to turn up for the humiliation of losing, so the sight of him patiently waiting capped his continuing good humour. The time since their last meeting had been one big party. Tak believed he’d even fallen in love; he felt almost shy around her, a very odd sensation indeed.

‘Hi, slowpoke,’ he swished his tail. ‘Are you ready?’
‘I am ready,’ sighed the turtle-like om. ‘But first we must have rules.’

‘Rules?’ Tak was surprised. ‘We don’t need them — I trust you.’

‘Once you are swimming through the lagoon I cannot see you. You could stay right here eating hermit crabs and just claim you ran and won the race.’

It was a good idea now the dawdling crab had come to mention it.

‘So I suggest,’ continued sage old om, ‘that you call out to me each time you come to an island. That way I know where you are. And you know where I am.’

‘Fair enough,’ agreed tak, thinking that his opponent would be so far back he’d really have to holler.

Now in agreement the race could start.

Tak was off like a rocket, propelled by the anticipation of a victory kiss from his sweet one.

Om slithered precariously on his rock, gained a claw hold and pulled his way back from the lagoon edge, feeling almost as well pleased with himself as tak was.

Woja was a long island but in record time tak was by the next island, Bekan. ‘Little crab,’ he shouted, ‘where are you?’

He was about to call again, louder, when a tiny voice piped up from the darkness on the shore. ‘Here I am. Just ahead of you.’

Tak stopped mid-acceleration. Stunned. Then he was off again, faster, faster.

By Katej he had regained his confidence. ‘Little crab, where are you now?’

Almost before he finished the question a thin voice returned: ‘Here I am. Just ahead of you.’

No needlefish had ever swum faster, yet at Mejajok, at Bikar, at Ennak and at Jeh the same reply returned from the shore: ‘Here I am. Just ahead of you.’

The swells were with him when he turned the corner of the atoll and they swept him down past Mejil, Tobomaro, and
on to Airuk. Still his head was pulsing with the speed of the clumsy crustacean.

Airuk, Jabwan and Buoj are joined as one, yet he called out at each. And at each: ‘Here I am, just ahead of you.’

The last remaining island was Enewe. *Tak* was there quicker than a shooting star. Once more he called out: ‘Crab, where are you?’

‘I am here,’ came from beneath a pandanus tree. There was a glimmer of hope. The hermit crab was on Enewe sure enough, but he was not ahead of him. With glee *tak* swam the remaining distance back to Woja. He surfaced triumphantly by the coral boulder.

‘Oh, you’re back at last.’

*Om* was perched complacently on dry land, peering down from a winning position. He was hardly even breathing heavily. *Tak* knew there were no second prizes and disappeared beneath the water, never to be seen again.

During the following week inhabitants of Woja noticed a huge influx of hermit crabs. In fat tun shells, in slender cones, in screw, worm, necklace shells, one in a trumpet, they all made their way majestically to the designated spot. Each congratulated *om* in his bulbous turban shell, each cousin, aunt, uncle, son, daughter, brother, sister, wife, mother-in-law, father, finally grand old grandpa, each and every crab involved in the conspiracy.

‘What a trick,’ they’d proclaim in their tiny, thin, *identical* voices. And how they ragged nephew from Enewe for forgetting to say the second phrase, ‘just ahead of you’. Clever *om* hadn’t had to move from the spot to win his race.

Boastful pride and vanity will get you nothing but bitterness was *tak*’s painful lesson. And for everyone else, well, if you want to beat a smart-arsed bugger, forget the slow and steady: you need family.
Joy’s mother arrived on a Friday having come up from Sydney through Guam. Joy and Geoff and her new, and only, grandchild met her at the airport. A glorious purple wot had been arranged through the office. Joy placed the ring of flowers on her mother’s thick red hair and Constance was truly appreciative: it made her look pretty.

On the way back to the newly spring-cleaned house, a ten-minute drive, Constance expressed horror at the state of the country. She’d read their letters of course, with half an eye and half an ear at least, but was unprepared for the level of pollution.

‘Inexcusable,’ she declared emphatically. ‘In Singapore they shot litterbugs on sight for a month and now it’s the cleanest country in the world.’

Geoff heard a sharp intake of breath beside him before Joy spat out the worst she could think of at short notice: ‘Mother, you can’t talk, you don’t even recycle your newspapers.’

‘Nor do I get involved in a lot of modern thinking. I have never gone for an abortion.’

It was Geoff’s turn to suck in his breath. And to bite his tongue. Maybe she would only stay for one week.

To do her justice, Constance had just sat for many hours on a tedious Air Micronesia flight and was tired. Joy’s first letter home, which she had read quickly during a coffee break, before rushing off to show a house to a pair of matrimonially linked
solicitors, had convinced her not to travel on the head-throbbing flight via Fiji, Tuvalu and Kiribati. But the centre of the world is in the middle of nowhere and any adventurer heading that way must endure a milk-run. The flight to Guam was mercifully direct. From there: Chuuk, Pohnpei, Kosrae, Kwajalain and Majuro. For some reason Yap, the remaining state with a jet airstrip, was not included.

Constance thought she somehow deserved more than one seat, but the flight was full. Full of consultants and experts, businessmen and carpetbaggers. They did not mind the length of their journey, being on hefty daily allowances. There were pots of gold out there for the taking.

So Constance found herself next to Jeremy who was conscientiously touting a privatisation package around the Pacific, a clever plan that would put the few island resources even more directly into the hands of the elite. The Eastern Bloc was doing it. Go for it, Micronesia!

Jeremy had charm, salesmen do, and Constance discovered she did not mind the loss of the empty seat beside her. He was young. She did not tell him she was a grandmother. Hell, she didn’t look it, so why should she? And when he asked her out to dinner, she said yes. She had no intention of going but it was flattering. Plus, sadly, after 56 years and two husbands she still had not learnt to say no — to men. Jeremy got off with his leather briefcase which would grow mould in the humidity, in Pohnpei, a high green luxurious island, and promised to see her the following week in Majuro. Constance smiled. The red hair was a good choice and worth the expense.

The heat had gobbled up her complacent good humour as she stepped into the Marshall Islands International Airport, and the sight that confirmed her as a grandmother was equally detrimental to good relations. He was a cute kid, as babies go, but the family portrait before her did not fit into the album of a successful, attractive, middle-aged real estate agent with an upmarket and handsome banker husband.
In the event the evening was wonderful. Daniel crawled for the first time and even Constance was down on the floor to encourage him. Seeing her with her knees grubby and lips puckered, Joy had an overpowering impulse to tell her all. Luckily the learning-to-dote grandmother slipped back onto her haunches, demanded to know if she was expected to smoke outside her whole stay, and repaired to the backstep to do so. Her daughter partially relented and joined her there.

‘Being a mother is not easy.’

The only presence in the firmament not to agree was the moon who was behind a cloud with his mistress at the time and hadn’t heard the plea. He too would have concurred if pushed. A universal truth is universal.

‘Routine and perseverance are all you need,’ responded the mother’s mother. That was all she’d had, and look, her daughter had grown and was a mother herself.

Through all the years at home, Constance had persevered. Her only child was always well fed, had ribbons to match her dress, new shoes each school year, sheets and underwear carefully ironed, friends to come and play, a mother who was home when she finished class. Always home as a good mother should be. Always at home, and no choice about it.

‘You are using contraception now?’

Joy mumbled assent. The hospital made an appointment with Family Planning before each new mother left the hospital, to make her feel she had to go, which many didn’t, and the population grew and grew and tipped the island into a sea of social ills. But Joy had gone. Once she found the office that bore no sign and entered, a visibly pregnant young woman with three children underfoot — it was school holidays — had given her the same abundance of choices as everyone. Tubal ligation, snip, snip, all over; an IUD which ‘would block the entrance of the cervix’; Norplant, a set of matchsticks that would bleed hormones into her for five years; condoms adhered in lumps of rubber. And the population grew and grew.
‘So what are you using?’
‘A diaphragm.’
‘The saints preserve us. You were a diaphragm baby.’
Geoff’s voice pierced between them from within. ‘Coffee, Connie?’

