Absence of Malice

Gert van Santen

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for raymonde

fey (doomed)
Middle English

Once a week—sometimes only once or twice a month,
if he was lucky—the same dreadful events would unfold in his sleep.
Forty years later they still had the power to wake him in a blind panic.
Eugene Sledge

Is it safe, or sane, to go into the future by the light of these same
established canons… that so have been tried and found wanting?
Thorstein Veblen

'When someone is seeking,' said Siddhartha, 'it happens quite easily
that he only sees the thing that he is seeking… because he has a goal… is
obsessed with his goal. Seeking means: to have a goal; but finding means:
to be free, to be receptive, to have no goal.'
Hermann Hesse

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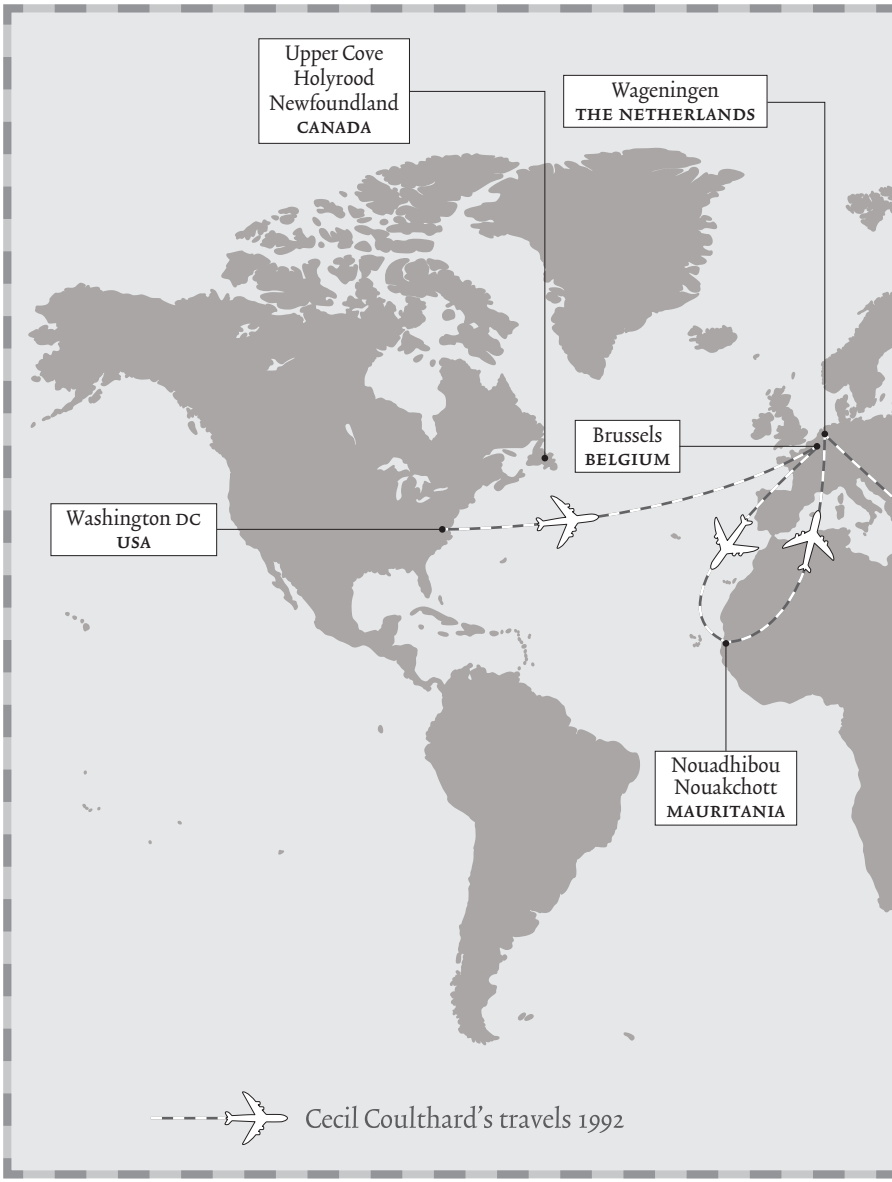
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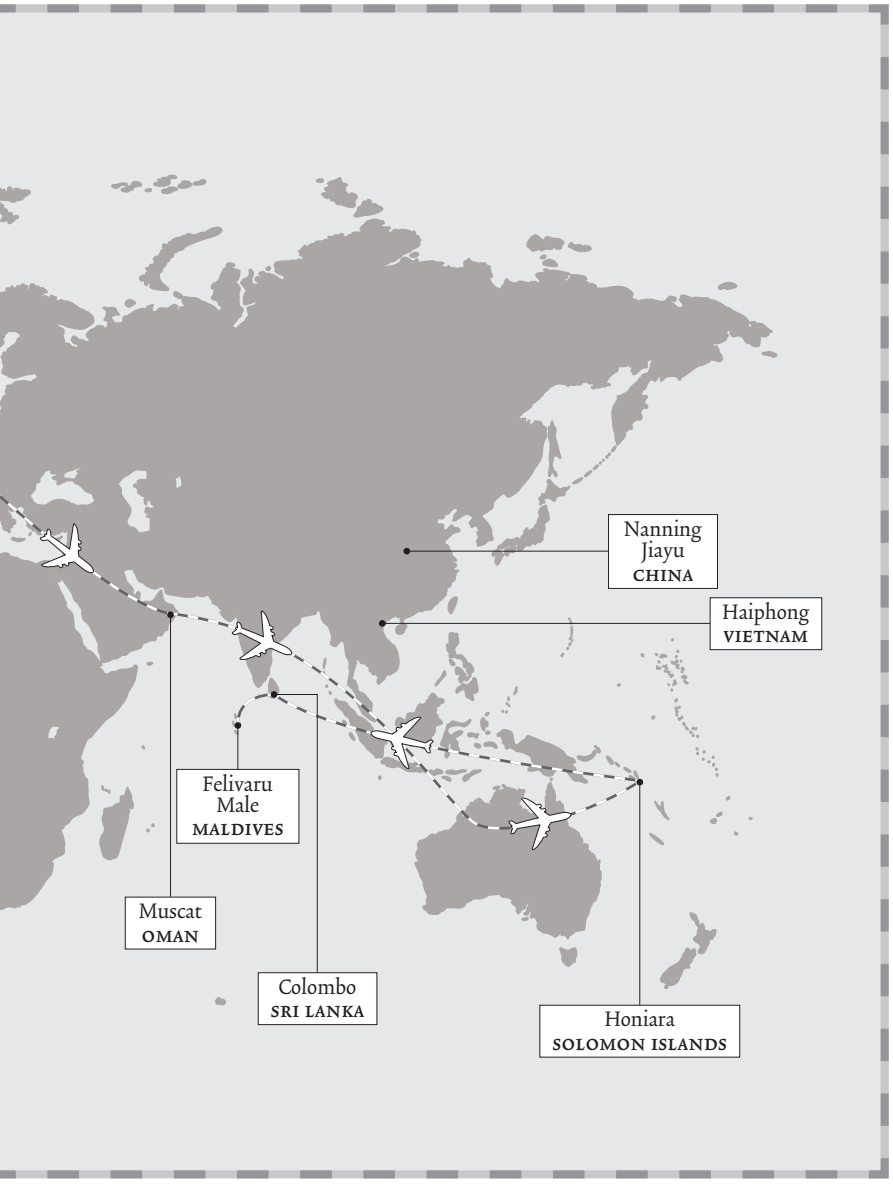
Cecil Coulthard's travels 1992


Nanning
Jiayu
CHINA
Haiphong
VIETNAM
Felivaru
Male
MALDIVES
Muscat
OMAN
Colombo
SRI LANKA
Honiara
SOLOMON ISLANDS

Main Characters

Cecil Coulthard, born in Newfoundland
- his father and mother
Claudine Maufort, born in Haiphong
- her parents and grandparents
- her father's visitor
Feng Lai and Wang Lai, born in Wuhan
- their parents and uncle
Wei-Li, girl in Jiayu
Mr. and Mrs. Shi-liang, shop managers, Newfoundland
Mr. Howard, Cecil's high school principal
Balmer, director, International Trade Institute (ITI), Washington DC
Lily Bellamy, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Washington DC
Liliane de Bock, director, United Resources International (URI), Brussels
Dr. Ahmed Sidi Aly, director of fisheries research, Nouakchott
Wong Oh
Mr. Mahmoud, trader, Nouakchott
Mr. Hameed, director, Coastal Fisheries Organization, Aden
Michael, URI representative, Honiara
Dr. Muller, director, Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA), Honiara
Josy, biologist, FFA
Leslie, economist, FFA
Hannah, librarian, ITI
Hal, Billy and Joe, former US Marines, Honiara
Henri, room boy, Aurora Sports Club, Colombo
Katharina Mulder (Kate), biologist, Fisheries Research Institute, Amsterdam
Truus, cafe owner, Amsterdam
Thillairajah, lawyer (ret.), Colombo
Mr. Jansz, Club member, Colombo
Dr. Gunawardena, surgeon (ret.), Colombo
Hassan Manik, director, Fisheries Ministry, Male
Leif Johansson, biologist, Fisheries Research Institute, Male
Adnan Ali, director, Maldivian Trade Organization (MTO), Male
Mr. Didi, board secretary, MTO, Male
Ibrahim Shakeeb, project director, MTO, Male
Bandu and Malik, directors, MTO, Felivaru
Mrs. Jameel, director MTO, Kaashidhoo

Prelude

1
Upper Cove, December 1948

Two whalers, rusty, battered and proudly showing the gleaming tool of their bloody trade, for reasons that never became fully known, anchored in Upper Cove, close to the entrance of Conception Bay. A force 10 storm is nothing to get excited about in Newfoundland; it's just something that happens, rather frequently. A pod of fishing boats, their white masts reaching skywards above their dirty wheelhouses like the heads of old seagulls between stretched wings, were already sheltering, tightly moored at the small stone-piled wharf at the end of Lower Cove, leaving no place for others. It wasn't unusual for whalers to seek shelter in the Bay, although they commonly favored St. John's harbor.

It was already getting dark when the man, holding the hand of the little boy, emerged from the pine trees, his body leaning into the wildly gusting wind. As their hulls heaved up and down, the white lights of the whalers were intermittently visible from the high ground, waves sending bowed screens of foam streaking across their guns. When the man noticed the blinking lights, he took the boy on his neck, sharing the advantage of his height. On he marched towards the water, glancing towards the ships on his left, careful where he placed his feet among the hummocks of grass. He followed the path out onto the promontory and set the boy down. Here, high above the cove entrance they stood, staring down into the darkness, where storm-whipped foam coated heavy ocean seas driven landwards.

'I can't believe it,' he shouted, 'Look at those whalers! Can you see the guns? Why the hell did they anchor here. Are they nuts?'

He had recently started an insurance business, and kept asking, more to himself than to the boy, why the crews didn't start the engines and lift anchor.

The boy wanted to stay, mesmerized by the violence of the waves battering the hulls, watching what his father later called 'a pre-meditated multiple shipwreck'. His father shouted at the ships; his futile words drowned before they even reached the water. 'Come,' he said.

And he took the boy back onto his shoulders and retraced his steps. In the forest the boy held one hand in front of his face, fending off the sting of twigs. At home his father called the Coast Guard; they already knew, would arrive too late. Both ships wrecked on the rocks not that far from the boy's house. Everybody was saved, which was considered a small miracle by the regulars at the local bar, claiming whaler crews are always lucky.

As the boy grew older, he would pretend he had been the first to notice the lights moving closer together, and his father would only smile and keep silent. After his graduation he never mentioned the shipwreck again, tried to avoid driving along the road where the rusted wrecks, now without their guns, rested on shallow rocks. But by then the scene had already lodged in his memory; a name written in white, now tinged brown, clearly visible on one largely submerged hull. He couldn't face those letters, so stubbornly refusing to submit to the rust. Years later, when he drove the road for the last time having just sold his parents' house, those letters, the ultimate evidence of complexity, had finally disappeared.

2

Haiphong, 1951-1958

Extracts from the diary of Claudine Maufort

1951

This is my diary. Grandma Miu gave it to me.

Mommy and I went to Grandma Miu in a tricycle. Grandma lives in a big white house, with Grandpa Mo. Viet and Ho live there too, they help Grandma. Grandpa has an office in a building near big ships. He has no store like daddy and Grandpa Gone.

Grandma Miu is leaving. Going back to France. She is afraid of shooting. Grandpa Mo is also afraid. Of bombs of Americans and of Giap. Mommy will not go. She wants to stay with daddy. Grandpa and mommy talk a lot. Grandpa was angry.

1952

Grandma Miu and Grandpa Mo left on a big ship. Many people waved. Mommy cried. Daddy did not come to wave.

Daddy and I went to my other grandma. Ma Tiau. She lives above a large store. Grandpa Gone was not there. I never see him. We only see Ma Tiau. She is nice. She gives me tea and sweets from a box with my name on it.

1953

Jean, Justine and Philippe are leaving. We have only 10 children left in our class. We have a new teacher, Mme Renard. She has gray hair. She called me mite. I do not like her. She is married to a general. He fights with Mao Khe.

Mom wants me to go to a different school with no French children after the summer vacation. I do not want to lose my school friends, but I do not like Mme Renard. She is mean. Only to me.

I have a special teacher at home. He helps me speak Vietnamese. His name is Bao, like the emperor, he jokes, but it is not his real name. He says words. I repeat them, many times. I am good, he said.

1954

Dad reads newspapers, Chinese, I cannot read the letters, too many. He tells me what happens in China. People fight for a better life.

Many soldiers and trucks come through our street. Dad listens all the time to radio bulletins. Mom and Dad left last night for a Party meeting, dressed in black. They never left together before, dressed like that. I had to keep the door locked and stay in bed. They came home late. I was happy they came back.

Soldiers are fighting at Phu, like in China. The radio calls it 'hell'. Dad says the French made a mistake. Giap was clever. I do not know how he knew that. It was not on the radio. Maybe he read it in his newspapers. He often goes to his meetings. Mom joins him sometimes, always dressed in black.

We have a small space under the store, with a trapdoor. Mom has put a bamboo mat on the floor and bottles of water and rice crackers in a box. I have to go there whenever they start fighting in the streets. The radio has no more bulletins. Dad explained Chairman Ho is talking with the French. French soldiers are marching in our street. They are leaving on large ships. Mom and Dad watched. The school is closed. Mme Renard left too. Good.

What a day. July 21st, the North is free. We went to May To Park. Viet Minh soldiers held a parade. Many people watched and everybody looked happy. Trucks full of soldiers pulled large guns. I listened to very long speeches. I did not mind. Dad and Mom celebrated, we had dinner in Dad's favorite restaurant. The fireworks were amazing, near the harbor. We had a place close to Grandpa Mo's old office. I am so happy the shooting will be over.

My first day in the new school. Dad brought me. I can still walk from home but on different streets. A girl in my class is French, her name is Laura. We have black uniforms, girls and boys the same. We have to stand in front of the school in the morning and sing for the flag. I do not know all the words yet.

1955

A soldier came to our class. He talked about Chairman Ho and Geneva. I did not understand everything. Dad explained last night. The country has been split in two halves. We live in the North, without Japanese or French soldiers. The French people can stay in the South. We are not going to the South. Dad wants to stay here. Mom has cut her straight black hair, she almost looks Vietnamese. Dad is happy because the Chinese helped Vietnam win the war. He is Chinese; the grandparents of his parents came from China before he was born. I am the only half-French, half-Chinese person living in Vietnam.

We visited Mme Duval. She has not left. She lives in a large house, just like Grandpa Mo. I could wear my new dress, Mom suddenly looked French in her red dress. We had tea and Mom talked. Mme Duval has no children. The Japanese killed her husband before I was born. She does not want to leave; she was born in Haiphong, just like me. She lives alone in the big house. The cook from a restaurant prepares her dinner. She eats alone. I feel sad for her.

1956

Since the French soldiers left, Dad has been attending even more Party meetings. Sometimes Mom joins him. Something has changed. Mom and Dad go together during the day, when I am at school. I do not understand and Dad does not want to talk about it. He writes during the day when there are no customers in the store. He never did that before. Mom is grumpy when he has to go again. 'Will this never end?' she asked him today. 'What else can I do?' he replied. Mom says it is complicated; Dad did not join the Cochin Chinese faction. Grandpa Gone did, the grandpa I have never seen. Because Dad is married to Mom, and my other grandpa and grandma are

French, 'Dad has to defend himself'. What does he have to defend? What can Mom do? This has been going on for weeks, no months. It is no fun, at home and even in school. Some kids do not talk to me anymore. Chinese kids, Vietnamese kids. Laura still talks to me. She's nice.

Dad is no longer happy all the time; he was when I was a little kid. He did not kiss me goodnight yesterday. Mom did. He does not go to the Party meetings anymore. Few customers come to the store. He sells nets to fishermen and other stuff for their boats. He sits there, waiting, and looks unhappy. When I come back from school he only says 'hi', does not ask what happened in school. We learn about the Party and history in school, about Chairman Ho. Mom teaches me at home, French, writing, arithmetic. It is difficult.

1957

We are training in school to help soldiers. We run round the school building. Last week the whole class went to an island with steep hills. We had to climb the hills and carry sacks on our back. I was too tired. We slept in tents, six in a tent. It was raining and we got wet and cold. I don't like training. Ms. Minh tells us war will happen again. We all need to help the soldiers. Why was Geneva not enough? The French and Japanese all left some time ago. After July 21st 1954 many Vietnamese also left from the harbor on large American ships, they went to the South. Mme Duval's cook left on such a ship. She found a new cook. Why might the war come back?

Ms. Minh is leaving; she wants to be a medic in the army. Our new teacher is an old soldier; he helped the Japanese when they were still in Vietnam, fought in Burma near a railway, fought the Americans. He is not a good teacher like Ms. Minh. He can tell stories that are exciting and terrible at the same time. About being shot and treated by a Ceylonese doctor. I do not like war.

Dad is confused, about war and other things. Mom says he is afraid Haiphong will be bombed by Americans and French again, just like when the Chinese came to chase the Japanese away. He

thinks fighting will come back to the city. It will be bad for the store. The fishermen will become soldiers and will not need nets or build boats. He is also afraid what will happen to us. The Party does not want *bourgeois*. Mom explained bourgeois means having a business and plenty of money. Also, bourgeois do not think like the Party, and they have foreign ideas. We are bourgeois. But we do not have much money. Dad reads about China, about war in Korea. He does not know what to do. Mom is also afraid but more about Dad.

On Sunday Dad got a visitor. He spoke Mandarin, had a strange accent. Not one of the regular customers. They talked in the store. After the man left, Dad came up, looked different, not sad. Mom asked who he was. Dad said he was just a visitor.

The man came back, on Sunday, like last week. Dad talked with him, in the store. They talked for a long time. Mom asked him who the man was. Dad was grumpy, he did not explain.

I told Laura about the man. Her father is Algerian, a pilot who helps to train Vietnamese pilots fly warplanes. They live near the airport. When the war starts, they will leave. On an airplane. He believes Vietnam should become one country again, independent. An example for Algeria. They don't get any Chinese visitors, sometimes Russians.

The man comes every day now. Sometimes he stays a few minutes, then Dad leaves with him, comes home late. The man never talks to us, he only talks to Dad in the store. Mom has given up asking about him. She is angry every time he comes round. Dad still hasn't explained why he is talking with this man.

Dad has left, with the man! He has gone to China, took the train to Kunming! 'To explore,' he told Mom. He is no longer happy in Haiphong. Mom is furious, I have not seen her this angry, ever. They argued, all evening. The next morning Dad left, early, in a black car. Mom closed the store; Dad never closes the store. Few customers come anyway. Now we are waiting. Mom does not know when Dad

will come back. This is so strange, Dad not being here. I like it better when he is here, even if he is confused.

Late last night Dad came back; Mom heard a car door slam. I heard it too. They talked all night. He did not come to kiss me goodnight.

1958

Dad is going to sell the store; we are going to China. Mom does not want to go, but staying in Haiphong isn't easy either. She does not want to go to France, like Grandpa Mo and Grandma Miu. Dad wants to go because the Party and his customers do not like him anymore, and because he's got a job in China. Arranged by the man.

Dad has changed. He is no longer confused. He said the masses lead the world. He's never said anything like that before. When I asked what he meant, he said that after 200 years the Chinese masses have ended the shameful foreign occupation of their own country and kicked the Nationalist traitors out to Taiwan. He talks like the voices on the radio. When he speaks his eyes are wide open. He doesn't look the same anymore. What has happened to him? What has that man done to him?

We are leaving tomorrow. One of my dad's nephews has bought the store, and everything in it. A niece I never met before came to see our house; she did not like it. It was too small for her. I want to take all my dolls, but Mom said I can only take two. We have three suitcases. The table and chairs and everything in the kitchen will stay. I am glad I won't have to train anymore to help the soldiers. I like leaving like Grandpa Mo and Grandma Miu, on a ship. Away from the war. It feels exciting, but Mom doesn't like it.

3
Nanning, 1959

The steam whistle blows three times, our ship is leaving. Here I am, standing where Grandma Miu stood and waved, watching the cables splash into the water, just like when she and Grandpa Mo left for France. This ship is much smaller, but it still feels big when I wave to Ma Tiau on the quay down below.

'What will happen to my box, the one with my name on it?'

She does not answer, maybe she cannot hear me anymore. The water between the ship and Ma Tiau stretches, it looks dark and I don't want to think about it. I already miss the box, my sweets. Who is going to eat them? Grandpa Gone, who I have never seen? He is not here and Dad is not even on deck waving, he is drinking in the bar. Mom said Grandpa Gone is a stubborn man. He lost face when his son married her. How do you lose face because of Mom and Dad?

The people on the quay are leaving; they know the ship will come back from Beihai in two weeks' time, as it always has. Grandpa Mo had the list of departure dates on the wall of his office. The harbor building is slowly becoming smaller, disappearing behind dark smoke. Now it really feels like I am leaving, forever. Most passengers have one suitcase; we have three. Are they visiting family, or moving for good, like we are? Are they escaping the shooting too?

This morning when a cart came to take our suitcases, Dad looked happy. 'Today we're going to China, to a bright future and my new job. In China we won't have to fear bombing and shooting, we won't have to live under a trapdoor.' Mom said nothing.

'Are you ready for a new future?' he asked me.

I don't know. Our house above the store, my room, I just left everything in it, except my two dolls. I didn't say goodbye to anyone at school, not even to Laura. 'Our trip has to remain a secret,' Dad had said.

The city disappears. Mom is sad, she cries. I wrap my arms around her middle, hugging her coat.

'Why are you crying? We are leaving the shooting. Dad has a new job, doesn't he?' Mom laughs through her tears; I've made her laugh!

'I am leaving the city I grew up in. And so are you.'

'But you won't miss the soldiers in the street, the shooting, the fights with the Party people, will you?'

'No. I'm happy to be leaving the Party inquisition; they didn't trust us anymore. I hope the Party in China will be different, less suspicious. And I'm sure war is coming.'

'Then why are you so sad?'

'Because Haiphong was my home, and I don't know where I am going.'

The small bar is empty. Most passengers have already disembarked. Dad wants to go into town to find out when the train leaves and to buy tickets. Mom is sitting in a chair, clutching her bag, which holds our passports.

'Why do you need *our* passports?' Mom asks.

'For customs, when we leave the ship.'

'You go alone; we'll stay here with the luggage, for now anyway. Here is your passport; I'm keeping Claudine's and mine.'

'You are being difficult.'

'No, I am not, just careful.'

'We are in China now, please behave like a Chinese woman.'

Mom inhales sharply. 'I didn't volunteer to come here. Claudine and I will need time to adapt. You are moving faster than us. You have been preparing for months. We have already discussed this. Please be patient with us.'

I feel tired. Even more tired than when I climbed the hill with school. Why does Mom sound so icy? In the cabin they argued last night. I pretended to be asleep, with my two dolls. One has a cracked face; I dropped her on the deck. Mom asked Dad about his acquaintance, she called him 'your guiding light'. She spat out the words. Dad got angry, said this man had changed his life, showed him a new future, a future in China.

'Maybe, but he has also changed you. I don't understand you anymore. You treat me and Claudine like strangers; me, your wife, and your own daughter! You behave like a Party man, like the ones that asked all those pointless questions, insisted on those endless discussions. What has happened to you?'

'I am preparing for my new job.'

'There are no trains!'

'What do you mean? Your guiding light told us there would be trains.'

'The trains are needed in the north, near Peking. The station master said trucks leave early in the morning to take people up north, to Nanning.'

'You must be joking.'

'No.'

'Why can't we stay here? It was so peaceful, two days away from the world. Or go back with this ship?'

'We are going to Nanning.'

Here I am, in my room with Mom in the guesthouse. It looks and feels like an old farmhouse, one that has not been lived in for a while. The mattress smells musty and the sheets are dirty. An old woman made tea on a wood fire yesterday. Mom is sleeping; she didn't get to bed until very late. The room is still dark. I can hear a rooster.

Yesterday we made it to Nanning in an old army truck, sitting on wooden benches in the back. We received a special reception: red banners along the streets. Our driver told us Chairman Mao had just given one of his speeches. Soldiers were everywhere, just like in Haiphong. The truck dropped us at the station. Inside, Dad's guiding light showed up. That was a surprise. He got us permits and tickets to travel to Peking. Just like that. Dad, it turned out, knew all along this was the plan but never told Mom or me. Mom was furious and they argued again, right there in public. Mom wouldn't give in. She asked who he was, why he had brought us to China. He laughed and told her not to worry, to get into his chauffeured car. He would take us to a guesthouse instead. She said no.

'Put your wife in the car,' he told Dad. Dad waited, and when I ran to Mom, he grabbed my arm and pulled me back. I tried to get away but he was much stronger than me. He has never grabbed me before. The man was holding onto Mom's arms. She screamed, tried to hit him with her fists. People were looking but didn't do anything, didn't help Mom. My father pushed me into the car and told the driver to lock the door. Mom broke free and ran back into the station.

Dad followed her, yelling at her to either come with me or lose me. My own father said that. Mom came back. I have a different father now, no father at all. The rooster is crowing again. A new day, I hate today.

4
Jiayu, April 1960

The morning sun is shining a circle of light on the wall covered in posters shouting political slogans. I can hear the shrill crows of a rooster. He must be a true survivor; most chickens are long gone, eaten when grain was taken away from the village, trucked to the cities. This rooster must have Party protection, and be particularly good at finding worms or crickets. Maybe he eats bark.

After a night in the church I feel cold. The round windowpane above the church door is missing. Everybody in the countryside needs to collect metal, and the steel window frame was logical scrap. The bell has not yet been removed; my own uncle, the Secretary of the local Communist Party, argued for using the church for political meetings in the village—the bell could simply be rung to call the villagers for their education in the thoughts and statements of Chairman Mao Zedong. He could not stop the removal of the wooden benches, perfect firewood for the kilns. A table is all that is left.

Feng is pulling on the heavy rope of the church bell. I can see his black trousers and shirt flailing about his thin body—clothes he took from the corpse of a grown-up in a field nearby, someone my father used to work with. Feng, like me, is hungry, but does not talk about it. He hasn't had a decent meal in many months. He hangs on; his feet lift from the floor when the bell finally rings, twice.

'Why are you ringing the bell? It is going to get us in deep trouble.'

'No, not this time. Uncle knows we are here; nobody will come. These tinkles are for them.' Feng points to the two bodies on the floor, my parents, covered by a gray curtain, a shroud that we found in the side room because I could not bear to see their disfigured faces.

'They were brave,' Feng cries out, sounding like a badly dressed actor in a theater. 'I need to show them I can be too, to honor them.'

Feng dug two graves last night. I could not. I wanted to stay here, with them. I watched over my gray father and mother, lying on the floor, waiting for us to bury them. All night long I listened to Feng, talking to himself, sometimes arguing. Defending them. In the end, he cried out, 'No, no, no,' as he knocked his shovel against the church

wall. When he was finished, he sat with me, on the floor, without saying a word.

When our parents and their fellow convicts first attended the village Party meetings, the church benches were still bolted to the floor. The villagers offered the seats to the city people; few would join them in sitting on the floor. When a regional Party chief visited, he insisted that all the 'rightist element' sit on the floor.

The whole night all I could think about was how two such innocuous acts—Father writing a letter, and Father ringing the bell yesterday—could have led to what is happening now. He explained that word, innocuous, to us when he read it in one of his English books, about a war and a beach. Between Father's writing and the ringing of the bell the Party destroyed his and Mother's lives with their bullets.

Chairman Mao invited people to criticize the Party, called it *'Let a hundred flowers bloom'*. We repeated the phrase aloud in high school; a beautiful phrase, the melody of the words so different from the usual Party slogans.

I don't remember my father, the English teacher in our high school, ever talking at home about what bothered him at school. Not to us. When Feng and I complained about homework, he would say, 'I am very lucky to be able to teach a foreign language. Like me, you are privileged to attend this school, never forget that.'

Nor my mother, head nurse in the hospital, who always remained optimistic and saw the positive side. One day, when the hospital had been treating many more patients than planned, she came home late, with a gray face. Bone-tired but excited, she sat at the table, 'Today has been the most wonderful day for the hospital,' she said.

Father felt encouraged by the flowery invitation from the Chairman; he would write a letter. He was going to ask for more schoolbooks and more time to teach foreign languages. I felt proud of him. Mother may have had second thoughts, but she never voiced them to us.

Nothing happened, at first. Then one day, in the middle of last winter, Father came home early, before Feng and I returned from school. We found him sitting in his chair in front of the bookcase holding the books he loved to read, sometimes to us. We understood a little English even before we went to high school. He kept strangely silent until Mother came home.

'This morning I got a message,' he said slowly, 'telling me to go to the office of the school's Party representative. I wasn't the only one; three of my colleagues were also summoned.'

He took a piece of paper from his bag.

'The Party representative had our letters to Chairman Mao lying on his desk. He reminded us of the Party's revolutionary struggle to fight its enemies, the nationalists, foreign elements, and of our duty as teachers to support that struggle. He accused us of being anti-revolutionaries, of being enemies of the people, directly criticizing the Chairman and the Party.'

'But the Chairman, the Hundred Flowers…' Feng asked. He is always quick, unlike me.

Father didn't answer.

'Please, Feng, let your father explain what happened this morning. You can ask questions later.'

Mother must have been shocked by Father's words, but she didn't show it. Maybe she already knew. It may have happened in her hospital too.

'Ten years, the Party representative said,' Father whispered, pointing to the paper in his hand. 'I have been sentenced to ten years' work in a village. I am no longer allowed to teach. We are losing our home.'

He fell silent, lost for words. Looking blankly at Mother, he had tears in his eyes. I'd never seen him like this before.

'We have to leave tomorrow for Jiayu, south of Wuhan.'

'Jiayu? Are you sure? I think that is quite close to where my brother lives.'

Mother spoke as if we were planning a holiday. She walked into the bedroom, closed the door. Feng asked again about the Hundred Flowers. Father waved his hand, did not answer. Later Mother came back.

'I will come with you. Feng and Wang can stay at my brother's.'

The truck came the next morning; accompanied by policemen who made sure we left our furniture and books, that we took only some clothes in small suitcases. Mother left with us. She hid our radio rolled in a blanket. It was a long journey. When we arrived at

the workers' compound, Mother was given a small room to use as a nurses' station. It had no electricity. She kept the radio, hidden, until a fellow worker snatched it.

Near this village, with its church built by a missionary, in the middle of the fields, Father and his fellow convicts had to dig the new irrigation canal. Every day except Sundays for the past year my father has joined other convicts and villagers to dig by hand; Mother treats the sick.

'Mostly edema; better food is the best remedy,' she explained to us one day, as always looking at the positive.'

Feng and I throw bricks from wet clay. There is no high school anywhere nearby so we are required to work. Most teenagers in the village work here, making bricks in wooden forms by hand. After drying they are fired in kilns. The bricks are used to construct furnaces to melt scrap iron, and sluices in the canal. We call ourselves the Red Brick Brigade. A girl, Wei Li, invented the name, it's not very original. Like us, she used to go to high school, her parents work here too. She has beautiful long black hair.

Yesterday my father and three of his fellow convicts walked from the canal through the fields to the church. One of them rang the bell; I imagine it was my father. I heard the sound, at an unusual time. Our uncle didn't know what was happening so he came here to investigate, brought fellow Party leaders and the local police. Mother must have known what Father was about to do; she also came to the church.

We were loading the trays of dried bricks into the kiln late in the afternoon when my uncle came by. He looked tired, asked Feng and me to come with him. He brought us here. He sat down on the floor, and for a long time he didn't speak. Feng looked around and pointed at a trampled white sleeve lying in a corner near the door. In the village my mother was the only one with a white shirt, taken from the hospital where she used to work.

'Is that my mother's?' he asked, pointing to the sleeve.

'Yes.'

'Where is she?'

'Behind the church.'

'Can we see her?'

'Yes. You must bury them, as your last and most important responsibility to your parents.'

'What happened?'

'Your parents and the other convicts complained about the lack of food, about having to eat grass, bark. The Party cannot accept that, our Chairman tells us food is plentiful. The police took your father outside. When my sister heard a shot, she ran outside; we tried to stop her. The other three convicts also fought with the police.'

'What will happen to us?'

'You can continue to stay with me for now. I will arrange for you to join a new, special activity run by the Party. You will go to Peking. On one condition! You will never talk about what has happened here today, not to anyone. Is that understood?'

'Yes.'

'And you, Wang?'

'What if I do?'

'The Party will never let go of you, wherever you are. You will join the convicts, or face the police.'

5
Lower Cove, 1961

It is very early, a Sunday morning, still cold. The endless gray of winter has evaporated. This is the right time to kayak. I like to float along the shore of Lower Cove, or even as far as the mouth of Gasters Bay. I enjoy being out on the water. This early in the day there's nothing to worry about; my parents are still sleeping. That's what I'm going to do today, on my last day of freedom, just paddle around.

Our white house lies across the Cove; it looks pretty fancy there on the waterfront, on the road leading out of the village, set against the dark green pine trees vivid in the morning sunlight. It also feels cold, and not because the water is bloody cold. It is my house but it does not feel like my home. When I visit my friend Roger, I see his parents showing real affection towards each other and to the kids. His mom is the kind center of a happy family. As a kid I pretended my mother was a stern aunt rather than my mother. They are not nasty, my parents; come to think of it they are more lenient than most, particularly my father. But it's like they haven't shown up for their own marriage, and sometimes I wonder if somehow I'm the reason there's a gulf between them. I think they might have been better off without me.

