CHAPTER 1

October, 1976

Potopoto 'a niu mui. ***The wisdom of a young coconut.***[1]

News of the murder hadn't reached me yet that morning, and my one wish, my only wish, was to sleep off my hangover. But the Kingdom of Tonga wanted me to wake up. It wasn't just the rooster I knew so well by then, his bright orange cape of feathers quivering with every crow, every screech, from the lowest branches of the lemon tree. It wasn't just the tapa makers, pounding rhythmically, patiently, with their wooden mallets at the strips of fiber on an ancient hollow log. It wasn't just the mangoes falling on my tin roof every ten or fifteen minutes. It wasn't just the goat jumping with a clatter onto Tevita's minimoke, the beat-up old dune buggy, and producing a stream of shouted curses from the kids. It wasn't just the family pig rubbing against the outside of my hut and squealing to be let in to get his chin scratched. It wasn't just the church bells of Nuku'alofa. The whole damn country didn't believe in sleeping in.

I rolled over on my metal cot, the iron creaking, and rubbed my eyes. I flicked a mosquito off my arm and stared at my net, rolled up and dangling limply from the lashed beams. I couldn't stand having the net around me, the way everybody told me it should be to protect against filariasis. As a kid, when I thought I'd be an explorer, the idea of a mosquito net over a bed seemed exotic. The first time

1. Tongan versions of the proverbs at the start of each chapter are from Eric Shumway's *Intensive Course in Tongan* from the University Press of Hawai'i. However, I have taken liberties with some of the English translations, adjusting them to match events of the chapters. Any paraphrases or inaccuracies are the responsibility of the author.

Tevita, my landlord and de facto Tongan father, showed me how to untie the net and let it down, I eagerly climbed into the bed. But within minutes, I felt entombed. The world outside looked gauzed over, fogged. Other than that first night, to make Tevita happy, I never used it.

I nudged at the hurricane window, propping it open an inch or two with a stick for fresh air. Hinged at the top, the push-out windows seemed to be cut into the hut as an afterthought. When the windows were down, my Tongan house was dark, day or night. But when they were open, there was nothing between me and the world outside. I'd developed a habit of pushing the windows open just far enough for a bit of air and light, but not far enough for anyone to see inside. I needed light the way other people needed caffeine, and with a hangover, I really needed air.

The morning air of Polynesia still amazed me. Rich and spicy, not crisp and clean like winter mornings back home in Ohio—the kind of sharp air that makes a person resolve to stand up straight. This air was lavish and damp, luxuriant with the scents of gardenia and salt water. Margarita air.

Not that you could get tequila here, unless some had just come through duty-free from somebody's trip home. Beer, yes. There was always beer.

I was twenty-five that October, about to turn twenty-six. I'd been in college in the '60s and had been a reporter for the first half of the '70s. But I'd never drunk so much beer in my life. The house brew at the Coconut Club was Steinlager, in brown quart bottles, fifty cents each. The bar served little white paper bags of peanuts stapled at the top for another twenty cents. I could make a supper out of that combination, and often did.

Last night, though, the party hadn't been at the Coconut Club. The Peace Corps treated us instead to the country's classiest establishment, the International Dateline Hotel.

The occasion was to honor me and twenty other greenhorns, the trainees of Tonga Group 17. We'd just finished our three months of in-country boot camp, just like sixteen other groups of Americans had done in the ten years before us. We'd spent three hours each morning sitting cross-legged on mats in the humid, two-story training house, struggling to master the vowel-rich language. We'd dozed through endless lectures about kinship systems and the politics of ancient Polynesia. We'd nibbled from canoe-sized platters of cassava and taro, conscientiously chewed octopus and raw fish salad, and bent over, one by one, yelping and bitching at Clark, the Peace Corps doctor, for gamma globulin shots.

And then we got kicked out of our cozy communal quarters, Kalisimasi's Guest House, and into whatever individual Tongan abodes the Peace Corps had

been able to wrangle. I moved into a cockroachy, oval lashed-bamboo hut on Tevita's property. Despite its bugs, it was a respectable little place with its own flush toilet, a cold-water shower, and a two-burner hot plate. Other Peace Corps volunteers moved to whitewashed concrete block condos next to the high school or to wood cottages on stilts over the lagoon. And ready or not, last night, we were declared trained and ready to start our jobs. After the feast, the crowd spilled into the hotel's leafy courtyard and danced, flirted, bragged, and sang Tongan songs, Bob Dylan songs, and French folk songs until two or three o'clock. I remembered someone yowling "Five Hundred Miles" and being shouted down.

I remembered wobbling back through the dark on my new black, British one-speed bike, smoking a final cigarette behind the hut, and staring at Orion, bright even to my night-blind eyes, before collapsing here, on my narrow cot.

A bit of cloth dangled from a nail on the windowsill. I smiled. That torn swatch, bright red, matched the shorts Mac Barnett had on when he scrambled through the window.

I hadn't planned it. I'd turned off my one electric light and clicked off my flashlight, too addled by beer to read, when I heard a rough knock at the back window.

"*Salote*," Mac whispered. I loved hearing my Tongan name, which is Charlotte in English. It made me feel *gone*—gone from Ohio, gone from boredom, gone from a lot of things.