‘It’s Constance.’ Konstanze for her Germanic parents, Connie for her Australian husband, Constance for herself.

They were back on the step a week later, having done all there is to do in Majuro. Joy showed her the Alele Museum, the Peace Park, the 1918 Typhoon Memorial, the two supermarkets, the handicraft shop, the tips of the island, the five-storey still-uninhabited office building, the ten-year and still-unfinished hotel, the half-submerged floating restaurant and the Yacht Club without yachts.

The postcards Constance wrote to her husband and office colleagues were by necessity brief, and by the end of the week, the simple visit to the Post Office and remembering not to stand in a line, as this was culturally insensitive, was an event.

Still, Daniel enjoyed the outings enormously, chattering away in a dialect only his peerless mother could understand. His grandmother called him ‘noisy’. Letao enjoyed himself even more, finding the uncomfortable atmosphere, with the fierce flares of antagonism, invigorating. Joy could not cook or clean properly for fear of criticism. She loved her mother but thought perhaps it would have been easier if she’d sprung from a tree in her father’s forehead, or burst from a boil.

Having so little to do made it more difficult. The suggestion of church at MIST had met with a flat ‘no’, leaving Joy no choice but to postpone enlightenment till her mother’s departure, and leaving Constance a lot of time to spend on the backstep — she was indeed expected to smoke outside her whole stay — alone with her cigarettes, with the occasional tug
of Daniel’s hand from behind, and fleetingly, the eyes of Philippina, the ghost-child.

At the end of the week Joy joined her there.

‘Are you happy with your husband?’ Constance attacked her.

‘Are you?’ Joy defended herself. Constance never spoke of The Tragedy. Joy tried to forget about her father’s death; said she accepted her mother’s remarriage. ‘Why didn’t you have any more children?’ she tried her own attack.

‘Why did you have an abortion?’

Joy was not equal to her mother’s tactics. Again and again she threw it up. Where was the mother with comfort and support? They’d done the best thing, she and Geoff. Their relationship had just begun, the bonds were unsteady, trembling on the edge of commitment. Into this unknown a child was a Mistake: every child should be a wanted child; wanted from inception, conception, for always. They didn’t need a complication, a burden, a shotgun, a shackle. It was a simple procedure. Why couldn’t her mother understand?

‘Now you see the upshot. You’re totally obsessed with this new child.’

‘I am not obsessed,’ Joy denied too vigorously.
‘Hiyou,’ shushed the water about Joy’s ears. ‘Hiyou,’ the lagoon lapped back and forth as she swam lazily, luxuriously, with her eyes on the miracles of creation.

They’d bought cheap masks and snorkels at the supermarket and discovered the true gateway to paradise. The live coral bristled with energy and vibrancy, the fish passed as every colour of the rainbow and more, the squid surged and promenaded in formation, the octopus bulged greedy-eyed from a crevice, a port-red starfish scooted on a hundred thousand suction-capped feet from surface to crowded coral surface.

‘Hiyou.’ The odd trickling persisted in her ears. She surfaced, located Geoff and Daniel looking picturesque on the beach under a squat palm, shook and cleared her mask, snorkel, head, and returned to the underworld.

‘Joy, Joy.’ She searched the surface but Constance was head down and paddling, not calling her daughter.

Her lightweight skirt billowed up, obscuring half her vision. She tucked it into her bikini bottoms, flaunting the possibility of offending a local with the sight of thighs. The irony of not being allowed to wear a bikini on Bikini or any other Marshallese atoll was not lost to her, and a school of five moorish idols glided majestically past, yellow, black and lithesome.

‘Joy, listen to me.’ It was a voice. Joy kicked out into the turquoise water, attempting escape. The agile starfish tumbled along behind.
‘You have to listen. Letao is not a naughty boy who needs to be spanked; he’s a wicked god who must be incarcerated.’
Joy listened.

‘I am Limdurianig, daughter of Lowa the First, sister of Wulleb, mother of Lanej and Lewoj, aunt of Letao and Jemliwut, unlearned except as daughter, sister, mother, aunt, forgotten except in relation and as a relation to the males of the pantheon, censored and erased. And pissed off. So let’s skip all this false grandeur “I am” verbiage that the male gods seem to enjoy so much.

‘My name is Limdurianig and I’m just an old minor goddess whom no-one remembers. I have taken on the guise of a starfish to find you today — I think it is attractive, besides we thought it best I come incognito when I warn you about Letao. He’s been a right little bugger since the moment he blasted from my brother’s forehead. And now he’s set to destroy the world.’

Joy found Limdurianig hard to understand. Not the concept — Letao and Daniel had inured her to visitations — it was because she couldn’t find any eyes to concentrate on during the speech. The starfish was indeed attractive, with five tapering points curling graciously around a rock, but it lacked the expressions expected with such messages. Even the bush burned to accompany the Christian God’s fiery words. After some drifting Joy decided to imagine she was listening to the radio. Then the words came through loud and clear.

‘I suppose I should tell you who “we” are. You humans are so rational these days and keep demanding credibility of your higher beings. By the way, feel free to interrupt and ask questions: we try not to be too authoritative.’
A spurt of bubbles appeared around Joy’s mask which was understood as assent.

‘We are the goddesses of the world, Goddesses in Action International Association if you want to be formal. Representatives from every civilisation meet together regularly. There’s Astarte from Mesopotamia, Isis from Egypt, Athena from Greece, both Juno and Rhea from Rome, as wife and mother of Zeus they had it all wrapped up, Freya of the Vikings, Hindu Sati, and from around my region there is Oviri from Tahiti and Hikuleo from the Polynesian Islands. Hikuleo, along with Nyame of the Ashanti in Africa, felt like they were coming out of the closet when they joined us, they’d been written about as being male for so long. Quite a few “wives of god” arrive from around the globe for the meetings, but the Great Mother Goddess herself stays away for the most part. We try to run as a collective and in her presence we tend to feel a bit overawed.

‘So, you see now, we are truly a representative international association, we didn’t simply add the word to gain false status. And we are active, intervening in world affairs when things get too dire, or when anyone thinks to ask us to. When we discovered Letao had escaped, we knew we couldn’t wait around for the final calamity.

“Escaped?” you ask. When the Americans locked him up, we all breathed a collective sigh of relief; then the news came through while we were in session in the Statue of Liberty…

“Statue of Liberty?” Well, it is a tangent, but I’ll explain that anyway. Meeting there is symbolic, we like symbolism, and we decided she was a lot like us: a woman censored, her ideals belittled. Oh yes, they gave her a mammoth face-lift recently, but that was all part and parcel of this vile beauty myth. Beauty is youth, a flawless facade, no room for maturity or character lines. Give all women a face-lift and a tummy tuck and liposuction and a lobotomy. The fact is the ideals she stood so high for are gone. Liberty lost out to freedom; freedom to grind the little ones into the sod.
Now you want to go back to the Americans and Letao’s escape? No sooner asked: Letao met up with the Americans in Enewetok, you know, the atoll that didn’t gain fame from giving its name to a set of beach apparel. Before the war that came after the war to end all wars, the Japanese had control of our land. They built fortifications on many atolls, including Enewetok. One morning the people of this atoll woke and were amazed. There were so many ships in the lagoon they could have walked from one side to the other. The Americans had arrived. They defeated the Japanese and Letao gave them some respect: they seemed a strong race. In turn, the Commander could see straight away that Letao was no ordinary native and readily agreed to him boarding ship and sailing off to the mainland where you can stand on ground and not see water in any direction. Letao found himself in such a place, called Los Alamos.