My mother, the full-time teacher. Being a teacher isn't a role she adopts for school, it's who she is. She's not often at home, except during vacations. She seldom looks happy, at least with Father and me. In school I see her chatting and laughing with other teachers. She teaches the old-fashioned way: formal, tough, sometimes with sarcasm. Some of my friends detest her; others keep quiet about her verbal target practice, joke about her when I am not around. I find out later. Yet out of nowhere a sense of humor can appear. At home she'll be relaxed, find something really funny and start laughing. Like last night. You never know when it will happen though, or what will trigger this personality change. It never lasts more than an evening. In the morning she comes down first, makes porridge, pours tea and eats an apple. When I stumble down the stairs, she'll call from the front door, 'Don't forget what you studied yesterday!' and leave. Father appears later and leaves after me. He doesn't talk

much, reads the newspaper and listens to the news on CBC. He does the same during the evening, preferring classical music when he is locked up in his study, while Mother corrects tests at the kitchen table.

Father is different when we get outdoors. Then it's just him and me. He used to grab an old hat and boots and take me out. 'Just getting a little exercise with the boy,' even when Mother was preparing dinner. She never joined us. I was maybe four years old when the whalers wrecked. He used to carry me on his back among dark pine trees, across hill ridges. When we came home late, Mother would be muttering about wasted food and he would invent an irrelevant excuse: 'These rocks have survived many millions of years; they once migrated across the Atlantic.' Said while pointing to the hills behind the house. 'We just walked on them. Isn't that amazing?' When we got back on that stormy night, he spoke with urgency, 'We saw two whalers slip their anchors at the entrance to the Cove. I need to make a call.' He taught me to row in an old skiff; later I got my kayak. The Bay was our adventure playground; we would paddle around, land in small coves, chasing birds and collecting crabs and oysters. He taught me to hike, follow moose trails around Middle Gull Pond, shadow whales in Red Rock Cove, or we'd watch the birds drop crabs to bash their carapace on one of the white-splattered boulders of Harbour Main Island. Now I like to explore on my own; nobody telling me what to do and where to go.

Father leaves home each summer; almost never misses a year. To have 'his vacation', as my mother calls it, her eyebrows raised; she does not approve. He never talks about it; just leaves with a small suitcase, takes the bus to the airport in St. John's. He gets back two weeks later, sometimes slightly tanned. As a kid I used to ask him why he left and where he went. He's never told me anything. Snooping around in his study for copies of the weekly glossy, eager for pictures of glamorous film actresses with large breasts in skimpy bathing suits, I once found airline tickets and boarding passes, stamps in his old passport—he has flown to Europe, Spain, France. I've never seen him leave with anyone, I guess he travels alone.

Over the last couple of years Father has changed. His old energy has evaporated, he's become sluggish as if he has been drugged. He's

lost interest in everything that used to excite him; he does not join me outdoors anymore. He still reads the newspaper and listens to CBC—never to anything else. He used to comment on something silly he had read, or jump up and wave his arms as if directing the orchestra. No more. He still complains about his business, how his insurance agency clients fake accidents. Something else, something between him and my mother is the real cause, I am sure of it.

This morning, I saw sunlight falling on the spire of St. Mary's church, farther down the road from our house. The church bell rang; I heard the tinny tinkle even across Lower Cove. Water conducts the sound of the Sunday morning service much better than land. A few dozen people will go to church, most of them, I think, because they like to sing. Sometimes, when I need money, I organize the parking. Not today. To my mother, the sermons have the quality of a poorly rehearsed car commercial—the priest even looks like a car salesman, with the shiny shoes to match. He gives his car more TLC than the church; he is often late. At Christmas and sometimes at Easter my parents—agnostics they call themselves—attend church and as a kid I'd tag along. I stopped. Everywhere you look in churches there are pictures and sculptures depicting a truly horrendous form of torture and suffering that is fundamental to the religion, and that's not for me. My mother, when I asked her why she attended the Christmas Eve service, said that growing older she found the appetite for illusion grows, as does the demand for bad illusionists. She may have read this quip somewhere.

The large shed behind the church is used for wedding and funeral receptions; my high school buddies and their girlfriends regularly rent it for Friday evening parties. Each time when I hand him the rental fee—small stuff, with the occasional subsidy from my father—the priest looks over his thick black-rimmed glasses and warns in his grubby voice, 'Young Coulthard, you cannot bring booze into the hall! Understood?' I always nod sincerely and thank him for the keys. No big deal. It shows the power of money to amplify hypocrisy—my rent money supports church maintenance. The priest never comes by, avoids the reality of the wet bar in a beat-up delivery van on the parking lot. The van is owned by the father of one of the girls; he lets her drive so he can have a couple of beers in the bar.

PARTY ANIMAL was printed across my picture in my high school yearbook. Yes! Hiking, kayaking and daydreaming are my passions, it said. How do they know what my passions are? Yes, I like kayaking, but is that a passion? I like to watch the whales entering the bay, but is that a passion? I don't even know myself what my passions are.

I never talk about school—Mother knows most of what happens there; the rest I don't want to tell them anyway. To fill the dinner table silences I tell stories about hikes, some true, some that could have happened. Yesterday evening as I fell asleep, I heard them arguing, in low voices, in one of their two bedrooms. I could not hear what they were saying—my room is on the other side of the house. Besides, I really didn't care, I'd already gotten a pretty clear message at dinner.

Yesterday when we sat down to dinner, the mood in the room was good. I'd come home a little late but not late enough to upset Mother. She and Father were engaged in conversation, a fairly unusual occurrence for them. When we sat down to eat, Father opened a bottle of wine and Mother accepted when he offered to pour her a glass. By the time we were eating dessert, they were both feeling jolly. With 20/20 hindsight, my mother's festive behavior was actually her way of marking my catastrophe.

Was it the wine that made my mother replay the scene to my father and me of what had happened when Mr. Howard, the high school principal, opened the door of his study to let her leave earlier that afternoon? They have worked together for decades. I think they like each other professionally, and personally too. He took her hand, looking appropriately serious as if for a real parent-teacher conference.

'Mrs. Coulthard, I have always tried to treat Cecil like any other boy,' he said. 'I don't have to tell you your son is a nice, intelligent young man. Over the past four years he has successfully managed not to fail while exerting the minimum amount of effort. As principal I am not happy about that; as the father of three boys I do understand. Boys have other things on their mind.'

Mother feigned surprise when he held onto her hand, then mirrored his expression. Previous parent-teacher meetings and suggestions made by her colleagues had conveyed the same message, albeit couched in kind words. They avoided implying that my parents

were partly responsible for my laziness. Only once did a churchgoing teacher tell my father that his liberal lifestyle could explain my weak dedication to study. My father told my mother, who seemed upset. I got a wink and Father left it at that.

'Cecil has told me he wants to study economics.' Mr. Howard slowly released her hand, took off his heavy-rimmed glasses and looked at her with the watery, pale blue eyes of an older man.

'He fed me some guff about why it appeals to him but I don't think he knows what he's getting into.' He shook his head and pushed his few remaining hairs across his forehead. 'It used to be a simple science, back when I studied it. It was Welfare Economics, based on a few principles. It assumed that humans rationally optimize their economic actions, like all-knowing robots—*Homo Economicus*—prioritizing what they value when what they would like to have is scarce. Prices act as the lubricant that oils the system.'

Mr. Howard moved like a magician taking off an imaginary top hat, covering it with a veil. With one quick arm gesture he removed the veil.

'Hey presto, with this theory you can explain the past and some economists use it to predict the future, for which it was never intended.'

He turned the imaginary top hat right-side up, tapped his finger on the crown and concluded, 'Empty.'

'What do you mean, empty? There are millions of economists. Are they all failed magicians pretending they know what they are doing? Come on, Mr. Howard, I am not willing to suspend my disbelief.' Mother talked to him as she would to a student.

'Exactly, Mrs. Coulthard, they are,' Mr. Howard exclaimed. 'The world has moved on. A few well-known economists are now questioning some of the assumptions on which welfare theories are based. As yet, no new theories have been widely accepted to replace the old ones; economists are a conservative bunch. What's worse, they are still doing their best to develop econometric models in the hope of better representing the complex real world; magicians creating ever more complex formulas based on theories cloaking ever more assumptions that may or may not represent reality.' He took Mother's arm as if to comfort her.

'Please don't misunderstand me, Mrs. Coulthard. I am not saying Cecil shouldn't study economics if he wants to but…'

The principal paused and raised his index finger.

'He likes the outdoors, so why, I asked myself, would he choose economics? Why not study biology or some environmental subject?'

He put his hands together, like the pastor concluding his sermon.

'I am afraid Cecil has selected what he believes to be the easiest and least intellectually taxing subject to study. Cecil still believes the simple description I just gave. I may, in my few economics lessons, even have been responsible for his misconception. I hope I am wrong, but I don't think so. Anyway, he will need to study his pants off from now on to get accepted by a university; any university.'

Then my mother started laughing. That is how my mother can be in school.

Even more unusually, at the dinner table my father read me the riot act.

'This is the only time in your life that a little hard work will determine what you can be and do for the rest of your life,' he lectured, without the usual wink.

My mother never had a problem being strict in front of her class of thirty unruly teenagers. Having fulfilled her parental role in front of the principal, and having let down her guard with my father, my mother reverted back to her usual distant self with me.

'No more hiking and kayaking until the summer exams. Get to work. Now!'

Last night I dreamt I studied like mad. At the very end of it all, Mr. Howard ignored me when he handed out the high school diplomas; then he wagged his finger and waved me away. I flunked, but I felt free and flew away, waving to the crowd, over the hills, across the Bay, towards the ocean.

6
Holyrood, July 1962

Accidental Drowning
Holyrood. The police received a call yesterday that a kayak had overturned in Lower Cove of Gasters Bay near Conception Harbour. It appeared that the teenage owner of the kayak (C. C.) let an untrained young acquaintance use it as a heavy fog entered the area, with fatal results. After the accident, the owner and his father searched the area with a motorboat and located the overturned, empty kayak. An extensive police search has not yet located the victim's body. The police have informed the parents of the boy; it is assumed he has drowned. Investigations into the accident are continuing.

I am watching the gray July sky. This little notice has not left my desk; Mother cut it from the newspaper. I'm C. C.; I was responsible, I alone let it happen. Every day the same story plays in my head, like a bad police movie with one main suspect, me. Even when I go out for a hike, or go back to my student dormitory, it continues, I cannot stop it. I feel disgusted with myself. At times I want to be dead, the ultimate escape, just to stop the bloody movie.

Father moored the boat, ordered me to go wait in his study. He didn't accuse me of being incredibly stupid, that much was patently clear. Shocked and frustrated, he acted fast and cool-headedly. After he called the local police, he took aim at me. 'When did you go to the bar?' 'How many beers did Wang drink?' Why did you leave the jetty?' His face was stony. He must have practiced his interrogation technique during the war.

Within a few minutes two local policemen were knocking on the door; they instructed others to take the lifeboat and search for Wang. For a while our house felt like a local command post, people were going in and out. I was kept in the study, while Father talked outside. Flashes of events came back again and again: Wang's confessions about his parents; the silence after the kayak had capsized; Wang's girlfriend Wei Li dancing in front of my eyes, her long hair waving as

she twirled around. My mother came in with coffee. The policeman keeping an eye on me shook his head, wagged his finger when she asked to talk to me. He closed the door behind her and sat down on the couch. I told him what I had told my father. I didn't say anything about the confessions, not to Father or to the police; I promised Wang that I would not and I did not. Not then. Later the second policeman came in and asked for details; he wrote everything down. He told my parents I should stay in the house; later he would go to the store to tell Wang's parents. The next morning Father went to the Shi-liangs' store to express his condolences and apologized for my lunatic behavior. He said what struck him most was that Wang's parents reacted strangely. They seemed subdued, even afraid, and showed hardly a hint of sorrow.

A plainclothes police inspector came over from St. John's. He could have been a bank teller or any anonymous man in the street. His suit was bland, well-worn. Only his eyes, hollow, dark eyes, suggested acuity. He was here to detect lies, or omissions. He sat in Father's chair; I perched on a kitchen stool. Question followed question, he wanted details and more details. His tape recorder kept turning. His raspy voice asked the same questions I had answered the day before but quickly moved on to how I came to know Wang and what I knew about his brother Feng and the Shi-liang family. I recalled the brothers' arrival in the village, their English lessons, the hikes I took with them. I omitted Wang's secret. The inspector sensed a lacuna.

'Your father told me you have a perfect record in kayak safety, you have lots of experience. Why did you decide on a cold and foggy day to give a demonstration?'

'I'd had a few beers.'

'Yes, that is what you said yesterday. Is being pretty intoxicated a reason to jump into a kayak?'

'I thought so.'

'You had a few drinks with a guy who seldom drank, decided to go home to get something to eat, and suddenly the thought enters your inebriated mind to paddle around?'

'Wang asked me to show him.'

'Of course, he asked you. But you were going to eat something. Could you not have promised to show and tell when the circum-

stances were more appropriate?'

He had a strange way of asking these questions, his thumb scratching his cheek below his ear. Later I realized that this routine and his never wavering gaze felt hypnotic.

It was such a hypothetical question I didn't know how to answer. 'I thought I could handle a little trip, and I *did*.'

As the reels of the tape recorder kept turning, he jumped up in front of me, shouting. 'You paddle around! I cannot imagine you didn't see the fog coming. Why would you allow your pretty drunk friend—who'd never even touched a kayak in his life—to sit in yours? What were you thinking?'

'I didn't *allow* Wang to jump into the kayak. He just got in, while I was taking off my life jacket.'

He didn't believe me. Over and over he repeated that something pretty important must have caused my incomprehensible decision, and he wanted to know what that was. He threatened me with months of incarceration for willfully causing Wang's death. I wanted to keep Wang's confessions to myself, like they had never happened. 'Please don't tell anybody, Cecil. Please, don't tell.' I'd promised him! The inspector didn't stop, kept coming back to that single question; he kept pressuring me, relentlessly.

I tried, really tried, but in the end I couldn't take any more of his persistent questioning and the way he kept scratching his cheek. I asked the inspector if I could see my parents in the kitchen. He agreed. I told them what Wang had told me, what I had promised him, and about the threatened prison sentence. They were shocked, at first they wouldn't believe me. They left me alone for a while. When they came back, they convinced me I had to tell the police.

I did.

The inspector didn't ask any more questions, ordered me to stay at home until the inquest. I didn't attend Wang's funeral. The Shi-liang family disappeared immediately afterwards, left their store locked. The neighbors recalled seeing the truck leave, never to return. The entire village knew in no time at all. Days later the police found the truck near St. John's harbor. The family had left on a foreign trawler. Their flight turned 'my' case from a drunken accident into a mystery.

A local policeman ordered my parents and me to come to police headquarters. He said they wanted to talk to us about the accident and about Wang, a routine interview. My father didn't believe him and found me a lawyer, Mrs. Dorsett, a distant acquaintance of my mother's. She told us that although it was clearly an accident, I could be accused of gross negligence resulting in death. Mrs. Dorsett coached me on what to say and how to say it, over and over. She told me that were I to keep quiet about things that could link the boys and the family to a political or intelligence angle, I could be convicted. They put us in a gray-painted room with a large window, a single table and several chairs; the standard setup in police movies. A man in civilian clothes who I had never met asked the questions, the same questions. My mother was grilled about why she had volunteered to give Wang and Feng daily English lessons, what she had found out about the boys. My father had to explain again what had happened once I was in his study. I repeated my story. The inspector with the raspy voice described my behavior as a grave error of judgment.

I wasn't convicted of gross negligence during the formal inquest; I was told I was a stupid, drunken idiot and that I should have known better. Father said the sudden disappearance of the Shi-liangs probably caused the inquest to become a formality. Afterwards my parents brought me back to my college dormitory. We drove in silence the whole way here. When I got out of the car, my father said, 'Do something about the grave, will ye.'

Court Proceedings

St. John's. In the inquest reviewing the drowning of W. S. on April 16 near Conception Bay following the overturning of a kayak, the Honourable Justice McHenry concluded that an unfortunate confluence of circumstances and unintended actions caused the accident. The owner of the kayak can be blamed for letting W. S. sit in the kayak, but not for the fact that W. S. unexpectedly took the kayak out into open water. After issuing a personal warning to the owner (C. C.), Justice McHenry closed the inquest.

Overture

7
Lower Cove, 1989

They came to have a look at the house—a quiet father, ebullient mother, two kids bursting with energy—and loved the view of the Cove, were happy about the large rooms and weren't bothered by the dated kitchen and heating. They made an offer, well below the asking price. Hearing the kids running around the house, their enthusiastic cries of discovery of its nooks and crannies, the decor of his youth, Cecil decided the house needed lots of joy after harboring decades of silent anguish. Astonished, his broker couldn't believe he was willing to sell for such a low price. Cecil didn't explain, felt strangely relieved the dark memories in all the rooms of the house would be replaced.

Emptying the shed a few days later, he found the box of letters, tied with red and yellow ribbons. He read them that night, all of them, sitting in his father's chair in the study, surrounded by a few empty bookcases. He laid the letters out on the floor, one by one, compared dates, underlined sentences, as if he were researching why cocoa had suddenly jumped in price while supplies were ample. At first the dates didn't make any sense, finally he understood; understood the permanent somber ambiance of the house, Mother's attitude, his father's withdrawal and his reaction when the box was discovered the first time, even his own feelings of not belonging. Now it all made perfect sense. Could his parents have behaved any differently?

Stepping out of the house the following morning, he carried his family's written history, now loosely bundled, with him. He felt the saturating force of *unwritten* history evaporate. He looked back to see the house lift its gray veil, now glowing white to welcome a new family, its 'sold' sign on the lawn waving in the slight breeze. Later, when he ambled for the last time through the empty rooms, his memories felt like a movie, watched from the projection room. He was visiting a recently sold home, one of many. Even his own room had lost its stamp of two decades. The 1.4 billion seconds of his life that had at times seemed endless, now felt transitory.

After closing the door behind him, he walked to the church. The parking lot hadn't changed, the building looked fresh, almost

well-maintained. Inside, the sound of his footsteps reverberated through the empty space, which now felt strangely intimate. Behind the altar the wooden sculpture of Maria and the baby, dust free, had been brightly repainted. Lighting a candle, something he had never done before, he wished the new owners well in their new home. A young pastor appeared from the vestry and asked him whether he needed something. As the former owner of the house next door, he explained his nostalgic leave-taking, commended the appearance of the church. Pleased, the pastor recalled his congregation's recent kindness, how they have been driven by a sense of urgency to address the building's state of disrepair. When the pastor locked the church door behind them, Cecil asked him what had happened to his predecessor. He didn't answer, looked askance. When Cecil mentioned his weekly meetings and payments, the pastor passed his hand across his face and made the sign of the cross.

'He married, left Newfoundland and died years ago, a car accident. May God have mercy on his soul.'

Walking along the coastal road, he could see the only whaler wreck remaining, nothing more than a gutted hull, the bow barely above the water. Feeling drawn against his will, he moved closer, looking for the sign that had appeared in the years since the accident. YU had been the original vessel code on the bow. Years of wind, rain and salty waves had broken away rusty pieces of the U, while the remaining letter had defiantly resisted the elements:

Yli

He had often watched this ultimate sign of complexity; something had happened here that nobody could ever have imagined. Every time when he had driven by, he had felt forced to see the name of a magnificent, unknown Chinese girl, her long black hair waving in the wind. She may never have known what happened to her young lover; her name stayed right above the water in which he had drowned. Now, this unnerving testimony had mercifully disappeared, the white paint capitulating to the elements, the rusty bow empty. He felt he could drive the road again, released. He could choose to believe that no correlation had existed, but as he walked away along the road past the Cove, the name swirled in his memory, and he wasn't sure.

8
Washington DC, February 1991

From the conference room on the top floor of the International Trade Institute, ITI, he had a ringside view of National Airport, enticing from the outside, inside a purgatory of insensitive security, bad coffee and delays to the rest of the world. Two small blurs of smoke followed by muffled applause—the raw burst of the engines reversing, barely audible through the thick office windowpane and the rain outside—confirmed each plane had touched down safely after appearing from the low-hanging clouds and making its tight final right turn. For Cecil, the Institute's *senior* trade economist and a frequent flyer himself, each touchdown offered reassuring proof of man's capacity to reduce the odds of crashing an incredibly complicated flying machine to infinitesimal levels. To enjoy the view, he would usually be the first to arrive in the conference room for the weekly division meeting. His early arrival today suggested everything was as usual, but the odd sensation in the pit of his stomach said otherwise. He hoped it would be eased by watching planes land safely, an experience he felt was akin to listening to Rachmaninoff playing his own third piano concerto, which could transport him to an altogether different level of consciousness, as far from the present moment as a sheet of music blown by the wind.

ITI was one of the institutes in Washington DC where politicians could bide their time between public jobs or nurse political defeats, occupying senior management positions linked to nebulous job descriptions. The few dozen true academics at the Institute carried the research banner that camouflaged its real load. Effective lobbying required politicians with strong networks, supported by studies with preordained outcomes. The overly generous levels of ITI remuneration—to douse whatever remnants of academic independence may still be flickering in its staff—provided Cecil with a lifestyle most academics could only dream about. The policies supported by the Institute proved far too conservative for his taste and inside the office he could be quite vocal in his questioning of study conclusions designed to obfuscate undesirable realities. He hadn't left. Creeping middle-age indolence, an attachment to his pleasant daily work

routine, the easy opportunities to explore economies in distant parts of the world; numerous reasons kept him at ITI. Finding another job at his age—a little too close to fifty—could be a lengthy and unpleasant process, and likely a gateway to a lower salary and a less extravagant lifestyle, possibly at a nondescript academic institution in the Midwest. He had experienced their like in Saskatoon and had no desire to return to their yawning horrors.

With his eyes on the wet tarmac as waiting planes lined up on the taxiway ready to depart, the memory of his unpleasant morning did not fade. Drenched after the short walk to ITI, he had felt an inexplicable twinge of anguish as he stepped into the dark marble-clad entrance hall. His ITI boss, increasingly aware of Cecil's growing unease at being forced to accept massaged study results, had promoted him. Closer proximity to the political kitchen had heightened Cecil's awareness of the questionable odor of the Institute's policies. But never before had it triggered the strange feeling of anguish he felt this morning. Aileen, his assistant, was waiting in front of the elevators. He felt comfortable having her around—despite her rapidly declining productivity and frequent absences. Well on the wrong side of sixty, she kept working to support her ailing mother. She grinned from under her plastic hair cover, not designed to flatter an older woman.

'You are moving again. Did you see the notice?' She sounded slightly embarrassed.

'No, not *again*.'

'Aren't you lucky you didn't unpack yet?'

'Any idea where they want me to hide next?'

'The second floor, the old Travel Office space. I'm sorry.'

'We're all moving there?'

'No, just you.'

The elevator door opened and she stepped inside, leaving behind a whiff of tobacco smoke mixed with cheap perfume. Too shocked to follow her, he mumbled that he needed a strong coffee and walked to the cafeteria. Waiting at the counter, he felt a hand touch his shoulder, and a mellifluous voice behind him spoke.

'Cecil, you have to look elsewhere.'

He hated being touched unexpectedly, and today it felt partic-

ularly creepy. The hand belonged to Juncker, ITI's Financial Vice President. The permanent smile on his suntanned face hid his brilliant ability to manipulate the use of the Institute's external grants. Over the years Juncker had schemed his way to become the linchpin trusted to translate the Institute's lofty objectives in support of international free trade into lobbying on behalf of companies seeking tariff protection and monopoly pricing power from Congress. His reputation had earned him the nickname *der Bomber*, although no one dared to click their heels in his presence.

'Well, Mr. Juncker, I presume?' Cecil tried to sound cheerful and look intrepid.

'We can't budget another extension of your trade study stuff, my boy. Funding is down, as you well know. Pure trade studies used to have a lot of mileage, but our sponsors whisper they are now looking for environmental arguments. Can't blame them. Refocus is the word these days. You can do it.'

He grabbed the cup placed on the counter, turned around and walked away, carefully sipping the Americano Cecil had just ordered.

'Salut! Ça va, Cecil?'

She knew she would find him alone in front of the window, staring outside even after she closed the door behind her. He looked preoccupied, as usual, and his lack of attention caused her to greet him in French. She knew he spoke the language, in an Anglo-Canadian way, and it irritated the hell out of him that he occasionally couldn't follow her rapid, colloquial French.

'Hullo, Claudine.'

The presence of Claudine Maufort and her ritual of speaking French to him would normally provoke his defensive, ironic posture. He found the sound of her voice on this rainy day reassuring, as if nothing had just happened. He turned around and sat down at the conference table, aligning his folder with the table edge. To Claudine, his gesture signaled unease, the opposite of what he intended.

'Have you met Balmer yet?' she asked casually after a pause, referring to his recently appointed boss.

'I will, after this meeting.'

His new boss had parachuted in straight from Capitol Hill

following a disastrous election campaign featuring his ex-wife spilling too many beans about his character and personal habits, including his frequent contact with female escorts. His first act of business was to lock himself into his office and call in his staff one by one.

Petite, and as always impeccably dressed in black, Claudine still raised his heart rate, although their affair had ended well over two years ago. He was still convinced her feelings for him hadn't completely disappeared, although she had made clear their affair was 'over, finished, *completely* finished'. He would have been surprised if she hadn't come early to chat. Usually an example of studious control, today she seemed uneasy, her fingers moving as if to get rid of a hair. She didn't sit down, walked around.

'Did you hear what he has in mind?'

'No. But Juncker just told me I've lost all funding for my program.' Cecil shrugged.

'You are not the only one; every budget is being slashed, courtesy of Balmer. He wants to set an example; cut the public sector fat the Hill is excited about these days.'

It struck him that she suddenly sounded like a public radio newscaster, with a slight French accent.

'We are not a public sector body. Somebody should tell him that. He has lost the election so he no longer has to waffle to the electorate.' Cecil realized he sounded piqued.

'He may not yet have recovered from losing, or maybe he's feeling ashamed, although I doubt it. Perhaps he wants to impress his ex-wife.' She looked at him, suggesting a double meaning.

He noticed her hands, trembling, smoothing non-existing wrinkles in her dress.

'What kitty still does have some dough?'

'Oil, the environment. *Please*, be careful with Balmer.' She didn't explain.

Cecil found himself thinking about his colleague Trevor, wrapped in the sterile white of a hospital bed. They had been office neighbors for years, knew each other well enough to get each other a cup of coffee without asking. One day the office next door had remained empty, which wasn't that unusual. A few days later he noticed that Aileen had packed Trevor's personal stuff into the usual

moving boxes. When he asked what had happened, she told him in her husky smoker's voice, 'It's so sad; he's getting treatment.'

His first impulse had been to visit him in the hospital right away, but then he felt he didn't want to intrude right now, not during treatment. Then he postponed again, rationalizing that as they never met socially—Trevor, like him, divorced, no children, also a frequent traveler—it felt a bit awkward to visit at this late stage. When movers finally took the boxes away, weeks later, he changed his mind. In the hospital room he hardly recognized Trevor, his weathered complexion had turned gray on the white pillow, and so had his thinned hair. He shook the limp hand on the sheet. Cecil first talked about the office, but the man lying under the white sheet didn't appreciate his effort at small talk, gave single sentence replies. After a long silence, the gray head turned to him.

'It's over. The doctors have given me a couple of weeks, at most.'

Cecil felt obliged to say something hopeful, but the gray head shook on the white pillow.

'I know it is over, no need to sugarcoat it. Can you get me a cup of coffee, strong coffee? The doctors tell me I can't, but in my condition I say, why not?'

After Cecil got back with coffee he mostly listened to the gray head and his story of not noticing the signs. For quite a while Trevor had felt fine, but he seemed to be running out of breath sooner when jogging. Then minor cuts didn't heal as quickly as before, a cold didn't go away and then he kept coughing, even at night. The scale in the bathroom pointed out that he had lost quite a few pounds; he happily assumed the loss to be the fruit of his regular jogging. One day he noticed a speck of blood on his handkerchief. The dots suddenly connected in a wave of fear. Forced to face the possibility, he first rationalized it couldn't be serious and repeatedly postponed making an appointment with his doctor. Blood on his pillow finally cut his bargaining with uncertainty and he made the call.

'In the end, it didn't make much difference. It had spread.'

Before Cecil left, he couldn't think of something to say. He shook the hand.

'Thanks for the coffee.'

'I hope the doctors are wrong.'

'They aren't.'

Balmer's office had a large corner window overlooking Pennsylvania Avenue, the privileged location of higher management. Outside, traffic moved slowly while the rain pelted a few umbrella-toting gray-suited executives waiting for cabs. Two men stood hunched under the narrow awning of a coffee shop next to a grocery cart full of plastic bags; the truck with free food for the homeless would come by later in the afternoon. Balmer was sitting behind a desk with a dark polished top, glaringly empty. He wore the uniform of all ITI executives, dark blue suit and white shirt. Only his tie suggested a frivolous side, showing a silver rose on a red and orange flame.

'Sit down, please.'

The 'please' came reluctantly; it sounded like an order. On the spur of the moment Cecil refused to sit down, remained standing halfway to the desk. Balmer took note, his eyes squinting slightly, but he did not repeat his offer.

'Let me come straight to the point. When I met the board after my appointment, the main message was clear: align ITI's activities more closely with issues that will interest Congress in the near future. Trade negotiations no longer raise my colleagues' heart rate.'

He cleared his throat as if this were the definitive proof of his need to make changes. Cecil gazed at the rain outside and glanced occasionally at Balmer's tie, thinking: the idiot avoids using *former* when mentioning colleagues. He couldn't bring himself to look Balmer in the eye. He felt like a cancer patient listening to the surgeon's final verdict; as if looking outside would leave the words without their target.

'I have had a look at your time sheets; you spend most of your time on various agricultural trade issues. Your last publication was released…almost six months ago?'

It was a barely veiled accusation, not a question, and Cecil didn't react. The last few months he had worked hard to collect massive amounts of data to prove the overriding impact of several political developments, weather anomalies and the value chain structure on world market prices of cocoa and coffee. Global supply and demand, traditionally assumed to be the driver, was taking a back seat, the data confirmed.

'Your recent annual reviews suggest you are less than pleased with the culture of ITI. Is that correct?'

For the first time Cecil looked directly at Balmer, decided that whatever he was going to say would not change Balmer's preconceived ideas, and gave himself license to say what needed to be said.

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'We have become an industry-run institute that behind the veneer of value-free research supports preferred political views. Other institutes in the Washington area do the same. They openly admit their political leanings. We don't, at least officially. And…I am really pissed off by edits of my reports that twist their main message.' He continued to stare at Balmer, who did not look away.

'That is going to change, we need to anticipate the interests of the majority party in Congress. Elections this year will create a new situation.'

'I am surprised that having occupied this office for less than a week, you can predict the outcome of future elections.'

'I can't, but I can predict future sources of funding for our research.'

Balmer showed political poise while his eyes and his voice remained cold. He moved his hands across the desktop, his lips pouting, gestures designed to soften what he was about to say.

'Your attitude and background may no longer be appropriate for this Institute. We do not have space for you in this office, but I have managed to find you a temporary office on the second floor. I expect you to prepare a research strategy and new work program—like the rest of the staff in my division—by next week. Natural resources and the environment will be our main focus for the coming year and ITI analyses will demonstrate that proven Chicago school of economics theories are particularly appropriate in these areas.'

'Proven?'

'Mr. Coulthard, I'll pretend I didn't hear your last remark.'

Cecil left without saying goodbye. The men under the awning were still there. Is this why a person gets fired, for questioning a loony theory while the idiocy of its results is in plain view? he wondered.

9
Washington DC, January 1992

A sprightly seventy-year-old, she wore a red necklace and clashing pink lipstick, but her greenish dress and her white face somehow suited her. On the dot of 10 a.m. she rose from her chair in the small meeting room and mustered the dozen attendees.

'Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Could we create a little more space in the back, please—we have a new member.'

She smiled at Cecil and Claudine, who took the last two seats in between an elderly man who kept his hat on and a girl in designer jeans clutching what looked like an expensive bag.

'Thank you.'

She stood upright behind a small table on which stood a solitary glass of water. 'Let's start our introductions. I am Lily Bellamy, and I am an alcoholic.'

'Good morning, Lily,' the audience countered in slightly delayed unison, some more forcefully than others. As she sat down, a burly man in a checkered flannel shirt got up slowly and repeated, 'I am Joshua Lieberstone, and I am an alcoholic.'

A short dark-haired man rose, and while he stood to attention, he almost shouted, as if reporting to an army superior. 'I am Lin Quan Ho, and I am an al-co-ho-lic.' He sat down and looked straight ahead without acknowledging the group's mumbled reply. A tall man came next, an elderly woman whispered her name, three men with short haircuts and stiff manners presented themselves in military style and the girl announced her addiction to alcohol as if she were happily surprised. When it was Cecil's turn, he waited a second, uncertain what to say.

'I am Cecil Coulthard…and I am a gambling addict *and* an alcoholic.'

'Good morning, Cecil.'

'I am Claudine Maufort and I am an alcoholic.'

'Good morning, Claudine.'

She sat down and closed her eyes. Her hand searched for a handkerchief in her bag.

Lily rose again, turned to Cecil. 'We have a few rules here. You

will find the details in the documentation map we will give you later. One rule we do have is that our newest members say a few words about themselves. We will listen and offer suggestions to help you succeed in your struggle. Of course,' she nodded to Cecil, 'trust is the basic principle of our group therapy. Everything you say here will stay within these four walls. It is probably easier for all of us if you stand here while you talk.'

As Cecil made his way between the chairs, he couldn't stop thinking how nice it would be to address the gathering with a glass of bourbon in his hand, a prank gesture in honor of his recalcitrant past, and a sure escape to a dismal future. Claudine had briefed him that he was expected to explain why he was here, but he still wasn't sure how much detail he would give.

'Eventually,' Claudine had said, 'you will tell your whole story anyway. You do realize this is your very last chance? If you blow it, I won't help you anymore. For once, don't escape, face the music.'

'Good morning.' He looked around and for a brief moment he felt as if he were back at his university among the wheat fields, lecturing bored students. The elderly gentleman with his hat on watched him closely, squinting, the military contingent sat to attention, the tall man looked at him expectantly; this audience seemed interested in what he had to say. Claudine, with a faint smile, twisted a non-existent curl around her finger.

'I got hooked on gambling and I drink a lot, too much. Over the past year it feels like I've been battered, like I've been in a Punch and Judy show, you know the puppets? And now it's up to me to get myself together again.'