I pushed open the window. All I could see were his glinting eyes. He said, "Let me in before Tevita catches me and beats my ass."

He had a rare pint of gin in his back pocket and a lime off a tree behind the house. We sat cross-legged on the floor and drank the gin until it was gone and we were taking off each other's clothes and French kissing. He was stout and sturdy. When he pushed into me, I thought of pop beads, those kid necklaces of the '50s. We laughed. I was crazy about him.

Tevita must have heard the ruckus and knocked on the door. I hurriedly gathered up my underwear and pulled on a green wraparound cloth, what I'd learned was called a *tupenu*. I yelled, "Wait, wait, Tevita. I'll be right there," to give Mac enough time to tumble out the window and make off through the banana patch behind the hut. I paused to breathe and then opened the door to Tevita, whose broad, brown forehead was creased with worry.

"It's okay, Tevita. I'm fine." I articulated the words carefully, trying not to slur them. I was plastered.

"Salote," he said, "I thought I heard something over here." He stood stolidly, looking me over, his feet spread apart, his arms folded over his barrel chest.

"It's nothing, Tevita. I'm fine. Thanks for checking." Tevita frowned and held his ground without saying anything as I flashed him what I imagined to be a dumb-looking, goofy smile.

Everybody swore you could sleep with anybody you liked in Tonga, but they just couldn't come through the front door. The middle-of-the-night getaway was supposed to be the Tongan way. Yet Tevita appeared to be upset.

I had no doubt that by the time Mac was gone, Tevita knew I'd had company. If I'd offended him, he didn't show it. If he were amused, he didn't let on. He finally grunted and lumbered away, back to the big house where his wife, Filipa, probably waited with a bowl of boiled plantain to calm him down.

Tevita's monitoring unnerved me. The Peace Corps trainers, Liz and Wade, warned me to expect it. They said to behave with respect. But Tevita acted so pious, and his concern seemed exaggerated. I wasn't sure what to think.

You're wondering about the murder. Here's a clue: the victim was a young woman, a Peace Corps volunteer, lovely and sexually bold and doomed. And this is where it starts—I mean, where it starts to be important who *I* was when it all happened. Point one: I was a preacher's daughter. I'd been monitored all my life, and that was one reason I joined the Peace Corps, to get away. I didn't trust piety or what we used to call *holiness* back in Ohio. Point two: I couldn't read Tevita. Was he secretly entertained and conning me into believing something else, even into being a little afraid of him? I was confused about Tevita, but I was also confused about myself. I wanted to be a good girl, but not by my father's definition. I suppose I wanted to be a good bad girl, like Mae West, but even after being away from Ohio for several years, I was far from solving any of these puzzles.

Tevita probably knew about Mac and me, since he seemed to know everything. He also probably knew that Mac wasn't the first guy I'd gone to bed with in Tonga. But Mac was the first one I courted the Tongan way. I wanted to try it. According to Liz and Wade, that meant feigning disinterest publicly and never, ever making a date in front of others. It was about discretion, they said. Appearances.

I tried so hard to get away from Ohio back then that it makes me tired to remember. Once I escaped from the parsonage, I slid easily into hippie life. Eagerly gave up my virginity in a stuffy attic bedroom in off-campus housing at Kent State. Slept with twenty-seven guys. Kept a list on a legal-sized envelope I took with me everywhere. June 8, 1971, the day after I graduated from college, I spent my commencement gift money to take the bus to Chicago, where I met up with Number Twenty-eight. Together, we hitchhiked to California. We had a few adventures, and then I ditched him and moved to the next guy, and then the

next. Hitchhiking in South Laguna, I took a ride from a lecherous geezer, who offered me a job at his newspaper. Karma, I probably sighed, and told him I had a journalism degree. I had enough money left to buy a dented '65 Corvair, red with a black convertible top, and tooled around my news beat in Southern California's beach locales: Corona del Mar, Balboa, Emerald Bay—charmed names, charmed places. During my off hours, I pranced proudly topless at faux-Buddhist retreats and burned my bras at least once (and wished I hadn't the next day, surveying my always inadequate underwear drawer). I believed, I thought, in "free love." Whatever that meant.

Liz and Wade, the sweet and serious couple—a former priest and nun—acted as if sex didn't exist, which was ironic since I figured they left their orders because of it. But for me and most of the other volunteers, coming to Tonga was about the sexiest thing we'd ever done. You could always feel the heat. We found one another in dark corners and at the end of the table at the Coconut Club, and we talked passionately about everything that was going on. Usually somebody'd be feeling somebody else's thigh through it all. We were like cousins, understanding one another's overheated libidos perfectly, as if we'd played "doctor" in our parents' rumpus rooms for years. Yet we found ourselves caught in a web of rules.

Mac had been in the Kingdom for three years. As gregarious as he was, that was enough time to get to know almost everybody. He spoke the language fluently, and, in fact, had lived here on Tevita's property before me. Over beers at the Coconut Club, gently squeezing my thigh, he offered notions of Tongan discretion. It was a catacomb of rituals that anybody could learn, like a dance or a church service. After all, he promised, it wasn't that you couldn't do anything. You just had to make it look like you weren't. That was the difference between good girls and prostitutes, "*fokisis*," as the Tongans put it. I considered his advice. I didn't want to get labeled a *fokisi* when I had work to do, but I couldn't imagine being celibate for two years, either. So I bought him another Steinlager and decided that when the time was right, I'd invite him over. But he didn't wait for an invitation. Last night he had invited himself.