There he joined a group of scientists dabling in a laboratory and, heaven help us, gave them the ability to launch rockets, bombs and spacecraft. He was bragging, the fathead. Boasting, setting himself up as stronger than even the strongest nation on earth. His infamy and stupidity were boundless; he took his slavish American friends home to our Marshall Islands and showed them the force of the atom and then the hydrogen bomb. Sixty-six times they watched the beauty of creation and destruction, 43 times in Enewetok, 23 times in Bikini. How they shouted “bravo, bravo” in 1954 when Bravo Shot rocketed 25 miles in the air and spread across the ocean to the unhappily inhabited islands. It was a thousand times more powerful than anything the humans had done before. How they shouted “encore, encore”. They had the power, and they didn’t even thank my nefarious nephew.

A trickster rarely expects trickery from others. He was a sitting duck for the devious manoeuvring. Bingo, he was imprisoned. It was our turn to cheer.

How do you securely shut away a god who has no limits, you ask? The scientists had needed Letao’s help to produce
nuclear fusion and fission, but they were a highly logical group. Letao is a creationary force; if the product of a creationary force can be contained, so could he. They lured Letao’s spirit into a lead-lined box and destroyed his body. We tend to disbelieve the rumour that they skinned him and his tattoos are hung in a museum somewhere. And we don’t know how they lured him in. Perhaps Letao got in the box willingly to prove their theory wrong. But the mortals were right. The Pentagon’s gain, for once, was the world’s gain. The world was free of the ultimate trickster.

‘How did he escape? Well, that’s the question we’ve all been asking, believe me. He can’t have extricated himself without help. And that is a frightening prospect. But as Gaia, the Great Mother Goddess Herself, advised: you can cry as much as you want over spilt milk and disappeared deities, but someone has to clean up, and it’s usually the women. So here I am.

‘You’ve got to stop Letao and save the world.

‘Now before you start with all that protesting, let me defend the reason for our decision. We are not, as you might be thinking, just a bunch of angry abandoned wives and crotchety spinster goddesses who resent being put on the shelf. I admit I’m bitter, sure, put yourself in my position. Lowa says “let there be animals” and I’m left with all the hard work of planning, developing and generating the creatures of the land and beneath the sea. It took time. In the end I allowed my sons to do a touch of decorative paintwork on the animals and the fish and they’re showered with praise down the ages. And who remembers me? Still, I’m not out for revenge on any male god. Letao must be stopped because he has broken the Holy Covenant. We’re just not allowed to let you lot into the secrets of creation. We always knew he had no regard for human life, but if he could break the Covenant, he’ll have no qualms destroying the world as you know it.

‘Why don’t we stop him ourselves? What a thought! We gods and goddesses are allowed only to intervene, not to
interfere. Letao having broken the rules now gives us more of a duty to do the right thing in this respect. Sorry, it’s always been the way. Mortals have to prove they want the world to be saved; otherwise, what’s the point? Anyway, it’s not as if we’re asking you to destroy Letao. There’s no bloodlust in us: we’re goddesses. We simply want him safely incarcerated for all eternity and beyond. Letao chose your Daniel, so you’re in it for better or worse. Afraid I can’t listen to anymore. I must go now. You’ll be horribly sunburnt on your back. Terribly sorry about that.’

Joy thought her mask had fogged over, for the starfish disappeared completely when Limdurianig’s voice discontinued its melodic injunctions. A hearty ‘good luck’ was heard from somewhere in the darkened distance and the lone earthling surfaced. Her family were waving almost frantically in her direction.

“You hadn’t popped your head up for so long we were beginning to worry,” explained Geoff as she waded in, dragging her skirt down to a modest level as she came.

Constance had gone back to sunbathing, as if any sane person did that nowadays, and Daniel was scurrying amongst the hermit crabs not minding the damage the coral wrought on his hands and knees. Limdurianig had been wise to accost her away from his presence. His curiosity was insatiable and only Letao knew what was passed on to himself.

Joy tried to put herself back into the family scene but the outing had been ruined. She’d gone to so much effort to hire the yacht, prepare the picnic, keep the mood going. Anticipation and planning had given structure to her mother’s second, and last, week with them. Land entertainment was exhausted, but anyone looking at the map would realise what a very small proportion of an atoll the strips of land actually are. Constance dressed herself in blue and white for the very Monte Carlo–Rhode Island sail across the immense lagoon, all
billo wing cloth, windswept hair, salt spray and speed. None of
the party could claim not to be enchanted by Enumanet, a
perfect palm-scattered island of white beach and solitude, yet it
was the warmth and welcome of the lagoon and coral reef that
bewitched.

Which is what Joy felt: bewitched. Under a spell. A rather nasty spell at that. So the united goddesses of history
wanted her to save the world from a precocious, sly little
trickster. Save it from evil personified. As far as she could see,
there were enough mortal tricksters and cheats around doing a
pretty good job of destroying the world — the heavens above,
land below and water beneath the earth — that the loss of one
disembodied con-artist was not going to tip the balance to
world harmony.

The world be damned — as it seemed to be — but she
did want to save her son.
A Footnote — The Secret of the Escape

Dolores arrived in the United States in 1991, though her passport did not register the crossing. She was a working-class, minority woman. In other words, no-one had ever bothered to educate her. For all the reasons above and more, Dolores was thrilled when her older sister got her a job with the cleaning crew. Cleaning up after other people is more worthwhile than cleaning up after your younger siblings. You get paid. A little.

Her workplace was a boring old laboratory in New Mexico but she put her mind, soul and a whole lot of elbow grease into keeping her territory spick-and-span. That way nobody got around to running those checks on her Green Card, and when it came to special assignments the head of the detail always thought of conscientious Dolores.

Spring had not come to the ‘Special Secrets Room’ for some time, decades probably, and she found herself in there one night with mops and brooms and feather dusters and the order to spring-clean thoroughly. The muck and grime were like caked-on fall-out, so she reached for the world’s trusted powder cleanser. The box was quite difficult to open and, once unsealed with a gasp of escaping air, proved to be empty. It was only on second glance that she realised she had mistaken the box marked Letao for the Ajax.

Well, when you’re illiterate, one disregarded ancient adventurer looks a lot like any other.
She wasn’t going to do anything until her mother left, but when opportunity presents itself, you don’t swim away as if from a talking starfish.

It was four days before her mother was to go, the day after the picnic, around full moon, at the tail end of the typhoon season. On a Monday.

A trip into town was made necessary by the constant complaints Constance was making. Such a moan about the impending journey up and down, here and there back across the Pacific. Geoff made himself useful by suggesting she change her ticket and finish the loop, returning through Honolulu. There was only one stop in that direction, at Johnstone Atoll, given that none of the chemical weapon incinerators there had a problem on the day and the plane could land.

The airline office was in town. Geoff was getting to be quite an expert taxi commuter and left early, so the three generations of family trundled over the bridge in the truck. Constance was acting in a more than usual eccentric manner: she hid her face against Daniel’s in an excessively loving gesture as they passed the government buildings. Joy quipped that maybe she was crazy, and it was genetic.

‘Uncle Roy definitely; you maybe; me, I’m hiding’ — which made less sense than her actions.

Then, totally inexplicably a man asked her to dinner while they were waiting for her new ticket. And she said ‘yes’.
‘I shouldn’t have hidden from him back there on the road,’ she explained to Joy. ‘I won’t be out late, don’t worry. Jeremy is a legitimate businessman.’

On the way home they stopped at Geoff’s office, a place of interest yet to be included on the sightseeing itinerary, and while they waited — waiting being a national pastime and not just isolated to their morning — for Geoff to return from Finance, chasing the computer requisitions at source, Rosina entertained them in her relaxed regal way. She dismissed the worry over the computer equipment: she had put her second husband Jakeo onto it; he worked at Supply.