The girl in the designer jeans dropped her bag. Her stuff spilled out and Claudine helped her pick it up from the floor. Joshua sneezed, and contrary to Cecil's expectations, he did not pull out a large red handkerchief but instead peeled a small paper one from a packet. Silence returned.

'I had a job at an international institution here in Washington: trade economist. I tried to figure out why prices of internationally traded commodities, like cocoa or coffee, were going up or down, and I assessed the risks producers and consumers might face in the future. I applied what is known as complexity theory; traditional

economic theory does not explain many of the pricing patterns we observe. One day the budget for my work was canceled, just like that. The same day I lost my rather large office; they put me in a windowless cubicle far away from the people I used to work with. My new boss insisted I abandon my work program and develop a new one.'

Cecil had told himself not to get excited, but his voice became agitated as he remembered Balmer's hand waving him away like an annoying insect. Everybody just listened; only Mr. Ho had a pen and a notebook as if he might take notes.

'The next week not a single study I had proposed for my new work program received a budget. I offered my resignation, but for all practical purposes I was fired. Never saw it coming.'

He noticed Claudine watching him with wide open eyes, now looking mournful. She was sitting up straight, her neatly folded handkerchief held in both hands, as if steeling herself for what was sure to come.

'A few days later I received a colorful envelope addressed to the "current resident". It contained an invitation to visit a hotel in Atlantic City, free of charge, a bus ticket and vouchers for food and drinks. I went to the hotel, where a very nice lady received me and assured me gambling was optional. The weather was lousy so I looked around the game rooms, where the very nice lady showed me how to play: black jack, craps, the works. She played; I joined in. I won 300 dollars that night. I remember because it was the only time I was ever in the black; after that day, I usually lost more than I won. The next day I won some and lost more; the very nice lady showed her face a few more times and I kept playing. I went back home and, what do you know, she called a few days later and offered me a long weekend at the hotel, all expenses paid.'

Cecil stopped. The tall man had raised a finger, as if he were still in school. Lily pointed to him.

'Yes, Robert.' Lily nodded her head in encouragement.

'You mean, you got all those drinks on the house, all of them?' He shook his head. 'They never paid my drinks in Alabama.'

Joshua Lieberstone snickered. Mr. Ho stuck his pen inside his jacket. The older gentleman took his hat off; the elderly woman pulled her shawl closer around her.

'You can probably guess what happened next. I went back to the tables, lost some money, and made a new friend. A guy who told really funny jokes and could play blackjack like a pro. He also drank a lot, not sure what, and I would join him every evening at the bar. I felt sorry for myself; he listened to my tale of woe, and he made me feel okay, like I was gambling and drinking a little to balance the wrongs of being sacked. That is what he said: "balance the wrongs". At first I thought he was making a joke, but he was serious. Boy was he serious.'

Joshua Lieberstone raised his hand. 'Are these the guys you meant when you said people were beating on you?'

'Yes. I didn't realize I was in their trap until I was already hooked. I couldn't live without the weekend excitement of the cards and the drinks. I began drinking seriously at home, waiting for the call I was sure would come. I went through the motions of getting another job, but my reference from my last employer was a killer. I was promoted to a separate room for serious players, predestined to lose serious money. I tried to win it back, lost more. The funny guy offered me a line of credit, and I accepted. It didn't take long before I got a notice from my bank to say I had exceeded my credit limit. There was a name and number to call. The bank I'd gotten the line of credit with called too. When I didn't reply, the banks became persistent, sometimes called every hour, then people showed up at my apartment with papers I needed to sign. I lost everything.'

He stopped, looked at Lily. 'That's it.'

'Mr. Coulthard, thank you very much for sharing this with us.'

'What happened next? I mean, like, where did you go, back to your parents?' The young girl interrupted, surprising Lily.

'Maybe we could discuss this another time, unless Mr. Coulthard wishes to answer your question.' She nodded to Cecil.

'My parents had already passed away. It was summer, the weather was warm and living rough wasn't that tough; when I was young, I did it all the time, I used to hike a lot. Panhandling in DC wasn't easy, but I got enough money to buy cheap booze. When the weather turned cold, I stayed at a shelter. One day I had a fight with a drug dealer and they kicked us out. Claudine here—he pointed—gave me a place to sleep, on the condition that I came here with her.'

He hesitated, took the glass from the table and swallowed the water, as if to say he accepted the liquid as the cornerstone of his future.

On the drive back to Claudine's house he was quiet, simply relieved he had told his story, the part he wanted to tell. She seemed occupied, handling rush hour traffic. While they waited at a traffic light, she spoke.

'You didn't tell me earlier about that woman at the casino.'

'I didn't mention her because I didn't want to hurt you.'

'So you did sleep with her.'

'Yes. Are you going to throw me out?'

'No.'

'You're behaving like a saint.'

'I am definitely not.'

'Why are you not surprised by my story?'

The light turned to green and she didn't answer.

He hesitated, waited a few seconds. 'She was in her thirties and she called herself Sarah. She was the honey trap; Jim, the guy with the jokes, was the one who reeled me in. They had a player identification card ready for me in my room; I went from "current resident" to a name tag before I even arrived…that's odd, isn't it?'

Claudine turned the steering wheel sharply to avoid a pothole, looked straight ahead.

'And there's one more thing, something Jim blurted out one evening after I lost some serious money. He said, "One Eskimo roll tomorrow and you'll be right side up again, Cecil."'

'What about it?' Claudine asked, preoccupied with the messy road.

'An Eskimo roll is one of the first things they teach you when you learn to kayak. To get back up after the kayak overturns. The only thing is, I never told them I could kayak. *Never.*'

'Maybe they thought every Canadian has a kayak…?'

'No, they knew I could kayak. The question is, how did they know? Somebody must have told them. Somebody from Newfoundland?'

'It's not improbable that the casino people happened to know

somebody who knew you, a lot of people must have gambled there.'

'Yes, I guess so.'

Claudine turned to him.

'Can I ask you a question?'

'Yes but, please, not about Sarah.'

'Why did you come back to me?'

Silence.

'Why to *me*?'

'The simple answer is that with the money I had left I could just pay the bus fare.'

'That was the only reason?'

'It wasn't. I met this guy in the shelter. Older, he wasn't very healthy, lived on the street for years. We panhandled together. He looked terrible and his clothes were filthy; I played straight and made sure my clothes were clean. He shook a coffee cup with coins; I asked people, "Could you spare some change, *sir*." We pooled our earnings to buy booze. The first day I met him he was pretty drunk. He kept talking about his service in Vietnam, people shouted they couldn't sleep so I took him outside, where we talked for the rest of the night.'

Claudine drove the car up to her garage. Before she got out, she asked, 'Does this booze story lead to an explanation, Cecil?'

'If you give me a little more time, yes.'

Inside, he dumped his jacket on a chair. She looked at him and frowned. 'I'll prepare coffee; you keep your stuff in your room, we agreed, remember?'

When he came back from his room, she asked him from the kitchen, 'What did your panhandling colleague tell you?'

'He worked for a propaganda outfit in the army, tried to sell the war to the locals. To me, it seemed a pretty soft job, but it took him everywhere, he saw the war at very close quarters…'

'Cecil, do me a favor. I used to live there. The locals are Vietnamese *people*. Never call them locals. Please?'

'After the army released him, he enrolled at a university, tried to study, never finished, couldn't handle the war, woke up at night screaming, even in the shelter. He would suddenly walk away when we were on the street, come back hours later, said he needed to escape from shadows dressed in black. To cut a long story short, that night

outside the shelter he told me what he had learned in life.'

'I can't wait to hear it.'

'It now sounds simplistic and crude, but hearing it from him, I was impressed. He had had it with patriotism. He had worked closely with Westmoreland's staff. He had learned tricks to instill patriotism in the locals…the people. He got drafted to fight a war he never believed in, forced to convince people it was the right kind of war, a just war against the Viet Cong and the North. He himself was convinced that fundamentalists run the religion of economics, and he quoted Plato's *Republic* to argue that democracy is doomed to failure. He had coherent arguments for everything. His explanation of flawed economics was brilliant. The basic premise of economic theory…'

'Cecil, for the last time, why did you come back here?'

'He said, "Hungry people cannot bargain." You said it once when we talked about the unfairness of the global grain trade back at ITI. I couldn't bargain anymore, my life didn't make any sense, and I thought you, with your background, would understand.'

'My background? What do you mean?' Alarmed, she looked up.

'I didn't mean anything bad, sorry. You said hunger was common, part of daily life in China. Remember?'

'Yes. Here's your coffee.' Claudine looked at him questioningly, as if his answer omitted something that could not be said.

'Thanks. I also have a question. Why did you check on me when I was out on the street? I noticed you watching me, several times. A coincidence maybe since I was panhandling close to the office? You watched me, didn't pretend to be passing by, you watched!'

'It's just the way things happened.'

10
Brussels, May 1992

Tall, gangly, Liliane de Bock was dressed in black, as black as her long hair intertwined with strands of gray loose on her shoulders. Her heavily lined eyes accentuated her mouth, too wide for her narrow, long face. When he stepped into her office, Cecil had difficulty hiding his astonishment: a *witch*! Her voice, which he vividly remembered from calling her the week before, had instantly retrieved a steamy picture of Marilyn Monroe from his repository of female images. The real Liliane touched middle age. She noticed his bewilderment; remained seated behind her desk when she took his hand after waving vaguely at the chair in front.

'Mr. Coulthard, welcome to Brussels. How was your flight? Hotel okay?'

Her voice, he still couldn't believe it: melodic with a hint of a throaty aftertaste, evocative. Confused, he sat down.

'A *café crème*?' she asked, and ordered one by phone. Waiting for the coffee, she tapped a cigarette from a blue packet. Without suggesting a 'no objection?' or offering him one, she lit up, exposing brown nicotine spots on her fingers. In the silence that followed, Liliane observed him, quite openly, through the smoke of her cigarette. Cecil looked back, without observing, trying to hide his confusion. A girl, who studiously avoided looking at him, uncomfortably handed him his coffee in a wide cup, with two local *marquisettes* and a spillage on the saucer.

Being responsible for the Oceans Program of United Resources International (URI), a Brussels-based non-governmental organization, Liliane interviewed many consultants, and—by looking at them without saying anything—could categorize most within a minute. This time she knew much more about the person sitting across from her than usual, but she couldn't place him; he didn't mind being observed, but his body language expressed distance, surprise. It didn't fit with what she knew.

'I do not believe we need to recall the circumstances that have brought you here.' She chose her words slowly.

He didn't comprehend what the sounds of her husky voice

meant, just absorbed their melody and pitch, and made sure his mouth wasn't open from sheer incredulity.

'For me, you are a consultant, exactly like any other we engage. Let me be clear, in recruiting you for this job, I am personally taking quite a risk.' She stressed the word 'personally' while looking straight at him; her long fingers tapped absent-mindedly on his resume and application letter in front of her, as if more were at stake, forcing Cecil to back up and pay attention to the real meaning of her words.

'My staff objected to your recruitment, for obvious reasons: your recent personal history and lack of exposure to the sector. You are here because I believe your lack of direct exposure to the fishing sector and your experience analyzing complex trade systems are the critical mix this assignment needs. You also have unusually strong incentives to deliver what we expect from you. My staff have selected the countries you will visit; you did read the job description.'

It was a statement, not a question. He had studied it and, like most, it was far too detailed for his taste. He wouldn't have chosen those countries—he had never visited them before—but didn't mind. Feeling lucky to have a job again, he would have agreed to swim the English Channel. One can always blame lack of data when ignoring impossible demands. It was her attitude that put him off. She moved too fast, treated him like a curious specimen in a lab that was unaware of the tests that would inevitably follow. He didn't like bureaucratic bulldozers, had never liked them. Even with a voice that elicited carnal images.

She took a long haul on her cigarette, this time waving the smoke away.

'This study has received high priority in URI's five-year research program. Our field staff have repeatedly complained that current fisheries management models are unworkable in tropical areas that have extensive small-scale fisheries and pervasive illegal industrial fishing; I saw it firsthand in Hong Kong. I believe the sector's management theories will come in for more criticism in the future and I want URI to be well ahead of the competition in providing alternatives. We want you to develop these alternatives to present fisheries management theories and models.'

She looked triumphant and depressed at the same time. Cecil

wrestled with his impression of her: angel, pinup or bully. She noticed his distraction and suddenly seemed eager to finish their meeting.

'You can discuss the idiosyncrasies of fisheries management with my staff. Making appointments in this city is nigh on impossible if you don't know the people you want to meet, so we've set you up: tomorrow you'll meet with people from the Commission dealing with fisheries agreements; in the coming days, with several NGOs active in fisheries. My staff have recommended that we extend our normal three-day period for consultant briefings. You'll get a week to dig through a pile of reports in our library. We have also booked you in as a URI representative at the fisheries economics conference next month in Wageningen. Questions?'

'Not really.'

'Unless some local war breaks out while you're around,' she tapped the ash from her cigarette to make the point, 'you should follow our travel schedule to the letter. My office and home telephone numbers are here,' she handed him a gray card bearing a dark blue logo comprising the interwoven letters URI, 'and also in the folder back at your hotel. Telex me if you encounter something unusual; call me if you hit a real crisis. URI's local contacts in Honiara and Colombo have been briefed about your mission; they can help you get a picture of local sector politics, make appointments. Contact them as soon as you arrive. In Male you should contact Hassan Manik; I know him personally. He's on the list of sector contacts in each country attached to your job description. You have a copy of the expense guidelines. We are very strict in terms of expenditure.'

She pushed a button on her telephone and a few seconds later a gray-haired woman came in, cigarette in hand. Cecil judged her age as considerably beyond retirement, in part because her dress seemed straight out of his mother's Sears catalogue from the 1950s.

'Goedele, this is Mr. Coulthard.'

As Cecil rose, Goedele took his folder, looked at it while taking a long haul on her cigarette, then mumbled in a creaky voice, 'We do know who you are.'

Cecil was sure Liliane had heard it too. She asked matter-of-factly, 'Could you handle the insurance and financial arrangements

for Mr. Coulthard and take him to the Travel Office.'

'I didn't bring much money; can I get a travel advance? I will be on the road for several months.'

'You don't have a credit card?

'No.'

'The Travel Office will provide travelers checks.'

When he suggested he would make his own travel bookings, as he had done in his previous job, Liliane waved a finger. 'Travel money is scarce here; our Travel Office will find the cheapest fares.'

Cecil nodded silently, overwhelmed by the speed of the briefing and still quietly judging Liliane. She noticed, pushed her cigarette into a large ashtray, looked at him once more, and said, 'We can have lunch tomorrow after your EU meeting; 12.30? See you at the restaurant around the corner: the *Fin de la Rue*.'

How unusual, he thought, a witch with a sense of humor.

Shrouded in drizzle, no other capital city assumed the palette of infinite shades of gray under an overcast low sky as Brussels did, a city that expressed whatever mood prevailed among its powerbrokers and politicians in their concrete and glass offices.

Waiting in a small meeting room without windows, high in the Berlaymont building, Cecil had ample time to philosophize about the architecture of dour office buildings discouraging punctuality. The middle-aged man and woman hurriedly introduced themselves in French after arriving more than a half hour late. He, with a Spanish name, exhibited the results of frequent extensive lunching in a deskbound job. She looked prim, of the mousy variety. Her card seemed surprisingly apt: ichthyologist consultant and a German name. When Cecil answered in Canadian French, they switched to English. Their body language yawned at this chore imposed by their bosses, the people whom Cecil thought he would be meeting. When Cecil explained that he had come to talk about the politically sensitive negotiations with third world countries for EU fisheries agreements, they looked knowingly at each other, and started off by summarizing official EU positions. When they referred him to a couple of glossy reports, Cecil was left musing why on earth Liliane had organized the meeting in the first place. He didn't need the expe-

rience of a time-wasting extraction of information from anonymous cogs in a large bureaucracy.

'I appreciate the time you are giving me, and your explanation of the EU position. Can I ask you a question?'

In a silent moment they demonstratively faced each other with raised eyebrows; he with a slight smirk.

'You've explained that the EU negotiates fisheries agreements with countries that have fish resources to which European fishermen want access,' Cecil continued, ignoring their pantomime. 'The EU fleet catches surplus fish—I apologize for being simplistic—that cannot be caught by the local fleet. The EU probably has other reasons—trade, financial, political—for negotiating with a country. How important are those non-fishery considerations?'

She looked again at her colleague and sighed. 'This is a very general question, Mr.—er—Coulthard. I am not sure it can be answered with a simple example. Can you be more specific, which country do you have in mind?' She sounded like a school teacher assisting a mediocre student.

'Of course,' Cecil answered confidently. This was the stuff he had dealt with at ITI for years; URI staff had briefed him about the ongoing Morocco negotiations. 'Morocco is a good example; the EU negotiated its first fisheries and trade agreements in 1988 and…'

The man raised his hand before Cecil could finish. 'What do you know about the latest fisheries negotiations?' He spat out the question.

Surprised, Cecil took his time to react. 'I believe negotiations for the next fisheries agreement have been taking place recently.'

'What do you know about the negotiations?'

Later, when Cecil evaluated the EU meeting with URI staff, they admitted that the negotiations appeared stuck but were unwilling to tell him how they had gotten hold of the draft of the EU agreement.

'I have been led to believe that the continuing access of the European fleets to Moroccan waters is being discussed.' Cecil looked straight at the Spaniard. 'In particular, for a sizeable Spanish fleet, since Spain is a relatively new member of the EU and its fishing fleet used to take most of its catch from Moroccan waters under earlier bilateral agreements.'

'How do you know this?'

'I understand that the first fisheries agreement included similar arrangements. That agreement and the protocol containing the technical details has been officially released by yourselves, the EU.' Cecil felt comfortable mentioning it—he had scanned it briefly the day before.

The German raised her high-pitched voice. 'What exactly are you studying?' She appeared eager to cut off further discussion of sensitive Spanish fleet access by her Spanish colleague.

'I understood that when URI requested this meeting, they explained my reason for wishing to meet you.'

Upset that his original question was being dumped in the wastebasket, Cecil forced himself in the role of lecturer, this time for a suddenly hostile audience.

'In a nutshell,' he said, straining to maintain a level tone, 'fisheries management is based on what research teaches us about the fish remaining in the sea after others have been caught. The sustainable level of fishing is determined by scientific models. These models only deal with the biological aspects: optimizing the weight of future catches. But a fishery is about much more than just catching fish; processing, distribution, retail, they are all part of a fishery. Income and employment are other key aspects. Institutions regulate a fishery. A political process directs the actions of these institutions.'

Cecil looked straight at her. 'You know the details better than I do; you negotiate fisheries regulations with your member countries. But to answer your question, I have been asked to explore how the current practice of fisheries management can better consider—negotiate really—these other aspects, such as employment, distribution of income, the social and financial sides, international markets and trade regulations.'

Her expression hardened. 'Did URI ask you to do all that? Do you have *any* experience in fisheries?'

Cecil had wanted to avoid mentioning complexity and a discussion of his previous exposure to fisheries, but her reaction required a showstopping answer.

'In my previous job in Washington DC I analyzed the trading of global commodities, like fishmeal and cacao, using a few principles

of complexity theory. Fisheries are complex adaptive systems, as you well know.' He whispered the last words.

In the silence that followed, the man folded his pudgy hands and shook his head. 'How can this be done? You are from Canada, I assume.' He paused, as if in silent prayer. 'Conservation is the battle cry of the Canadian Government these days, after what happened to the cod stocks. So no more foreign industrial cod fishing. The Eskimos, what you call the First Nations, need fish to survive. How are you going to compare and value what appear to be apples and oranges?' He opened his arms like a preacher questioning a heretical belief.

'In theory Canada could accept multiple objectives for its fisheries management regime, could negotiate priorities and determine the risks,' Cecil said, relieved the Spaniard had resumed civilized discussion. 'How will they do this in practice? That is the political, institutional and financial side. I do not know what is happening in Ottawa these days.'

'Mr. Coulthard,' the woman hadn't given up on her earlier questioning of Cecil's fisheries exposure, 'are you aware the EU has made efforts to develop a more up-to-date fishery policy, based not only on biological considerations? We seek an *economically* viable, efficient fishing industry that provides a fair standard of living for its participants and considers the interests of consumers in our member countries.'

'No, I am not,' Cecil admitted, recalling a draft report on his pile of unread documentation that he had ignored because of its size and bureaucratic language. 'If you will allow me a preliminary comment,' he added quickly. 'Just like in Canada, your multiple objectives could require, shall I say, operational guidance. In New Zealand small-scale fisheries largely disappeared after a quota system was introduced that aims to optimize only purely economic benefits called "rent", something similar to a monopoly profit. The country spent a small fortune on the social safety net required to obtain political approval of the system. How important are incomes and employment in the context of fisheries management in your member countries, particularly when fish stocks are heavily overexploited?'

Don't question them too hard, Cecil realized, still seeking an

answer to his first question.

'Will these principles also apply in your negotiations with Morocco?' he added, almost sneakily.

'Mr. Coulthard,' said the Spaniard, taking the opening Cecil had provided. 'Obviously, a country will object to the details of sensitive negotiations being discussed in public. I am shocked that you appear familiar with them; who briefed you? URI?'

When Cecil didn't reply, the German had clearly had enough. 'Let me also point out,' she waved her hand in front of Cecil, as if chasing a mosquito, 'our fisheries policies and agreements include financial compensation for restructuring and funds for research and development. We take the financial implications very seriously. Do you favor a different approach, as our critics do?'

Her tone suggested a rhetorical question and irritation that the meeting was taking too much of her valuable time.

'Please,' Cecil tried to soften the resurging aggression, 'you are my first contacts for a study that will take many months. I haven't come to any conclusions, about fisheries management practices or your negotiations. I look forward to having a look at your revised fisheries policy. As you indicated,' he turned to the German, 'it appears to be a major step in the right direction.'

'I am pleased you applaud the EU', the Spaniard concluded diplomatically, if with slight sarcasm. 'It happens rather infrequently.' He raised his corpulent body slowly from his chair. 'Shall we conclude this meeting?'

He extended his hand across the table. It felt soft and moist as he mumbled, 'Pleasure.'

She stood by the door, and Cecil couldn't stop himself from bowing his head, asking, 'Is there anybody with whom I could discuss fisheries complexity in more detail?'

'We leave those assessments to scientists from our member countries.' Without taking his hand, she turned on her heel.

He arrived early at the small restaurant. The window beside the reserved table overlooked the road, where cubicle workers were seeking natural light and something to eat. When Liliane appeared, folding a large black umbrella, he imagined she could have glided across

the threshold. Gallantly, he took her coat and umbrella.

'Thank you. Have you already ordered?'

'No.'

She looked around, searching for a waiter.

'*Emile!*' Her voice, straining to top the din of the luncheon crowd, still sounded husky, attracted stares from the people having lunch. Emile waved at her from behind the bar.

'The usual.'

Cecil longingly observed people having glasses of wine but ordered d*e l'eau pétillante*. She pulled out the blue packet and matches from her large black leather bag, and handed Cecil the matches. He lit her cigarette.

Emile served two plates of thinly sliced *baguette* and small, craftily sculpted pyramids of a green and yellow buttery substance, and a glass of red wine for Liliane.

'I always order the same when I lunch with consultants.' Her eyebrows lifted briefly, suggesting a chore. 'It's a local dish, goat cheese mixed with beer and some syrupy concoction. It's an acquired taste. If you are still hungry, you can order what you like from the menu.'

She laughed, but her eyes suggested this was one of her tests.

'I tell all our consultants this story, so don't be offended. When I joined URI, my old boss told me, right here in this restaurant: "Keep them on a tight leash, consultants have a habit of becoming loose cannons, doing stuff they shouldn't do, not doing all the stuff they should do, or making decisions they shouldn't. Keep looking over their shoulder, kid, and never fully trust them—most of them are boring but some can become dangerous in no time and, what is worse, often without realizing it. Unfortunately, in this business, you cannot do without them." You have experience of dealing with consultants. Do you agree?'

'Yes.'

'I want to talk about *you*. I always do when lunching with new recruits. You understand that in your case I really have to…' She nodded without embarrassment.

'Since your studious omission yesterday I've been expecting it. Go on.'

'Okay. Your CV skates over several issues. Most CVs do, but in yours they are screaming for an explanation. You mention 'marriage' and 'divorce' in the same year. Why are these words in inverted commas? Did you discover you were gay?'

Her tone was casual, suggesting the training and experience of a psychologist, and Cecil's silence was the standard reaction. Embarrassed by his own silence, he recalled having been asked these questions once before, by a military psychologist.

'We had sex, we eloped, and we found out that we had very different interests, characters.' Cecil too spoke casually, making sure he maintained eye contact. 'She came from a well-to-do family in St. John's, loved movies, cultural stuff…I wanted to hike and kayak. It's not that complicated. She was highly intelligent; we both came to the same conclusion at the same time. No hard feelings.'

Liliane seemed slightly disappointed; she pursed her lips.

'So it was lust. And this experience has prevented you from making a commitment ever since?'

Her directness shocked him again; this time he couldn't think of something personal he felt comfortable divulging.

'Sort of.'

'You secretly married again?'

'I never did.' The answer sounded more indignant than he intended. 'Never met the right girl at the right time. I've always traveled a lot, not the circumstances in which to raise a happy family.'

'Your relationships have been more casual?'

'Yes.' Cecil realized she required an answer that fitted within her human resource assessment, and he needed the job, but her bluntness reminded him of his equally intrusive army interview and raised his hackles. 'I regularly sleep with women, usually just the one.'

'You lost your job at ITI. Due to what exactly?'

Despite expecting it, he felt wrong-footed. Liliane was going for the jugular. The food had to wait but since it was clearly another test, he didn't mind. Emile looked towards their table, waiting for a sign that he could take their next order.

'ITI downsized, set new priorities in order to attract additional funding; trade wasn't one of them. It was all fairly political. They were responding to pressure from Capitol Hill.'

'But after more than ten years…?'

'They were looking for young, highly educated graduates from elite schools prepared to work on short-term contracts; a more flexible workforce that could be easily molded to suit political and financial requirements.'

'Anything else?'

'I wasn't particularly happy about how they edited my reports.'

'But it came as a real shock…?'

'Yes.' It still caused a rush of adrenaline.

'You started drinking and gambling.'

She was making a statement, not asking a question. She didn't have that information from his resume.

'Yes.'

'Why?'

He waited, to be absolutely sure about his answer. 'I suddenly lost a routine that suited me, and I met the wrong people. That particularly! Afterwards it seemed almost staged.'

'Staged?'

'Yes, I'd never gambled before, and then I met this woman and a guy who introduced me to the casino, arranged free transport, rooms, drinks. I lost quite a lot of money and then gambled big, to recoup my losses. I should have known better, the bank always wins, I never did.'

He spoke matter-of-factly, as if it were no big deal anymore.

'You got help?'

The question startled him. She didn't ask the obvious follow-up question but moved on. As if she knew at least part of his sorry story, even those details only on his secret movie reels. Who had told her? Claudine, of course, but the rest?

'A good friend of mine took pity on me, helped me, took me to AA, and brought this job to my attention. Ms. Maufort must have told you?'

'Yes,' Liliane acknowledged, after a slight hesitation. 'She did.'

Later, months later, he would finally understand what her answer implied.

The goat cheese tasted bitter, but after the interview it felt like a relief. Emile took their order. The food was excellent. Liliane

morphed into an entertaining host, telling stories about her previous job at an NGO in Hong Kong, exposing the dubious practices of merchants who were importing illegally caught live fish from all over the region. She had made a movie about it, aired by the BBC. It had caused quite a stir in Europe; Hong Kong did not renew her work permit. That reference, he remembered later, should have raised another warning flag.

'No hard feelings?' she asked almost playfully while she paid for his lunch.

11
Nouakchott, June 1992

Ahmed Sidi Aly's light blue *boubou* flapped in the wind above his traditional white pointed slippers. His small frame, typical of most people of Arab descent in Mauritania, exuded energy, though streaks of gray colored his hair and short beard. Behind the main fisheries research building, white-capped dark blue waves were being whipped up in the ocean by the wind hugging the rocky coast. The water looked forbidding, the wind felt unexpectedly frigid on this western promontory of the Sahara, even with the piercing midday sun directly overhead. He pointed to the ocean.

'You are looking at one of the richest fishing grounds in the world, Mr. Coulthard. Nutrient-rich water energized by sunlight and dust from the desert fuels the explosion of phytoplankton. Sardines love plankton, larger fish eat sardines, octopuses like the neighborhood too. We have lots of fish. Like all scientists, biologists argue about how much fish there is, about our research methods. I do too. The amount of fish is not our most pressing problem; I am convinced we still have quite a lot. What we pretend to know, but actually don't, is how to really benefit from all this fish. To put it in less politically correct terms: ultimately foreign people profit most. They occupy offices a few thousand miles northeast of us, earn our money, eat our more expensive fish. Mauritania does benefit, modestly; most local fishermen here remain poor.'

As they walked back to the large research building, Ahmed proudly summarized its history and full research agenda. He suddenly stopped, turned, his hands open towards Cecil.

'Mr. Coulthard, when you called, my initial reflex was to find an excuse; many visitors wish to see me; they take too much of my time. I changed my mind when you mentioned that you question fisheries management theory. I really would like to know what is wrong with it. An old Arab proverb says: Cursed is the science that is not useful to humankind.'

Books covered the walls of Ahmed's office, which felt and smelled like a study. Neat rows of technical reports, their spines typically blue and

dark green, and global statistics lined gray steel bookcases. The small desk was clear, unlike those in most public offices Cecil had visited recently, where rickety tables held stacks of messy stenciled papers. Offered a seat and strong tea, Cecil felt strangely relaxed, almost at home, as if the academic environment of Saskatoon had been cloned across the ocean. Here, admiring the small models of a trawler and a pirogue on the sill of the office window, he recalled his colleague in Saskatoon walking into his room with a stenciled copy of a working paper, and the brief moment of immense thrill he experienced days later when he read it.

Among endless yellow fields, as the newly minted adjunct professor, aspiring and cynical in equal measure, he had tried, really tried to question economic theories only to be rebuffed by his colleagues. After a couple of frustrating years, stung by sometimes openly snickering colleagues, his papers rejected by second-rate economic journals and a poor evaluation by his faculty head the final straw, he had given up. In his cubicle he could still dream, the visionary economist dissecting the vices of broadly accepted theory.

'This I got from a friend,' his colleague had said one day, smirking, as he entered his cubicle holding the paper between two fingers, like a dirty rag, as if stenciled working papers were at best bad science. 'It comes from an institute in Austria. My friend doesn't understand economics but he knows the author, Brian Arthur. Have a look, it may help you dismantle the dismal science.'

The paper explained the dynamics of possible outcomes. Traditional economic theory was based on 'negative feedback'; the more you do of something, the less profitable, enjoyable, every additional bit becomes. A second candy bar doesn't taste nearly as good as the first. Arthur suggested that in economics 'positive feedback' was not only possible, it occurred frequently, as it did in biological systems. Events that appeared insignificant could have major consequences, like small mutations in DNA. Arthur's discovery of positive feedback was the first recognition that economies were actually complex systems and it fundamentally undermined classical economic theory. Here, in the quiet study next to the dark blue ocean, Cecil was no longer censored by skeptical, sarcastic colleagues.

'Why is it so difficult to manage fish resources with the current models?' Cecil asked rhetorically. Ahmed had to be a good listener, dealing as he did with stubborn scientists and politicians with an inflated sense of their own worth. He simply nodded, looked to Cecil to provide the answer.

'If you compare your models with economic models, the similarities are obvious. For a long time, we economists wanted to believe our theories and models mimicked reality sufficiently closely to be useful, to give reasonable predictive power. Unfortunately, the models are unable to generate most of the strangeness seen in the real world. Why?'

Cecil inhaled, waited for a reaction, but none came.

'Economies, national and global, are what are now known as complex adaptive systems. One can try to represent part of the system in a model, applying simple abstract assumptions, as economists have done for over a century, but never the entire system. Many components and connections, such as politics and cultural aspects, remain largely hidden. Contrary to prevailing assumptions, economies are never in equilibrium. They are never stable, are always adjusting, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly—like a work in progress at multiple levels that never ends—in response to human behavior and external events that economists have not considered or their assumptions have not captured.'

Cecil paused, looked around for something that could be used as a blackboard. No luck. Ahmed closed his eyes repeatedly, as if he had a sudden headache. Cecil's student audience on the prairie gave similar signals when they got itchy. His current lecture required fishy specifics.

'Let me turn to fisheries. You use scientific models to optimize how much fish can be sustainably caught, a choice between postponing catching some fish in order to have more fish available in the sea in the future, and catching more now. I am convinced a fishery, any fishery, operates in at least three complex adaptive systems: there's definitely one below the surface of the ocean, possibly one on the surface, and one onshore. One cannot, over a longer period of time, "optimize" by considering only the weight of the catch. That doesn't address many of the aspects important to people engaged

in or affected by a fishery, or what happens with the fish once it has been landed.'

'You are quite sure about this?' Ahmed asked suddenly. 'My biologist colleagues, and probably your economist friends, may not agree with what you have just said.' He managed a faint, diplomatic smile.

'You are right about my former colleagues. Yes, they dismissed my criticism of economic theory. I gave up trying to convince them.'

Ahmed took a slender report from a drawer.

'A large foreign mission recently looked at our fishing sector; I wrote this report for them. It describes what has happened here over the past ten years, the decisions made, good ones, bad ones—well, that judgment depends on whose perspective you adopt, those who benefited or those who suffered. You can read it at your leisure back at your hotel.'

Grateful to be getting critical information without having to ask for it, Cecil thanked Ahmed profusely. Fending off Cecil's praise, Ahmed raised a finger.

'You have presented one theoretical reason why our current objective of fisheries management may not be reached. Let us now talk about the real world, about Mauritania, about practical answers. I would value your opinion of the main recommendation made by this mission. The team recommended that here in Mauritania we should introduce a system of individual transferable quotas for octopus. They are our most valuable fish. You are familiar with ITQs?'

Cecil nodded.

Ahmed articulated slowly, both questioning Cecil and giving the impression he was questioning himself.

'The team believes ITQs will be good for us, will improve profits and fleet efficiency. They claim the recent experience with ITQs introduced in New Zealand and Iceland has been quite positive. Will they work in Mauritania?'

'Quotas give a single fishing vessel the right to catch a certain amount of a specific fish species, say 500 tons of octopus, in a particular year. As in economics, if you wish to manipulate a complex system, you can never predict all the unwanted or unexpected consequences.'

Ahmed placed his index finger on his upper lip and pointed to

Cecil with his other hand.