Before Tevita barged in, Mac had sighed loudly and said, "I've lived here three years, and I've found out one thing for sure: I like to fuck." He'd arrived a virgin, and in the States, he said, he felt nerdy and unsure. Here, the Tongans took him under their wing. He said he felt confident now.

"And come to think of it, I have Uncle Sam to thank," he concluded. But now Mac was ready to go home, back to Cedar Rapids to study hydrology. I admired how he'd gotten the Tongans to like him. I liked his flagrantly sloppy, baggy shorts and bony Midwestern legs. I liked his mass of hay-colored hair, pulled

back most of the time in a ponytail. I liked his thick glasses and his bawdy wit. I also liked the fact that he was about to go home.

Just then, two brown fingers reached under the hurricane window and began to pull it up.

"Who's that?" I muttered in Tongan.

It was one of Tevita's kids, the six-year-old. I still wasn't sure which was which by name—there were eight to keep track of. Propped against the little girl's hip was another, baby Lupe—I remembered that one. The older girl peered under the window at me but spoke only to the baby. They both craned to get a peek. I tried my fiercest dirty look. The kid was unimpressed. The baby sucked her fingers and stared some more.

"See?" the kid said to the baby. "That's the American. Look at her skin, how funny and white. Daddy gets money for giving her this hut. See? See the American? She's still in bed."

I suddenly realized that in the night's heat I'd thrown off my green *tupenu*, and Tevita's kids were seeing me buck naked, just as I'd been when Mac clambered out the window. I jerked the *tupenu* back around me, but it was too late.

"For chrissake," I spat in English. "Didn't you little bastards ever hear of the word *privacy*?" As a matter of fact, most of the Tongans hadn't. Privacy, I grudgingly remembered from some tiresome lecture, was antisocial in Tonga.

I glared at the older girl and growled in Tongan, "Get lost." Then I made a big show of slamming the window down, careful not to catch her fingers. She shrieked with mock outrage and scurried away, the wide-eyed baby still bouncing on her hip.

"The American's naked! The American's naked!" the kid screamed like a town crier, up and down the coral road.

Actually, Tevita's daughter hadn't used the word "American." She said *palangi*. *Palangi* this, *palangi* that. It was the word for white person. Supposedly, according to our language teacher, Pulu, it came from the word for stick or mast. When the Dutch navigators Schouten and Lemaire (see, I *was* paying attention) came in 1616, and then Tasman in 1643, and later the urgent rush of explorers in the eighteenth century, Wallis and Cook and the infamous Bligh, the Tongans first saw their masts, poking up forebodingly on the horizon. The appearance of those tall sticks came to embody a dazzlingly confusing mix of history on both sides: hospitality, betrayal, curiosity, fear, repulsion, dread, greed, conspiracy, hostility, resignation, envy, gratitude, resentment, hope. Now the word held all the meanings together and was applied to almost every Caucasian. It was dawn-

ing on me that I would never *not* be a *palangi* here. Whatever else I was, the word came first, the thing that defined me above all else. I was an outsider.

Finally, I swung my legs onto the damp, woven floor mat and sat up, my head in my hands. Then I stood up, the blood rushing away from my head, and stumbled uncertainly toward the table, looking for an aspirin from my Peace Corps first-aid kit. I was going to need it.

CHAPTER 2

Ngali pe tevolo mo e po'ulí. ***The devil fits in with the night.***

I finally opened my door and propped up my windows, declaring that visiting hours had begun. Tevita's wife, Filipa, looked up and smiled from the back porch where she did most of the cooking for her rambling, ravenous brood. Unlike many of her countrywomen, Filipa had not ballooned in middle age. She was delicate, the only evidence of her eight pregnancies a slight belly. Soft black hair curled around her face, and she had a perfect Polynesian complexion: honey-colored, not too dark, and not too white. When she smiled, she showed dimples that made her elfin and delightful. Her sparkling almond eyes sometimes watered and squinted. I thought maybe she needed glasses.

She was stirring the contents of an enormous aluminum kettle. I figured it was probably giant blocks of taro.

"*Ha'u*, Salote," Filipa called, "Come on over and share my lunch!"

My Tongan was coming along. I was impatient to speak openly and fluently with Filipa, but in the meantime, she didn't seem to care. She knew enough English to get the main points, and she smiled at everything I tried to say in Tongan. I don't know how I sounded to her. In Tongan I was inarticulate, and I didn't recognize myself that way. In English, I trusted that I could sound facile and slick; my SAT score in language arts had been a healthy 750. I loved that number.

But at the beginning, Filipa and I had to stick to basics, language without subtlety. Our friendship was elemental and comforting, like grade school—primary colors, the ABCs, and the present tense.

"*Malo e lelei*," I said, settling on an upturned stump under the overhang. "Thanks for being well." Filipa handed me a platter of taro. "*Malo*," I said again, picking up a piece with my fingers and taking a bite. It was an acquired taste,

heavier and gummier than a potato and richer, like sherry to chardonnay. I'd learned I could make a delicious meal of boiled taro root and *lu*, the dark green leaves of the taro plant cooked in coconut milk.