‘Second husband?’ asked Constance, thinking she’d found some point of commonality with the overblown woman in floral whom Joy was treating with deference.

‘From when I was younger,’ Rosina laughed behind her hand. ‘My third husband is in the Cabinet. But what a time Jakeo and I had when we were courting. We had to meet behind the Supply building — you understand — climb the crooked old pandanus tree and get in through the broken window. The window is still broken, they say,’ she added wistfully, then the laughter recommenced. ‘More sheltered and comfortable in the building than in the tree — you understand.’

Joy thought she did, Constance hoped she didn’t, Daniel asked if that was how babies were made, and Geoff returned flushed with success. No, the computer had not miraculously fallen through a hole in the ozone layer into his lap: he had been invited to The Funeral, the final interment of the mother of the government, and would be leaving for the neighbouring atoll of Arno that afternoon. He’d be gone the night.

Joy did not attend to the explanations and elaborations for she now had the evening free of Constance and Geoff to prepare, the bed free of Geoff to sneak out of during the night, and the means of entry into Supply to steal one of the lead-lined boxes. On an earlier occasion she had listened closely to Geoff’s computer saga, the day amongst the lost supplies. Yes,
she knew what she wanted, she knew where to get it. Now, she knew how.

How Joy was going to entice a limitless, all-powerful — well, very powerful — bodiless pest into a lead-lined box was anyone’s guess. She’d certainly been doing a lot of guessing herself. It wasn’t like cheese in a mousetrap. On the other hand it could be like the story of Lijakkwe the beautiful who turned a would-be suitor into coral rock. Coral rock fits nicely in a box. Ugly evil Borlap the suitor remains inanimate and silent, while, to this day, the beauty that lured him to his doom is witnessed in the sky of Ebon. As Lijakkwe bathes at each sundown, her comeliness is reflected in the sea, the sky and on the earth, as the radiant rose and flame the less knowing think are from the setting sun. Lijakkwe was looking very beautiful that night. Crystalline pink played with jade green and deepened to a warm-hearted burgundy.

The old woman, mother of the government, was wise to choose this lyrical and symbolic time of day to be laid to her eternal rest. She had not irritably blown off the silly bit of white handkerchief from across her mouth and nose: she was stone cold dead. Very cold after her extended stay in the hospital morgue as her loving family heatedly, and at great length, debated on which of her many weto land holdings she would rest in peace. Arno, an atoll close to Majuro, had won the day. Arno was the home atoll of the famed ‘University of Love’, on which the reputation of sexual prowess for the entire country rested. Hearsay alone attested to the love school and its lessons in rhythmically rocking canoes; no-one younger than 90 claimed attendance much less a graduation certificate. Perhaps the mother of the government…

Her body, her family and friends, most of the government by the looks of the empty desks, sailed and flew and congregated on little Bukarej, Arno. The kids got pretty bored,
as children do, and amused themselves with long jump across the grave opening and with stick-ball using the mock mahogany casket as second base. No-one complained, least of all the old woman. What is death anyway? Only remains were buried, and what is this corporeal without the spiritual after all?

Daniel was in bed by the time the coffin was two feet under — atolls are neither high nor deep — but Constance almost threw the whole plan awry by staying out till two in the morning. Joy was ready to go and in a panic by midnight, nauseous by 1 am, and angry by 2 am. There would not be another chance to sneak away, Geoff was a light sleeper, and it would be just like her mother to thwart her.

She pretended to be asleep when the backdoor finally creaked open and closed. At 3 am she re-awoke, the pretence having failed and sleep taken over. The effort of moving from the bed seemed so awesome, as it always seems to in the early hours, that Joy almost abandoned the foolhardy plan. Yet, she peeled her still-tight sunburnt back from the sheet, the backpack was thrown in the pick-up along with a prayer that it would start first time, and the mission commenced.

Disconcertingly, the night had decided not to be dark on this occasion. A full moon like a hungry man’s plate — after the meal, like a frisbee in flight, like a silver dollar, like the biggest, closest, brightest, roundest moon ever, hung about flaunting his presence and shining reflective, revealing light on ocean, lagoon, palm, road, truck and Joy. The black obscuring clothing she had assembled served only to make her look like a Ninja warrior on a well-lit stage.

It was her first break-and-enter, so the items she had gathered together were largely illusionary props. Torch, rope, hammer, screwdriver, more rope, a breadknife, crowbar and a pillow (to break the fall from the high window, of course). The full backpack did make her feel more comfortable. The lace-up
sandshoes, found in the suitcase above the wardrobe, did not. It had only seemed necessary to unpack the sandals when they had arrived, the freedom of island life being the freedom of feet that could breathe. Suddenly in shoes her feet felt cramped and pinched.

Yes, Joy was an innocent abroad. Much like the thief who found fame in the weekly Police Blotter published in the local newspaper. Said character ‘walked away with some valuable items such as a glass necklace, a bottle of pancake syrup, some panties, and a box full of foreign coins’.

She did a reconnaissance drive past the Supply building, a tin shed lit up like a silver nugget moonbathing. No cars, definitely no-one lurking in shadows, definitely no shadows. A little way up the road a copse of trees beside the Copra Plant presented itself as shelter for the car. The cloying smell of coconut left no doubt about her location, and from there, away from the smell, Joy walked to her goal. Anyone seeing her would merely assume she’d taken advantage of Geoff’s absence and was finding her way home after a night at the notorious disco located further back along the road.

Though ‘The Pub’ was close by, the sounds of music, dancing, romantic scuffling and fisticuffs were inaudible. The silence was full of the chick-chack of geckos. The chattering mocked Joy’s lonely ears like the sounds of cheerful lovers. Which in fact they were, if truth be told. On an overcrowded island, in an overcrowded house, in an environment devoid of all privacy, a woman does not want her mother to witness her sighs and squeals of ecstasy; so easy instead to mimic, and thus to blame, the ever-present little lizard for the noisy activity.

Three-fifteen in the morning is the proper time for love. Nevertheless, Joy went behind the Supply building, scraped her way along the very full lagoon edge, and found Rosina’s pandanus tree. It was thankfully ‘empty’. The crooked branches were like a ladder, the window was still broken, the descent inside was aided by a pile of boxes: the entry was simple.
As her foot hit the cement, thunder assaulted the skies. The spirit Kobange must have been taunting the great bird Jorur again. Jorur threw up his wings and pulled harder and more urgently against the lashings that bound him to Kobange’s guardianship. His beating wings rumbled as thunder throughout the land. On and on, roll upon roll, the angry tugging continued. Rain bore down in sheets, dampening the captive bird’s energy to intermittent roars.

Odd how the storm crept up so suddenly. The startled thief hoped it was not ominous, that she was not about to meet lions on the bridge, or some such portent.

Regardless of significance, the rain and thunder amplified their way around the warehouse, frightening the circle of torchlight in and out of boxes, up and down piles, and over agitated rats. A three-foot square box of bulldog clips, a pile of typewriters, too many rodents. A ‘missile’ flashed past. Joy returned the beam to the crate. Kwajalein Atoll Missile Base had never received their consignment of lead-lined boxes, never forwarded them to Bikini Atoll for their intended use.

The crate she opened (the crowbar) contained several boxes, each about one foot by one foot by three feet, say the size of a child’s coffin. She reached down to lift one out.

She’d expected it to be heavy. ‘Like a lead weight’ was a term she was familiar with, but this was ridiculous. There was no way a woman alone could climb up boxes and down a tree with such a burden. Not to mention the distance to the pick-up. Despair only half covered Joy’s depth of feeling. The heavens cried for her. She sat down on an old office chair, swinging and kicking her legs for want of anything better to do. The chair rolled on its four squeaky wheels as she kicked.