'Stop right there! What consequences?'

Later Cecil felt he should have been less explicit. But he felt Ahmed, who had given him an unexpectedly hospitable reception, deserved a straight answer. Briefed in Brussels about the dogmas of ITQ theory, he believed he could elaborate.

'ITQs require institutional and political "basics" to be in place: effective research, a fisheries administration with enforcement powers, and a judicial system that really does punishes cheaters. Those are necessary conditions. But the real keys to ITQ effectiveness are its ultimate objectives—creating and maintaining a complex biomass and deciding who should ultimately catch fish and benefit from the ITQs. ITQs may make a few people very rich and most fishermen and others poor. In New Zealand many small-scale fishermen left the sector, sold their quota. In Tasmania's lobster fishery wealthy lawyers in Melbourne became large quota owners and pocketed most of the benefits.'

'You believe the recommendation made by the team may be… premature?'

Cecil realized he had reached the limits of his speculation comfort zone. This was Ahmed's test, the point where theory met the real world. He should step back. He didn't.

'Does Mauritania have the basics in place?' he asked. 'Does political discussion within Mauritania and with foreign fleet owners and the EU allow for negotiations and compromises? Some of your fish stocks are heavily exploited. Who should be asked to catch less? Foreign vessels? The Ministry of Finance may not like that, they earn a lot of financial compensation from the EU fisheries agreement. The catch share of the local industrial fleet may be equally sacrosanct. The distribution of ITQs, now and in the future, requires difficult compromises, perhaps even financial compensation for small-scale fishermen.'

Cecil felt like a preacher raising a moral question without the backup of a Holy Book.

Ahmed took quick notes, suddenly appeared irritated. He hadn't gotten the answer he had hoped for. He spoke softly, without looking at Cecil.

'In my paper I explain the many complications we face in Mauritania. We do not yet have the severe overfishing problems experienced in Canada where the cod recently disappeared. Many foreign vessels used to fish around Newfoundland. Such collapse shouldn't happen in Mauritania.' Ahmed pronounced the last words as if Cecil personally had something to do with the dwindling cod resources, and a better solution was required here.

The harbor of St. John's overflowing with rusty industrial trawlers, most of them from communist countries, this sudden picture overwhelmed Cecil. Trawlers like the model in the window. In a flash he watched the pickup truck of the Chinese supermarket manager Shi-Liang driving along the harbor quay. It turned. Several people got out to board one of the fishing vessels. No! That movie was the last thing he wanted to face right now. He walked over to the window, breathing heavily, avoided looking at the trawler model, watched the dark blue ocean where white caps sprayed tears whenever they reached the rocks.

'Please, could you excuse me for a moment?'

He took his time in the bathroom. Why had this scene hit him now, so suddenly? Was it part of a dream not consciously remembered? What had triggered this flash of his imagination? He hadn't even been there on the quay; had never seen what had happened, the car, the people. 'Get yourself together, don't blow it,' he said softly. 'Don't get distracted; focus.' He washed his face; the cold water calmed him down so that he felt ready to face more questions.

When he returned, Ahmed tapped at the paper on his desk.

'As you just explained,' Ahmed continued as if nothing had happened, 'with fish you have to look beyond what happens in the ocean. Too many foreign and local vessels are catching our most valuable species, octopus, just like the cod in Canada. We, the scientists in this building, are convinced catches should be reduced now to rebuild the octopus stock. We talked, then talked some more to many people. In the end, a political decision was made. Half the fleet of local pirogues—they catch octopus very effectively and cheaply—was told to stop fishing. It was a political decision; many of these small-scale fishermen come from Senegal.'

Ahmed walked to his bookcase, slid the glass door across and without hesitation took out a green-covered report with two titles, one in French, one in Arabic.

'We know what is happening in our industry here. We recently completed this study; our own people compiled it, for our government. The conclusions are simple. The local industrial fleet of ice-carrying vessels is mainly losing money, reducing their catches now would add insult to injury. These old second-hand vessels, bought abroad with large local bank loans—that are not being repaid—are too often in port waiting for repairs. Our fish-processing plants onshore are unable to repay their bank loans because most foreign vessels freeze the catch on board and land it directly in Las Palmas, not here. Because of these dud fishery loans Mauritania faces a serious financial crisis.'

He pointed to his own report on his desk and shook his head, as if reality invited disbelief.

'We had to ask international organizations to sort out the financial mess, hence the recent mission. We are working with the Chinese to provide new vessels for local fishing companies. But at a price! We receive financial compensation under the European Union fisheries agreement, funding we use to support a substantial part of our national public budget. To get the money we are forced to accept lots of Spanish and Dutch vessels in our waters. Former Soviet vessels are also still fishing here because they pay license fees. It is complex. How can ITQs solve all these problems?'

Cecil realized it was time to admit he needed to do his homework.

'Can I read your paper first?'

He left the obvious conclusion hanging in the air. Ahmed agreed, clasped his hands together, sighed.

'Can we meet again? Please call this number, we could meet at your hotel.'

Cecil's taxi moved erratically as the driver turned the wheel indifferently to avoid potholes. The reddish velvet dust covering the entire city following a recent storm had penetrated the car's interior. It covered everything Cecil touched but did not temper his cheerful

feeling. Mauritania appeared to be an almost perfect case for illustrating fisheries complexity. After the frustrations of the past days, meeting with uninterested bureaucrats, Ahmed had shown him he was right on track. If only he could figure out what type of answer he should look for, something acceptable inside the black box of the local political scene. No consultant knowledge was needed here but wisdom distilled through complexity. He didn't have it yet.

The coffee shop in the hotel was empty but not yet closed. After the waiter had put a generous portion of rice and goat stew in front of Cecil, a short, heavily built bald man entered. He took off his dark glasses and waited, his sharp eyes observing, roaming the restaurant. He walked over to Cecil's table, introduced himself as Wong Oh, shipyard representative, could he join him? No more quiet lunch was Cecil's initial reaction. His feeling of contentment prevailed, he introduced himself when shaking Wong Oh's hand and waved to the chair in front of him.

'Please, take a seat.'

Wong Oh sat down, placed his glasses on the table and clapped his hands. The waiter appeared, rushed to the table. Wong Oh pointed to Cecil's plate and ordered.

'One more.'

'So, Mr. Coulthard, what brings you to Nouakchott?' His voice sounded tired, as if he were repeating a well-worn question.

Surprised by the directness, Cecil's apprehension about this disturbance of his lunch returned.

'Research.' Cecil waited a moment, not certain he should elaborate. 'I study fisheries. Mauritania is one of my case studies.'

'You are enjoying Mauritania?'

'It's my first visit. So far it appears quite interesting.'

Wong Oh's eyes searched beyond Cecil; he drummed his fingers on the table while waiting for his plate.

'I understand Chinese fishing vessels have been recently introduced here, Mr. Oh. Is your company building those vessels?'

'My—er—company has built fishing vessels for Mauritania,' Wong Oh answered, looking past Cecil, as if speaking to some distant guest.

'Have more vessels been ordered?' Cecil tried to sound genuinely interested.

'Maybe, we are looking at possibilities, new opportunities.' This time Wong Oh's eyes searched Cecil's face.

'Are you based here, Mr. Oh?'

'Not really, Mr. Coulthard, just visiting.' His lips showed a slight smile, but his eyes didn't. His fingers kept drumming.

'Could I ask you a favor?'

Surprised, Wong Oh leaned back, his fingers stopped. He nodded, barely.

'Could you put me in touch with somebody managing the Chinese vessels?'

Wong Oh closed his eyes briefly, leaned forward, waved his finger.

'No, Mr. Coulthard, my company does not manage the vessels we built, they are owned and managed by local people, local companies.'

'Do the vessels have foreign crews?'

'Chinese captains and engineers operate the vessels, with local fishermen.'

'Building and delivering a fleet of fishing vessels, training crew, organizing maintenance; it must be a big, shall I say, project. Is there a project manager? Could I meet him?'

Wong Oh closed his eyes again and his face was expressionless, like a serene Buddha. It took a while. Cecil waited, patiently, curious about Wong Oh's reaction. He watched the fingers; they didn't move. The pieces of goat partly hidden in the rice were releasing inviting spicy flavors. Finally, Wong Oh opened his eyes, pushed his chair back and leaned across the table.

'How much longer will you be staying here, Mr. Coulthard?' The tone was ominous, and Cecil now regretted his hospitality and his question.

'About a week.'

'Well, I hope you can leave sooner, Mr. Coulthard.'

Wong Oh grabbed his glasses, walked to the kitchen door, canceled his lunch and left without saying goodbye.

The incident killed Cecil's festive mood. The rice didn't taste as he had expected; the goat must have met its maker at a ripe old

age. Back in his room, with a view of the badly maintained garden of brownish plants, his unease continued. Who was Wong Oh, and what did he want? When he called Ahmed's number, his assistant answered; Ahmed had gone home.

He fell asleep. Knocking on his door woke him up. A bright full moon in the black desert sky was looking in through his window, almost as bright as the sun.

'Yes.'

'Un message, monsieur.'

When he opened the door, a tall black man in a rumpled black suit showed him an envelope with his room number. He smiled.

'Bonsoir monsieur; c'est pour vous, monsieur Coulthard?' The man spoke slowly, as if repeating a vaguely remembered sentence.

'Qui, merci monsieur.'

The man offered the letter to him, slowly, reluctantly. Did he need a financial contribution for his effort? When Cecil went back into the room to grab some ouguiya, the man laughed before walking away.

'Un message pour monsieur Coulthard, bonsoir, bonsoir monsieur.'

The envelope contained only a business card: M. Mohamed Ould Mahmoud, *Conseiller*, an address and telephone number. When Cecil got down to the entrance hall with his ouguiya, the hotel reception appeared empty. In the office a guard was half asleep. He hadn't seen or heard a tall man in a black suit, anybody at all for that matter. Back in his room, Cecil locked the door. He couldn't sleep anymore, read Ahmed's report and watched the bright moon.

They met in the hotel coffee shop. A tall man wearing a dark shiny business suit; Cecil offered him coffee after their initial handshake. In a baritone voice, Mr. Mahmoud inquired about his stay in Nouakchott, the hotel, the dust, and his family. Cecil didn't have any, and said so. A gentle inquiry about Mr. Mahmoud's family and health triggered a long monologue about his three wives and quite a few children.

'I am the proud father of seven boys, Mr. Coulthard.'

He didn't mention any daughters.

'You must be. I am grateful that you have come here and won't

take much of your valuable time. I understand you are involved with the Chinese fishing fleet here.'

'You know, Mr. Coulthard, for quite some time Mauritania allowed foreign vessels, Soviet, Dutch, Spanish vessels, to fish here. We Mauritanians are not fishermen. We are traders! A few tribes in the south fish, people from St. Louis in Senegal fish here, but Mauritanians have been traders for a very long time.'

He looked pleased, almost proud, as if his forebears had made the only sensible choice. He put his finger tops together in front of his face, as if he were about to tell something he had been told to be careful about sharing.

'Years ago, we started to buy foreign vessels, old vessels with many problems. Our people lost money and needed a different solution. My company has long traded goods from East Asia; we have reliable contacts in China. I am happy I could be of some help maintaining contacts with the Chinese shipbuilder. My company handles the local organization here, now that the ships have been delivered.'

'This was an arrangement between private companies only, Mr. Mahmoud?'

'The simple answer is yes and no. Let me explain. Mauritania is a country with many traditions. Several families have been quite important in its history, and remain so. They have interests, and sometimes wish to participate in commercial activities. When a Chinese company has a commercial contract in a foreign country, the Chinese government needs to approve it. Particularly when the deal requires Chinese financing. In Mauritania the fishing companies required agreement from the government. So both governments were also, let me say, indirectly involved in the contract.'

'The vessels are now owned by local companies?' Cecil lifted his coffee cup, waiting for a yes-or-no answer, but Mr. Mahmoud's frankness continued to surprise.

'They are, in a way, but arrangements have been made with our government to guarantee repayment of the loans.'

Cecil had analyzed similar loan deals in other countries for ITI, but why did Mr. Mahmoud not show any qualms about explaining what must have been a politically sensitive deal to a total stranger like himself? Curious about how much more Mr. Mahmoud would

be willing to divulge, he asked, 'These are US dollar loans?'

'Of course, Chinese contracts are always in dollars.'

'Does the contract stipulate what happens with the catch?'

Mr. Mahmoud appeared slightly taken aback by the question, turned around to the door as if the answer might appear from outside.

'It could be,' he hesitated again, 'that repayment is possible with fish exports.'

His reluctance to answer this question contrasted with his earlier frankness, and he appeared well aware of it. Cecil had seen it all before, many developing countries were dotted with foreign loans structured to acquire a raw material cheaply. Would Mr. Mahmoud be the intended go-between? Cecil decided against pursuing this part of the story any further, preferred Mr. Mahmoud as the source of less politically sensitive information.

'Will more vessels be ordered?'

'That is a difficult question, Mr. Coulthard. It all depends, these decisions require political consultations, and many people need to approve them. Of course, we are confident the vessels will perform well.' Unintentionally, he had predicted Cecil's next question.

'The vessels are already fishing? The crews have been trained, they are performing as planned?'

'The captains are still training the crews. We tried to select experienced industrial fishermen, but that wasn't easy. Our Mauritanian industrial fleet employs few local crew members. The Chinese vessels are small; Chinese people are not tall. We ended up selecting short pirogue fishermen.'

'How did the vessels get here?'

As Mr. Mahmoud continued, recounting the tribulations of the transport, Cecil wondered why the man across the table was so uncharacteristically open, almost guileless, divulging information about the vessels while asking no questions of his own about what Cecil was doing here. Mr. Mahmoud happily, almost eagerly complied when Cecil inquired about the vessels' technical details: engine horsepower, dimensions of the nets. It dazzled Cecil, who frantically scribbled notes but could not keep up. To stop the torrent of data, Cecil asked whether his guest would like another coffee.

'That is very kind of you, Mr. Coulthard, but no thank you, I think I have given you what I can recall about the vessels. I believe I need to go. Thank you for the coffee.'

As they shook hands, Cecil asked on a whim, 'One last question, has Mr. Oh been involved in this contract from the very beginning?'

'Oh no. Mr. Oh showed up about a week ago, after our regular yard representative suddenly went on leave. I'd never met Mr. Oh before.'

That evening Ahmed called; could he come by? They preferred the inconvenience of dimmed lights in the coffee shop—Cecil failed to locate light switches—to the ears of passing visitors in the hotel reception area.

'I am afraid I cannot offer you coffee.'

Ahmed shook his head, then sat down in silence at a small corner table with his face to the kitchen door.

'I understand you met Mr. Mahmoud?' Ahmed avoided the usual introductory niceties, looked straight at Cecil.

'Yes,' Cecil answered, raising his brows.

'How did you get in touch with him?'

Not expecting this kind of interrogation, Cecil fired back. 'I tried to contact you, but you had left. Who is Wong Oh?'

Ahmed slowly rubbed his chin with one hand. 'Did you tell him anything about my report?'

'No!' Cecil answered heatedly. 'Let me explain. Uninvited, Wong Oh walked in here while I was having lunch yesterday. Told me he represented a Chinese shipyard. Strangely enough, he seemed reluctant to talk about his own role, so I asked him if somebody could tell me more about the Chinese fleet. He said he hoped I would leave quickly and left abruptly. Last night I received Mr. Mahmoud's business card. I called him and we talked this morning. So, who is Wong Oh?'

'After we ordered the vessels, a yard representative set up shop in Nouakchott,' Ahmed said quietly. 'A nice guy. He left about a week ago, well after the ships had arrived, it didn't make sense. Anyway, Wong Oh arrived the same day to replace him, I understand temporarily. He let Mr. Mahmoud handle the day-to-day activities of the

fleet. I don't really know who he is, or who or what he represents. Sorry.'

They talked about Ahmed's report, ITQs. Ahmed hinted at the convoluted history of both recent Mauritanian internal politics and the fisheries negotiations with the European Union.

'When you come back some day, I may tell you more. Now, without context, my impression may confuse you.' Ahmed refused to elaborate.

Feeling slightly embarrassed he had even raised the subject, Cecil felt he should at least finish what he had started the day before.

'We humans have a tendency to seek simple solutions for highly complex problems. In my previous work I was often lured into imagining a simple solution because that was expected of me: a solution that any politician could throw about. But there are no simple solutions for problems in complex systems; it's a fallacy.'

He moved his fingers to indicate quotation marks. When Ahmed didn't react, he continued.

'You have been so kind to trust me, a visitor you didn't expect. I owe you my honest consideration of the mission conclusion, about ITQs. In principle they may help you to reduce the risk of the octopus stock collapsing, but they can only be a small part of the solution. As a trade economist, I am used to looking at value chains, competition, political aspects, negotiations. You are not the only country fishing around here for octopus; Morocco catches a lot, so does Spain. Complex markets for octopus in Japan and around the Mediterranean take most of your exports. As you say in your report, you are a price taker in those markets; your product quality can be a problem.'

Cecil pushed back his chair.

'After reading your report, I am convinced you need more than ITQs to improve the benefits derived from octopus exports. I do not have to convince you, a biologist, that some regional agreement is needed on how to share the octopus stocks and rebuild their biomass. Your Ministry of Finance has a major interest in maintaining the budget support gained with the EU agreement. One option may be to require the EU and others to accept an initial, modest reduction of catches, to avoid a major reduction of EU budget support, and in parallel to increase the fishing license fees of other foreign vessels.

Can you negotiate a remit of your dud bank loans? I can imagine many more actions, but I don't know what other conclusions were reached by the recent team. Trying to solve Mauritania's current conundrum only with ITQs is, I am quite certain, a questionable sleight of hand.'

Nearly three hundred miles north of Nouakchott, the relics of fisheries policy were in plain view. Rusty hulls were stuck in the mud in front of the main quay, others were spread around at a distance, forever anchored as the heat, salt and wind destroyed them ever so slowly. Dozens of decrepit fishing vessels were the main residents of the port of Nouadhibou, clogging up the protected anchoring area. Forever waiting for their ignominious end at the hands of breakers who never arrived. Breakers required donor money and legal permissions from owners hidden behind frequent transfers between opaque shipping registers in faraway countries. Because the owners either owed money to banks reluctant to give up on their only remaining surety, or could not be traced, the permissions were endlessly pending. Breakers required payments, preferably in advance, a necessary precaution when donor payments involved complex administrative fiats issued by multiple local bureaucrats earning a pittance. Bureaucrats may demand bribes, carefully concealed. So the wrecks remained, rusty gray and dark brown under the hot sky, the tide and wind swaying their hulls until, like Alzheimer's, the mud erased them permanently.

Nouadhibou gained fame with its railway, moving iron ore from the mine at Zouérat, deep in the desert, to the red-dusted, fat bulk carriers at the very tip of the peninsula. As an unofficial service, it also transported hobos hundreds of miles along the track. Rumbling trains passed by at the back of Cecil's hotel and woke him late at night; in the first rays of the desert dawn people moved slowly past his window, as if transported only by the sound of the train, Buddhas sitting on top of the ore in the railway cars, their bodies wrapped entirely in blankets.

From Peter's bungalow a steady rumble was audible, the ore being

dumped into a large bulk carrier nearby, red dust rising above the ship. Peter, a biologist tracking the catches of the industrial fishing fleets, preferred being away from the capital and its bureaucracy. Ahmed had suggested Cecil pay him a visit, if for no other reason than to have a look at the main fishing harbor and get a feel for the difficulties researchers faced in getting reasonable estimates of actual catches as compared to the statistics officially reported by foreign vessels.

Peter mumbled to himself under his gray beard, his natural commentary on the daily frustrations of living in the middle of nowhere and analyzing mendacious catch statistics continuing, even when he had company. After Peter had offered him a beer—'not the best but I can't be picky, foreign fishermen drink whatever is available'—Cecil felt strangely relaxed here between the Sahara and the ocean, the rumble providing soothing background music. He was back where he had been years ago, traveling, talking to interesting people, even grappling with questions for which he didn't yet have an answer. He asked for a glass of water.

'We export three things from here,' Peter said, waving an arm towards the harbor. 'Iron ore, fish and dust.' When Cecil raised his eyebrows, Peter grinned mischievously, as if he might go on to set Cecil a few little tests.

'The Saharan dust storms move very fine particles by air to the sea, fertilizing coastal waters, and even across the ocean they fertilize the Brazilian rain forests. Without the nutrients from the dust, the rainforest probably wouldn't be lush—Brazil has pretty poor soils. The sardines off the coast here feed on plankton feeding on algae, which require nutrients, provided by dust, blown for free from the desert, and by cold upwelling water originating in the Antarctic.'

He took his glass, swirled it gently as if tasting wine, took a long sip, foam sticking to his mustache, put the glass back on the table and with a triumphant smile mumbled, 'These fish feed West Africa.'

'Mauritanian fish?' Cecil asked incredulously.

'Yes. It is simple if you understand the technology. The Dutch fleet here operates large freezer trawlers. They have a worldwide distribution system for frozen small pelagics caught in Dutch waters so they feed a lot of fish caught in Mauritanian waters into their

distribution network and market them in Ghana, Nigeria and Ivory Coast.' Peter emptied his glass as if to prove his point.

'Why did Mauritania invest in fisheries? Because it has lots of fish! Industrial fishing vessels from Europe used to preserve their catch on ice; Mauritania bought those old vessels. Local people had optimistic financial assumptions or were misinformed. Greedy people with the right connections invested with only borrowed money. And, of course, Europeans and others were happy to get rid of their old vessels. Anyway, most people didn't realize what they didn't know; they were missing critical parts of the big picture.' He grabbed the wine bottle and laughed. 'Can I offer you something stronger, wine?'

Cecil always preferred to take a taxi to the airport after a country visit in order to avoid making embarrassing small talk with people he had met professionally but barely knew personally. Besides, he would usually be worn out. But Ahmed wished to drop him off at the airport.

'Taxis here are not that reliable and I want to make sure you actually leave,' he joked over a short farewell dinner. The plane was scheduled to depart at midnight, but Cecil insisted on getting there early, a neuroticism fed by the few occasions on which flights had left earlier than scheduled and unannounced. It would spare Ahmed a late return home. The moon, as bright as ever, outshone the few streetlights. On the tarmac the Boeing 747, its body and tail brightly lit, looked bizarrely huge next to the modest airport buildings, as if ready to prance above the desert. It was the only flight leaving that evening, a sign of the airline's monopoly.

Lots of men dressed in *boubous* or dark suits filled the departure area, a few women and many children dotted between them. The check-in desks were not yet open. Cecil invited Ahmed to have a glass of tea at the bar. Seated at the small table, he had difficulty saying something that didn't feel like small talk. He recalled the people passing by his hotel window.

'It must be pretty cold, spending a whole night sitting on top of a train.'

'It is, but don't underestimate the tribal people in the desert,' Ahmed explained. 'They are used to these temperatures; they are tough people.'

'I watched them, these men I have never met and never will, sitting there stoically, one after another after another, an endless line of people moving, it seemed to me, to some ultimate destination. It did something to me. Spoke to me in some eerie way.'

Ahmed laughed.

'The desert does that to you, it surprises, reveals delusions.'

They said goodbye when Cecil moved to passport and customs control. 'You have been a tremendous help, Ahmed, really. I am so happy to have met you. You will get a copy of my report as soon as it's finished.'

Then, suddenly emotional, he added, 'My visit was a real eye-opener; it confirmed my feeling about simplistic resource models. Thanks again for your kind reception and hospitality. I hope to return the favor one day.'

After they shook hands, he turned towards the passport desk and recognized a tall black man in a crumpled dark suit, standing in a corner. When Cecil turned around again in the customs area, he was gone.

12
Wageningen–Muscat, July 1992

He was expecting a call from Kate: 'Why did you leave after the first day of the conference?' He had prepared an answer, of sorts. But it was Liliane who woke him up, quite early. The noise of a vacuum cleaner next door in his dated, wood-paneled Wageningen hotel couldn't muffle her voice. She didn't bother to start off with small talk, didn't ask him what had really happened in Mauritania—he had sent her a short telex that 'all has gone quite well' without explaining the 'quite'—but asked him what he knew about Yemen.

'I've never had any dealings with the country. They don't trade much internationally, I believe. The South used to be Marxist. Did it unite with the North a couple of years ago? Wait…you cancelled my visit to Yemen. The local contact wasn't available?'

'He is now but not in PDRY.' She used the acronym of the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen.

'On the way to Honiara the day after tomorrow you will have a four-hour stopover in Muscat. We have arranged for you to meet the Yemeni director of a public fishing company at the airport. His experience of managing the lobster fishery in a former Soviet satellite state is unique. You can meet him in the transfer area. Carry a copy of an FAO report, so he can identify you. His name is Hameed, easy enough, a tall man with a mustache.'

She rang off when he asked for the full name. When he called the fishery specialist in her office a little later, he was referred to a country research study, a document he had left in Brussels. The specialist faxed him over its summary. What a way to start an interview, and his 36-hour trip, with three stops and plane changes; URI travel policy certainly did select the cheapest fares.

The tall mustached man was waiting when Cecil entered the transit area. One look at the report was enough for him to shake hands. Mr. Hameed appeared relaxed, courteous, with more than a hint of alertness, quickness of mind.

'You are welcome, Mr. Coulthard, welcome to Oman. Can I offer you some coffee?' He pointed to an area with large sofas.

'Please be comfortable.'

A waiter appeared out of nowhere, returned with two small cups and a tall silver pot with a sharp bird bill of a spout, from which he poured coffee from a height.

When Mr. Hameed did not react to the ubiquitous inquiry about family and health, Cecil introduced himself, explained his interest in the complexity of fisheries and their management, and Liliane's sudden request. Listening attentively, Mr. Hameed didn't interrupt, and he remained silent as Cecil briefly summarized his visit to Mauritania. Then he spoke, slowly.

'So, how can I help you?'

'I understand you manage a number of small fishing boats with contracts to supply lobsters to your company, you process their catches and export the product. That seems fairly unique.'

Cecil didn't mention any public company, or 'from the former South Yemen, or PDRY'.

'Surely you are aware that other countries operate such arrangements?' Mr. Hameed asked. 'Close by; Kuwait operates a mainly public shrimp fleet linked directly to processing for export. Although I admit it isn't a Marxist country.' He smiled, softening his implied criticism.

'I didn't know that, but what interests me is what you, your company has done to make the operation a success in what must have been, until recently, quite difficult circumstances.'

Leaning back in the soft sofa pillows, Mr. Hameed shook his head.

'No, my operation is not a success in the sense that we earn big profits. Sometimes more, sometimes less, sometimes we lose money, it all depends.'

He sipped his coffee, closed his eyes. Cecil, unsure whether the closed eyes suggested Mr. Hameed felt there was nothing more to talk about since he was meeting with somebody bereft of any local information, lifted his cup and savored the strong coffee, catching its slight lemon aftertaste.

'Before we go any further,' Mr. Hameed again spoke softly, 'Please tell me what you know about the lady who told you to see me.'

Surprised by Mr. Hameed's change of tack, Cecil elaborated, keen

to salvage his meeting.

'Ms. de Bock is the director of the Oceans Program at URI, an NGO based in Brussels; it operates in many countries. This is the first time I've worked for them. I have spoken with her occasionally, mostly over lunch. URI has asked me to look at the risks and scientific weaknesses of current practices in fisheries and their management. URI staff believe your company has been able to avoid or at least limit those risks in a rather, shall I say, challenging environment.'

'Mr. Coulthard,' began Mr. Hameed in a sharper tone, 'when I replied to the telex by saying I could not meet you in Aden, your Ms. de Bock was very persistent. She called me just two days ago to arrange this meeting, here. How did she know I was in Muscat?'

'I have no idea. My original itinerary included Aden, but it was scrapped when I was still in Brussels. Like you, I got a call from Ms. de Bock two days ago.'

'You know nothing about her, her background, or her staff maybe?' Mr. Hameed was no longer smiling.

'She interviewed me for the job, was very thorough, knew more about me than I expected.'

'Did she mention any contacts she may have in Yemen?' Mr. Hameed's smile reappeared. 'In the Ministry of Fishwealth, the Planning Ministry, perhaps people working for foreign organizations in Sana'a or Aden?'

'No, we didn't talk at all about Yemen because my visit was cancelled.'

All of a sudden Mr. Hameed bowed towards Cecil, 'I can understand why.' He ticked off the points on his outstretched fingers. 'Aden is not an easy place to get to, particularly now; it takes time to get a visa; and Yemen has few consulates where you can get one. In fact,' he paused, 'I wonder why Aden was included in the first place.'

'I do know URI staff get a lot of their information from reports written by international financial institutions and NGOs. One summarized your lobster operation. Purely from a fisheries management point of view, it makes sense to look at a country like Yemen where you integrate the management of fishing, local processing and export,' Cecil felt obliged to offer a modest defense of Liliane's decision.

Mr. Hameed leaned back. 'The World Bank finances more than one project in Yemen, people from Washington visit, I meet them, we talk about my company. That may explain why she wanted you to know about my company.' He leaned forward again.

'But it would have been much easier for you to read the report in Brussels. And since nobody knew about my travel plans, not even in Aden, I am left wondering, Mr. Coulthard: how did Ms. de Bock find out where I was and why did she insist we meet in person?'

Cecil was briefly tempted to volunteer his very first impression of Liliane, to suggest a supernatural ability, but kept quiet.

Thinking aloud, Mr. Hameed pondered his own questions. 'Several consulates and embassies used to be located in Aden; most moved to Sana'a. They must still have contacts in the South. No. Aha! Yes! Your lady, does she have any connections in China?'

Cecil didn't answer immediately, was struck by the possibility that in some way he himself might be part of the connection.

'What has China to do with your visit here?' he asked.

Mr. Hameed breathed heavily.

'China is a large country, Mr. Coulthard. With Mr. Deng now in charge it will become an interesting market, a very interesting market. My lobsters are sold mostly in Muscat and Dubai. I have tried to sell directly in Western European markets, but that is more difficult; I still have a little quality problem. Lobster from the south of Yemen also faces, shall I say, an image problem. I am here to explore a market that does not care about image, accepts the quality I can deliver. You haven't answered my question.'

'She used to work in Hong Kong.'

'Interesting. When was that?'

'Not sure, some years ago. She told me she had worked there, but her visa wasn't renewed.'

'Hong Kong? Hong Kong?' Mr. Hameed kept his gaze fixed on his empty cup, held it in his hands as if reading tea leaves. Suddenly he looked straight at Cecil, without a smile.

'Did you meet any Chinese people in Brussels?'

'No, not at URI.'

'In Brussels?'

'No again, but…'

'Yes?'

'I met a Chinese man in Nouakchott, about two weeks ago.' Cecil felt inexplicable relief at mentioning it.

'You did, ah, Mr. Coulthard, very interesting.' Mr. Hameed's face brightened, his voice became almost tender, he leaned in towards Cecil. 'Did you do any business with him?'

'Well,' the sudden change in tone encouraged Cecil to explain. 'He happened to approach me in my hotel, a representative of a Chinese shipyard. He was not very, what shall I say, friendly, for reasons I still don't understand. But he did help me meet the Mauritanian manager of the project that trains local crews for the fishing fleet the Chinese delivered recently. That manager used to trade with China.'

'I see. Ms. de Bock finds out somehow—we do not know how—that I will be in Muscat, and you and I talk. But why? Really, why? Does your Chinese man play a role in all this? That, Mr. Coulthard, is something I would very much like to know.'

Cecil nodded in agreement.

When Cecil indicated that he wanted to leave to catch his plane, Mr. Hameed's reluctance to discuss his activities in Yemen evaporated. He had much to say about his contracts with the fishermen, the closed season, and the rejection of berried lobster females his company had been able to enforce to avoid overfishing. He hinted at the political confusion that followed the unification of the North and South, fishermen now using illegal nets, and his inability to stop them doing so. He talked about the past, about the PDRY, his PDRY. His monologue diverted to cover the war that had brought the PDRY's short history to an end, and how the new, unified Yemen had been born, its identity uncertain at birth, Marxist or traditional Arab. In fifteen minutes Cecil got much more than would have been contained in a heavily edited official report. When he turned to leave for the departure lounge, Mr. Hameed shook his hand. Cecil thanked him, feeling grateful and embarrassed.

'Please Mr. Coulthard, your answer to my question about meeting any Chinese people: I almost accepted it. Until you said that the Chinese gentleman was apparently there for business reasons. If that

were the case, he couldn't have known why you were there unless he had been briefed; I am guessing now, but he must have received his orders from an organization, Chinese maybe? Why? I admire your inventiveness, but I still do not know why it was so important we met. Was it a message? For you? For me? It's something to think about. Have a nice flight.'

13
Honiara, July 1992

From the moment they met, Cecil had difficulty guessing how to interact with Michael, the local URI representative waiting for him at the airport. He seemed impervious to how other people judged him. Outside the Arrivals Hall at Henderson Field—a dark place where suitcases, cold from the plane hold and wet from the local humidity, were being released—Cecil had not expected to meet a short black man with the build of a wrestler. After most passengers had left and the few taxis had disappeared, Cecil stood on the pavement looking lost. Appearing from a car hidden behind a few palm trees, Michael shook Cecil's hand and introduced himself.

'Welcome to Honiara, mate, I am Michael, aboriginal, Australian, marine biologist, URI rep, in that order.' He observed Cecil's face as he added, 'I hope you can find here what you are looking for. Won't be easy.'

In the car, with the URI logo on its hood, Michael asked Cecil point blank: 'You're no biologist, never dealt directly with fisheries. We have had all sorts of blokes examining the Pacific tuna industry, but Ms. de Bock never parachuted in a trade economist without fisheries experience. What's going on?'

As the car moved slowly around wet potholes, the silence in the car felt more oppressive than the humidity.

'Complexity, I know a bit about complexity.' Cecil's jet-lagged brain grappled to summarize what required a longer explanation. 'URI doesn't like current fisheries management models and theory; I am supposed to find a better way to manage fisheries. I think I know what is wrong; the alternatives need a bit more work.'

Michael didn't acknowledge his answer. 'I'll drop your stuff at the hotel and we'll have a beer at the bar at FFA, on the hill; it's Friday.'

Tired, Cecil agreed; the bar looked like the perfect place to be introduced to Forum Fisheries Agency staff, and his gut feeling told him that Michael could make some practical sense of a fishery that exploited over half the world's oceans, even though he didn't hide his

disdain for a visitor uninitiated in the secrets of tuna.