The baby, Lupe, "little pigeon," freed from her sister's earlier grip, tottered from around the corner and climbed into my lap, begging a snack. She grinned at me and whispered "*pahlangi*." That word again.

"Hi, sweetie," I said in English. Nuzzling her baby neck, I forgave the embarrassing wake-up call. "Yeah, American. White person. Crazy about you, even though you woke me up in my birthday suit." Lupe looked at me quizzically, nodding to the unfamiliar syllables as if they were a nursery rhyme, and grinned. She held up her pudgy little fingers and said, shyly, "*taha, ua, tolu*," teaching me to count to three. "*Taha, ua, tolu*," I complied.

Lupe and her brother Mosesi were the darkest of Filipa's children, as dark as Ghirardelli chocolate, like their father. The rest were a rainbow of honey brown, taupe, and cappuccino. That's why I remembered those two names: their siblings made fun of them, gaily and mercilessly, using a word that had arrived in Tonga, we were told in training, with the American soldiers during World War II: nigger. *Nika*, as they shouted it. No more lovely than at home.

It was clear that not all Americans honored their host country or left behind useful remains. One guy from Louisiana, a former volunteer, was in a Tongan jail right then for growing pot. The soil and weather were perfect for it. And though Tevita said that Tonga appreciated the Americans who protected Nuku'alofa during the bloodbath in the Solomon Islands, the Yanks loved to party and left behind pale and sometimes oddly blond children. But for me, until the events of *this* bad day unfolded, it was the legacy of *nigger*, that shocking, bitter word, which most sourly summed up the Americans who'd been here before.

Lupe's cheeks bulged with taro. She picked up another chunk and pushed it into my mouth. I chewed extravagantly, saying, "Yummy, yummy, yummy!" and making faces until Lupe burst into giggles, half-chewed taro plopping out of her mouth. I managed to plant one last kiss on the back of her neck before she squirmed down and tottered away.

"She like you," Filipa said in English. "You're the favorite *palangi* of her."

"She's so cute," I said. The fat and sociable Tongan babies, healthy and cared for by a flock of aunties, weakened my resolve not to have kids. It was fun cradling babies in my arms; Tongan moms handed me their kids as if they thought I knew what to do. They clucked and smiled when I snuggled their little darlings and cooed sweet nothings in my made-up mix of English and Tongan baby talk.

Filipa reached for a battered aluminum kettle and poured us both a cup of tea. I watched as she dripped creamy condensed milk into a cup, stirred it, and handed it to me with both hands. The tea was excellent. I swallowed it gratefully, feeling the sugar and caffeine rush relief to my dehydrated cells.

We sat there watching the breeze riffle the banana leaves. Kosi, the family goat and lawn mower, awakened from his perch on a junked minimoke and stretched his neck, ogling us. Then he jumped off the car and gamboled away. The moke was supposed to be a taxi, one of Tevita's money-making schemes. He thought his two oldest boys, Siaosi and Touliki, would keep the family in canned mackerel by running the jalopy around town. But the thing kept breaking down, and the boys didn't like tourists, who treated them not like boys but like museum exhibits. Or mules.

"I heard about trouble last night," Filipa said suddenly. "*Pisikoa* trouble." Peace Corps trouble? I caught my breath. Had I gone over the line so badly? I looked quickly at Filipa, but, inscrutably blowing on her tea, she turned away from me toward the banana patch, where Lupe was chasing the goat. Should I come out and admit that Mac had come and gone through the back window?

I lost my train of thought, remembering Mac's sturdy body, remembering how we stripped off our gin-soaked clothes, trying not to laugh for fear of getting caught, and how we kissed madly before getting down to serious business. The lantern burned down, and the moon sent slivers through the lashed bamboo walls and onto his beautiful chest, catching like glints of broken glass in his eyes.

Or was it better to play dumb like the Tongans, admitting nothing, denying everything? I sighed, apparently loudly, and Filipa turned back toward me, looking at me without a smile.

"What kind of trouble?" I finally said, trying to be casual.

"*Pisikoa* woman," Filipa said intensely. "Too many *mafus*."

Mafu was the word for heart—and for boyfriend.

"No good," Filipa said. "Too many *mafus*."

I felt my face go pale. Maybe some of the kids saw Mac slip away. Maybe someone talked to him on the road, knew he was drunk, and complained to Tevita. "I'm sorry," I began.

Just then, the white Peace Corps Land Rover pulled into the coral driveway. The white Rover usually signaled a cheerful event: a chance to gossip, a delivery from home, a visit from an American. I jumped up to see who was driving. But when Mac leaped out, I felt a quick blush come up, and I hesitated. I looked at Filipa, who betrayed nothing.

"Maki," Filipa called out. "Come here and see your Tongan mommy." Mac strode quickly up the drive and made the proper greetings. He looked sharply at me.

"There's some really bad news," he said. "I came to pick you up. We have to go to the Peace Corps office. We have to go to a meeting."

He looked at Filipa. My brain struggled into gear.

"Whatever it is, Mac, I have a feeling she already knows."

He dropped onto the stump and leaned his head into his hands. "Melanie Porter's dead," he said.

The shock stopping everything.

Then my voice, croaking: "Dead? She's dead?"