The chair rolled... The lead box could well sit on it and be pulled along like a dog on a lead (the rope). With that plan she’d only have to get a chair and a lead-lined box out of the window.

With a sigh, unheard in the cosmic din, she picked up her toolkit. She would attempt damage on the doors. Fifteen
foot high doors a tank could comfortably fit through; a screwdriver, hammer and breadknife: the competition seemed uneven.

The human-sized door to the left only then became visible. Joy pushed against it hopelessly. It opened into the storm: it had been open the whole time. Joy thanked the thoughtlessness of Wishery and Barmy and Jakeo and all government workers.

For aesthetic as well as practical reasons, it was lucky that the lashing rain and roaring thunder provided a curtain for Joy and her wheeled partner’s exit and progress down the road.

Home, and she heaved the stolen chair in the lagoon, where it sank without trace; and she left the purloined casket in the laundry where it was well camouflaged. No-one could ever find anything in there.

A self-satisfied wriggly worm inside tossed Joy about in bed, until the rocking put her quietly to sleep.
‘The future is Mine.’

Despite the late night and little sleep Joy was full of surging energy, pulsing like electric currents of power. Maria Brandau had failed to protect her young Heinrich, but that fine Tuesday morning Letao was as small, as infinitesimally pesky as those ants, and as easy to deal with.

Limdurianig, if nothing else, had helped her recognise that there was no use waiting around for christenings and exorcisms and far-off gods. If you want something done, you do it yourself. Joy was in control. The Christians had taken control and cut the long hair from the savage natives in the 1880s, subduing them totally. Now it was their god’s turn. Like Delilah with Samson, she’d be snipping Letao’s power with every lock of hair. Metaphorically speaking, of course. Letao was without hair; if he had some, it’d be on a head, and then he wouldn’t have been hanging around wanting Daniel’s body in the first place.

Control felt good to Joy. And she was off to exercise it at the mother’s group morning, on Mine, possessor of beauty rivalling the legendary Lijakkwe. Letao would most assuredly manifest himself before such temptation.

Constance came too, being around and, technically, a mother too.

A second new face at the coffee morning was advanced in her first pregnancy, a nervous melon of a woman. Stories began, to put her at her ease, as the gentle sex, given any opportunity, will eagerly share the most horrific details of her birth experience. Perhaps this is largely for her own and not the wide-eyed listener’s benefit. Duration, dilation, to be or to
epesiotomy, caesarians, cement breasts, midwives with magic fingers, doctors with bodgy timing, husbands with mirrors, friends with video cameras. The woman who had this to look forward to was hardly comforted. When Constance started to contribute her experience, Joy left the room. She’d given up hope for a supportive, mothering mother but was not prepared to accept the woman who hadn’t let her win ‘Hunt the Mintie’ at her own fifth birthday party, as a with-it contemporary.

She found Mine in the kitchen resplendent in sunset colours: a new dress from her employer.

‘Yokwe.’
‘Yokwe, yokwe.’
Daniel seconded the greeting.

After a suitable preamble of embarrassed silence Joy asked, sweetly, if Mine would like to come and do some babysitting for her.

‘Oh, yes. Daniel is a very beautiful baby.’

Joy left convinced the date was set and Letao was in the bag. Or box.

Though, it must be remembered, in this context ‘yes’ is open to interpretation. From birth Mine, and any child in a Marshallese family, was taught of the discourtesy of disappointing the one you are with; was warned of the insult in the word ‘no’. She was not an ill-bred person. No matter her intention she would meekly, willingly, sincerely return the much-wanted affirmative to her given companion lest she disappoint them. That this same companion would suffer no amount of frustration in the long run was not the issue under consideration.

Joy’s confidence may not have been misplaced. Mine had been particularly trained in all forms of acquiescence. There was not a negative element in her soft curves and depthless eyes. The dimple on her elbow spoke of unfailing obedience. Joy had asked; Mine would be there. Perhaps.

On the way home — Constance had enjoyed the morning thoroughly — they stopped at MEC, the energy
company, to pay the bill for the electricity that sometimes was and sometimes wasn’t relayed to their house. A very friendly old man greeted Joy as a long-lost friend. He didn’t ask where she was going but turned his admiration on her son.

‘He was born here, I remember. Born in Majuro. He is Marshallese like me. Such a fine big boy! One day he will lead us, he’ll be our leader! Oh yes, one day he can be our President!’

The office laughed at the great joke while the old man smilingly nodded with wise eyes. ‘A fine boy.’

The sun beat furiously on the windows of the pick-up, ignoring the pathetic puffs of vapour from the air-conditioning vents. Joy found herself feeling unaccountably irritable. She tried to blame the late night catching up and to forget the old man. They all wanted to get home.

When they got there, it was low tide. The stolen office chair lay wheels heavenward on the reef flat for all the world to see.

‘Joy, go and get rid of those kids.’

Joy was trying to rest in her darkened bedroom. She presumed her mother was trying to do the same, as the command had issued from Constance’s room. Now that she was alerted to it, she too could hear the children’s voices; they were coming from the lounge. Some kids must have snuck in to see Daniel, sleeping soundly in his day crib.

Joy dragged herself out of bed. The voices were arguing and did not hear her barefooted approach. Philippina’s shrill words denied Daniel’s firm assertions. Somehow the impossible had happened. They could understand each other.

‘My mother is the best in the world.’
‘No, mine is.’
‘My mother and I are very close.’
‘Mine is the most holy.’
‘My mother and I are so close she would know if it was me inside my body and not someone else.’
Fear found its way from Joy’s heart to her throat. She had been so intent on her own trap that she’d forgotten Letao was the biggest — and best — trickster in the land.

The prospect of losing her son overwhelmed her. She could not let his innocent soul be taken. Should Letao take his body after all, she would lose him the way she had her father: to a merciless god. He’d driven off that Christmas morning, her father, hurrying to the church to prepare for the most joyous of church ceremonies. As warden, he had to be there early, but he never did arrive. He died in the collision with the drunkard. Head-on. No chance and no sense. He was in his Heaven, they said.

Letao would be sending Daniel to heaven too. If she didn’t stop him. Deceit versus decency left the cunning to inherit the earth every time.
It was a large hole, deep enough to hold a large animal. The sides were steep and, as the crowd watched, coral stones were lowered inside. The Iroij had called for the um to be constructed and soon the huge oven would be ready. The sight was enough to send any population mad with the anticipation of succulent tastes and smells. In Mili the sight of the chief’s wives busily lighting the firewood to heat the stones evoked a different madness — because of its sheer cruelty.

This population was starving, weakening as they watched. Famine had seated himself atop their island many months before and the lethargy of his limbs prevented him from leaving. There was no food to put in the huge and newly heated um.

Letao laughed at the faces and the unnecessary concern. He laughed as the incomparably beautiful wives of the Iroij pulled scorching hot stones from the um. He even laughed as he jumped into the excavated hole and pressed his tattooed limbs against the baking surfaces.

The enchanting double vision of divine wives as they held back, fear shimmering on the moist tears in their eyes, plump bottom lips caught by anxious pearly teeth, increased his mirth. They looked good enough to eat, as they prepared him to be eaten.

‘Cover him up, stupid wenches,’ shouted their husband and King. He had his own fear hidden in the crown of flowers about his head.

Obediently the women hoisted hot stones back into the um. As they worked, sweat formed about the neck and chest.
Nothing prevented gravity from pulling the beads down the gentle, tempting slope of their breasts. This — the last image Letao enjoyed as the stones completely buried him in the oven.