High above the town, the balcony of the FFA bar offered a wide view of a sprawling mix of trees, corrugated iron roofs, and a small commercial center with two-story real estate in all its poorly lit glory. The balcony was crowded; people stood in small groups or sat on the low wall separating the bar from the well of darkness below. A few people turned their heads when Michael and Cecil walked in. Michael waved hello and turned to a woman with a radiant face straight from a Gauguin painting.

'Hi Josy, what a crowd! Can we get a beer? Meet Cecil, he is visiting.'

Offering a blue can to Cecil, she noticed his hesitation.

'You don't like Aussi beer?'

'No, it's not that. I don't drink alcohol. Sorry.'

'You're in luck, because of the conference we got lolly waters.'

When Cecil tasted the sweet stuff, he regretted his 'luck'. Whatever standing he may have had with Michael had probably disappeared. He felt humiliated, which inflamed his suppressed longing for something stronger to drink.

'Honiara, the place didn't even exist during the Second World War.' Michael waved his arm theatrically towards the town below, his hand precariously holding his full glass of beer. 'Yet it was around here that the Japanese Pacific war strategy was blown apart.'

Pointing to the office building higher up the hill behind him, he added, 'It is here that right now the global tuna industry is being changed.'

When Cecil didn't react, he teased, 'You don't believe me, do you?'

'Yes, yes, I do,' Cecil said, trying to look sincere. 'The conference, I didn't know about it.' Cecil decided to accept his greenhorn status.

'Well, it isn't a conference really, nothing official. The bunch of scientists and consultants you see here have been asked to review the observer scheme FFA operates, observers of the tuna fleet. A few of my mates thought it was easy money, to observe. They needed help with contract negotiations, practical stuff. I negotiated for them. We were wrong. It isn't easy money. Being a single observer on a boat full of Japanese or Koreans who don't speak a word of English is tough, and

dangerous. That's why I joined a few of the review sessions. To see how observers can be better protected and be more effective,' Michael explained matter-of-factly.

'Funny thing,' he added, 'in the meetings they brainstorm mostly about the future of the tuna industry, informal, below the radar. Something you are interested in I guess?'

Cecil nodded.

Abruptly, Michael turned around, grabbed Cecil's arm. 'Let me introduce you to FFA's DG, Dr. Muller.'

Fooled by the name, Cecil expected to meet a stern white scientist, but Dr. Muller had the friendly demeanor and face of a Pacific Islander.

'Welcome to FFA. Cecil Coulthard, you said? Yes, I knew you were coming, a telex from Brussels. By the way, Michael is wrong to introduce me as the Director General; I no longer occupy that office. I am only here to brief my successor, who hasn't arrived yet, and to chair the meetings. Now, I don't want to be rude, but I can't talk to you now, I would like to rejoin the people who are leaving tomorrow. Can I offer you a coffee, in the office, at around ten tomorrow?'

Michael smiled happily as they returned to a space near the wall. 'Muller is a great guy; you are damned lucky he is still here.'

'The history of the Pacific Islands is a bit murky,' Dr. Muller appeared genuinely embarrassed to admit. 'No written history, only oral traditions remain, stories told from generation to generation. Most likely two waves of travelers populated the islands, a couple of thousand years ago, and another wave came some five centuries ago. These people brought a few animals with them, but they were mostly dependent on fish, the fish close to the islands.'

Dr. Muller deftly operated the coffee machine in the reception area of the large open office.

'Because fish was critical for survival, many islands created a unique and dependable system to regulate their fisheries; enforced limits on where and what could be fished, and how to distribute the catch. The islanders believed they didn't "own" the ocean; it was part of something much bigger, unfathomable, *nature, spirits, gods* to be treated with dignity and respect, like a goddess. That system mostly

disappeared when foreign vessels intruded.'

He pointed to a large map of the Pacific Ocean.

'Several huge fish resources call this ocean their home, among them six commercially important tuna species. They were hardly exploited before the Second World War. The islanders caught only a few tunas. The Japanese were the first to catch them; initially they were used as fertilizer—difficult to imagine now, with prices for a single bluefin in the six digits. Much later the Americans introduced industrial purse seining, they developed the technology to haul huge nets. That advantage made them the biggest producer of canned tuna. Right now we have several countries catching and distributing tuna products on a large scale. Pacific island communities hardly benefit, we have a few small vessels, a few processing plants. Foreign vessels employ no local crews, until recently made no license payments. The US is the first country to pay for the right to fish tuna in the Western Pacific.'

'Why did they decide to pay?' Cecil exploited the short silence as Dr. Muller drank his coffee.

'Good question, I'd expect that from somebody dealing with trade and complexity. The political aspects of the tuna fishery don't tend to appear in scientific reports. Distant-water fishing nations like Japan, Korea and Taiwan have used development aid to discourage fundamental changes in the free-for-all tuna management regime in the Pacific. To put it in highly undiplomatic terms, *if you insist on greater tuna benefits, no more grants for hospitals, infrastructure or foreign education*. The US is an exception because they consider the Pacific their front yard and paying Pacific islands is in their own strategic interest. The aid blackmail has been an important reason Pacific island nations have yet to fundamentally improve local benefits from foreign tuna fisheries. But not the only one.' Dr. Muller pointed theatrically to himself, 'Getting agreement among Pacific island governments has proven difficult, even without external pressure. We are islanders, have always been independent, and we're a bit mistrustful of each other. Strategic cooperation does not always come naturally; it takes time.'

Later, after he had shown Cecil around the magnificent FFA build-

ing, perched on a steep hill just outside Honiara, Dr. Muller finished his lecture.

'This new building, our observer program, these are tangible proof that we Pacific Islanders can work together. Admittedly, we needed some prodding and foreign support from Australia, the US, UN agencies, scientists. It has been a slow process, but I am convinced that, eventually, our small countries will be able to earn more money from tuna fisheries. That money will go to governments, only indirectly to the people. My wish, the wish of an elderly man, is that ultimately our people will be fully in charge of the Pacific tuna industry and will treat it just like we did in the past: take what is needed and fairly distribute the benefits to all, with dignity and respect, treat it like a goddess.'

Cecil's hotel room felt cramped; its small window faced the parking lot. Located a short distance from the city center, the building looked, felt and smelled like hotels he remembered from rural America: siding on the outside and noisy dripping air conditioners—slightly askew, as if they were about to fall out of the windows—and inside the smell of cleaning fluid mixed with moldy carpet, stained plastic curtains around a dripping showerhead, and a loose toilet seat in the bathroom. The Sikh owner ran the place with his wife and three daughters. Promptly at 7 a.m. the eldest banged on his door to announce she was about to clean the room in fifteen minutes, and that breakfast could be enjoyed in the restaurant. After a night spent listening to the increasingly irritating noise of the air conditioner, he asked the owner for a different room.

'Yes sir, that can be arranged, but it will take a little time. Our guests usually stay for longer periods; they do business in Honiara, like yourself. Our corner rooms are more comfortable, they have new air conditioners and are a bit more expensive; of course, you understand. We have no vacancies right now, but one of our other guests is leaving in about a week.'

'Please, can you book me into a corner room as soon as one becomes available?' Cecil felt relieved as he walked out of the small office, a sensation he could not explain.

The fried eggs and cornflakes gave a solid start to his day, to be spent reading about tuna fisheries in the Pacific. Michael would pick him up from the hotel; for the next couple of days Dr. Muller had offered him free access to the FFA library, the perfect surroundings for silent study.

'Being a scientist doesn't mean I can't perform part-time librarian duties,' Josy explained. 'FFA is a small outfit; we can't afford lots of staff. Shoot, what do you want to know first?'

'I feel like a kid in a toy store.' Cecil looked at his crib sheet, ran his hand through his hair.

'For a sector I haven't studied before, the first thing on my to-do list is to get a picture of the main characters. I had a look at the fishmeal business some time ago, so I am familiar with the Eastern side of the ocean, the anchovy story. Do you have documentation about tuna fleet ownership, transport, processing and marketing in this part of the ocean?'

Josy frowned; her lips and eyes raised a silent question mark.

'Next the biological picture, get an idea of the level of exploitation, species, products,' Cecil added quickly, trying to avoid hurting her professional sensitivities.

'Finally, where can I get an idea of the methods institutions responsible for fishery management are currently applying and how the fishery management system operates?'

'I wouldn't prioritize like that, but I'm not you.'

Josy reminded him of his first encounter with ITI's librarian in Washington DC. She had been well over forty, separated—although he hadn't known that when he met her for the first time; she explained when he got to know her more intimately—and he had asked her what the library could offer about the Second World War, particularly about the Netherlands.

'Dear me, that is the strangest request I have had in a very long time, Mr.—er—Coulthard, you said? Particularly from somebody who, I think, is visiting our sanctuary for, is it the first time? World War Two and Holland? Why Holland?' She laughed and looked at him as a teacher would a tardy student. 'I am Hannah.'

'It's to do with a story about a family member; I need background to put the story in perspective.'

His gut reaction was defensive, a reluctance to avoid having to tell her about his father and reveal the rest of his parents'—and particularly his own—history. She looked at him as if she didn't believe his excuse for arriving late to class, then smiled and responded professionally.

'We do not have much material about the war here, but we can always get books from universities and local libraries. I am curious about why you are interested in the war in Holland. My mother is Dutch; came to the US before the war.'

'She did?' Cecil was genuinely surprised.

'Yes, many Jews in Holland assumed Holland would remain neutral, just as it had during World War One. Luckily my grandparents didn't share the belief that Hitler would leave the Dutch, and the Jews, alone.'

'Maybe I should talk with you before requesting any specific books?' Cecil said after a short silence, trying to avoid having to react to what must have been a terrible decision, leaving family and friends behind, and having to watch what happened from the US.

'Sure, I can tell you a lot. In a nutshell, most of my relatives did not survive the war.'

Her voice was flat. She read his evasion like a shrink. In the silence that followed, Cecil struggled to say something, anything.

'The Canadian Army liberated most of Holland; my father was a lieutenant. Something happened.'

She turned away, disappeared behind one of the bookcases and returned with a book.

'I'm sure you're aware of Anne Frank and her life story, she is known the world over, but I wonder if you've ever read her diary. It gives us a glimpse of what it was like to live in hiding in Amsterdam. Read it, then we can talk.'

A few days later he returned the book.

'Did it help you understand the war in Holland a bit better?' she asked, looking up over her reading glasses from behind her desk.

'It did, and it raised one question I struggle with.'

'Only one?' Her voice didn't suggest irony.

'It is not the question of how the Nazis found out about the family. That could have been something truly accidental, or some-

body with a grudge. It is a human question, a moral question.'

'You want a simple explanation for the Holocaust?'

'Not on that scale, but…'

'On the scale of a single human being?' she suggested.

'Yes. The question is, are we humans all wired to cause or perform the most unbelievable atrocities if conditions seem to prohibit the selection of less violent or more humane alternatives?'

'Not all but most.' She shook her head slowly.

'Most people will follow orders when put under pressure. For some, an incentive like preferential treatment or personal power may suffice, or a traumatic personal history may provide motivation. Others will not realize, or will ignore situations lying in wait or that they themselves may cause, and become trapped. In truly extreme circumstances, like war, personal survival seems to trump everything else, for most. Still, some accept the high cost of preserving their human dignity, even death.'

Taking her glasses in her hand and pointing them at him, she explained.

'I am not sure we are all wired to shoot unarmed villagers or force people into gas chambers. A few people refused; I don't know what made them so brave. My unhelpful answer is that it may all depend. The political philosopher Hannah Arendt suggested that for a decent human society to survive, it needs a few people who have that moral strength. Which suggests most people will compromise everything, even their humanity.'

'Circumstances, family background, personal history may all play a role?'

'Yes, perhaps other factors too. People perform heroic acts on the spur of the moment. Jump in front of an approaching train to pull somebody out of a car stalled on the tracks.'

'Could that be a different kind of heroism?'

'It could be. I am not changing the subject, just widening the scope. Let me ask you a question.' Her humor and slight smile were surprising but also attractive.

'Of course.'

'What made you think about human atrocities? It is not in the book; maybe it is implied.'

'My father met a woman who was married to a Waffen-SS soldier. If you are still interested, I will explain over lunch. Will you do me the pleasure of joining me?'

Josy slowly pushed a stack of books and reports across his desk. 'Here is your homework for today. See me when you are finished or have any questions; my desk is in the main hall, next to our economist. You should talk to him too. Good luck.'

Over the next couple of days he followed an enjoyable routine, reading in FFA's library, having chats with Michael in the car, and writing during the evening in his blue book for Kate. The story of the tuna industry became less blurred. Josy explained the ins and outs of tuna biology and stock assessments, from the prolific skipjack to the majestic bluefin. Her economic colleague Leslie let him drown in economic data.

'According to the official sources, we have some profitable and unprofitable fisheries in the Western and Central Pacific,' he reminded Cecil formally. 'Canning and marketing are in theory more profitable, but substantial fluctuations in energy, fish and consumer prices, and high investment costs make fishing and canning tuna high-risk investments.'

He illustrated the basics of economic doctrine: be flexible, the theory or data may fool you. Cecil found it difficult to control a smile.

'Data from Japan, Korea and Taiwan are not easy to get and interpret, the Americans have better data, but you never know what the boys in Washington DC cook from the raw data.'

Leslie was a small man, and he seemed even smaller behind the piles of papers and reports on his desk. An Australian, he spiced his formality with deadpan observations. Without looking up, he seemed to sense Cecil was walking towards his desk. He would smile whenever he turned around to answer yet another of Cecil's questions.

'Do you have any information about the supermarket margins for light and white tuna in the US? I don't dare to ask about Europe.'

'Of course.' He jumped up to grab a report.

'Most supermarket chains just provide shelf space; margins depend on volume sold and payment arrangements between the

cannery and the supermarket. Late payment means lower margins for the supermarket. Americans eat a lot of tuna, supermarkets are eager to sell it, even if the margin is low; volumes are high. Three big canning companies compete in the market; it is not an easy market. Americans prefer white tuna in their tuna salad. It is more expensive; albacore is more difficult to catch.'

He shuffled through the pile of papers on his desk.

'The European market is different. Many local canneries, smaller volumes, more high-quality products, imports from Asia and the US compete; those buggers have more choice, and they are prepared to pay for it.'

'The tuna the Americans catch in the Western Pacific go all the way to the US mainland for processing?'

'No, we have a large cannery in American Samoa; they get a lot of locally caught tuna. We have our own tuna cannery here in the Solomons; it is tiny. Visit it if you are in the neighborhood. For the footnotes in your report: most canneries earn quite a bit of money from selling pet food, cans of dark tuna meat and offal from fish cleaning for cats and dogs to enjoy.'

He turned back, pencil in hand, to copying data onto a large sheet.

'Could you join us for a minute?' Michael asked, 'The conference is about to close and we have a few ideas about the future. Can you shine some complexity light on them?'

Coffee cups and lots of paper covered most of the conference room table. Dr. Muller presided; five people Cecil had only met in passing sat some distance from the table, ready to call it a day. Michael occupied a corner seat. Dr. Muller introduced the scientists and consultants.

'Mr. Coulthard has applied what we know about complexity when analyzing global commodities, such as fishmeal,' he explained. 'I'll be very brief. What do we in this room see as the main issues when looking at the future of the tuna sector? Can we see how the Pacific Island countries could obtain more benefits from tuna? We know what has been tried in the past: increasing local participation in fishing, transport, processing and marketing. So far, the results

have been, shall I say, mixed, disappointing for a host of reasons.'

He rummaged in the pile of papers in front of him, could not find what he was looking for. 'Leslie can give you details of those investments. That is the past we have to live with, poor investments we have to learn from. Looking to the future, we feel that our countries are struggling with six, let me call them 'aspects', all of which are linked.'

Dr. Muller pointed to the flip chart in the corner, where words were written neatly in red marker: *importance, potential, complex, links, sociopolitics, institutions*.

'These are simple words, tiny summaries of what the reports in our library describe in more detail. *Importance*: our countries already rely on tuna license income. *Potential*: as managers of the fish resources, in principle our countries are in a strong position to negotiate future benefits. *Complex*: they need to work together on a host of issues, which is politically difficult. Also, *links*: what happens in the ocean when you fish has a direct impact on prices, investment, profitability, fee income. *Sociopolitics*: islanders experience few benefits from foreign tuna fishing in their daily lives. Finally, *institutions*: the local Ministries of Fisheries are mostly understaffed and underfunded; regional organizations like FFA have a limited mandate. What we are asking you is this: how can we be more effective in obtaining more benefits from this web of interlinked systems?'

While Dr. Muller was talking, Cecil felt enthusiastic, almost happy. Mauritania was no fluke. The Pacific tuna business showed exactly the same type of complexity, and these guys understood that. He should avoid giving exuberant explanations. These guys knew a lot about the sector. They were all watching him right now, like a congregation waiting for the first sermon by the new parish priest: uncertain what to expect, still unhappy that his predecessor, a source of tradition and certainty, had left.

'Dr. Muller, gentlemen, after four days in the country, enjoying the copious resources of the FFA library, and discussions with its staff, I have to be honest: my understanding of the tuna business in this part of the Pacific is still miniscule compared to yours.'

An elderly scientist with a gray beard closed his notebook, pushed his chair farther back.

'What I can give you,' Cecil looked directly at him, 'is my impression of what several scientists over many years have learned about complex systems. Your tuna fishery consists of complex systems: the ocean, the fishery and the industry, and what you aptly call the sociopolitics.'

The gray-bearded scientist raised a finger. 'This is not new; we know the ocean is complex.'

'Complex systems are *adaptive*,' Cecil continued, ignoring the blunt remark he hadn't expect this early. 'What are called *agents*—all the known and unknown players in and between the systems—cause them to constantly adapt, change, in ways that are often difficult to predict. Fisheries management struggles to handle economic, technical and political events, or the ignorance of politicians, or the conservatism of fishermen and consumers.'

Cecil walked over to the flip chart.

'Your tuna sector contains much more than the complexity of the ocean. You put these six words here. I agree with them. Combined, they may overwhelm your and my understanding. In part because emergence is one crucial property of complex systems, the whole is more than the individual components. Let me explain. I think three words could be added to your list: *time, risk* and *governance.*'

He paused briefly, a trick he had learned to push students to pay at least some attention to a subject they considered particularly boring.

'When working with complex adaptive systems, people in your position, dealing professionally with the tuna sector, have to assess the risks. Virtually everything that happens in the sector involves risk, some of it well known, much of it hidden. All these risks eventually determine what happens in the system. Time and risk are closely linked. Some risks may have an immediate impact; others take years to become apparent. Let me give you an example I read about yesterday.'

Cecil took the marker and sketched symbols on the paper, linked them with arrows.

'When the purse seine fleet catches a lot of skipjack, it also catches juvenile yellowfin tuna, they school together. Research suggests this may reduce the catches of local long-liners fishing for deeper-swim-

ming mature yellowfin and the volumes of fish exported by air. This causes transport frequency to decline, transport costs to increase and market prices for fresh tuna to decline on account of lower quality. All because the purse seine fleet has expanded its operations substantially over many years.'

Cecil wrote *long term*.

'If you want to improve the outcome of complex systems you need a long-term picture of where you want to be thirty, even fifty years from now. Create a vision. It may not, in the end, be realistic, it may need adjustment—I'll come to flexibility in a moment. Particularly in your situation, with many countries involved, you need an idea of how to reach an acceptable compromise. I am not talking solely about the biological aspects but also about the distribution of benefits over time and space. Fleet ownership, local employment, profits, public budgets. What are the known risks of pursuing such a vision? I am not suggesting you need to write a bible on what the world should look like in half a century, but you need a picture that is sufficiently fine-grained to be operational while being sufficiently blurry to enable compromise. Yes, I admit this is not yet very specific, but it gives you an important idea, something to start with.'

'How is it possible to predict the biomass of yellowfin fifty years from now? It is difficult enough to recommend annual catches in the Eastern Pacific for the next year.' A young American scientist shook his head. 'Forget it, fifty years, that's a joke.'

'You are absolutely right.' Cecil wrote again, *risks*.

'I am not suggesting you predict the yellowfin biomass fifty years from now. You already know what the biomass would be if there were no fishery at all; your stock assessment models can calculate that now and will be able to do the same over time. A vision may define what level of exploitation would be desirable fifty years from now, and what to do if biological conditions change fundamentally, even a regular El Niño will cause that. You can use a blurry picture of what the fishery and everything around it will look like, showing contours, few details.

'The third word I would like to add is *governance*. Most fisheries require some form of governance, providing a process to create and adjust a policy framework and drive its implementation. I am not yet

in a position to be specific, but I am convinced that improving governance will be the key to getting a bigger slice of the tuna pie.'

Looking at his watch, Dr. Muller interrupted his presentation.

'Sorry, Cecil, but we are looking for a few practical suggestions, not just the long-term picture. How can we deal with risks, uncertainty, governance as you put it? We have a little time left.'

'Three suggestions. First, cooperate; together you are in a far stronger position to deal with distant-water fishing nations and the companies processing and marketing the fish. Second, create stronger institutions. Allow FFA and other organizations supporting the sector to help you to mitigate mistrust. You need flexibility to negotiate, implement, and also adjust as you move to the long-term vision, and that requires mutual trust. That is only possible with more robust and experienced institutions, locally and regionally. Finally, and it may sound simplistic, but attracting money to strengthen your governance may be less difficult than you have experienced in the past. Controlling access to the most desirable fishing grounds with plenty of tuna will attract long-term capital that will insist on effective governance. I think all this is possible. Thank you.'

He sighed, unhappy that he could not explain more but also relieved they had listened until the end. Complexity, as he knew better than anyone, was a hard sell. What was the right way to handle complexity? He was still working on it.

In the car Michael didn't lift Cecil's subdued mood.

'That was a pretty long lecture, mate. Lots of abstract concepts, not much meat for a scientist to dig into.'

'What do you expect? I've been here for less than a week, haven't talked to people from the industry or government. Can you help to arrange a visit to the local cannery? Where is it, by the way?

'Nah, it's halfway between Honiara and Bougainville, two hours by small plane. Not worth a visit, a Mickey Mouse cannery getting supplies from a small fleet of pole and line vessels. Japanese joint venture with international funding. Don't waste your time, or mine. We can see the Secretary of Fisheries in a couple of days. I would try to see Muller again; he understands the whole picture better than most.'

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Honiara, July 1992

Beside the beach near the mouth of the Tenaru River, the carcass of the wooden hull, its bare ribs stretching upwards, balanced awkwardly on supporting oil drums and heavy poles. Beneath coconut palms, Billy and Joe were lounging on two wooden benches hanging from steel cables between the trees, slowly swinging their bare feet, nursing whiskey glasses. A pale moon peeked through the palm leaves; a single neon light stared from the cabin porch. Hal was grilling burgers over a wood fire in front.

'We used to tease the Japs with the smell of burnt meat, we knew they were bloody hungry,' he explained suddenly, holding a sizzling burger up to Cecil. 'They couldn't get enough rice from Rabaul during the night runs, started eating rats, most died of hunger, not from our bullets.'

He dropped the meat back on the grill, ambled towards the cabin to return with a bag of rolls and a bottle of ketchup.

'We flew our supplies in during the day, they had to ship fresh infantry and supplies in at night in fast transport boats, mostly without air cover.' He added as a matter of insider fact, 'They dumped most of their food in the water, we found it after they left.'

Cecil had met the three gray Americans, wearing frayed T-shirts, when Hal stumbled through the door of a small supermarket in Honiara, dropping one of two cases of beer he was carrying. Billy and Joe followed with the same load. As Cecil lifted the fallen case, Hal thanked him.

'That's mighty nice of you, man. Come by for a can?' He spoke slowly, seemed slightly drunk.

That evening Cecil joined them at their cabin near Henderson Field; he had brought a bottle of scotch for them and tonic water for himself. When he explained why, Hal, looking remarkably sober again, laughed.

'You went to the bloody AA, did you? I tried it, didn't work for me. You're still welcome though, appreciate the bottle. Where are you from? American? You don't sound Aussi. Pom maybe?'

'No, Canadian, I used to live in the US.'

Hal grabbed glasses from the kitchen sink, dried them with what used to be a towel, asked, 'And what brings you here? Are you one of the do-gooders paid to pretend to help the poor local buggers while staying in a fancy hotel?'

He smiled as if this were the perfect opening question in a friendly conversation.

'C'mon, Hal,' Joe interrupted before explaining to Cecil, 'Hal can be a bit blunt. Always has been, he can't change that.' He pointed to Billy. 'We tried.'

'I'm here to learn a bit about the tuna industry,' Cecil explained, taken aback. 'I am not necessarily helping the locals…local people,' he added with a wry smile. 'But since you mention it, what are you guys doing here?'

'We are building a boat,' Billy explained, holding up his glass to Hal who was unscrewing the bottle. 'To sail back on…' He hesitated, took a swig and after a long silence mumbled, 'and leave this place forever.'

'To the US of A,' Joe added. 'If we ever get the damn thing finished.'

He sounded like a comedian fed a poor line by his stooge.

'Why this place? Does it mean something to you?'

The silence that followed seemed to last minutes.

'Come on outside.'

Hal ushered Cecil towards the benches and a do-it-yourself timber chair. Joe and Billy followed. Once seated, they looked straight ahead, as if separately checking their memories.

After a long silence Hal growled, 'Does it mean something to us? Hell yes, it does. We spent three bloody stinking months here in 1942. And it feels like yesterday.'

'You see,' Joe added, sounding relieved Hal had broken the silence, 'we joined the Marines in 1942, the three of us, First Marine Division. Exactly fifty years ago. We're all from Coos Bay, Oregon. I used to fish from there. Can tell you a bit about the halibut fishery. The fish are mostly all gone now,' he added. 'We were dropped near Henderson Field on August seventh; I'll never forget that date.'

Cecil poured himself a glass of tonic, not sure how to respond.

'That was the very beginning of the Battle of Guadalcanal?'

'Yes sir, it sure was.'

'Now you are back here, building a boat. There must be a reason?'

As soon as he had said it, Cecil felt embarrassed. Why ask about something that must be personal and sensitive. He hardly knew these guys.

'It's a long story,' Hal said, looking at the boat in the back.

'No, it's quite simple,' Billy interrupted. 'I went crazy because of what happened here and during the rest of the fighting, and these guys thought it could help me if I came back here, built a boat and sailed away, slowly, freely, leaving it all behind me without risking getting a bullet in my back. I got one when we attacked the Japs' night transports here, almost at the end,' he said apologetically.

'It's taking us a while,' Hal explained. 'Billy can't sleep at night, still gets nightmares. We work a bit at night and have a beer during the day.' He waved his hand. 'A few beers.'

'You came all the way back here to forget?' Cecil was astonished.

Billy nodded. 'Yeah, I tried everything, physiatrists, counselors from the Marines, getting married.' He smirked. 'Hal and Joe were the only people I could really talk to. I would come by Hal's house—we all still live in Coos Bay—at three in the morning to talk, drink. He got fed up with all that. In the end, nothing worked, talking didn't help. The Jap demons would always come back, after a day, a week. At times I felt I was saved, finally; I could sleep nights on end. But it's like a river that keeps flowing, they come back, following me in the jungle, shooting me, eating me when I'm dead. Joe suggested coming back here might help. Hal wanted to build a boat; he likes to sail.'

Billy had said what he wanted to say and walked over to the fire.

'Hey Hal, are we going to get something to eat tonight or what?' He put his glass out to Hal, who was still nursing the bottle of scotch.

Between munching burgers, Hal and Joe told him how the three of them had fought during the rest of the war, up to the Battle of Okinawa. They had all been injured, recuperated, and had a hero's welcome parade when they got back to Coos Bay.

'That's when the shit started,' Hal explained. 'When you've been

a Marine for three years, killing people like they're flies, it ain't easy to be a civilian. You've changed. You think differently, like your mates around you. Nobody else really understands that, feels what it means, how you think, what you can't get rid of.'

Camping on the very banks of the Tenaru River, these guys were grilling burgers where they had fought man-to-man with the Japanese, thought Cecil.

'What did you do after you got back home?'

'I got a college degree,' Hal explained, articulating slowly. 'Joe went back to fishing, and Billy started out cutting trees. That didn't work. Actually, nothing worked in the end. We looked like model citizens for a while. My ass, we were. Billy was the one with the most problems. He ended up on the street; in an abandoned caravan; begging in Coos Bay. Joe and I helped him, with food, money, talk. I married four times, the last time for a couple of months. Too many jobs to remember. Fired too many times. Women can't handle that, the uncertainty, I mean. Joe here managed best. He still has a family, kids. And since you didn't ask, we got here on Veteran's Pensions.'

Hal scratched his head, raised his arms and shouted, 'Hallelujah, thank you USA.' He sounded like a drunk but flipped an empty beer can right into the basket some twenty feet away.

'You know,' Joe added, 'what happened here is that we—he pointed to Hal and Billy—won the whole bloody Second World War, right here! At the Battle of Midway our air force was lucky. By chance they discovered the Japanese carriers while they were refueling aircraft. In five minutes, bye-bye carriers. Henderson was one of the pilots who didn't make it; the airport here is named after him. Midway was the easy part. Here we did the difficult part, crushed the remaining core of the Japanese fleet, right here, and we fought the rest of the war, got the islands back, one by one. The Japs couldn't possibly win anymore, after Guadalcanal. The story is all under water, the ships, people, guns, on the bottom of the sea, right here, in the channels between the Solomon Islands. Perfect for diving.' His face showed no trace of irony.

Cecil didn't know what to say. He drank tonic; it tasted sweet. He suddenly realized he had ended up more or less like them. They had a boat to finish to save themselves. He had a job to finish to save

himself. Coincidence? The very thought reanimated his craving for alcohol.

'How long have you guys been here?'

'About half a year I guess, Hal? I'm losing track of time.'

'Can I have some of that scotch?' Cecil felt relief after saying it.

Hal laughed, got a glass. 'Are you sure?'

'Just a drop.'

Walking back to the roughly made chair, Cecil stumbled over a stray piece of wood hidden from view by the glare of the neon light. He fell flat on his face; the glass rolled away from his hand. *This is how it all started*, he realized groggily before getting slowly to his feet.

'You okay?' Hal asked, 'You need another glass?'

'Yes, I'm fine.'

He looked around; the boat on crutches suddenly resembled the motorboat belonging to his neighbors, back home at Lower Cove. The sand of the beach had become fog. Cirrus clouds concealed the moon, or was it the navigation light across the Cove. He shuddered, knew too well the telltale signs that the movie in his head was about to project. He needed to get out of there, walk away from the images he had tried to keep hidden, forever tightly wound on the movie reel.

'I'm sorry, but I have to leave you now. I'm getting awfully tired; jet lag is hitting me I'm afraid. Hal, many thanks for the burgers; they were great. Goodbye, and good luck with the boat.'

As he rushed away, Hal shouted after him, 'What the hell?'

Cecil kept to the path between the palms, followed it to the road, where the dim light inside the taxi revealed that the driver was sleeping. As they drove back to the hotel, blood dripped from his forehead onto his shirt. It started the movie all over again. *He was rushing to his house. Listening quietly to CBC, his father looked up—'What the hell?'*

It took him a while before he could fall asleep. In his dream two Chinese men were following him through coconut palm groves where he could not hide. As they got closer and closer, he couldn't breathe anymore, woke up gasping for air and wet with sweat. At 5 a.m. a sliver of light was coloring the parking lot shades of pink and gray outside his hotel room.

The next morning the hotel owner called to him as he was about to get into Michael's car.

'Mr. Coulthard, you can move to the corner room near my office later this afternoon, the current guest is leaving today.'

'Thank you, very kind of you.'

Back in the car, he felt the strange sense of relief come back to him, and he had no idea why.

'You have been reading for a week now, mate, you need to ask some questions. Let's have a coffee near the market,' Michael decided.

Watching people carrying vegetables and fish, Cecil relaxed, enjoying a flat white. Life in Honiara, the town that hadn't existed fifty years before, demonstrated in a small way how humans had established themselves on the islands in the ocean, their daily chores creating the impression of belonging, of permanence.

'What do you think I need to understand that isn't documented in the library? What's the thing that no one has told me yet?' Cecil asked.

'It's the politics, bloody complicated, too many players, too many games being played. As an outsider, you will never fully understand. I'm sorry, but I can't help you with that, only warn you, some people are earning serious money from the current situation, negotiations, external funding. That will be difficult to change and I don't think you should even mention it in your report.' He looked serious.

'The rest, at least what we know about the sector at present, is reasonably well documented. One more suggestion, have a look at proposals to create a vessel day scheme: foreign and local vessels paying for a day's tuna fishing in the area of the countries that participate. It is an interesting new idea. It won't solve all the tuna problems, but it has the potential to give the countries involved more income, and a much stronger negotiating position.' He put his cup down. 'It is about time we saw the Secretary, let's walk up there.'

The car parked in front of the Fisheries Ministry office had a small red flag fluttering on its hood in the hot wind. As Michael and Cecil walked past, the rear door opened sharply and a man with dark glasses jumped out. Cecil immediately recognized Wong Oh; Michael looked surprised.

'Mr. Coulthard, you are still here, you have not finished?' Wong Oh stood awkwardly close to Cecil. He ignored Michael.

'Michael, this is Mr. Oh. I met him in Mauritania.' Cecil sidestepped to pass Wong Oh, tried to create a modicum of normality while he felt his heart pounding.

'I have a meeting here, Mr. Coulthard. You cannot talk to the Secretary.' Wong Oh elbowed Cecil away from the entrance to the building.

'Hey mate, what's your problem? Get out of the way. Leave this bloke alone.' Michael took charge. 'We have an appointment. You can't change that. Who are you anyway, what are you doing here?'

The driver of the car got out and joined Wong Oh.

'My team has just made an appointment to discuss Chinese investment in the Solomon Islands.'

Wong Oh called out in what sounded like Mandarin towards the car and two more men got out, more dark suits and dark glasses; together with Wong Oh they entered the building. On the threshold Wong Oh turned back.

'Finish your work very quickly, Mr. Coulthard, and leave.'

'You've got some very strange friends, Cecil, in pretty high places.' Michael looked in astonishment at the door closing behind Wong Oh. 'Do you want to explain?'

'Can you check inside what's happened with our appointment? I can't. I'll go back to the cafe; I need a coffee and something to eat. I'll tell you what I know about him.'

Josy invited Cecil and Michael to dinner at the King Hotel, a relatively smart establishment downtown. While enjoying barbecued lobster, they heard sirens and cars speeding, saw flashing blue lights. Returning to Cecil's modest accommodation, they found the traffic was backed up, so they got out and walked the last few hundred meters; the police had set up road blocks. A crowd had assembled near the hotel and members of the fire service were keeping people at a distance. As they got closer, Cecil saw black smoke streaming from a couple of hotel rooms facing the parking lot. His old room was one of them.