I stood up. "What the hell happened?"

"They found her stabbed to death in her house."

"*Oiaue, fakapo*," Filipa interjected, nodding. *Oy-yah-way*, the mournful exclamation. *Fakapo*. Murder.

"Jesus," I said. I paced around the boiling pot, Filipa watching me. "Jesus." I felt my forehead tighten—the hangover attacking. "Who the hell did it?"

"You'll never believe this. They've got Mort Friedman in custody."

"Oh, my god. Mort? But…" I tried to take it in.

Mort was a short, muscled guy from—where? Minnesota? Wisconsin? He looked like a wrestler, broad and burly. I'd met him a few times at training parties, but he hung back and mostly talked to the other guys. I'd always associated the idea of murder with either great brains or great passion. Mort seemed to have neither.

"They say he stabbed her twenty times, and she bled to death."

"Jesus Christ. Why?"

"Say it in Tongan, Maki, speak Tongan," Filipa said urgently.

Mac apologized and quickly translated, then went back to English. But he didn't answer *why*.

"He got her good. Used a fish knife. She lost so much blood so fast, they probably couldn't have saved her, even if…" He paused. "He got her everywhere. Her body was in ribbons."

"You saw her?"

"Yeah."

"*Oiaue*," Filipa said, and keened a long, mournful phrase.

"She's saying an awful thing has happened," Mac said. "You're right, Filipa, you're right."

I lurched over to Mac and put an arm around him, as much to steady myself as to comfort him. Something buzzed at the corners of my eyes—blood, or panic. There wasn't a single ambulance in the entire Kingdom, and the hospital was ominously called the *falemahaki*, the house of disease. Even if Melanie'd had a chance, she might not have made it.

"Damn," I said.

Mac continued in choppy sentences, half-Tongan, half-English. He'd been home a couple of hours when the police knocked at his door. They'd been rousting Peace Corps staff, one by one. Melanie's body was at Vaiola Hospital, and they took him there in a noisy minimoke.

Her body lay on a table, her eyes still open, her face blue and swollen. He reached to close her eyelids, but a policeman stopped him. She had wounds everywhere: her stomach, her chest, her neck, her face, her temples. A strip of skin hung off her skull, where it looked as if the killer had tried to scalp her. Her arms were bruised, scratched, and slashed, probably when she tried to defend herself. The doctors had hooked her up to a saline drip on both arms, hoping to coax life back, but once it was determined she was officially dead, they unhooked the needles and left the tubes dangling at each side. They had cut off her yellow dress—Mac recognized it from the party—and set it aside, covered with blood, on a metal rack.

Mac got a ride from the hospital to her house and arrived just as Evelyn Henry, the Peace Corps director, arrived. She told him to go home, but he said he wanted to see, that he had to see. He realized he was shouting. A couple of Tongan police shifted from foot to foot. He stepped across the threshold, and as his eyes adjusted to the darkness inside, he saw that everything was as the killer had left it. Blood. On the whitewashed walls, on the pandanus floor mats. On her linoleum table and wooden folding chairs. In the sink. Blood in the doorway, bloody handprints on the door frame, which she'd probably grabbed as she tried to crawl for help.

"Jesus Christ," I said again. Filipa asked a few quick questions and added her own thoughts, too fast for me to understand. Then nobody said anything, and Filipa bowed her head.

"That's what I heard about," she finally said, in English so I would understand. "You better go now. You better go."

Mac jumped in on the driver's side, and I climbed in on the other, dazed and self-conscious, as Filipa stood up and watched. Chickens scattered behind us, clucking wildly. The coral gravel crunched.

I reached across the vinyl seat for Mac's thigh, trying to wrestle down a rising vertigo.

"I can't believe it," I said. "How could this happen?"

"He stalked her after the party," Mac said, staring straight ahead. The Rover bumped and swerved. "Supposedly he went crazy because she didn't want to go to bed with him. They say Mort tried to get her to go back to his place after the party, but she went with Gyorgy instead."

"But murder her? He and Gyorgy were good friends, I thought. How could he murder her? How could he do that?"

"She and Gyorgy stopped by the Coconut Club, but it was closed," Mac said. "I guess Mort followed her back to Gyorgy's place. Gyorgy said they thought they heard something in the bushes, but didn't think much of it. Then they say Mort followed the two of them back to her place when Gyorgy drove her home. Mort must have waited till Gyorgy left, and then he must have gone inside with his knife and attacked her."

"Jesus, Mac. Where's Mort now?"

"In a cell at the police station," Mac said. "When they picked him up, he hadn't bothered cleaning himself off, and he had blood all over him. He'd used the knife to cut open a watermelon, and he was sitting there eating it, with blood all over it, over himself." Mac spat out a sound, half cough, half sob. "He was eating watermelon with her blood on it."

"I didn't really know the guy," I said bleakly.

"People thought Mort was crazy," Mac replied. "But they thought he was harmless."

I felt speechless and cold. Last night, the new single women volunteers (there were only three of us) had sat at a table together, sipping from sweating cans of beer, and watched Melanie Porter dance. That yellow dress was ankle-length, chiffon, cut low at the bosom. We checked her out like jealous old ladies, tut-tutting under our breath.

"Where'd she get a damn dress like that?" I whispered to the other two, Bridget and Diane. "I thought we were supposed to dress modestly down here."