He had arrived in Mili feeling slightly peckish. The reports of the beauty of the Iroij’s wives had proved to be far from exaggerated, otherwise he would have been very angry at the lack of food. The human goddesses wept as their husband spoke of the plight of the island. A terrifying typhoon, famine, privation, an unpromising future. The lord of the land pointed into the trees that had survived the winds: no fruit. His territory was devastated and his throat sore with worry. ‘Build an um’, was Letao’s airy advice.

Letao was obviously no normal wayfarer. His height, his health, his tattoos set him apart. Yet the Iroij hesitated.

‘Starve. Or build an um’, was the only inducement Letao offered for his scheme.

The stranger rested while the oven was prepared.

Then, to the astonishment of the crowd, he jumped into it himself. ‘All will be ready by sunset. Prepare to feast.’ He was gone from sight.

Some prepared to feast. They anointed their hair with coconut oil scented with shavings of sandalwood that had drifted in before the typhoon. Others anointed their bodies with perfume made from the annan bird. However, the wives of the chief returned to their hut to weave a burial mat for the fool who had ventured into their lives.

By sunset every person on the island had gathered around the um to see if Letao was cooked or not. Not even the bravest could stand within a body length of the oven; the fierce heat drove them back. Into this hell the wives were sent to open up the um.

Letao was not there.

It was a miracle. Loaves and fishes be damned, there was baked breadfruit, taro, pandanus and arrowroot cake, coconut balls, fish, crab, lobster, squid, all in such quantities that each and every family could be glutted with food.
A familiar laugh came from the crown of a remaining coconut tree. Letao was welcomed down as a hero and the celebration commenced.

There was no doubt that the Iroij was impressed. He was responsible for the welfare of his people and as he watched their emaciated faces in the firelight — now gorged and happy, yesterday and tomorrow lost and despairing — he knew he wasn’t doing his job very well. His uncle, the last King, had never let the community starve. And neither would he.

With all subtlety he asked the stranger about the miracle.

‘So simple,’ explained Letao in his off-hand way. ‘You build an um, jump in, tell your wives to cover you, and at sunset the oven will be loaded with food.’

It wasn’t exactly the explicit explanation the Iroij had been hoping for. Slowly he formulated his next assault: ‘And how do you get out of the um?’

‘Through the hole beneath the fire…’

Obviously, nodded the chief.

‘…You’ll come out over on the ocean side.’

The Iroij duly contemplated and digested the information.

‘I could do this?’ he asked warily.

Letao was sincere in his assurance. He drew the Iroij’s ear closer and into the night whispered the final secret: ‘I am a mere kajur, a common man, but you, my lord, are of the highest lineage. You are a chief, a king. Tonight I produced this meagre supply of roasted food. You as Iroij, you…’ Letao’s hands painted a mountain ‘…so much more…’

Sitting on the flat atoll the Iroij was lost in the vision.

Very early the next morning the chief called for his family and announced that they were to build the biggest um the island had ever seen. Against the protests that there was still no food
to cook once the oven was built, the Iroij calmly insisted. ‘The stranger has given me the power. I will feed my people.’

‘You fool,’ muttered one wife.

‘A noble fool,’ muttered the other.

The whole community helped build the um. It was so big that even with everyone's help it took a long time. Finally it was ready. Without any to-do the Iroij jumped in. His brother was about to comment that they may as well start collecting shark's teeth to shave their heads in mourning for the chief, when the chief’s screams of pain drowned out all thoughts and flippancies.

Letao alone spoke. ‘It is nothing,’ he told the crowd. ‘You'll get used to it in a minute,’ he shouted down to the Iroij. ‘Now get them to cover you.’

‘Cover me!’ No-one understood the courage in the chief's command.

Two hysterical wives, who could never be disobedient, covered him. The wailing was muffled.

‘Now we must sing,’ ordered Letao. ‘It is a joyful occasion.’

The voices sounded sad at first: low and slow. Sticks clicker-clacked as castanets, the tempo increased and drums throbbed. Gradually the kneeling singers relaxed and threw their arms around in sensual abandon. The music reached its apex, the crescendo crumpled and silence fell. No more singing, no more wailing from the pit.

The wives were agitated all day long. They searched the oceanside but could find no sign of their husband. They held little faith.

At sunset the population was eager to feast. It was only the wives who approached the um with trepidation. Letao seemed a gay and helpful fellow, his food had melted in their mouths, yet... One by one the stones were thrown aside. Nothing stirred within. The Iroij must have escaped... The last stones were gone.
The crazed screams of the two women startled the crowd. Those closest suddenly realised the smell that was sending their stomach juices over cascades was not baked fish. Their chief was still. Still inside the oven, and as still as death, a fearsome mass of charred flesh.

‘Poor man,’ murmured Letao as he comforted the widows of unsurpassed beauty. ‘He didn’t get it right. But have no fear: I will care for you as if you were my own wives.’
‘Really, Daniel, dear boy, your admiration for your mother is misplaced. All children love their mothers and yours is only mortal — a human — and cannot live up to your pride in her. I can prove this to you.

‘Or you can prove your point to me.

‘How? Quite simply. You believe you and your mother are close. You say she would immediately recognise your soul’s absence from that neckless body it currently inhabits. You are very sure that she would know it was me, Letao, and not her baby Daniel, squawking in her arms. So test her.

‘I will agree to stay in your body for a day. Just a day, mind you. To think of spending more time in close proximity to your mother, and your grandmother, is most horrible. Yes, I know you love them, and I don’t mean to purposefully offend, but we are friends and must tell each other the truth. Twenty-four hours is the limit of my endurance.

‘Of course, of course, if she sees me sheltering behind those big blue eyes, I’ll be off in a twinkle.

‘See, if you are correct, I’ll be out of your body in moments. If I am correct, I’ll be forced to stay the whole day. The price of victory we will say.

‘And what will the winner receive? The satisfaction of being correct, of course.

‘Agreed?’
On Wednesday morning Daniel would not talk to her. Joy expected he was upset, justifiably, with the lack of attention he’d been getting.

Her attention was demanded elsewhere: Geoff had returned from Arno the evening before full of coconut crabs and paradise. He wanted a warm shower, ice in his gin, and to tell his stories.

In the other ear, Constance was packing, buying handicraft baskets and ‘Nuclear Free’ T-shirts, insisting on creating a cordon bleu dinner from the fragile stock in Joy’s cupboards, disappearing for drinks with that Jeremy person, and demanding her daughter’s hands, time and attentiveness throughout. It was to be a grand exit.

And in her inner ear Letao was mocking her feeble leaden trap. An imagined derisive laugh suffocated her plans for the coming Friday.

No wonder Daniel could not be heard. No wonder Daniel was silent.

By lunchtime Joy knew she was really worried. Daniel had failed to respond to tickling and funny faces. He’d cried once. But not an intelligible word had passed cupid-bow lips.

‘I love you, sweetheart. Do you love me?’

Yesterday, the day before yesterday, the day before that, and back and back and back, he would have responded without hesitation: ‘I love you, mummy.’
On Wednesday he pulled himself up in her arms and placed a slobbery open-mouthed kiss on her cheek. But not a word.

A tear fell from her eye to mingle with the baby dribble, all shakily mopped away with the bottom of her T-shirt. Daniel’s mouth smiled a toothless smile.

Joy did not know how to interpret what he was trying to say.

‘Don’t cry, you silly thing,’ chided Constance. ‘You won’t miss me that much. And we’ll see each other soon, I’m sure.’

When had her mother stopped being able to interpret her?

Toward night Daniel fell asleep. Joy read his angel face, skin almost translucent, eyelashes nestling in against his cheeks, the freshness, the innocence. It told her that Letao had gone, completely; that he had become bored with the company and gone on to more nasty climes. The spell had broken. His presence had somehow allowed Daniel to talk to her. No more. Now was normality, not before. Now she would learn to be eager for the first word, mama, dada, nono, dog. Her trap was unnecessary. They could live in peace.