'What on earth happened?'

'Somebody threw what may have been a Molotov cocktail inside, about an hour ago. Can you believe it? Luckily nobody got hurt. We extinguished it easily enough,' the fire officer reported. 'Fires don't happen frequently here; nice training.'

'You have been damn lucky, mate,' Michael said, almost admiringly. 'When did you move rooms, two days ago?'

'Can we enter the hotel? I have a room here.' Cecil asked the fire officer, more afraid than surprised.

'Talk to the owner, he is round here somewhere with his family. Shocked, the poor bastard. He's been here for years, and now this. Unbelievable.'

'After what you told me, this smells like something your friends in high places may be responsible for. If I were in your shoes, I'd move to a different place; you can stay with me for the rest of your trip,' Michael offered, surprising Cecil. 'Let's get your stuff, pay and get out of here.'

Cecil decided to leave a few days before the date planned in Brussels. The presence of Wong Oh and the fire had robbed him of any illusion he may have had of doing a regular job. He wanted out, fast, and the owner of the travel agency Michael recommended looked bewildered.

'This is a complicated ticket. I can get you out tomorrow, but you will need to change your reservations for the flights out of Port Moresby and Singapore.' After leafing through the ABC travel bible, he added, 'If you're unlucky, you'll have a twenty-hour layover in Papua and a day in Singapore. Are you sure you want to change your ticket? You can fly with much less hassle in four days' time.'

'Okay, forget it. Thank you for your help.'

Outside the office Cecil looked around for Chinese gentlemen.

'Michael, thanks for your offer. I'll start writing my interim report at your place. I'm not going to visit anybody else; I think I've got everything I should know from the FFA library. I need to think. Do you mind?'

'Suit yourself, mate. It's fine with me. One condition. Tell me why this is happening to you, how you got yourself into this pickle.'

The plane was due to leave in the afternoon. Cecil decided he defi-

nitely had to thank Dr. Muller. Michael acted again as driver and bodyguard. After Cecil had told him most of the story about Wong Oh, he volunteered.

Walking from the FFA car park to the building entrance, Cecil watched the red-flagged black car appear and stop right in front of the steps to the door. Two Chinese gentlemen in dark suits jumped out, protecting Wong Oh who, wearing his customary dark glasses, walked straight into the building. After Michael made a move to follow him, they blocked the door.

'No entrance, go away,' said one, putting his bag down in front of Michael.

'Could you *please* let us pass?' Michael asked, slowly, without touching the bag.

'No entrance, go away,' the man repeated.

The other one pushed Cecil, who stumbled from the steps. Michael grabbed the bag, pulled it away and threw it towards the parking lot.

'Let us through,' he whispered to the men in front of the doorway.

The door opened and Josy appeared, looking astonished at the scene.

'Hey Cecil, what's happening here? Hi Michael.'

'These guys are trying to keep us out of the building,' Michael said, incredulity in his voice. 'They became a bit obstructive. Their leader just went in. Is he talking with Muller?'

'No, Dr. Muller left about an hour ago, he's going to take the afternoon plane with Les.'

'That's settled then,' Cecil decided, determined to avoid having to face Wong Oh one more time. 'I'll talk to Dr. Muller at the airport.'

He embraced Josy in front of the Chinese men.

'Many, many thanks for all your help and advice. I'm really going to miss you. You're the best.'

Without giving the black-suited guards another glance, he walked back to the parking lot. Michael grabbed the tie of the man trying to retrieve his bag.

'You know, you are damn lucky this lady appeared.'

INTERMEZZO

15
Colombo, August 1992

The train whistle pierced the gentle whisper of the breaking ocean swell drifting through the off-white cotton curtains of his room at the Aurora Sports Club.

'The first train from Mount Lavinia passes at 5.45 sharp,' Henri had told him. 'It whistles before entering the railway tunnel. To tell the sleeping people to move away from the rails.'

For a Canadian like Cecil Coulthard, the age of the sinewy room boy running around on flip-flops in a grubby white sarong was still a bit of a mystery. But Henri's age he gauged as late sixties. His intelligent face reflected understanding, deep dark eyes, sharp edges softened by age; in conversation, he proudly recalled his decennia-long service at the Club. His reciting of railway safety regulations appeared to be Club lore, the ephemeral reminder of sumptuous gatherings over more than a hundred years at the pinnacle of social climbing in Colombo.

The shrieking whistle jolted Cecil awake. Struggling with flashes of his fear-ridden dream—crawling between the coconut trees of what felt like Henderson Field, desperately trying to reach a distant plane, its propellers already turning, its brakes shrieking when released, while the ghosts of hundreds of emaciated soldiers shot their guns at random—it took a while before he realized the bloody train was passing.

From his bed with its single thin cushion and customary bedroll—'to keep between the legs when the air is hot and humid,' Henri had explained—Cecil could just see the ocean horizon above the windowsill, the blue-painted pool with its greenish water and the train tracks behind the whitewashed back wall hidden from view. The ocean hypnotized, its indomitable lazy swell persisting well after the wind had died, its diaphanous face shining yet covering all beneath.

He forced himself to watch the oily waves. He knew that after some thoughtless observation, controlling his wandering brain would prove easier, as he applied the soothing routine of switching in a single theater between multiple movies in which he played the

main character. Recalling scenes from his student years often worked best.

Watching the distant horizon through the waving curtains from his bed required nothing of him: he was awake. He had accepted the muggy air in the room after checking in. The swishing noise and drafty air of the fan irritated and he had switched it off. The noisy purr and moldy draft of the beat-up air conditioner irritated even more; he kept the windows open instead.

My *kind-of* marriage. She was one of the most beautiful, no sensual, daring girls in town. Okay, our affair disintegrated with equal suddenness, but it was exhilarating for the first few weeks. I needed that, for sure! We met at a university reception, had sex hours later; she softly shook her bra from perfect breasts. After a few weeks I was stupid or daring enough to ask her father for her hand. They lived in a large traditional wooden house, pillars supporting its balconies. Her father looked and behaved like a typical member of the lofty merchant elite of St. John's. His speech was slurred, his fat lips barely moving in his condescending face.

'So who are you? Coulthard? I have heard that name before, insurance or something. Is that what your father does?

'Yes, he runs an insurance business.'

'Good. My daughter suggested we meet. I am not sure why. But when a daughter asks you something, you always agree, sooner or later. Being a father has its advantages and disadvantages. What brings you here?'

'I met your daughter at university…'

'Yes, she told me. I am not sure she told me everything. Probably better that way.'

'We like each other…'

'Sure.'

At that point I felt I had nothing to lose.

'I am asking for her hand.'

'You are *what*? My dear boy, that I did not expect. Are you serious?' He laughed without joy.

'Yes, I would like to marry her.'

'Well. You've asked a serious question; for my daughter's sake, I

will give you a serious answer; she is my only daughter.'

He rose up from his chair, stood looking down at me, his hands behind his back.

'You are still young, and since you're asking for her hand after having met her only a couple of weeks ago, you seem a bit too wild for me. You have not even finished your PhD.'

He said it as if getting a degree was a necessary condition to get a marriage license. Addressing his daughter, who was sitting in silence at the other end of the room, he said, 'This young fellow should first get himself a steady job, with a decent income. My business experience, with economists, is that they are up to no good. They have funny ideas about value, models.'

He walked across the room. Bending over her, he touched her shoulder to comfort her and met her eyes.

'Look, I want the best for you, to give you a happy future. When he'—and he pointed at me—'has set up his own business, in trade for example, he can come back…'

She jumped up and ran out of the door. I wasn't surprised; she sure had an independent streak. The fool didn't know about the accident, the inquest, the article in the regional newspaper, just assumed my job search would postpone any matrimonial plans for years, if not forever.

We eloped, not very far, settled in my two-room apartment on the outskirts of St. John's, overlooking what I considered to be similarly depressing homes. The apartment was the first reason that within a few days she started complaining she couldn't cope with being alone, locked up in suburbia—her job at her father's trading firm gone—with a lover often occupied during the day. I couldn't yet afford frequent trips to the theater or restaurants, and refused to borrow money. She missed the city's pleasures, of course, and for her sex at night lost its magic surprisingly quickly. Her initial willingness to hike during the weekend disappeared after close encounters with moose and bad weather; she didn't even try to enjoy nature. Mostly, though, she quickly discovered—women do this much faster than men—that I wasn't the one. We talked, argued and later had a monumental row after she accused me of keeping her locked up

and forcing her to participate in weekend boot camps. A visit by her parents, secretly arranged, was the last nail in this hormone-accelerated introduction to holy matrimony. They provided a modest dose of carefully phrased parental guidance about what they considered a regrettable dalliance and forgave her. That was the nudge she needed to accept that she would be far better off back home. We ended the affair maturely—she did not even say goodbye.

For a while after she had left, I felt life had become quite pointless, I no longer wanted to achieve, scratch the rock of eternity. She had been an ideal diversion to push memories of that one day in April far down. Mother sensed I was lost again. She came by and told me point blank to go back to work, just as she had told me after the accident and, again, after her talk with Mr. Howard. She also mentioned in passing that I was the main reason she had stayed together with my father. I didn't fully understand what that single sentence really meant at that time, but once I believed that I owed my parents, had an obligation to at least satisfy *their* expectations about *my* life because they had stayed together *because of me*, I did perform. Assistant professor at the University of Saskatchewan and later *senior* trade economist at the International Trade Institute in Washington DC—where the location of my office near the White House implied status. Rather than an excellence I could feel proud of, I always felt my career showed only persistence.

A different movie reel.

The serendipity of meeting Kate. It all started with a glass of champagne. After the plane's departure from the dusty airport at Nouakchott, the purser offered the passengers in the economy section a glass of champagne. At that moment I felt literally on top of the world, even proud of myself. Mauritania had been an early success, a perfect example for my study. I accepted the glass, my customary response. It looked pretty stupid, keeping the full glass in my hand, and later, without taking a sip, returning it to a stewardess, who gave me a strange look.

'Is something wrong? We do not regularly offer champagne in

economy.'

'No, I don't drink anymore. *Excusez-moi.*'

Later, once I was in Holland, spring flowers and budding green trees lined the roads; colors appeared clearer under the clean blue sky. I avoided the highway and its depressingly mindless sense of urgency, took secondary roads designed by history rather than motorized utility. I still felt great. For the first time in years, I was simply happy.

At the conference in Wageningen I joined students taking seats in the back of the lecture hall. Academic types greeted each other as if they were reluctantly attending a birthday party of a nerdy colleague. Those lower in the scientific pecking order excessively enthusiastic, the few top dogs, or those pretending to be, barely noticing anybody. It was eerily similar to my faculty meetings in Saskatoon.

She looked really tall. It was her composure and the way she seemed oblivious of those around her that impressed me most. She never told me why she decided to sit next to me while many of the seats in front were not yet occupied—did she feel drawn to me? I sensed the outdoors; here was this woman smelling like the wind, fresh like the flowers I'd seen from the road. I introduced myself. She smiled, took my hand.

'Kate. You are not from here?'

'Cecil, Cecil Coulthard. No, I am Canadian, work for a Belgian NGO.'

'You are a…scientist?'

'No again; I am an economist, but one who no longer believes in most of the theory.'

My voluntary admission to someone who appeared to be a total stranger felt like the fresh breeze in the car.

She looked at me while her hand slowly pushed her hair behind her ear, then sat down, took a thick folder from her bag, opened it and looked at the list of attendees.

'Cecil Coulthard,' she repeated slowly. 'You didn't write a paper?'

'No, I am here to learn, understand why fisheries management doesn't really work in most places. I used to analyze international trade.'

She wrinkled her nose, as if those involved in trade must be a

particularly nasty species of economists, or because economists were never that clever at understanding fisheries, or both. Over dinner she would later admit that she generally despised people who had never been on a fishing vessel and pretended to understand a fishery, but that she had made an exception for me. Now she just shrugged her shoulders.

It was during the tedious presentation by a bioeconomic modeler who looked and sounded ever more depressed and less convincing as he plowed through his formula-laced presentation that I asked her what she did.

'I work for the Dutch Fisheries Research Institute on interactions within marine systems,' she whispered. I asked her what that meant. She frowned and looked sternly at me.

'You need knowledge about interactions between species and the changing oceanic environment when giving management advice. It is complex but also that simple.'

Amazingly, she had mentioned complexity, she of all people, the woman who had decided to sit next to me.

Kate came back to him each morning in the humid room of the Club as he looked out over the ocean. He reminded himself, as on each previous day, that he really owed her an explanation why he had left early the next morning, without saying goodbye, while the conference had two more days to go. He wrote for her in his blue book, a few paragraphs each day. It didn't take much time, he knew the story by heart, it wrote itself.

Cecil's arrival in Colombo hadn't been equally auspicious. Following the jarring take-off from the short, coconut palm-lined runway of Henderson Airport in Honiara, he had ended up exhausted after a sleepless night and day spent bundled up in the back of the economy sections of planes, with hasty transfers in Papua and Singapore. In Colombo he'd had to wait behind a large group of Taiwanese tourists standing in line for Sri Lankan customs. Two Chinese faces suddenly appeared in the glassy facade protecting the brown-clad customs officers. One face stubbornly grafted onto his mind for decades, the other the threatening round face of Wong Oh, the most recent addi-

tion to memories he would have loved to permanently discard. He forced himself to accept the mirrored depictions in the stuffy air as products of his overactive imagination that had nothing to do with sweaty reality; regular tourists were in line ahead of him, patiently shuffling forward—their pale green Taiwanese plane still parked on the tarmac. The faces disappeared when the line moved again.

Waiting for his luggage and sweating profusely in the hot moldy air, he kept looking uneasily for faces in the crowd he could recognize. When the tourists did finally leave, he felt no relief; worn out, he did not want to leave the airport yet. In a restaurant in the Departures Hall he ordered tea and curry. Watching the buzz of the passengers, lugging huge suitcases, surrounded by family and lots of children—the departure of the flight to Dubai had been announced—gradually reduced his anxiety. The curry made him feel better but he was in no state to face any Chinese people, even if they happened to be regular tourists, during the weeks he planned to stay in Colombo. He needed a place to hide from the world, and a hotel was the least suitable option. Since hanging around in the airport wouldn't solve where to stay, he took a taxi. The driver, a convivial, corpulent fellow, asked him where to go.

'Colombo,' Cecil mumbled.

The driver looked at him in the mirror, raised one hand and smiled: a green tourist or frequent traveler who hadn't bothered to memorize his hotel? Both offered richer fares compared to well-informed travelers and stingy local people. Cecil, frequent traveler, believed survival on the road depended on the quick judgment of drivers in the chaotic traffic of mindless megacities or eerie two-lane highways occupied by trucks whose drivers pulled 24-hour shifts. This driver seemed a decent type and Cecil didn't mind paying him a little extra if he could find him a tourist-free establishment.

'I need to work somewhere quietly for a couple of weeks. Do you know a place providing board and lodging where I wouldn't have to face tourists?' He didn't explain, couldn't anyway.

'Sir, I know a very good place for you, no tourists, quiet, a very good place, yes sir,' the taxi driver shook his head in confirmation. 'It's a club, sir, a very old club.'

Half an hour later, with the driver carrying his suitcases behind

him, Cecil stepped into the dark, wood-paneled Aurora Sports Club, its air pungent with the timeless scent of mothballs mixed with mosquito spray, tranquil as a seldom-visited museum. The man behind the bar, dressed in a pale blue uniform washed far too many times, smiled faintly as he greeted Cecil.

'Members only, sir, the Club doesn't accept walk-ins.'

Cecil explained he needed a quiet place for a couple of weeks to finalize some research and didn't like large hotels while the barman listened, absentmindedly cleaning glasses, as any barman would who was used to being the target of persistent client chatter. The driver, waiting behind Cecil for his fare, nodded approvingly when Cecil promised to pay cash, dollars, in advance. The barman put down the glasses, dried his hands on his uniform and called on a black rotary phone. Two minutes later he silently offered Cecil a key and a leather-bound registry book in which to write his name, after which the barman wrote, *Guest of Mr. Tanaratnam*. He took Cecil's money and passport—'to do the necessary'—without ever explaining what that meant.

A remnant of colonial times—of which he had noticed quite a few on his drive into Colombo—the Club, with its stubby whitewashed pillars, was battling tropical decay. To Cecil, it suggested ageless leisure at a time in which starchy members relaxed beside the pool drinking gin fizzes, leaving life's little worries to waft towards the ocean after their polo match on the Galle Face greens. He imagined the former Club members in their white suits, their women in jodhpurs or dresses, proud and self-assured in their elevated colonial status, mingling on the grass below; at the social pinnacle, the directors of the Club, some self-effacing—the barely perceptible demonstration to the initiated of their true status—and only hinting at their feats and those of their polo ponies in the game just played.

Something still remained of these pillars of society: the off-white flowing letters of the names of the Club Presidents on a teak shield in the Club's lobby; the Sri Lankan names painted below a long list of Smiths and Cuthbertsons. Upon reflection, the women probably didn't play polo in the tropical humidity, hence no jodhpurs, a Freudian slip of his imagination. The Club's elegance was still faintly

discernible. What had become a quite dilapidated building, shown in its full former glory in a sepia picture in the dining room, had been visibly restored. The traditional now blended with some new additions; modern colors, new furniture and off-white cotton curtains in the rooms, washed with poor-quality detergent, had joined the old, dark, creaking wood floors. It provided exactly what he needed.

Every day in Colombo he followed the same ritual. After the train whistle jolted him awake, he let his mind wander through movie clips of his past. The practice satisfied his slight predisposition to procrastination. Henri served him his breakfast at 7.30 a.m. sharp: papaya with a sprinkling of lime, tea, toast, some red substance called jam and a fried egg swimming in coconut oil. After breakfast on the second day Cecil did try to call his counterpart in Colombo; the woman who answered reported him sick with dengue.

'It will probably be a week before you can call him; he has a severe case, and it may be weeks before he is back at the office.'

Cecil gladly grasped the unexpected opportunity to postpone his exposure to the outside world. He didn't want to arrange meetings before his counterpart was approachable; it would give him time, which he really needed, to cajole the mass of notes and impressions into a midterm report. In his sweaty bubble with nothing else to do, he forced himself to work, writing at the small table with hardly enough space to spread documents around his typewriter.

'Work heals,' Lily, the lady in the green dress and pink lipstick at the AA meetings, had said ad nauseam, was it only about half a year ago?

'It controls anxiety that fuels bad habits, like drinking and gambling.'

Today, his handwritten and typed papers spread out around him, out of nowhere it struck Cecil again, the feeling of purpose he had experienced on the plane from Nouakchott. Nothing he had done so far compared to what the names in flowing letters on the dark teak shield at the entrance of the Club had achieved. Here, in his sweaty room looking out over the ocean, he could make a difference, write a story that could change global fisheries. Scratch the rock.

Henri regularly disturbed the solitude of Cecil's room, even serving his lunch there. Every time Henri knocked on the door, Cecil put his typewriter away to properly receive the old man. 'Good afternoon, sir,' Cecil greeted him, acknowledging his age and proud demeanor. On the first day Henri would wait until Cecil indicated where he should put the tea in between the papers spread across the room. After a few days he put everything on the floor, against all Club rules. They talked, as older men do with strangers whom they somehow trust, little stories, a few sentences, suggesting the past without revealing details that might embarrass. Henri recalled the Club's history, the social hub it had been for civil servants, burghers, and the mix of foreign businessmen, aid workers and the small contingent of British who hadn't left after independence. He recalled how his father had struggled his entire life as a day laborer on the tea plantations near Kandy. A plantation owner had arranged Henri's job at the Club; fate had provided him a passport to a bright future for his three children, each safely employed as a status-wielding government bureaucrat. Cecil recalled his adventures along the coast of Lower Cove, as he had as a teenager at the dinner table, some true, some spiced by a reality that should have been. He even talked about growing up in the empty white house. From Cecil's hesitation to describe its other occupants, Henri guessed its emptiness had more than a literal meaning. Henri's visits allowed Cecil to talk, to chip away at the frenetic tension of the past weeks.

It happened after Henri had served his tea. While he was brooding on a sentence that needed editing but failed to improve despite multiple iterations, the dark past slithered back. Out of nowhere two Chinese faces appeared on the curtains in front of him, as in the airport. Haunted by what appeared real images, bubbling up from that part of his imagination he had most difficulty suppressing, he forced himself to watch the ocean and the hot air shimmering above the railway tracks as he pushed the memories back onto their memory movie reel. After a few minutes, the waves of the ocean swallowed the faces.

16
Colombo, August 1992

Camping for a week in the confines of a warm, humid room filled with papers and the ghosts of rejected sentences, Cecil felt ready to play his part as a guest of the Club. He joined three elderly gentlemen whom he had seen at sundown on the lawn each day, engaged in quiet conversation. After he introduced himself, one man rose.

'Welcome to the Aurora, sir. I am Thillairajah. Thilly to my friends. It is a pleasure to meet the guests of our members. With whom are you acquainted, if I may ask?'

'I assume Mr. Tanaratnam.'

Cecil didn't expect the short silence that followed.

'Mr. Coulthard, may I introduce Mr. Jansz and Dr. Gunawardena.'

Cecil shook hands, settled into a recently painted bamboo lawn chair that creaked at his every move.

'What brings you to Colombo, Mr. Coulthard? You seem to be quite occupied.'

Mr. Thillairajah appeared comfortable to divulge that he knew Cecil had checked in a week ago, and had hardly left his room.

'Yes, I am busy drafting a report, a bit of a deadline.'

'With all the beautiful hotels in Colombo, you prefer our Club?' Mr. Thillairajah seemed genuinely surprised.

'It is quiet here, no tourists to distract me. I am very happy I found it, or to be honest, my taxi driver recommended it.'

'Did you come here just to write?'

'No, I was going to visit people here, but my local contact is sick, so that has to wait.'

Mr. Thillairajah smiled when he asked what really interested him, but being an excellent lawyer, he took his time.

'I like to pigeonhole people; a simple vice that is quite useful for an old barrister like me, but I am a bit confused. If you will allow me to play this little game? I am hedging my bets: a little money on businessman or international bureaucrat, a few rupees on scientist, most money on economist. Am I right?'

He seemed delighted with his conclusion.

'Impressive! Yes, I am an economist, working for a Belgian NGO. I used to work for an international trade institute. How did you guess?'

'He didn't guess,' Mr. Jansz's deep voice growled. 'He read the guestbook and your passport.'

Mr. Thillairajah laughed out loud, not at all embarrassed his old friend had implied he read more than that.

'Jansz isn't telling the whole story; we check the background of all visitors to Sri Lanka. We have to, with the events going on in the North.'

They continued to talk about 'events' in the North; a conversation among insiders who didn't utter the words Tamil or India, as if being specific would offend, or because they were curious about his opinions on what appeared to be an increasingly violent Tamil uprising. When he realized he was being judged, Cecil finished his glass and excused himself, pointing to his window where his report was waiting.

Back in his room he regretted almost immediately that he had left so quickly. Why shun others for fear of being judged? The next day Cecil joined them again.

The Club's ambiance encouraged historic reflection, and the conversation drifted towards war, the Second World War. Still practicing well beyond regular retirement, and proud of it, Thilly divulged that while studying law in London, he had joined the British Royal Air Force in 1940 and spent the war in some murky intelligence outfit in Devon. Fearing Thilly would start a tale they knew quite well by now, Dr. Gunawardena raised his hand.

'Mr. Coulthard, yesterday I noticed that you didn't drink, at least no alcoholic beverages.' After a short silence he added, 'At least not here.'

A slender retired surgeon, Dr. Gunawardena looked almost embarrassed by his own indiscretion.

'Well, he must have his reasons. Preferences in the West have changed. Hard liquor consumption is down, according to the BBC,' Thilly reacted, showing a moment's slight irritation. Then, so as not to embarrass their unusual foreign guest, he asked, 'Did you enlist,

Mr. Coulthard?'

'No, I didn't have to. Canada had abolished conscription when I finished my studies.'

The prosaic truth had him running around in shorts, along the corridors of the dour army barracks during the intake process, between scores of yet-to-be-physically-examined soldier candidates with two of his high school buddies, all still delirious from an exhausting series of graduation parties, screaming, 'We are reds, bloody reds and Mao is our great helmsman.' Later, when asked 'Why?' by a skeptical army psychiatrist, after filling in an exhausting list of standard psychological test questions with ridiculous answers, Cecil confided in staccato, 'I have become totally committed to the revolution of the Chinese workers.' He had even raised a socialist fist. The doctor, who had seen it all before, concluded Cecil could well become a pain in the force and sent him home with the highest negative psychological stability rating. His mother, an overt supporter of antiwar movements, was content, and to his surprise said so. His father was mad, told him he was making a big mistake, didn't talk to him for weeks but never explained his initial outburst.

'You missed out on the best part of life,' concluded Mr. Jansz, mischievously nodding his white meaty face, his permanently pouting lips grimacing slightly.

Cecil was not sure what he did for a living; his interruption yesterday and his demeanor and black suit and tie suggested something public, important and probably related to security.

'War can be horrific,' Cecil replied, moving to a subject he felt comfortable talking about, remembering his panhandling buddy. 'Most do not achieve what they set out to do. Vietnam is the obvious example or the Great War. Given what we know about that war now, how the murder of a single third-rate prince triggered the deaths of many millions, I am not sure it still deserves that title.'

'Ah, Mr. Coulthard, wars can be terrible but you should know there are false wars and just wars; judging by your age, I venture you didn't consciously experience the Second World War, but you must concede it was a *just* war, the suffering was necessary because a higher moral value was at stake: the liberation of the world from Fascist forces.' Thilly shook his head in confirmation.

Looking at him, a Tamil whose voice had a hint of innuendo, Cecil was not sure he was referring solely to that war. Searching for a reply that would not upset his hosts well versed in military history and would avoid local sensitivities, Cecil was momentarily at a loss for words. To gain time, he lifted his glass.

Mr. Jansz looked at him intently. Compellingly, as if speaking from direct experience, he added, 'Yes, wars bring gruesomeness to the surface, men are allowed to kill, they can and sometimes must become beasts, behave mercilessly, irrationally; civic morality evaporates, and for some it may never come back. But, in the greater scheme of things, crazy cruelty has always been part of humanity, and has always been part of the war's solution: winning.'

'Winning the war at any cost surely defeats the purpose,' Cecil interjected. Assuming his long-lost academic posture, he launched into a lecture.

'It may be easier to judge *ex post* whether a war was just, but justifying one *in advance* is a different exercise altogether. The liberation of people from some authoritarian or deadly regime may be pursued on purely moral grounds—be considered *just*—provided one has the option of engaging in a war or not. To *justify* engaging in a war requires sufficient confidence in all possible alternatives that such war could lead to, and its potential costs. It has to do with system complexity. *Just* considers only moral benefits. *Justification* of a war requires political, economic and moral consideration of the options, of risks as yet unknown, and even the consideration of highly complex events and of the costs, not only in terms of money but also deaths, destruction, psychological damage, even when resulting many years later, on both sides. It raises the ultimate question: how will fate throw the dice?'

As he talked, Cecil realized he was drawing on a sermon he had heard with his mother as a young boy—one of the few occasions when the priest at St. Mary's had made a lasting impression—and was combining it with Joe's story of a couple of weeks previously. But he did not stop.

'Fate needs to favor your side over the opposing side. Before December 1941 the US believed it had the option to engage, but it lost that after Pearl Harbor; the attack became the justification. Admiral

Yamamoto did a simple analysis comparing military and economic capacity before Japan attacked and concluded that Japan couldn't win. He was proved right but could not have foreseen that his own decision to order the Japanese navy to occupy the airport at Midway and later a small airport in Guadalcanal would seal the fate of the Japanese. He could not have foreseen the Americans' ability to decipher Japanese code, nor the incredible luck of the American navy bombers that discovered, by sheer accident, the Japanese fleet near Midway while Japanese aircraft were refueling on deck—a window of vulnerability of less than half an hour. These bombers destroyed the core of the Japanese fleet in five minutes; most Japanese sailors didn't even see the enemy. That, and the battles Yamamoto's fleet and air force ultimately lost at Guadalcanal, determined the destruction of the Japanese Pacific strategy, a strategy that the Japanese never changed. The Americans, by contrast, adjusted their Pacific strategy as they went along. That is the only way to deal with complexity: by adjusting to emerging circumstances.'

Jansz shook his head vigorously, his fleshy cheeks following. 'War may be planned, but most countries find themselves under attack; they have to defend themselves.'

'Yes, that makes justification so difficult,' Cecil agreed. 'We never know what the end result will be of going or *not* going to war, of not defending Henderson Field at Guadalcanal, of not attacking Iwo Jima, of not dropping bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.'

Dr. Gunawardena squeezed a wedge of lime into his gin and tonic. Without looking up, he said, 'Yamamoto was a career soldier by choice. Most individuals don't have that option; they are forced to join, enlisted, or compelled by propaganda or peer pressure. Civilian casualties never have a choice; they always far exceed the numbers of military dead and wounded.'

The old surgeon squinted against the sun setting just above the wall separating the garden from the train tracks.

'Eugene Sledge, a Marine, wrote a memoir about Okinawa, where he himself fought. "It is too preposterous to think that men could actually live and fight for days and nights on end under such terrible conditions and not be driven insane." Retired, I have time to read. We now know that two-thirds of the American casualties in the Okinawa

combat zone were "neuropsychiatric" casualties—26,000 soldiers who were driven insane.'

Cecil smiled shyly, reluctant to continue. He glanced at Dr. Gunawardena, who had his eyes closed against the red sun. Mr. Jansz glanced furtively at his watch.

'War is slightly organized madness directed by a political and military pyramid believing in simplistic models, executed by young people most susceptible to military indoctrination, any indoctrination.' Jansz concluded, 'As long as mankind is being told to believe in the importance of belonging to national, ethnic or religious tribes, young people wishing to escape the tedium and pointlessness of ordinary domestic existence can be convinced to fight. The same hunger for intensity could compel others to become monks, spies or terrorists. They discover fear only later, when it is too late, when their life or death has already been largely determined elsewhere. I also believe people don't really know themselves and what they are capable of in certain circumstances.'

He took out a large white handkerchief and patted the sweat from his brow.

'Well, it's about time to get something to eat.'

Thilly emptied his glass, rose from the creaking chair, and nodded to Cecil. Mr. Jansz followed the lawyer to the restaurant. Dr. Gunawardena remained in his chair, eyes still squinting against the sun.

'You know quite a bit about war, despite not having been a soldier.'

'Economists do read esoteric journals and books; we need to read to at least get a grasp of the real world.'

Cecil smiled, fondly remembering Hannah at ITI and her reaction when, after years of ignoring the library's free offerings, he had suddenly taken stacks of Second World War history books home, to understand what had happened in Holland and, of course, to get to know her better. But here, on the lawn talking to a real war veteran, he didn't explain the real reason why, almost afraid to mention his parents' letters, the search for a father with a military history he had never really known.

'I joined the British and American forces in Burma as a newly

minted surgeon,' Dr. Gunawardena said quietly. 'Every day of my life, often at night, I still remember the endless stream of wounded entering the surgery tent. I made fateful choices as a young doctor. One can argue that fate determined who survived, including myself. Yet the moral question remains: 'Did I make the right choices?' I tried; I did save many wounded, even Vietnamese and the odd Japanese. From the official Allied point of view, the answer has always been yes. For most people who experienced the war close up, soldiers, civilians, the answer may be different. Many cannot speak about the horrors they have experienced, even many years after the fact. The war may have been politically unavoidable, but, as you said, that is a different argument, and nobody knows what the result would have been of alternative decisions at the top of the pyramid.'

He rose slowly, took his half-empty glass and walked to the restaurant. Henri was stacking the chairs on the terrace; it was time to leave. In the restaurant—string hoppers and jaggery pudding part of its regular fare for over a century—the three men quietly discussed menu choices and then talked in Sinhalese. Cecil retired to his room; he had to write for Liliane.

17
Colombo, August 1992

Having drinks on the historic lawn of the Club with his geriatric buddies and exchanging nostalgia with Henri reduced Cecil's anxiety. Slowly, he was starting to feel more comfortable, as if this retreat were keeping the future at bay. Chinese faces no longer appeared before him during his days of monkish drafting. Reasonably certain about what had gone wrong with current fisheries management practices, he was enjoying the satisfaction of having completed what he considered the easier part of his job. The next part looked like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle without a picture on the box. Influencing how decision-making affecting fisheries could be better organized would require more than the simple generalities about scientific models he had imagined so far. Waking up after the first train passed, he felt relaxed and well-rested, unconcerned by the difficulties ahead. He smelled fried eggs in coconut oil from the kitchen below and felt convinced it would be okay to gamble a little, to venture outside the Club. Imagining a breakfast at the five-star Greens Hotel, a few minutes' walk down the road, Cecil decided to enjoy sumptuous food after days of hard work and Club meals that seem to appeal to an historic palate.

'Just walk to the hotel,' he rallied himself. As he left the Club, the engine of a black and yellow Ambassador taxi, parked nearby, started up noisily and the vehicle crept towards him. He shook his head, the taxi driver waved and the taxi disappeared down the road. Close to Greens Hotel he noticed the taxi waiting at a taxi stand, without its driver.

Don't see ghosts when there aren't any, he thought.

The food drew him like a bee to nectar. Giddy, he leapt up the stairs set between the massive pillars at the hotel entrance. A receptionist, dressed in an incandescent green silk sari, greeted him and directed him to the Verandah, where breakfast was being served. The smell of fresh bread and coffee welcomed him. A group of whispering elderly sari-clad ladies occupied tables overlooking the pool. A family, all dressed in shorts, were exploring the loaded buffet tables. Mother decided what to take first, Father dutifully followed. Their two teen-

age daughters argued noisily in Italian as they loaded up their plates. A young man, casually dressed, probably local, was breakfasting with four chunky businessmen in dark suits and ties, their jackets hanging over their chairs.

Nothing unusual. Great!

He selected a table dressed with starched white table linens, fresh frangipani and fine china, and ordered coffee. At the buffet he selected the smoked kingfish and crisp, thin slices of toasted brown bread. He was about to taste his coffee when a doorman passed by carrying a small blackboard with a tiny bell on its rim. As Cecil looked up, he saw his name written on the blackboard: *Mr. Coulthard*, properly spelled, followed by *reception*. As the doorman walked on, Cecil's anxiety exploded.

No! Not here, his brain initially panicked, then questioned, Who can possibly know I am having breakfast at this hotel?