"I know," Bridget whispered back. "And how does she get away with wearing yellow? I look fucking dead in yellow. She looks like some kind of damn angel."

The Peace Corps men noticed, too. Just starting her second year in the Peace Corps, Melanie had been a kindergarten teacher from North Dakota, and the nectar she gave off, her All-American sexiness and grace, attracted men like ants. She'd been a cheerleader, a homecoming queen, and an athlete, and she was buoyantly healthy. But she also had sophistication that went far beyond that of

the average cheerleader. Her father, people pointed out, owned a mining company, and he'd moved to Minot from New York. Melanie came from old money. Her parents sent her to Europe, and she'd made the rounds of finishing schools and graduated from one of the Seven Sisters—I couldn't remember which. She just had something. She could smoke a cigarette like Marlena Dietrich and dance like Ginger if she had to.

Last night Melanie was dancing with everybody, letting one guy after another cut in. It was hard to tell whom, if anyone, she liked best.

None of the three of us young crones-by-comparison had been popular in high school. Bridget had been president of the National Honor Society. Diane, an upright but overweight salutatorian, dated boys from Demolay. She went to the prom with the pimply-faced president of the Math Club, and though she hated herself for refusing, she couldn't bring herself to kiss him. Bridget and Diane had both endured braces; at least now they had fine teeth. Worst for Bridget, though, she had curvature of the spine and wore a body cast from ages twelve to seventeen. In those cruel years, she could never make matching sweater sets fit over her horror-movie body. Now her neck was a bit too long, and her chin seemed squashed upwards. She had a jumping gait, almost a canter, as if her body couldn't believe it was free of its restraints. I'd been free of braces (my sister got those, my parents explained, and I got college) and free of body casts, but I was consigned by my sheltering, suspicious parents to Saturday nights without dates and a lonely absorption in *Middlemarch* and *Jane Eyre*. For all of us, the homecoming queen was the enemy, our nemesis, the target of our ridicule and the wellspring of our adolescent envy. Sitting there watching Melanie, we squirmed in shame as old resentments flared up.

"The trouble is, she's *nice*," Bridget said as Gyorgy, a Canadian volunteer, swooped Melanie up for another dance. "I hate it when beautiful women are nice."

For a moment the rest of the dancers stopped to watch, but then, as if not to call too much attention to herself, Melanie glided away into the crowd.

I have to confess that, in my diary, I fussily categorized the Peace Corps volunteers into types. We were such a mix, such a motley group, that I wanted to see whether I could fit us all into any system I could invent or understand. I settled on three groups: the altruists, the adventure seekers, and the lost. The altruists were missionaries, idealistic and eager to help. They were leftovers of the Kennedy kids, I decided, pioneers who couldn't wait to take their youthful American energy to the world. But by the late '70s, I noted like a professor in my mildewy book for the scholarly paper I might write someday, the altruists' ranks had

thinned. After Vietnam and Watergate, a more practical bunch emerged—the adventure seekers, who claimed little philosophical reason for volunteering, but who wanted to take advantage of what seemed like the playfulness and good heart of the government's most touchy-feely program. These volunteers, too, often arrived with personal gusto, tried everything, and then had trouble focusing on their work.

The lost were the people who didn't want to join the Army and couldn't seem to find a niche at home. Some of the lost found themselves steadied by the demands of new experience, and others sank deeper into trouble, confused and paralyzed by the cultural and physical changes.

I counted myself among the adventure seekers, of course, because it sounded best. I certainly didn't want to be an altruistic missionary, although my father liked to tell people that's what I was. And nobody wanted to be lost.

Bridget and Diane were adventure seekers, to be sure. Melanie was a mellifluous blend of altruism and adventure, like the girl on the cover of *Seventeen*. I didn't know where to put Mort. But I did know, even after only three months, that the volunteers that we heard had cracked—usually dropping out and going home early—were the altruists, outraged by their lack of control, or the lost, sent home for their own good, usually to some benevolent dry-out clinic.

I recalled that Mort was finishing his second year. I couldn't remember whether he'd signed up for a third. The re-uppers were a special class, the Brahmins of Peace Corps, and they intimidated me. Some had jumped the cultural fence and didn't want to hang out with other Americans. It was a badge of honor to speak enough Tongan to hold your own, drink with Tongans, tell dirty jokes. A lot of us tried not to be American for a while. We wanted to be something we'd never been. Some wanted to stay to avoid going home, to avoid fitting in back there, like our boring, unhappy parents. Some were surprised by their luck in Tonga; like Mac, they had been accepted. I didn't get that feeling about Mort, though. He was nobody, another tanned *palangi* in a flowered shirt who drank too much. There were so many single guys that I had trouble keeping them apart.

"He was into black magic—did you know?" Mac said. "Some of the old women knew it. He was always asking them about the old religion. They just thought he was another crazy *palangi*. Now it turns out…"

"What about Gyorgy? Where's he?"

"The British consulate. They said he tried to break into the police station to get at Mort, but when they calmed him down, he said he had to get off the island. They gave him something, a tranquilizer, I guess."