It was up to the goddesses of GAIA to fix Letao. He was their business.

It was dark when she next went to check on the sleeping child. She crouched by the cot and, as her eyes grew accustomed to the shadows, Daniel’s face appeared like the image on a developing film. In negative.

Letao had not gone. He was closer. He was within the body that was once Daniel. Evil had entered the material world.

Joy held her pillow. She could smother him there and then. In moments he’d be gone. With one movement she could thwart the trickster and prevent the destruction of life as she
knew it. Or she could allow evil into their lives, harbour a monster to her breast. Let Letao live. Let Letao win.

Joy pushed the pillow forward. And buried her own face into the cool cotton. And sobbed. Huge life-shaking sobs for the weakness that was in her.

Geoff was showering next morning when he noticed Daniel had yet to wake. Neither was Joy up, but she’d tossed and turned half the night so he hadn’t expected her to be.

He crept back into the bedroom and up to the cot, wearing the silly ‘hello’ smile that was reserved for his son alone. Daniel’s bright, cheerful face was not reflected back. He did not move. Geoff whispered ‘good morning’ in his ear, and then panicked. It felt like he’d picked up a rag doll. A mute, limp child slumped against his body. Joy was screaming next. Then Constance was in the room trying to revive the baby.

‘Cot death, cot death,’ Geoff tried to say as he gulped back sobs.

‘He’s not dead yet.’ Only Constance was calm. ‘Get the car. There must be a hospital on this godforsaken island.’

Daniel did not appear to be alive as they raced along the road. The wind wailed and keened and the radio announced a nationwide alert to prepare for an approaching typhoon. It had come out of nowhere. It was approaching quickly, unexpectedly, and very late in the season.

Geoff and Joy and Constance ignored the warning but many hadn’t. The hospital was virtually empty; staff were securing their homes or evacuating their families to high and safe structures. The door to Emergency swung free. The room behind was deserted. Joy could do nothing but sob, hopelessly, into Daniel’s body.

It was only moments, not a lifetime, later that Constance returned with a doctor. She had been on shift all night, a busy night with four births, and was not anxious to deal with a group of hysterical RiPalles. But seeing the condition of the child she quickly lifted him onto the examining table. His pulse was
almost impossible to find, his heartbeat was feeble, all vital signs were discouraging. There was no essential life force, no obvious cause, no equipment and no paediatric expertise on hand. She tried to break it to the parents gently. No reason this should happen to any other child they had in the future.

‘We just give up on Daniel?’ demanded Joy.

The boy lay lifeless on the table, as if he had given up on himself.

‘There must be something?’ demanded Geoff, though he could not think what.

‘If you can’t do anything, get someone who can,’ demanded Constance.

They waited.

An old though sound humidity crib was pushed in and connected to the electricity and oxygen. At least oxygen levels and temperature would be regulated as he died. The premature baby that was sleeping fitfully in it moments before was sharing the hospital’s second crib. Both newborns were so tiny there was room enough together.

Daniel’s body looked, if possible, more vulnerable within the glass walls. Joy could not leave his side. She rubbed her aching eyes, knuckles leaving big red stars floating before them. Bulky fat red stars more like starfish.

‘Don’t give up,’ whispered in her ears.

Geoff was not giving up. He was demanding medical evacuation. The doctor and the administrator who had materialised shook their heads. Their whole manner said that there really was no hope, no miracles in modern medicine. It would be a waste of money. A waste of hope.

Constance agreed. ‘But you go and arrange a referral to a hospital in Honolulu. Do the telephoning or faxing or whatever you have to do. I’m booked on this morning’s flight, the mother will be in my seat, so don’t get caught up worrying about cost, just do it.’
Constance was authoritative. She always had been. Questions that should have been raised weren’t and the process was put in motion.

She turned to Geoff. ‘Haven’t you noticed how crazy and obsessed she’s been lately? There is no hope for Daniel, but we must make Joy believe she did everything possible to save him.’ And after her first husband’s death, she’d had to do everything possible.

The family were pale and demoralised. Yet there was no need to despair. Daniel was winning his struggle against the evil usurper. Letao would not dominate the Marshalls and the world through his body.

Not through his *dead* body.

The ambulance drove them to the airport. The eerie journey was against the background of a nation in frantic preparation for a natural disaster. Sheets of protective plywood by the score were being nailed against windows by the score. The hammering vibrated through the air, like the last hammering of nails into a coffin.

The 727 jet was full. It was the last plane out and the Senators congratulated themselves on getting seats. They sipped cocktails and discussed what could be done with the disaster relief money.

Joy and the humidity crib were up the front. Joy watched intently for any movement — of which there was none. Ultimately, she had merely been an inadvertent observer all along; the conflict was between Daniel and Letao. She could not hope to be responsible for his salvation. Perhaps we are all responsible for our own.

How she wished to get to Honolulu, to a world that made more sense.
To make the distance the plane landed to refuel on Johnston Island. ‘Welcome to Johnston Island. You may not leave the aircraft,’ came the threatening greeting for anyone tempted to sightsee amongst the chemical weapons incinerators.

As the pressurised door popped open at the back, Daniel let out a wail. And another, and another. A rush of wind swept down the aisle and through the door. Fresh air filled Daniel’s lungs. He screamed and howled with undeniable life.

Letao fled from the noise across the tarmac and into the arms of the welcoming typhoon. His plans had been scuttled by that ridiculously tenacious soul. He’d not expected Daniel to try and regain occupancy of his body after the voluntary withdrawal, that supposed 24 hours. How could he have expected such a foolhardy attempt? They had struggled: Letao was convinced of near victory. But then he was on the plane with a distinct feeling of *deja vu*. No, he was not going to be caught in another ‘condo in Hono’ fiasco. He was off. Let Joy and Daniel go to their home island, that huge one called Australia. Let Geoff leave Planning to a successor and join them.

Letao knew there must be easier ways to become Master of the Universe.
The Trickster

A shout went up from the lagoonside. Young Lojeik raced from the sandy shore towards the scatter of households on Majuro Island. ‘It’s time, it’s time,’ he called triumphantly. He had not yet attained his tattoos, so was proud to have been entrusted with the message.

There was instant activity in response to the cry. The Iroij launched his magnificent canoe first and soon enough every other canoe from the community was in the water sailing deferentially in his vessel’s wake. A few of the women had time to look up from their chores to sigh at the wonderful sight of the lagoon under sail. And to anticipate the fun.

The fish, the sardine-like delicacy, only swarmed this once a year. The shoal of silvery dashing bodies would be countless strong. No-one on the island could count above a hundred, and there would be a lot more than that. Some kindly god called them to congress and the delighted Iroij gathered his clan to round them up for the easiest banquet of the season.

The Iroij expertly manoeuvred his men and their canoes into positions of greatest detriment to the silver cloud of fish. The wooden hulls urged the fish closer and closer to shore. The chief’s outrigger alone would have been a formidable sight, should the fish care to look back at their adversary: beautiful coloured feathers and coconut ribbons danced from the rigging, each tied in the most secret and special ways to promote good luck. Seen with the rest of the flotilla, the effect was terrifying. Recognition of defeat could be had at a glance.
The canoes dropped back once their prey was close to land, but respite for the fish was brief. The older men and boys splashed through the crystal water shouting and whooping up a storm of noise. The clamour was accompanied by a great show and thrust of long sticks. The crystal lagoon clouded and cracked in the agitation. Shards of shattered silver sped this way and that. That way, that way the wooden prods compelled them. That way into the enclosure.

All was quiet.

The trap was set and sprung. Not one of the multitude of ocean creatures dared to cross back under the corral of strings and leaves.

Tricked, laughed Letao from his vantage point atop a handy palm. Should they dare to turn, no substance bar this shimmer of foliage floated in their path. The minds of the captives rather than any physical wall prevented escape. Mind over matter proved again, Letao was pleased to see.