Torn between denial, fight and flight, he argued feverishly with himself. Find out who wants to talk to me, or pretend I'm not here. No. Somebody knows, obviously, or doesn't but is fishing.

Realizing his last argument didn't make much sense, he stayed seated, didn't raise his hand. He sliced his toast and drank his coffee.

Wait and see.

He hardly tasted the fish. When he returned to the buffet tables, he saw a group passing by in the hallway—four men, one woman following a doorman pushing a loaded luggage cart. Chinese people! He immediately recognized Wong Oh in his dark glasses; he was less sure about the other men. He no longer had a sliver of a doubt: Wong Oh was following him, from Mauritania to Honiara. Cecil's fight or flight conundrum became moot. Time to leave, *now*! Wong Oh would likely drop his luggage in his room and return for breakfast. Cecil rushed to the reception desk.

'Could I pay for my breakfast here, please? It's an emergency.'

The receptionist in green looked at him dubiously.

'You didn't like the food, sir?' she asked. 'Are you Mr. Coulthard? Did you meet the delegation? They wanted to talk to you, a doorman went round with your name…'

'No, I am sorry.'

Cecil paid and almost ran back to the Club. In his room, his

heart pounding, he grabbed papers and asked the barman in the Club office to connect to him with Liliane's office in Brussels. Nothing doing, of course; she was still fast asleep. He gave the barman her home number. It took a long while before a male voice grumbled.

'*Qui, merde?*' Then he heard Liliane's voice.

'*C'est pour moi, chéri.*' She sounded chirpy, even in the early morning.

'Liliane, I hate to call you this early, but you won't believe it: Wong Oh just arrived in Colombo. He is following me, everywhere, it's no longer just my *imagination*.'

Cecil was shouting. He heard Liliane sigh, but she didn't answer.

'He even knew I was at the hotel. I'm not staying there, was just having breakfast, for the first time ever. They knew my name, tried to find me. *Liliane*, they are following me, a whole group of them. Wong Oh, others.'

'Calm down, Cecil, please.' Her husky voice measured the words, didn't express surprise, just asked for time.

'Liliane, I want to get *out of here*.' He could no longer control his panicky voice.

'Cecil, please listen to me, carefully. The Chinese are probably in Colombo to negotiate the construction of several harbors. The timing of their visit may appear odd but it is *totally* accidental. We got the press releases last year, straight from the Chinese embassy in Brussels; a Chinese company has bid for harbor construction in Sri Lanka, surprising but increasingly common. The only thing that really surprises me is that Wong Oh is part of the delegation; a program like that is usually handled by one of the public service units, something to do with infrastructure not shipbuilding.'

'Liliane, I am not an unreasonable guy, I am not paranoid. I can accept that a Chinese gentleman called Wong Oh introduces himself to me in Nouakchott; the Chinese sold the Mauritanians fishing boats. In Muscat, lo and behold, another Chinese link but no firm reason to suspect something fishy. Mr. Hameed is looking into whether he can sell his lobsters in China. Then in Honiara Wong Oh and his gang corners me, as I telexed you from Singapore. Mr. Oh tells me again, in no uncertain terms, to hurry up, to get lost. When I show my face at the Forum Fisheries Agency, one of Oh's

mates almost throws me down the stairs. My hotel bursts in flames; it's only pure chance I wasn't in the room. I have had enough. Your assignment is interesting, far more interesting than I imagined, but something is very wrong. How did they know I was at Greens Hotel; what do they want from me?'

Liliane didn't answer immediately. Stumbling noises suggested she was getting out of bed; a door closed.

'Mr. Coulthard, you have a contract with us. We provided a ticket and terms of reference. At your request, we extended your stay in Colombo to give you time to draft your interim report, and because our representative was sick. You are still required to visit Maldives. I do not like to be formal, Cecil, but let me put it to you straight. If you abort your trip, I will be forced not only to cancel your contract but also to withhold payment. I have no other option. We hired you despite certain references calling you a drunken gambling addict. Others recommended you; you have done the rehab. If you throw in the towel, I cannot ignore that history.'

She hung up, not waiting for an answer. Cecil looked at the telephone, as if the black horn shared responsibility for the abrupt end to his call, and he remembered Liliane's story about being refused a work permit in Hong Kong after she had made her movie about Chinese fishermen catching fish illegally. Did she know Wong Oh?

In the lobby Cecil stood and waited; the Club's barman, with whom he needed to renegotiate his excessive down payment and pay telephone charges, had disappeared. As he looked at the list of directors on the teak shield, the feeling of achievement, the satisfaction he had felt earlier that morning vanished, overwhelmed again by anxiety. All he could think was of a hike, a particular hike he still remembered, vividly. He must have been ten or eleven, hiking through the rough Newfoundland countryside with his father for most of the daylight hours. They had followed the abandoned train tracks, miles from any road. Every step was difficult; snow had accumulated over the sleepers and rails. His father wanted to show him what a famous local politician had once done, walking the train track across the entire island when the train was still in use. Dead tired and cold, following his father's footsteps, he stumbled over a branch, fell face

down, and at that moment felt no reason to ever stand up. His father grabbed his arm, pulled him up and angrily shook him.

'Never give up,' he shouted. 'Never ever give up, particularly when you are tired. You can rest, yes, but never give up.'

Was this his father's military training speaking or his father reminding himself?

He remembered his faculty struggles in Saskatoon, struggles he had initially lost, but he had been able to wave his faculty colleagues goodbye, leave for a fancy job in Washington DC. He hadn't given up. Nor had he given up at ITI. When his reports were watered down, he had tried to limit the damage of the opium of sycophancy disguised as political correctness.

Even in high school he had not given up. He heard his father's voice again across the dinner table, wine glasses half-empty, his invisible mother sternly present.

'This is the only time in your life that a little hard work will determine what you can be and do the rest of your life.'

His voice had sounded tired, the voice of a man who hadn't left a scratch on the rock, or slanted letters meant for posterity, because of one wrong step in a lifetime.

He kept staring at the names until the tinkle of cutlery broke the spell; the barman seemed to have popped up and was polishing worn silver.

'Henri, I have to leave, right now, earlier than planned; it is an emergency. Do you know a reliable travel agency where I could change my ticket?'

'To change the ticket, I know a very reliable agency, sir. Near the train station, it is on the way to the airport. My cousin owns it, sir. Very nice people they are. Tell them Henri sent you. So sorry you are leaving so soon, sir. We enjoyed your stay here.'

He dropped his mop in its bucket, dried his hands on his sarong.

'I am really sorry myself, Henri, I've enjoyed the Club, your kind help.'

Henri did not resume his bathroom cleaning duties; Cecil realized something else was required and offered him a generous bundle of rupees.

'Henri, could you please take care of my laundry; I will collect it when I come back in about two weeks' time.'

At the curbside the same black and yellow taxi had returned; it started its engine as if it had been waiting for him. Suspicious, Cecil's nerves told him to hail another taxi, but before he could act, Henri had dropped his suitcase in the trunk, and instructed the driver in Sinhalese. The taxi was pretty old and inside fumes of petrol competed with the gray smell of tropical mold mixed with coconut oil. When Cecil asked where they were going, the driver answered in Sinhalese. Just his luck, the guy did not or would not speak English.

Henri's cousin had his day off; a woman in a yellow sari and large spectacles was happy to help him. While others were waiting, she asked him to sit at her desk, ignoring Sri Lankans waving crumbly train tickets. As they looked over Cecil's shoulder, expressing no concern about the flagrant priority given to a foreigner, she asked for his ticket and passport.

'I cannot change your ticket, sir, so many sectors; it can only be changed by the originator,' she decided after leafing through his ticket. 'You can purchase a return ticket Colombo–Male–Colombo here, sir.'

After making a call to the airline, it took her less than fifteen minutes to book him to Male on the 4 p.m. flight.

'When do you want to fly back, sir? A return ticket is so much cheaper than a one-way ticket. Please ask your office to cancel your original flights to and from Male, otherwise your entire ticket becomes invalid if you skip sectors. Please remember.'

'Two weeks from now, same day, morning flight, so I can catch the Muscat flight that night.'

'Yes sir.'

She limped as she moved to the back of the office to get his printout; one leg appeared shorter than the other. Polio? thought Cecil. Some people are born unlucky. Fate is unfair.

She smiled as she handed him the printout and his ticket.

'Have a nice stay in Male, sir.'

18
Male, August 1992

Most airports have long runways, comfortingly surrounded by land, lots of land. Descending into Hulhule airport, Cecil's plane skimmed ocean water almost until touchdown. Cecil, the world traveler, was unnerved, a sensation he felt again when the plane, breaking hard, seemed destined to dive into the sea at the other end of the runway, which stretched the length of the small island like a rubber band. Stepping down onto firm ground should have provided relief. It didn't. A warm, humid, salty wind greeted him as he walked across the tarmac to the Arrivals Hall, but it didn't lessen his anxiety, palpable after his hasty retreat from Colombo. Even the sun appeared menacing, descending through blackened clouds. 'You made it, safely,' he repeated to himself, patiently waiting in line for passport control and during a much longer wait to collect his suitcase. As he stepped into the twilight outside, he glanced at the hotel signs held aloft. He was not going to honor his reservation, not here.

'Where are you going?'

Preferring anonymity when arriving in a foreign city, any city, he was used to avoiding the clutches of waiting travel reps. But on this island no escape into a taxi presented itself. Lights from Male flickered in the distance across a dark expanse of water. Dressed in a smart uniform, the woman who had spoken looked too young and innocent to be a taxi hustler.

'How do I get to Male?' he asked, refusing to mention a hotel.

'Come,' she motioned, accompanying him to the quay, where many boats waited. Waving to a speedboat, she asked 'ten dollars', took his money, and disappeared. Once the boat had accelerated hard, the driver asked about his hotel.

Cecil repeated his Colombo approach; he was seeking something small, out of the way.

'The Lena,' the driver determined, and followed up with a lengthy left-turn, right-turn explanation, most of which was drowned out by the racing sound of the outboard engine and the hull hitting the waves. Discharged onto a jetty at what appeared to be a corner of Male island, in front of the hotel where he had been booked to stay,

Cecil expected but didn't find a taxi. People paid him no attention, a hesitant man with a bag and a small suitcase. He decided to walk, and turning corner after corner promptly got lost. He found his way back to the jetty, asked the man at the hotel front office where he could find the Lena.

'Yes sir, it is one of the small hotels that recently opened, it is located near the commercial quay.' He nodded, raised his hands. 'The tourist map of the island is being reprinted, so many recent changes…'

An elderly man sitting in the lobby stood up.

'I can show you, if you wish.'

He had a bicycle, took Cecil's suitcase and walked him to the hotel, most of the way along a seaside boulevard. He didn't say anything; after a while Cecil felt obliged to hold a conversation.

'I tried to find the hotel, got lost. There are no taxis in Male?'

'Male is a small island, about a square mile, many people live here. They ride bicycles or motorcycles. We have few private cars here.'

'You live here in Male?' Cecil couldn't think of a more neutral question.

'No.'

'You are visiting then, like me?'

'No, I work for a construction company.'

'A Maldivian company?'

'No, our company employs a Sri Lankan subcontractor to construct our projects, mostly hotels.'

'You are Sri Lankan?'

'Yes.'

'From Colombo?'

'No, from Galle.'

Cecil closed the increasingly awkward conversation; the man appeared reluctant to engage. After a while the silence bothered Cecil.

'You are staying at the hotel where I met you?'

'No, our company has a small apartment in Male.'

'Did your company build the Lena Hotel?'

'The Lena? No.'

'I met you by chance, then?'

'Yes.'

Mercifully the hotel was less than fifteen minutes' walk from the jetty, a tall modern building next to low tourist shops on a narrow unpaved lane. Cecil received his suitcase.

'Thank you again, sir, for being my guide. I appreciate it. Could I give you this as a token of my gratitude?'

Cecil tried to offer dollars; he had forgotten to change money at the airport.

'That is really not necessary; no, thank you anyway. I hope you enjoy the hotel. Good evening.'

He turned his bike, mounted it and disappeared around the corner.

Safe in his spartan hotel room, its only furniture a narrow bed, luggage stand and cupboard, a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling, Cecil stretched out on the creaky bed and gave his thoughts free rein.

After all that has happened, Maldives cannot be the safest place to visit, Mr. Coulthard, and that is an understatement! he berated himself. Do you really need to complete this contract? Why? To prove to yourself that you never gave up? Is that worth whatever risk Wong Oh and his gang may pose? Remember what you discussed in Colombo about starting a war. You never know what the end result may be. You fear Wong Oh. Why? These are questions you should have asked yourself before you changed your ticket and flew here.

He concluded that his snap decision to make this mad dash to Maldives was made the second Liliane ended their telephone conversation; he had followed his gut feeling, fueled by his father's words. This ex post reasoning, just like most economic analyses, provided no clarity about what to do next, but the notion of never giving up did offer some flexibility. He could interview a few people here and disappear, fly to Colombo and back to Europe. If, by chance, Liliane would accept his reasons for limiting his stay in Colombo and Male, the draft midterm report he had partly finished would do fine. If not, the report could relatively easily be copy-pasted into a conference paper, and his strenuous labor would still find an audience.

He fell asleep; in his dream the principal was handing out

high school diplomas. As usual, he didn't get one. This time he felt dejected.

The sound of motorbikes woke him up. His white cubicle, the light still burning and the lingering smell of fresh paint, it all felt oddly normal, as if a time machine had put him back in a university dorm. Having arrived almost a week early, he felt he had the luxury of exploring the small island and taking his time before contacting Hassan at the Ministry of Fisheries. Liliane had met Hassan at a tuna conference, years ago.

'A rather unimposing man at first sight, of uncertain age but with a highly expressive face. I could never have imagined how special he was,' she had recalled, 'I met him after he made an impressive presentation about Indian Ocean tuna resources. He was working at the Ministry of Fisheries, managing new projects. His CV also listed training as an architect and a degree in marine biology. A famous artist and historian, he designed Maldives' new currency and he discovered remnants of an early Buddhist society. I could picture him in renaissance Italy, not in a tiny country in the middle of the Indian Ocean. Talk to him first!'

Following directions given by the lady who served his breakfast of white Wonder Bread, canned cheese and marmalade, he walked along an unpaved road with coral walls on either side, crossing similar roads full of people, to the small boat quay. The moist air smelled faintly of dried fish as he approached a fish market, still empty. He took his time watching the loading of the local wooden transport vessels, vying for space with fishing boats at the quay. Their rotund hulls and high cabins, with people sitting on top, looked awkward and unstable next to the elegantly sculpted hulls of the low fishing boats. Carts, pulled and pushed by men dressed in shirts, sarongs and flip-flops, were moving bags of rice and cement, corrugated iron sheets and boxes from nearby shops. Fishermen lugged heavy yellow plastic jerrycans on board before mooring lines were let go. Noisy engines powered the boats leaving the harbor. Farther along the boulevard a sentry stood at ease in front of a long white two-story building, perfectly maintained. A jetty in front had an

elaborate, sculpted wooden canopy. A varnished sign announced this was the Presidential Jetty. A large luxurious motor yacht that appeared totally out of place between the working vessels nearby was anchored in front. When Cecil raised his hand, the sentry raised his head slightly and smiled. Lingering near the President's Jetty, Cecil watched the fishing boats speeding by.

The hotel did have one telephone; the breakfast lady assumed concierge duties and called, speaking in the local language, Dhivehi. Hassan was attending a meeting. The lady suggested he could be seen at around midday; Cecil should confirm first. His cubicle lacked a desk and chair. Cecil installed himself in the breakfast room. The lady didn't mind, served coffee. What to do first? Give Kate priority or edit Liliane's report, just in case? His blue book was sitting on top of the stack of papers in his bag.

His handwritten story told the facts, described his family life, without too much detail. After reading it while he enjoyed his coffee, he felt it was missing something. His parents were the actors in the show of their lives he had created. He had become the observer, seemed to be hiding offstage, in the wings. The observer didn't express any surprise, relief, a sense of closure, nothing, even as he was reading the letters while sitting in his father's study, and the mystery behind his family's peculiar behavior was finally being revealed. At that time, and even when he started writing in his blue book, the other side of the coin hadn't yet occurred to him, obsessed as he was by his own family's secrets. What had happened in Kampen after his father returned to Canada? A simple question in plain view he had egocentrically ignored. His father and mother had been living apart together, initially, he had thought, for his sake. What had made them stay the course they had forced upon each other and themselves? Once, he recalled, he had glimpsed the cusp of change. The day his mother had come home from school lighthearted, happy to drink and chat with his father. Cracks had appeared in the mold, continuing at the dinner table as she related her talk with the principal. But then she had snatched away his freedom and solidified the status quo.

Cecil closed his blue book, decided he didn't have time for a thorough edit. If Kate confirmed she was his half sister, he could paint the broader picture for her later. After a frantic search of his bag and suitcase, he had to admit he had not kept Kate's address, or even her telephone number. After another cup of coffee he was ready to attack his midterm report again.

Hassan's office reminded Cecil of Ahmed's neat place in Mauritania, bookcases full of reports, a few papers on the desk, these ones written in characters Cecil recognized from the airport signage; Maldives had its own unique script. Hassan was a small man with a fine, chiseled face. Like Liliane, Cecil had difficulty estimating his age. Dressed in a white shirt and dark tie, just like all the other people Cecil had noticed working in the Ministry, Hassan looked the proverbial local bureaucrat.

'I do not believe we have met before, Mr. Coulthard,' Hassan added after softly mentioning his own name and shaking Cecil's hand.

'You are Canadian? We had two naval architects from that part of the world here, years ago. One came from Maine, the other from Newfoundland, if I recall correctly. Pearson, do you know him?'

When Cecil shook his head, Hassan continued.

'No? Anyway, you mentioned Ms. de Bock on the phone. I remember meeting her in Penang. What is she up to these days?'

'She runs the Oceans Program at URI, an NGO in Brussels,' Cecil confirmed. 'She contracted me to explore why fisheries management theory and particularly management practices don't really work, and what alternatives may be available. I've looked at fisheries in Mauritania, the Solomon Islands, and I've just come from Sri Lanka. Maldives is my last stop. She recommended I introduce myself to you first—she was impressed by your presentation in Penang.'

While Cecil spoke, Hassan carefully wrote Dhivehi letters.

'What do you know about Maldives, Mr. Coulthard?'

'I understand from my briefings in Brussels that Maldives has this unique small-scale tuna fishery producing for local consumption and export, no industrial fisheries. You export canned tuna and traditional products.'

'Do you have a fisheries background?'

'I am a trade economist by training. When I have half a chance, I explore the effects of complex systems on trade.'

Hassan kept writing tiny slanting letters while Cecil waited for a reaction.

'Mr. Coulthard, please do not take this personally, but you are the latest in a line of well over fifty foreign people who have come to Maldives this year to talk to the Minister or myself. Most are studying something, consultants, scientists; others are financing projects and visit to appraise or supervise them. Small technical assistance projects mostly, a couple of larger ones. All these visitors take a lot of our time. Don't get me wrong, technical assistance can be useful. The naval architect from Maine, Cyrus Hamlin, designed the dhonis we use mainly for fishing these days. Our port and fish-processing infrastructure are partly foreign financed. What I am trying to say is that I regret I do not have the time to provide you with the information and analysis you are looking for. What I can do is introduce you to people who can: a tuna scientist at our research institute and staff of the Maldivian Trade Organization. They run our fish-processing and international trading activities. Where are you staying?'

'The Lena Hotel, here in town.'

Hassan smiled, looked genuinely surprised.

'You are? Most consultants stay at resort hotels near the airport. My nephew owns the Lena. I hope it is comfortable?'

'Yes, I slept well last night.'

'Please contact Leif Johansson, our resident tuna scientist; this is his telephone number. Somebody will contact you from the Maldivian Trade Organization. They face problems collecting tuna. Maybe in return you can help them?'

He rose from behind his desk.

'When you have completed your fact-finding, please give me a call. I would like to receive a copy of your findings before you leave. Nothing fancy or elaborate, succinct findings and recommendations only; I do not have time to read lengthy reports. Most consultants disappear and send their reports later, some much later or not at all. I have to write back, diplomatically point out the mistakes they have made, or why their conclusions and recommendations may be theo-

retically correct but don't make much sense in Maldives. I prefer to discuss that in person. Goodbye.'

Tall and sporting a head of red hair, Leif Johansson could have been living proof of Viking relationships of yore with Irish women. He had also inherited the Irish gift of the gab.

'No, since you ask, I was born in Australia, great-great-grandparents came from Scotland, convicts. They lost their access to the commons; during a famine they slaughtered sheep belonging to the duke. Such nice people.'

Leaving the target of Leif's sarcasm—the nobility's monopoly on land ownership in Scotland or the moral rectitude of Australia's early European settlers—for later consideration, Cecil asked, 'You work at the Fisheries Research Institute; only on tuna or also reef fish?'

'I wrote my thesis on these beautiful fish, some of the fastest in the world.' Leif made no secret of his passion for tuna. 'I am a marine biologist. Maldives has potential problems with its reef fish stocks.' Leif shook his head, as if resigned to the inevitable. 'They are interesting animals too,' he acknowledged.

'I visited the Forum Fisheries Agency before I came here. In the Pacific most tuna stocks, except for yellowfin and skipjack, are heavily exploited. Is it the same here?'

'Maldivian fishermen only catch surface tunas: skipjack, a few juvenile yellowfin, virtually no bycatch. Nearly all our dhonis use pole and line to catch tuna. No purse seiners or long-liners are allowed to operate in Maldives' 200-mile economic zone; none are based here. As in the Pacific, foreign vessels do operate in the Indian Ocean; mostly European purse seiners near Seychelles, Asian long-liners fish all over the place. They catch most of the tuna, their catches have more than doubled in the past five years.'

'Did government policy limit fishing technology? I have the impression Maldives is the only country using pole and line.' Cecil quickly exploited the brief pause in Leif's monologue.

'No. Maldivians have been fishing tuna this way for many centuries, as have the Indonesians. A Chinese trader and historian, Wan Dayuan, recorded Maldivian tuna fishing in the fourteenth century. In the fifteenth century the eunuch Zheng He undertook seven

voyages to explore the Indian Ocean for the Chinese emperor. After that the Chinese didn't return until, maybe, a decade ago. Now they are collecting reef fish from Indonesian and Malaysian waters for live fish markets in China and Hong Kong.'

'The Maldivians have never changed the way they fish?' Cecil tried to stay close to policy questions.

'Not really, except for the recent mechanization of dhonis. Maldives has few trees, and most are of no use for boatbuilding. They have always used the only wood that is abundant, coconut palm wood. It has another advantage, impregnated with shark liver oil it lasts a long time, even in seawater. Sharks are fairly plentiful, some give birth to their pups here. All the older fishing dhonis have coconut wood hulls. In the past they had sails and were rowed; that limited their range. Pole fishing was the only way to catch surface tunas with these small boats. These days there are far fewer sailing dhonis. Most have engines and ferry tourists around. The local boatbuilding yard has been building dhonis of a new design using imported wood. They are bigger and are now the main vessel used to catch tuna. They still use the same process though: catch baitfish in the early morning within the atolls, catch tuna from schools swimming in the ocean, return early afternoon.'

'You aren't worried about the state of tuna resources near Maldives, or in the Indian Ocean? The catch statistics I saw show Maldivian catches increasing rapidly.'

'Skipjack are the rats of the ocean; they are highly fecund, spawn all year round, everywhere, as long as the ocean surface temperature is over 18 degrees. No worries about overfishing skipjack, not with the current local fishing fleet. Maldives is one huge fish aggregating device. Some skipjack schools like it here, they become residents for longer periods, others just pass through.'

Cecil put both his hands out, as if on a dashboard.

'Please, not so fast. You are talking to an economist. Are FADs used here?'

'No, not yet, but they should try them. Tuna forage on small fish; in the ocean small fish like to shelter and feed under floating objects, like logs. Fishermen used to target those floating logs and concentrations of birds to locate schools of skipjack. Centuries ago Indonesian

fishermen were constructing floating bamboo rafts anchored in deep water to attract small fish and ultimately tunas, the original FADs. Maldives has hundreds of miles of coral reefs, with lots of small fish. The country will always attract tuna. In the Pacific industrial fleets use many FADs, most just float around. We could try a few experimental ones here, anchored in deep water, like in Indonesia.'

Leif pointed to a fishing dhoni returning to Male.

'Those blokes are early; they want to be the first at the market. Fishing around Male is a bit of gamble. All tuna caught nearby is sold here for local consumption; Maldivians eat on average over 60 kilos of tuna per year; a third of the population lives in Male. When fishermen catch a lot of fish, market prices in Male drop. Early landings avoid the risk of lower prices.'

'What happens to the reef fish?'

'People here prefer tuna, have never bothered much with reef fish; it is being dried and exported from atolls with few tuna, mostly by sailing dhonis. When the tourists started to show up, in the early 1970s, everything changed. Tourists prefer large reef fish: snappers, emperors, groupers. Unfortunately, these animals reproduce slowly. They used to die of old age. No longer. We are trying to get hotels on individual islands to control fishing in their neighborhood in order to manage reef resources. It will take a while.'

Leif stopped in front of a low door in a long white wall.

'This is our research institute. Modest compared to what I am used to in Australia but pretty effective. We have a few excellent biologists; we know what's happening with the tuna in the Indian Ocean, not just in Maldivian waters. I will give you a few of our publications, with the stock assessments we use. Lack of tuna is not a problem here; how to benefit from their exploitation is the key issue. As you will find out. And it is complex.'

Cecil recognized Ahmed's words, almost verbatim.

The lady at the hotel had a message: call Adnan. Cecil was also welcome to pass by his office. She provided directions to the Maldivian Trading Organization; not very far. Nothing was far in Male, and once Cecil realized its streets formed a nice north-south, east-west grid, he didn't understand why he had gotten lost when he arrived.

19
Male, August 1992

Talking to a captain of one of the freezer vessels, Adnan was busy on his marine radio. He spoke English, waving Cecil to a chair at a large table. Tall glass-covered cases along the wall displayed stacks of tuna cans of various sizes with brightly colored labels. Nylon fishing line and boxes of hooks were piled in a white plastic fish box next to what appeared to be Japanese electronic equipment. Coils of steel cable, still in their paper bandage, were stacked in a corner. The office smelled of paint and tar. Adnan had a dark complexion. Some Maldivians, like Tamils in Sri Lanka, were dark-skinned, Cecil had noticed, while others had a much lighter complexion.

'Hi, I am Adnan, I run the operations here. You are?'

'Cecil, Cecil Coulthard.'

'Welcome to the Maldivian Trade Organization, Mr. Coulthard. Coffee?'

'Sure, thank you.'

'Hassan Manik told me you study fisheries management, current practices, but also have experience of analyzing trade, international trade.'

'I did, in an earlier life.'

'How come, an earlier life?'

While Cecil explained, Adnan continued to listen to the crackling radio. When a deep voice suddenly entered the room, he clicked the mike and started talking in Dhivehi.

'Just a minute, Mr. Coulthard, a compressor has broken down on one of our ships, I need spare parts.'

As Cecil drank his coffee, Adnan spoke Dhivehi into the mike, which he kept wedged between his chin and shoulder, while dialing a number on his phone. He switched to English with an agent in Singapore, taking the mike in his other hand. The deep voice occasionally made noises, suddenly commented on a product code number in English. The parts were ordered and would be flown to Male. Cecil was impressed.

'So, you said you analyzed international trade,' Adnan resumed as if the past fifteen minutes had not happened.

'Did you by any chance study frozen and canned tuna in the Solomons?'

'I did.' Cecil talked fast, afraid of another radio call. 'The Pacific Islands have found it very difficult to derive benefit from tuna fishing by foreign vessels. They have tried to manage tuna fishing—organized a monitoring and control system, wanted decent fees for fishing licenses. They are still at it, much still needs to be done. Some small island countries have spent serious money on developing their own port infrastructure, cold storage, even canneries. Most of it hasn't worked out, they have lost millions.'

'We don't have foreign fleets operating in our 200-mile zone, at least most of the time. But like the Pacific Islands we have problems making money from the tuna we catch. We catch tuna efficiently and, compared to foreign industrial fisheries, quite cheaply. The problem we have is how to get the tuna into our fleet of collector and freezer vessels from the fishing boats that cannot preserve fish and operate in a wide area. We also have difficulty keeping down the costs of freezing and canning. We operate one cannery in the north; just opened a land-based cold storage in the south. Much of our freezing and cold storage capacity is vessel-based; very old vessels from the time the Japanese were collecting tuna here, three modern vessels, and a bunch of tuna long-liners apprehended when they fished illegally in our waters. Our ships are expensive to operate. We produce fresh tuna at a low price but pay too much to collect and freeze it for export. What can we do about that?'

Adnan drummed his fingers on his desk, took the mike and started talking again in Dhivehi. He jumped up, called to somebody through the half-open door. A little later an elderly balding man came in, erect, wearing a white shirt and tie.

'This is Mr. Didi, our board secretary—Mr. Coulthard.'

'How do you do, sir?'

Mr. Didi spoke as formally as his appearance suggested he might.

'Could you arrange he has a chat with Ibrahim? That's our projects manager,' he added for Cecil's benefit.

'I will be happy to arrange that, Mr. Coulthard. Please come with me.'

As Cecil was about to shake Adnan's hand, the radio crackled and

a different voice called out. Adnan waved and turned to the mike.

Trailing Mr. Didi along a corridor where industrial-looking boxes were stacked against one wall, Cecil passed several offices with single empty desks and one where a man sat making a phone call. This first impression of a public corporation in Maldives confused Cecil, being used as he was to messy offices full of people behind desks, shuffling papers.

'Please take a chair, Mr. Coulthard.'

Mr. Didi invited Cecil into a large wood-paneled room with maps and pictures of ships on the walls and a long conference table in the middle.

'Mr. Shakeeb will be back in a few minutes. I am curious about your name. It sounds French, but you speak English like a native, if I may say so; although not American.'

'You are correct, Mr. Didi. I am Canadian. My ancestors, many generations ago, came from Acadia, and I assume originally from France. You noticed my accent?'

'In the 1970s I did a stint at our UN embassy in New York. Quite a change from the small island I came from,' said Mr. Didi, his face lighting up.

'New York! I used to live in Washington DC. Did you visit the Capitol, our Mall, the museums?'

Finding a rather distant neighbor from the US prompted a rush of empathy with Mr. Didi.

'Yes. DC seemed a more relaxed city than New York,' Mr. Didi replied diplomatically. 'What brings you all the way to Maldives, literally the other side of the globe?'

Cecil explained, repeating his usual introduction.

Mr. Didi pointed to a long map of Maldives.

'Mr. Coulthard, different layers and agents in complex systems, as you call them, have influenced our destiny. A diplomat observes; and I learned from New York's history and different communities that what unfolded there also happened in Maldives but over a much longer timescale. It might interest you.'

'Please explain, Mr. Didi.'

'The city of New York became the magnet that attracted people

from Europe, because of its location. It provided opportunities for people escaping poverty and wars. The Dutch controlled the city for a while until they exchanged it with the British. Finally, it became part of an independent USA.'

Mr. Didi pointed to an island.

'This is Thinadhoo, on Gaafu atoll across the One and Half Degree Channel in the south of the country. I was born there. Our islands may appear isolated, surrounded by the ocean, but ever since the first settlers arrived, foreign contacts have determined what happens in Maldives. More than 2,700 years ago, people came from India—Tamils and other Dravidian peoples—and foreign kings claimed the islands. They introduced a sun-centered Hinduism; the remains of a sun temple still exist. Ceylon claimed the Maldives a few centuries later, Sinhalese immigrated, and we became Buddhist for sixteen hundred years, with a local king—or queen; we had a matrilineal society at that time—paying tribute.'

Waving an arm across the map, Mr. Didi proclaimed proudly, 'Hassan Manik, you have met him, has explored the many Buddhist stupa remains on the islands. All our traditions in Maldives were developed at that time, our language, customs. We had a prosperous society, fishing for export, producing coir rope for export, bartering cowry shells for rice.'

'What were the cowry shells used for?' Cecil asked, eager to show he was paying attention and wished Mr. Didi to continue.

'Our reefs were the main source of cowry shells in the Indian Ocean, they were widely used as currency. Arab traders from Hadramaut, on their way to Aceh, came here to buy them; some traders stayed permanently. Indonesians on their way to Madagascar settled here too. The king became the sultan in around 1100 AD when we became Muslim. Dutch control of Ceylon in the eighteenth century boosted the cowry and rope trades. The British removed the Dutch from Ceylon and needed to protect their shipping; like Aden, we became a British protectorate. They created a base on Addu, the southernmost atoll; the RAF operated the airfield until 1975. We used to work there, the people of the three southernmost atolls. In previous centuries sailing vessels had passed through the Channel, and occasionally shipwrecked. Surviving sailors stayed in our island

communities, often for years. We had customs that allowed these mariners to marry a Maldivian girl, but when the sailor left, he had to leave without her.'

Mr. Didi smiled.

It occurred to Cecil that Mr. Didi, with his relatively light complexion, might have this arrangement in his own family history.

The door opened and Ibrahim Shakeeb interrupted Mr. Didi's history lesson. As he walked in, his right foot turned, trailing slightly, Cecil remembered the lady in the travel agency in Colombo. Polio.

A small-framed slender man with a sharp face, he greeted Mr. Didi in Dhivehi.

'Please meet Mr. Coulthard,' Mr. Didi introduced Cecil.

'Ibrahim Shakeeb, nice to meet you, Mr. Coulthard. You've had your history lesson from our country's historian?'

Shakeeb grinned, bowing his head in mock deference to Mr. Didi.

'You have an amazing history.'

Mr. Didi raised his hands.

'Please let me finish, Ibrahim. We became independent from the UK in 1965, and later our Majlis, our parliament, decided the country should become a republic. The RAF's role in Addu continued, providing employment, and the British compensated us financially for the use of the base. In the run-up to the British deciding to leave, the three southernmost atolls wanted to create a separate state. It didn't last long, but it created tensions within the country that have not completely disappeared.'

Mr. Didi turned to his colleague.

'Our more recent foreign interactions Mr. Shakeeb can explain. You agree, Mr. Coulthard, like that of New York, our history reflects complexity, many agents, many influences? And the process continues.'

'It does, it's quite remarkable.'

'I understand from Hassan you studied international trade, Mr. Coulthard?'

Cecil's visit had evidently been discussed internally.

'Correct. I used to work for the International Trade Institute in Washington DC,' Cecil confirmed, relieved he didn't have to repeat his standard introduction.