Gyorgy was Mort's opposite: a tall, handsome guy who, despite his six-foot-three height, seemed more interested in finding vermouth for his martinis than threatening anyone. He taught English and philosophy at the high school where, rumor had it, the Tongan kids held him in considerable awe. He had a reputation for being cultivated—the exact word somebody in my group used when we first met him at the Coconut Club. We caught him making some point about Puccini and berating Viliami, the Coconut Club's beloved bartender, for letting the gin run out. Gyorgy was negotiating with his bosses back in Ottawa for a third service year. Greeting the new trainees, he'd been congenial, but more concerned with the liquor shortage than with our newcomers' angst.

Gyorgy, too, had a story, which Mac told me one night at the Coconut Club while Gyorgy stretched himself elegantly over the snooker table. After his father was killed in the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, his mother wheeled Gyorgy across the mountains in winter in a baby carriage. Inside his diaper were three gold coins. Beneath him, wrapped in a ragged baby blanket, was a small, polished icon that had been in Gyorgy's family for three hundred years. He and his mother traveled by night and ate snow. His mother gave one of the gold coins to each family who sheltered them. Eventually they found their way to Canada. In Ottawa, his mother sold the icon for twenty thousand dollars, the grubstake for their new life. Since then, people said in the Coconut Club, no other woman could equal her saintliness. Gyorgy remembered none of the escape from Hungary, but he spoke with a faint lilting accent and seemed happy to be alive. Yet he constantly kept Melanie at his side; her glamour suited him. The other men watched and envied, coveting his panache. Gyorgy and Melanie looked great together, a couple out of *The Great Gatsby*. He intimidated me.

"Poor Gyorgy," I said.

"He'll be messed up over this," Mac said. "It'll tear him up. He's just the kind of guy who'll feel responsible." We considered this in silence.

"So, where's…the body?" I asked.

"I don't know. They took it somewhere. I don't know how these things work down here. Evelyn's taking care of that."

We pulled into the Peace Corps parking lot, a grubby, gravelly expanse already nearly filled with the standard-issue black bikes and a couple of ratty vans and taxis. The concrete block building had only one graceful feature: a second-story balcony that looked out over a reef lagoon lined with stilted mangroves. I'd spent several blissful evenings on that balcony at Peace Corps parties, sipping New Zealand beer and congratulating myself for getting out of Ohio. Sometimes an

outrigger canoe would course through the water; sometimes I could see uncountable stars.

On the first floor, the Peace Corps doctor dispensed quick remedies for diarrhea, coral cuts, flu, various bug bites, and boils, which everybody, to their horror, seemed to get. He also ordered the whole bunch of us in for shots, including the aforementioned gamma globulin, which left a knot the size of a golf ball in the butt but protected everybody from hepatitis. Some Tongans regarded the doctor as superfluous, a luxury for the Peace Corps and an insult to the Tongan health care system. He had not been called in last night until it was too late. From what Mac said, though, no one could have saved Melanie's life, not even the Peace Corps doctor.

At the top of the rickety stairs was a large meeting room where the Peace Corps put on parties, showed Marx Brothers movies on a small, tattered screen, and held meetings. On one side were four offices—for the country director, Evelyn Henry, and her two assistants, and the training office where various terminating volunteers, like Mac, worked on contract for extra cash before going home.

Volunteers from all over the island of Tongatapu were gathering. Some, stationed outside Nuku'alofa, had come in by bus or had ridden their bikes. Some, like me, had been informed and picked up by the two Peace Corps Land Rovers, which had been crisscrossing town all morning. It was complicated to get the word out to all the forty volunteers on the island because no one had phones, but by noon, the story had been broadcast on Station A3Z and anyone who hadn't heard knew then. A3Z was turned on everywhere, all the time.

My forehead ached. Oh, this was a nasty hangover.

"I don't want to go up there yet," I said to Mac, watching people slowly navigate the stairs. "Go on. I'll be there in a minute." I sat in the Rover as Mac joined a couple of other volunteers, everybody hugging and going up in two's and three's. Just then, I didn't want to be part of the group. I didn't want to be a Peace Corps volunteer. I wanted to be Charlotte Thornton, independent operator, former Buckeye, good in bed, occasional wit. I didn't want to have to talk about what had happened.

In Kent State dorm rooms in the '60s, it was a free for all and a party. I was proud to have given up my virginity at 1009 Vine, a funny, rhyming Dionysian house, no grownups in sight. Later, in California, I used to crawl into bed with any guy I liked, and it was a private matter between the two of us. In the series of walk-up apartments of my five years on my own, no one cared what I did with men. There was no such thing as a neighborhood, only condo associations that had meetings nobody ever went to. Sex didn't have ramifications. It was a right,

like free speech. We had birth control, penicillin, and a seemingly endless supply of willing partners, one always waiting.

Damn. Tonga was going to be different. In a weird way, the country already seemed more like Ohio. Had I been hijacked? Was it fate? For the first time, Tonga felt threatening, its flowery nectars toxic, too sweet in the nose. Perhaps I would come to suspect the hot, black nights that made me want sex whether it was a good idea or not. What was I trading for my supposed escape?