From on high Letao could also spy the Iroij sailing his canoe back and forth. The others had returned to land and the solitary dip and turn of the chief’s craft was positively gleeful. It was an enviable vessel.

The whole community, man, woman, child and babe, joined Letao in his observation. The forty-strong crowd lined the shore by the captured, darting fish. The tide ebbed lower and lower. For the second time that day, the cry went up: ‘It’s time, it’s time.’ The chief tacked his outrigger landward as he shouted the message to his waiting people.

With his command, as one, they jumped into the swarm of fish, now exposed and vulnerable in the knee-deep water. Loud was the rejoicing. Fish, fish, fish. Fish stuffed in baskets, tucked into clothing mats, handed into hats, and when receptacles brimmed and bulged the shouting was muffled by the tails of fish hanging from mouths. Lojeik was proud with ten dangling delicacies. The Iroij laughed and gathered and made
sport with the rest, his pride, his canoe, temporarily abandoned on the shore.

Such a feast would be fried that night.

By the flickering embers of the fire, Letao introduced himself to the replete and satisfied boatbuilder Koko. He said he was a traveller passing by on a journey to visit his mother's family in the north. Koko found energy enough in his lassitude to show interest in Letao’s canoe; long journeys to the north required worthy sailing vessels.

Letao admitted to a sound and serviceable canoe, but professed his belief that he had never seen such a magnificent outrigger canoe as he had seen under the sail of the Iroij that very day. The grace of the lines, the strength of the design, the weight of the load it could carry — on these amazing qualities Letao was voluble and honest. It was a fine vessel.

Koko spat the remaining fish bones from his mouth and preened in the wash of Letao’s sycophantic words. He introduced himself then as the master boatbuilder on the island, for the whole atoll in fact; he personally accepted all tributes to his creation and his skill.

‘You are the father of this craft? Forgive me, I did not know,’ Letao smiled his untruth. ‘It is truly an outrigger fit for the gods. Will you make me one?’

‘Alas, it cannot be,’ Koko shook his head sadly. ‘Something uniquely beautiful can never be duplicated. An imitation, a mere caricature would result. I am an artist and those are the rules given us from on high.’

Letao had thought it was a very stupid rule when Lowa and Wulleb and Limdurianig were discussing it in Eb an eternity ago. He would have to get a perfect canoe — the perfect canoe — by other means.
Koko obliged by taking Letao over to meet the Iroij. He was surrounded by his wives and concubines, the former distinguishable from the latter by the quality of their dress mats and their ugliness. Marriage was an obligation to merge and protect the most exulted chiefly bloodlines, which were not always found in attractive packaging. It was more than natural, Letao having had a mite to do with the formation of the society, that every other woman past puberty was available as compensation.

Letao admired the women surreptitiously and the outrigger canoe openly and eloquently. The chief allowed his pride to fill the night.

‘Yep, mate — she’s a beauty — a dead cert for the race,’ crowed the lord, in the vernacular.

‘There is to be a race?’ enquired Letao. He got the response of a splendid raise of dark eyebrows, indicating the affirmative.

The mortal was actually referring to the showcase he had organised for his skipping, skidding, singing sailcraft, having cleverly advertised it as a race to attract the chiefs of other atolls. It was rumoured outriggers would be sailing from as far as Arno and Mili to join the event.

Letao could not resist the temptation. ‘I shall enter the race,’ he declared. ‘And it would be a fitting reward for the winner, indubitably, that the most wondrous craft, yours, should be the prize.’

The Iroij did not have even an inkling of a doubt that he would win and took this as a great joke. His splendid eyebrows rose once more in assent.

Letao set to work immediately next morning. He found a suitable kone tree for the hull of a new canoe to enter in the race. Kone wood has two unique qualities. One is that it can be polished to a smooth even texture, to a gleaming, teasing
surface. Letao rubbed and polished until his canoe outshone the sun. Even his eyes were amazed by the beauty of his new craft. And the beauty of his plan.

The night before the race, waiting until all the visiting Iroij had moored their canoes to land and their pleasure-loving bodies to some woman’s jaki mat, Letao took his wondrous hulled canoe out into the lagoon. Once it was safely positioned, he filled it with the heaviest of stones to better boast its strength. It was a tantalising sight by moonlight. In the full light of the morning sun it was irresistible.

The Iroij of Majuro could not resist. It looked to be a craft built to win a race. His envy of Letao’s outrigger canoe was obvious. Letao kicked his heels and mumbled and clasped and re-clasped his hands in a picture of indecision. Finally he conceded to the power of the Iroij. ‘You are the most mighty on this atoll. It is fitting that it be you who sails my perfect canoe in today’s race. It is with regret that I hand her to you. But I am willing to swap my craft for yours.’

The Iroij was delighted and immediately sent his men to divest the shining hull of kone wood of its mammoth load of rocks and stones.

‘Beware!’ warned Letao. ‘Without the weight, that canoe is faster than the wind. Before the race it is best to have someone you trust tie you to the mast lest you fall off.’

The chief was dignified in his thanks, while laughing within himself with glee. At the end of the day, when he had won the race in this new canoe, he would be the proud owner of it and his former joy. The latter was, after all, prize to the winner. Never was there a man more proud of his acumen. He had arranged a double victory in his race.

As the time for the regatta approached, an array of fine vessels were lined up along the shore. They were launched to float beside Letao’s creation, still solidly in the lagoon where he had
placed it before the moon’s witnessing eye. The Iroij of Majuro had his uncle tie him securely to the gleaming, vanquishing hull. He raised his voice in an exulted shout to declare the race begun.

Letao was away in the Iroij’s magnificent canoe, coloured feathers and coconut ribbons flying in the face of all the other entrants who could only follow. Koko was indeed an artist and the canoe flew like a gull across the lagoon.

The canoe Letao had polished to the point of overpowering beauty was discovered to be, somehow, stuck on a coral head. The Iroij’s family valiantly pushed it free.

The second unique quality of kone wood is that it will not float.

The Iroij knew too well that revealing anger was unacceptable in his culture. He seethed as he sank. As the water bubbled around his chest, he clung to tradition. As the water caressed his neck, he screamed in righteous fury.

‘Get that man. Catch Letao. He won’t get away with my canoe,’ he cried.

They tried. The visiting chiefs tried. The men of Majuro tried. But Letao was enjoying sailing the canoe Koko designed very much and he was soon at the passage from lagoon to ocean — the finish line.

Letao laughed back at the posse. ‘I have won. This canoe is mine. I claim it as my prize.’ The wind carried his laugh to the drowning Iroij as Letao sailed away from the atoll.

So it is remembered: what is beautiful is sometimes worthless.

So Letao is remembered. The greatest trickster of them all.
A Short Biography

Jane Downing was born in Australia in 1962 but was taken to live on Manus, an outer island of Papua New Guinea, three weeks later. She has since lived in Tanzania, Ireland, Indonesia, the (then) USSR, China, the Marshall Islands, Guam, as well as Australia. Her education was at the closest school, whichever country she was in at the time, and she went on to gain a B.A. in Psychology and Sociology from The Australian National University.

Her first job was at the American Embassy in Moscow. She has since worked for the British Embassy in Beijing, the United Nations in the Marshall Islands (as an Australian Volunteer Abroad), the Australian Public Service, the National Gallery, two Youth Refuges and a Domestic Violence Crisis Service. She was most recently a Community Development Officer for an Aboriginal Corporation.

While living and working in the Marshall Islands, where truth was often stranger than fiction, Jane Downing began to write fiction. She has since had short stories and poetry published widely in Australia, and in Europe and the US. A collection of her short stories, Searching for the Volcano, appeared in 1999.

*The Trickster* is her first novel.