I was proud of my sexual history. It made me feel alive. I thought, no matter what else happened, my cherished memories were proof that I was in the game, that I *had* escaped. I was living my own life, and all those men were my beloved evidence. With my envelope list as a crutch, I could name them all. I could describe them all—a point of honor to me then. I made "free love" with old men and young men, tall and small. I went to bed with a beautiful black man who drove me home in his Jaguar. I slept with a Vietnam vet who had delicately removed his artificial leg. I think it was the left. I slept with a six-foot-eight hippie with two feet of hair; high on mescaline, we did it under a bridge at the Colorado River.

Partial to rivers, I smoked dope in a tiny MG on the Mississippi with a Harvard boy whose father was in politics. That time I got pregnant. I wasn't even on the pill and should have known better. I had to fly to New York for an abortion; it was 1970, pre-Roe. The guy or his ambitious father paid for everything. Also on my list were a poet, a preacher, an ex-con, a wheeler-dealer, and a piano bar roué. Also an architect, a filmmaker, a car dealer. A boss or two. Libertarian, Unitarian, Catholic, Quaker, Jewish, and Ba'hai. Even a Republican: I was ecumenical and non-partisan. The times were on my side. After a few years on The Pill I decided to try an IUD, because I didn't want chemicals in my body. I came to Tonga with a Copper-7 installed, lucky seven in my womb, so simple, good for three years. I could feel the little knot at the end of the thread of it if I ever wanted to check on my protection. Sometimes I couldn't believe the choices I had. It was easy.

I know that sounds crazy nowadays, with rape drugs dropped in drinks and serial killers and AIDS. But back then the worst we had to fear was herpes. Penicillin took care of all the rest. It seems quaint now and unbelievable, like a dream that corresponded with my youth—a brief, amazing time when sex couldn't kill you. I thought it would always be like that. I took it for granted.

It was easy and exhilarating, but had nothing to do with sexual pleasure. I never came, something I noticed but didn't particularly care about back then. It wasn't my goal or my concern. What mattered was experience, stories, conquests.

What mattered was anything not Ohio, not my father or my mother, not the innocence I doggedly aimed to shed. Sexual pleasure wasn't easy for me to start with. At a women's lib workshop in Laguna Beach one time, a beautiful lesbian nurse named Rainbow Skye examined me and told me I had a "high clit" and kindly explained I'd need to ask my lovers for special attention. I remember smiling and feeling relieved: so *that's* why. In private moments in my various apartments, I took care of myself from time to time, but with men, I had no patience. I didn't want to ask for anything. I just wanted another story.

I was at Kent State trying to be a hippie in May, 1970. It was Saturday night, party on the hill outside Taylor Hall, everybody smoking pot and cheering as the ROTC building went up in flames after the U.S. invaded Cambodia. Who lit that damn thing was never clear, but it was just a rickety old wooden Quonset hut, anyway. Who'd have known that fire would lead to all those tanks and soldiers right on campus, all that shooting, all that blood on Monday? I was in class when it happened, but the teacher, blanching at the sound of sirens, let us out of class early. When I got to Taylor Hall, the bodies were gone, but blood remained, a shocking amount of it, blood spattered and pooled and tracked through. People moved in slow motion, paralyzed with horror and confusion.

Like everybody, I'd been seeing bloodshed in Vietnam every day on the news, but Kent State slammed me. None of us could have believed those guns were loaded; how could the National Guard, young guys our own age, keep order at a peace demonstration with loaded guns? How could they shoot *us*, their neighbors, their peers?

That day my boyfriend of the week and I took off for Niagara Falls, the most nonpolitical spot we could think of. We put on black raincoats and rode the Maid of the Mist, bought trinkets at the gift store, drank sloe gin, and fucked wildly in a cheap motel. We went to see "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" and couldn't take it; we cried for two hours. Kent State, too, was supposedly another reason why I was in Tonga—to get away. But like the rest of Ohio, it followed me here. I brought it with me.

Now Tonga was calling out bedeviling variations on my confusions. Back home I could indulge my grief privately, work things out on my own. Here, somebody was always watching. If it wasn't Tevita worrying about me, it was the Peace Corps staff making judgments. Or the other volunteers, in varying stages of loneliness, horniness, or envy, inevitably starving for gossip. Emotional life in Tonga, along with everything else, was community property.

And now everybody would want to analyze everything. What made Mort crazy? Why Melanie? Did she lead him on? Weren't all the volunteers supposed

to be friends about sex? Should Melanie have been dressed like that at the party—bold cleavage, long legs tantalizing through chiffon? Wasn't she playing with the guys, flaunting her wholesome good looks? And what about Gyorgy? Was she playing two guys off against each other? Why did Gyorgy let her go home? Or why, for that matter, did he take her to his place in the first place, late at night, with the neighbors and Mort probably watching?

And what did this mean for me? I was still alive, young, and sexually bold, like Melanie. And now, as I'd been after Kent State, I was half-terrified, full of dread, and depressed.

Spilling out of Mac's backpack on the front seat was a half pack of Golds and a beat-up book of matches. I pulled one out and lit it. Now the moralists would come out of the woodwork. They would say, "We told you so." They would say, "See what comes of a woman like that?"

The avalanche of questions and my hangover depressed me more. I couldn't think straight. And I couldn't get it out of my mind that when Mac and I were making love last night, half crocked on gin and lime juice, making light of everything including our own pliable bodies, Melanie Porter was getting killed, apparently for refusing to do the same thing. How could that happen?

I finished the cigarette and stubbed it out.