'In the early 1970s,' Ibrahim recalled, 'political tensions with Ceylon stopped our export of 'Maldive fish'; Ceylon was our only market. When the UK withdrew from Addu, they also stopped compensation payments. We had a difficult time. Our government decided to invite foreign companies to collect fresh tuna, we expanded our international shipping company, and we encouraged foreign investment in hotels on unoccupied islands.'

'Did we know how this would change our society?' Mr. Didi clapped his hands as if this signified the end of an era. 'Not really. What it did, and still does, was push migration to Male, it encouraged people to leave their islands. That migration still continues. About a third of our population now lives in Male. Only older people are left on some islands. Schools and hospitals are concentrated in Male. Hotels, close to the airport, offer jobs. The government is expanding rapidly, attracting better-educated people. Mr. Shakeeb and I came to Male.'

Mr. Didi turned to Mr. Shakeeb, silently apologizing for his interruption.

Curious, Cecil thought. Would perhaps Didi's southern origins and the short-lived independence movement have anything to do with his opinionated interruption?

'Mr. Didi is right, he always is,' Mr. Shakeeb resumed. 'Fish had traditionally been the country's main export product, nicely spreading employment for fishermen and women over many islands. We have difficulty finding young fishermen now. Our shipping company offers jobs for school-leavers. Tourists bring us foreign exchange and many jobs.'

Mr. Shakeeb pointed to a picture of two old, anchored vessels, surrounded by many small local fishing boats.

'That,' he said, 'is one of our problems. We have an infrastructure problem: our vessels that collect and freeze fish are old, expensive and have insufficient capacity. We have a technology problem: our dhonis cannot yet preserve fish properly. We have a social problem: few teenagers want to become fishermen. We are facing a long transition period. What, Mr. Coulthard, can we do about it?'

Mr. Didi took his leave. Cecil asked questions and Ibrahim Shakeeb

explained. They talked for hours, about the cannery, the two new cold storage facilities in the south of the country, new dhoni designs, fish preservation. In the end, Cecil realized the Maldivian Trade Organization had much more on its plate than managing technological change. The recipient of the hand-me-down facilities left by foreign companies, it had been gradually forced to handle the social change caused by a rapidly developing society, providing social security to the older fishermen and their families still living on many islands. Cecil didn't pretend to have answers that made sense here, in the middle of the ocean, but felt privileged that people trusted him enough to take the time to explain.

20
Felivaru, September 1992

Mr. Ilyas, the chair of the Maldivian Trading Organization, seated behind a large gleaming desk sporting a small Maldivian flag, insisted. Cecil should at least have a look at the cannery to better understand the ins and outs of his tuna business in Maldives. Cecil tried to find arguments to stay in Male, to talk to more people, safely in their offices, but Mr. Ilyas waved those away.

'Talk is just that, talk. Words do not explain everything; to understand our problems you need to look at the bigger picture. How, Mr. Coulthard, can we market frozen fish for direct human consumption, in Europe, even in Japan? If you don't see the cannery with your own eyes, and the distances between the atolls, our fishing dhonis, you cannot fully understand what we are up against in our markets in Thailand and Europe. You can join our projects manager when he visits our new cold storage facility on Kooddoo, in the south, but you should first have a look at the cannery, the main reason my hair is gray.

Even if Mr. Ilyas had not been so important and politically well-connected, Cecil would have found it hard to refuse his travel proposal, and he agreed, reluctantly. Walking back to the hotel, Cecil became convinced that being away from this city, with its formal offices, its whitewashed coral houses surrounded by claustrophobic walls, its sandy roads, would at least give him time to calm his nerves, consider his next move. He would become a tourist, with nothing urgent to do. He could still observe and do his now likely unpaid job.

It happened just as he reached his hotel. Large hats worn by elderly female tourists in colorful dresses filled the shop next door, which catered to the sunburned leisured classes. Inside the shop a man, with his back to the door, was looking at postcards. Cecil did not recognize him immediately, then the man turned around and Cecil saw his face. It was the friendly guide who had been reluctant to talk. But when he spotted Cecil, he turned back. Cecil entered the Lena and stood by the door, looking up and down the street. His guide rushed out of the shop. Farther along the road he collected

his bicycle and cycled away. Cecil craned his neck, and saw him stop and talk to a man waiting at the corner, a short man wearing large sunglasses.

He descended with most of his papers to the restaurant, pushed two tables together. He needed to prepare for another escape, possibly without luggage. The 'how' was of later concern. His critical analysis of the theory of fisheries management, his 'scratch on the rock', must survive to find an audience. Now! The interim report he had almost completed was likely to face an ignominious resting place in a safely locked desk drawer if he sent it straight to Brussels. Asking an old colleague in Saskatoon or at ITI to help was unlikely to get an unbiased reaction. Getting his findings the attention they deserved required presentation at a conference or seminar. His faculty experience in the wheat fields of Canada suggested that publication in a scientific journal and ultimately a book was wishful thinking. Maybe later. Getting a conference paper accepted required time and the mediation of somebody experienced in dealing with picky conference selection committees. Of course, Kate! He could let her have his notes and his midterm review to cut and paste an abstract and draft a conference paper. He would finish the paper later after safely getting out of here. She would not refuse. Getting the stuff into her capable hands without an address would require further assistance. The only address he had memorized was his temporary retreat in the suburbs of Maryland. Claudine. She could also judge the relevance of the blue book. He frantically scribbled notes and letters to Claudine and Kate; tore pages from the Aurora Sports Club's gratuitous note bloc. The hotel receptionist offered him a small box; she knew all about when and where the package could be posted. He cut and pasted sections for a draft paper and put his notes in order before he hurried to the post office.

On the way back he carefully checked the streets. At every corner he looked back. The shop next to the Lena had no customers. There was no sign of the 'friendly' guide riding his bicycle among the dozens of white-shirted office commuters. Nor of Wong Oh.

He hardly slept, made plans in the middle of the night to escape. In

the early morning he considered withdrawing from the world, staying in bed. He forced himself to focus on his room, the sounds from the nearby kitchen. Here, in Male, in this small hotel near the fishing harbor, nothing could happen. Male was no Honiara. He forced himself to get out of bed and face the white bread breakfast.

He left early, sauntered along the short quay, just as he had done on previous mornings, watchful, cautious. The sun, still below the horizon, colored the eastern sky reddish orange through purple clouds. The bustle near the local transport vessels helped soothe his nerves. The sentry in front of the presidential palace stood at ease, signaled safety. When Cecil raised his hand in greeting, the sentry lifted his head, looked the other way, did not smile.

The boat was waiting at the jetty in front of the Fisheries Ministry, as Adnan had promised. No speedboat but an old dhoni, with its elegant curved bow extension. It had an outsized roof and benches to ferry tourists. The captain, Umair, wore shorts and a white T-shirt three sizes too big for his diminutive frame. Immediately after Cecil got on board, he started the noisy engine; during the trip he didn't speak, even to Abdulla, his single crew member. Inside the atoll, Abdulla stood at the bow watching for suddenly appearing submerged corals hidden by the reflecting sunlight. Once the dhoni reached deep water between the atolls, he cooked rice.

Cecil felt fine as long as they sailed inside Male atoll on this serene, windless morning. The sea colors, aquamarine blue, light green in shallow areas, reflected a cloudless sky. They passed the airport island, the tall yellow and blue tail of an aircraft visible behind the terminal. On nearby resort islands edged with white beaches, hotel buildings hid between coconut palms; fancy speedboats collected tourists waiting on intricately roofed jetties for their excursion to Male. Islands moved to the horizon as Cecil's dhoni puttered farther north. He felt strangely at ease, almost hypnotized by the engine sound, watching the air warmed by the sun create islands of tiny ripples, wavering and disappearing, on the glassy sea surface, an ephemeral skin masking an unknowable body.

They passed between two large islands with traditional houses, a Maldivian flag flying from a tall flagpole on each island, a few fishing dhonis anchored close by, and entered the deep-water channel

between Male and Lhaviyani atolls. As the water colored deep blue, a light breeze from the ocean sculpted small mirrored waves that reflected sunrays along the top of a long swell. The dhoni glided beautifully over the sparkling waves without spray. What Cecil feared actually happened. The dhoni's lazy movement and spirited engine noise stirred nausea, and just in time he leaned over the railing to express the injury done to his stomach in a donation to the fishes. Entering Lhaviyani atoll, he felt sick and exhausted. An hour later he stepped onto the long coral jetty, wobbly on his legs, his ears still ringing.

Two men were waiting to receive him; the youngest, after talking briefly to the captain, turned to Cecil as the dhoni left, noisily proclaiming its departure.

'The crew will stay at a guest house in Naifaru, two islands from here. Welcome to Felivaru, our tuna cannery.'

Cecil shook hands with Bandu and Malik. They were dressed in Male office attire. As they walked along the long jetty, Cecil could hear the muffled sound of the factory and could smell fish, exhaust and smoke. Sandy roads connected the jetty to a nearby office set among the ubiquitous coconut palms; tall industrial buildings rose on the left. Women in saris walked in front, wearing white boots, green plastic gowns, and blue caps to cover their hair. In the office Cecil was offered tea, but he apologized for not tasting the local fish delicacies; he didn't yet trust his stomach.

For a recovering victim of seasickness, the smell and heat Cecil faced inside the cannery suggested a quick visit, but Bandu and Malik had obviously been briefed to show their visitor the intricacies of how to put a piece of hot cooked tuna into a can. In the sweltering main factory hall the fish was being pre-cooked in large steel cauldrons. Wearing a plastic gown and white boots—a bit too small for his feet, but they were the largest available—Cecil had to observe dozens of women gutting tuna, the blood and entrails slowly spilling from the stainless-steel tables into a gutter from where the smelly mess disappeared into an adjacent tank. Others were separating the still steaming tuna meat from the bones and skin. The women allowed Malik to inspect skin and bone removal, a show-and-tell for the foreign

visitor. Surrounded by the steaming tuna, Malik explained why the percentage of the whole fish other canneries were able to can sometimes exceeded his own.

'We catch mostly small skipjack, and not so much juvenile yellowfin, which are bigger and school with the skipjack. But we are not doing too badly. We also have a small fishmeal factory.'

Malik proudly showed him a dusty heat-irradiating machine.

'We also process animal feed from the dark meat of the tuna. That's where the money is these days.'

Malik continued his presentation, elaborated on recent trends in the fishmeal business. Cecil was amazed that here, on this tiny atoll island in the middle of the Indian Ocean, people appeared to perfectly understand what he had studied extensively—was it only two years ago?— in Washington DC: how the single-producer organization actually controlled global fishmeal and fish oil markets and prices. Yet being impressed didn't diminish the view and smell of the bloody entrails moving towards fishmeal heaven.

At other tables women were filling individual cans. The lid-sealing and sterilization machines appeared to be the only truly industrial contraptions; canning was the work of nimble hands, never allowed to rest as hot fish bodies relentlessly approached the cleaning tables and empty cans waited to be filled.

Meanwhile Cecil tried to ignore the stench, heat and noise, avoided the baskets of steaming fish people were sliding around. He was feeling desperate, about to lose control of his unruly stomach, when Malik set off for the labeling, packing and storage rooms.

A machine glued labels, women packed cartons, men stacked cartons. The machines made slithering and gurgling noises. The glue had an odor, but the air felt noticeably cooler; fans overhead made life more agreeable and allowed Cecil to reclaim a modicum of stomach control. After he took a peek inside the cold storage, half full of steel cages loaded with white frozen tuna, his stomach settled down.

They walked back to the office under a still burning sun. Once inside, he drank a glass of water with a slight sulfur aftertaste. His complaining stomach under control, Cecil asked the question he had not dared raise inside the cannery.

'Thank you for showing me around, that's the first time I've ever

seen a self-contained tuna canning operation. It must be difficult to manage one right here, in the middle of the Indian Ocean. Quite impressive! I don't want to sound critical, and certainly not impolite, but if you'll allow me, I have one burning question. It betrays my own ignorance and the sensitivity of my stomach at the moment. How can anyone work day in, day out in a fish cannery?'

Bandu looked at Malik, then to Cecil.

'These women all come from India, on one-year contracts. Most stay just one year, we have some regulars, mostly supervisors. They are happy here, earn decent money compared to what farm work in Kerala pays. We work one or two shifts, so they can earn overtime when we get a lot of fresh fish. The women stay in our dormitories, on the other side of the island. We need the Indian women; Maldivian women refuse to work in the factory.'

'And you, do you live here, on the island, with your families?'

'No, our families live in Male, because of the schools. We stay here during the week; one of us sails to Male for the weekend.'

Malik unpinned two large informational graphics from the wall.

'These are our factory's weekly receipts of raw material and our company's exports of frozen and canned tuna. Most of the tuna caught in Maldives is frozen and exported to canning factories in Bangkok. Our factory uses mainly freshly caught tuna for canning. Skipjack schools migrate. In the past, fishing was good in the north of the country. Recently, fishing near the One and Half Degree Channel in the south has been much better; we find less fish here.'

'How do you get sufficient fish here?'

'We have only a few small collector vessels to receive tuna from fishermen operating from nearby atolls. We bring frozen tuna from our operations in the south when fishing is bad here. Without onboard cooling, freshly caught tuna will increasingly accumulate histamine. If histamine levels are too high, the tuna fails our own inspection and would be rejected in most markets. Fishermen are forced to operate close enough to Felivaru or to our collector vessels to ensure fish quality. If they cannot reach us in time, they are forced to process the tuna into Maldive fish on their own islands.'

Cecil looked at the histograms, their steep peaks and valleys. If his complexity theory required a typical fisheries example, he

thought, this cannery would do well. Likewise, the tuna fishery in the Pacific and Mauritania's fishery in the Atlantic.

'You are trade economist, Mr. Coulthard?'

After a dinner of fish soup, rice, string beans, boiled skipjack and a milky coconut sweet that Cecil hadn't done justice to, Malik started the conversation.

'While we wait for tea, let me briefly explain our trade problem. Our cannery is a pretty small operation by current world market standards. Tuna is being canned in many places around the world, but most of the global tuna canning capacity is owned by just a few companies, three in the US and some in Thailand. Canned tuna has become a cheap commodity product, particularly the light tuna we produce here.'

From a bookcase he took a thick folder with 'EU and US Tariffs' written on its spine.

'The successful marketing of canned tuna requires access to supermarket shelf space and knowledge of tariffs. We are too small a player to negotiate directly with large supermarket chains in Europe; we use wholesale agents to do that for us, in the UK and increasingly in Germany. Even for our high-quality product—we use fresh raw material that has been caught dolphin-free—we still get below market prices. We have tariff-free access to the European market, but face strong competition from Thai production. Thais pay EU tariffs but have extremely cost-effective factories. High volume, low labor costs, using the cheapest raw material, achieved in part by paying us, and others in the Pacific, too little for our frozen tuna.'

Cecil smiled; it confirmed the Forum Fisheries Agency story.

'The raw material accounts for only 40 percent of the costs of producing a can of tuna, the can itself and labor make up most of the rest. Our fishing boats are very efficient, we pay less for our raw material than any other cannery. Unfortunately, our labor, energy costs and overhead are relatively high—we have a small cannery that is being subsidized by our fishermen.'

Since Cecil had arrived on the island, Bandu had said little.

'Our company has been caught between two competing economic policies,' he explained. 'Some people take the position that

the entire fishing sector should be privatized: fish collection, freezing, canning, trade, everything, open to local and foreign investment, competition, may the best party win. Consultants at an international financing agency have recommended the same, including a quota system for tuna caught in our waters; they call it the Washington Consensus.'

Bandu scratched his balding head.

'We, our company, and people at the Fisheries Ministry believe such a policy would be disastrous, socially and economically. Right now our fishermen operate from many islands, fishing where our company has floating and land-based facilities, like our cannery. If you were to allow anybody else to operate in Maldives, fishing or collecting fish, these new players would put a few large floating cold storage facilities near the best fishing grounds—as has happened in the past—pay a few rufiyaa more and ignore fishing in the rest of the country. When fish catches in Maldives are low, for example because of the monsoon, or when global frozen tuna prices are low, these players could move their vessels elsewhere, even out of Maldives, and we would run the risk of losing a big chunk of our fishing sector. It has happened before. Chances are we would end up replacing a socially responsible company like ours with one or more foreign companies that we may not be able to control. Result: many fishermen would be forced to operate most of the time far away from home. Many would stop fishing; their sons would migrate to Male to find a job in the capital or elsewhere in the tourism business—this is already happening. The financial and social costs of housing and other infrastructure for the rapidly growing population in and around Male are already enormous; in some houses people sleep in three shifts.'

He sighed and drank his tea.

'This country borrows abroad to finance all this development. Our company's job is to handle tuna and, critically, to slow this migration, to maintain viable regional living conditions, jobs. If foreign companies were to operate here, that would be difficult.'

Cecil listened quietly, not believing his ears: here was economic dogma laid bare on a small island, with all its nonsensical results.

'Do you mind if I tell you about my previous work, and my thoughts on economic theory? Most of it I've written over the past

couple of months after studying fisheries in Mauritania and the Solomon Islands.'

It took him half an hour. Bandu listened attentively; Malik almost fell asleep.

'It has been a long day, gentlemen, but thank you,' Cecil excused himself.

He felt sorry for Bandu and Malik, who didn't get many visitors at this outpost, but the trip and long cannery tour had taken their toll.

'I am really tired and would like a good night's sleep.'

His excuse sounded feeble; he didn't care.

Sitting on the verandah of his guesthouse looking out over the wide dark reef, small waves breaking in the distance under the full moon and star-studded sky, he felt, for the first time that day, tired but at ease. Indian music from the other side of the island wafted past the drone of the generators. His boat trip had been a success, he had what he needed, proof that his belief in fisheries management based on consensus between multiple parties made sense. Reclining on his bed, he concluded that Liliane had been right; he had managed to conceive of a different management approach. Liliane 1, Cecil 0. The question was, what next?

The next morning the cannery woke early. Cecil breakfasted on fish soup. Malik offered a loaf of white bread wrapped in plastic, butter and an open can of tuna.

'Taste it, it's our top-of-the-line light tuna, for the German market.'

Cecil ate it all; he felt in control of his stomach again.

On the way to the jetty Malik suggested Cecil visit the island where the company stored Maldive fish for the entire country.

'It is on the way, halfway to Male. You cannot miss it. In the past almost all tuna was exported as Maldive fish; right now it's less than 10 percent of our exports.'

The dhoni was waiting for him. Abdulla had brought a burlap sack with frozen tuna.

'For his family,' Malik explained. 'Tuna is quite expensive in

Male these days.'

He waved when the dhoni separated from the jetty, turned around; he had more important duties to attend to.

A fresh northeastern breeze whipped short waves into action. Within the atoll it did not bother Cecil too much, but once outside, the waves became taller and steeper. Moving faster than the dhoni, they lifted the stern, ran beneath the boat and dropped the bow quite steeply, causing the dhoni to follow an up-and-down, snake-like pattern. Cecil tried to watch the horizon, a fixed point, to control his stomach. He felt quite sick by the time they reached the island in the middle of the channel.

Unlike most other islands, this one was barren, with large white coral sheds in the middle. The company office here on Kaashidhoo island had direct radio contact with Male and the cannery. When Cecil stepped onto the small jetty, a woman in a dark blue traditional dress was waiting. She smiled, did not shake hands, and called herself Mrs. Jameel.

'You are our first foreign visitor this month; visitors nowadays have little interest in traditionally processed tuna. Which is a pity because Maldives has produced Maldive fish for many centuries. We used to sell to China, Ceylon, India. You know what it is, don't you? A condiment. Only the Sri Lankans use it, but they take it wherever they go. We sell to the UK, the immigrant communities there use it. You shave it for soups and other dishes. Here, take a look.'

She opened a door; the smell of smoked fish escaped. Large sacks occupied one corner of the room; what looked like large black slugs were piled high in another.

'We produce Maldive fish from skipjack. Long ago a three-step preservation process was developed.' She took a piece from the pile. 'You can keep this without refrigeration for months.'

Cecil looked at a rather unappetizing piece of black tuna protein.

'When fishermen cannot sell their catch for freezing or canning, it becomes Maldive fish. They return to their island, where women are waiting to clean the skipjack and cook them. After cooking, the skin and bones are removed, and overnight the pieces are smoked,

sometimes twice. The smoked pieces are left to dry in the sun; this allows bacteria to do their work. This is a well-dried piece.' Mrs. Jameel threw it back on the pile. 'It takes about five kilos of fresh tuna to produce one kilo of Maldive fish.'

'Does it still make economic sense to produce this?' Cecil asked.

'The answer is yes and no.' Mrs. Jameel turned back. 'Please come to my office.'

Outside a small white building a generator whirred; inside it felt really cold. Carefully arranged colored folders were stacked on her desk. A marine radio with green dials stood in a corner.

'I studied food technology in Singapore. What they didn't teach me was the hidden secrets of the financial world.'

She laughed, rested her hands on her desk.

'Maldive fish has a captive market in Sri Lanka, but it's a solitary market controlled locally by a few traders. They know we cannot sell anywhere else, except in the UK. Our annual price negotiations have become part of more complex political discussions, and Maldives usually gets the short stick.'

She put her hands together.

'Maldive fish has become our social security surrogate. Fishermen quite often cannot sell their fresh tuna; collector vessels are not available or there is more fish than the collector vessels can handle. Producing Maldive fish is the only alternative for them; it takes a lot of work by women, done at night, and the price I can pay doesn't cover the real costs. As long as our fishermen continue to come home with rejected tuna, we will produce Maldive fish.'

'Do you see a long-term solution?' Cecil asked, impressed by her analysis.

'Japanese specialists have suggested we replace Maldive fish with *katsuobushi*. This is a similar but much more sophisticated product; it requires high processing standards, a lot of investment. I am not sure we can compete in the Japanese market, which is also dominated by trader clans. No, we need to do what we are good at, catching skipjack and yellowfin, with improved vessels. Our dhonis must be able to preserve fish; probably in a refrigerated seawater system. We need bigger boats, with crew accommodation, for multiday trips. And we should look at alternative products, for direct human consumption,

such as tuna loins and whole fresh tuna for the East Asian and European markets. It will require different infrastructure, not too much, and shipment, possibly by air. But I believe that will be the future.'

She tapped her pen on the desk. The interview was over.

21
Male, September 1992

Against the dark sky Male emerged, a mini city, lights blazing. When the dhoni sailed closer, Cecil could see a man waiting on the quay, with a bicycle. From a distance he imagined his silent friend was waiting for him. The relief of two days spent observing the reality of the tuna industry and meeting out-of-the-ordinary people, even the discomfort of his nauseous sea trips, it was all wiped away by the image of a man with a bicycle. His fear returned, and it did not ebb away when the dhoni turned into the harbor and he saw it was Ibrahim Shakeeb waiting for him.

'Mr. Coulthard, the plane to Thinadhoo will not leave at eight tomorrow morning but at twelve. I need to handle an urgent medical matter concerning my wife tomorrow morning; I will join you at the airport just after eleven. This is your ticket to Thinadhoo. Our local representative will receive us and take us to Kooddoo. The next day you will fly back; I will stay on for a couple more days.'

He stepped onto his bike, one foot carefully touching the pedal.

Cecil walked slowly to the Lena. The sentry had disappeared. When he turned into the main shopping street, he saw boys and girls relaxing on the benches of an ice cream bar. Families were taking their evening walk, helmeted people on motorbikes slalomed by. Shops were doing business, business as usual. Daily life in this city in the middle of the ocean did not lessen the pressure he felt, this sickening feeling of being observed, hypnotized by his own imagination and history, fed by coincidences, a participant in chance encounters.

A small car was parked in front of the Lena. Inside, a man wearing large sunglasses rolled down the window.

'Mr. Coulthard, we meet in the strangest places. This must be the last leg of your journey. You have enjoyed your trip?'

Cecil could not believe his eyes and ears. Speechless, he didn't know how to react. Wong Oh did not wait for an answer. He rolled up the window and slowly the car moved away.

'Good evening, Mr. Coulthard,' the lady at the desk greeted him gaily.

She liked this guest, busy meeting, writing, sending packages; the kind of well-behaved guest the hotel liked to attract. She was suddenly concerned when she saw his ashen white face.

'What happened, are you not feeling well? Can I do something for you? Please sit down.'

She disappeared into her office and returned with a glass of water. Cecil took sips; he could not control his shaking hand. Panic bulldozed through his head; he was having difficulty breathing.

'What happened?' The lady repeated. 'Do you need a doctor, an ambulance?'

'No, no doctor.' Cecil shook his head.

'Do you need to lay down, rest?'

'Yes, I believe so, thank you.'

While Cecil drank more water, the lady collected his room key. She took his arm and walked him to the foot of the stairs.

'Thank you, I can manage from here,' Cecil decided.

He slowly climbed the stairs, finally got the key in the hole after several attempts. The lady followed him.

'You *should* lay down for a while.'

'Well, I will.'

'Please, if you need anything, ask me. Are you sure you are okay?'

Cecil nodded.

'Did this happen suddenly?'

She was genuinely concerned about her favorite guest. Cecil felt he owed her an explanation.

'Yes, I came upon this man.'

'You met a man?'

'Yes, a man who has followed me to all the countries I have visited on this trip.'

'Do you know him, this man?'

'No, but I feel threatened by him. He's been in every city I've visited these past few months.'

'Has he spoken to you?'

'He made a veiled threat in Honiara, told me to move on, to leave. My hotel room was set on fire, I am sure he was responsible. In Colombo he was looking for me when I arrived at the hotel; I wasn't even a guest, I was just having breakfast there.'

'Do you know his name?'

She hadn't got her certificate in *how to deal with difficult situations* at hotel school for nothing.

'I do not know his real name, he introduced himself as Wong Oh.'

As she left the room, she turned and asked, 'Can I help you with anything else?'

'No, thank you. You have been very kind.'

Confused, she closed the door behind her.

He watched the black sky crowded with stars. Outside, the ordinary noise of the kitchen below went on. His heart rate came down. He could think again; it was time to execute plan B. Male was interesting, more so than he had expected, but he needed to get the hell out of here, catch the first flight to Colombo, and use Henri's travel agency to get back to Europe. Brussels, Amsterdam, he didn't care where. He packed his small bag: money, passport, toiletry bag, the notes he had made the last few days. Money for the bill, her tip and the room key he left on top of his suitcase. A note to Hassan left on the bed explained that extraordinary circumstances had forced him to leave Male immediately. He would write to him later with a proper explanation. Resting on the bed, fully clothed, he was careful not to fall asleep. When he felt ready, he left quietly, went down to the lobby. Nobody was there; it was a small hotel. He watched the street through the glass door. Nothing was moving. He avoided his usual route along the seafront, walked slowly, watching before rounding a corner. A few early workers appeared, talking. Maldivians. When he heard the bell of a bicycle, he moved closer to the wall that edged the street. The jetty for airport transport was still empty. No dhonis were tied up yet, it must be too early. A speedboat bobbed nearby; its two crew members appeared from under a tarpaulin. Cecil watched; the boat had a large airline sticker on its windscreen.

'Hey, can you get me to the airport?'

The men did not answer; one waved. The engine started; grumbling, the boat homed in on the jetty.

The night was still pitch black, but in the light coming from across the street Cecil saw that the crew members were wearing black jogging suits and sneakers, unusual for a regular airport or

hotel speedboat. He hesitated, not sure whether to cancel the trip. Then, determined to get to the airport, he jumped aboard. Its engine revving, the boat spurted forward and sped off, traveling between the airport and Male islands, towards the ocean.

Finale

22
Vessel Fu Yu 1122, September 1992

The Shi-liangs were known in the village as hard-working immigrant shopkeepers. Mr. Shi-liang liked to take an early morning walk, undeterred by fog or rain. In his beat-up pickup he would drive once a week to St. John's to fetch new merchandise and return empties; on Sundays he would drop his wife off at the church and drive around until the service ended. A villager, attending a teacher conference, spotted Mr. Shi-liang once walking through the harbor in St. John's, talking to the crew of a rusty Eastern European trawler, one of the foreign vessels fishing for cod on the Grand Banks before the stocks collapsed. The truck was really helpful for removing snow from the church parking lot in readiness for Friday evening parties, but Mr. Shi-liang wasn't a fellow to have drink with at the bar. Mrs. Shi-liang always wore a flowery dress and a Maple Leaves cap. She tended the shop the Chinese way: she was always there, knew every customer—even the kids—by name and credit risk.

One day, years after the couple had settled in the village, Mrs. Shi-liang told her customers she was expecting her twin teenage sons to come to Canada to study and help in the shop. The regulars in the bar next door, leaving after closing time, were the first to spot the brothers' arrival when Mr. Shi-liang unloaded suitcases from his truck. For a while the brothers stayed out of the shop, hidden from the community's increasingly curious eyes, but soon they could be seen helping their parents.

When a high-school boy came in, Wang introduced himself, 'I… am…Wang,' he said haltingly but without embarrassment. Wang looked pleased to be exploring these new sounds. Dressed in black, he looked haggard and small, carrying stacks of large cereal boxes. From behind the counter Mrs. Shi-liang said proudly, 'This is my son Wang,' before rapidly firing off monosyllabic words in Mandarin. Feng appeared, also dressed in black, and hung in the doorway and watched, his arm around the doorpost, then he disappeared before she had finished talking; she continued her monologue with Wang. The customer felt self-conscious, a bystander to a family affair,

and didn't know what to say. Walking to the door, he remembered why he had come and asked Mrs. Shi-liang during a brief moment of silence for a packet of cigarettes. She nodded, resumed talking. Behind the checkout counter—with the abacus and the seldom-used cash register—Wang opened the glass door of the cigarette cabinet and after further directions handed over the right packet.

'You want credit?' Mrs. Shi-liang asked.

The boy hesitated. His mother frowned upon Mrs. Shi-liang's offer of credit to high-schoolers, but his father thought it was a good way to learn to handle money.

'No thanks. I'll pay in cash.'

A few days later a teacher living in the village offered to teach the two brothers English. Unaccustomed to accepting help, Mrs. Shi-liang initially refused. Surely this would be too much work? Easily able to control a class full of rowdy teenagers, the teacher insisted and Mrs. Shi-liang agreed. Every weekday at 4.30 p.m.—with great punctuality—the brothers would enter by the back door of the teacher's house. At home, they would rehearse words together at night, sometimes until the early hours. A few tests hidden in her language questions convinced the teacher that the brothers were quite proficient in math and science, and already knew a fair amount of English. The work ethic and progress of her new students truly impressed her. She persuaded Mr. Howard to put Feng and Wang straight into tenth grade.

The teacher asked her son, Cecil, to show the brothers around the Bay; he would not have thought to ask them himself, he preferred solitude when hiking. Feng seldom spoke to him directly; he spoke Mandarin with Wang. On their early trips, Feng insisted they return within half an hour. Feng showed no particular interest in blueberries, birds, oysters or moose trails, and refused to wade into swampy areas or stay out in the rain. Only once, when he spotted a large pod of killer whales near the shore, did Feng show some interest in nature.

The brothers steadfastly refused to talk about their past. Cecil's mother did find out that they had attended high school in China but only until the Great Leap Forward. When Cecil asked, Feng pretended not to understand.

As their hikes took them farther afield, Cecil invited only Wang to join him. Wang seemed to enjoy being out on the hills, although he lacked Feng's stamina. Without Feng around, Wang became more talkative. He was curious about the local girls and the Friday night parties.

Wang and Cecil would sometimes go to the bar after a hike.

'Would growing up in China be like this?' asked Cecil, putting down a beer in front of Wang. He watched Wang smile uneasily.

'We are happy to be in Canada.'

That was it. Nothing more, no elaboration. Wang said nothing more.

On that gray Saturday in April the bar was particularly crowded and noisy. Wang appeared melancholic, spoke little. Cecil thought the noise was bothering Wang, told a story about the latest loss by his shockingly bad university ice-hockey team to cheer him up.

When asked about school, Wang suddenly turned on his barstool and said softly, 'I don't like it.'

'What did you say?'

'I don't like school, never did.'

This was the usual attitude of high-school kids. Cecil had felt the same way before he graduated. Yet he was surprised to hear it from Wang, the model student according to his proud mother, who kept track of Wang's progress at school.

'What's happened?' he asked Wang.

'Nothing has happened.'

'Does it have to do with Feng?'

Silence.

'Hey, if you are that unhappy, you should have another beer.'

Wang reluctantly agreed and finished the glass unusually fast. Maybe Wang was relieved not to be asked any more questions.

'One more, it's good for you.'

For a while they drank. The noise in the bar almost drowned out Wang's words.

'You can smell the Bay, the trees any time,' Wang said, with the determination of a drunk. 'I cannot smell pigs in the garden, or the streets of my town after the rain. You can hear the wind in trees, or

the birds. I cannot hear a rooster when I wake up. You study with people your own age; I am in a class with little kids. You have nice parents. I only have an uncle in the village, the Party Secretary.

'An uncle? You have an uncle here too? Your parents aren't that bad, are they?'

'The Shi-liangs are not my parents.'

'You've lost me, Wang.'

'My parents are dead; they were shot.'

'Shot?' with the fog in his head, Cecil couldn't put the pieces together.

'They were hungry and they asked for food.'

Wang looked around, searching for the words, or just to make sure the noise would drown out his story to all but Cecil.

'When you are hungry, you cannot bargain. You always lose.'

The whispered words became engraved in Cecil's memory. Wang didn't look up, stayed silent for a long while.

'Please don't tell anybody, Cecil. Please, don't tell,' Wang said, repeating it several times.

'Of course. I won't tell anybody.'

He was blown away by Wang's words. He would have agreed to anything Wang asked at that moment.

In silence they had a couple of more beers. The alcohol did its work. Wang started to talk excitedly about missing the girl he used to meet stealthily outside his village in China.

'She is magnificent, Cecil, more beautiful than girls here in high school! Much more beautiful!'

Cecil decided Wang had had enough to drink. They left the bar.

'Wei Li is her name,' Wang shouted across the empty pavement. 'Magnificent, beautiful eyes and long hair. Wei Li.' Wang touched his own shoulder. 'This long, beautiful black hair.'

Wang, drunk, grabbed Cecil's arm to elaborate further, but Cecil was lost in thought, mulling over what had been said earlier. He decided they would go to his place for a strong coffee and something to eat. Halfway there, Wang grabbed Cecil's arm again.

'Can I see your kayak?'

He had told Wang about his kayak trips when they were hiking, but Wang had never shown any interest in paddling before. The

kayak was stored under his house. He felt honored Wang had chosen him for his revelations. He felt he owed Wang and was quite happy to let him have a look.

They crossed the church parking lot and he pulled his kayak out onto the grass. Red and yellow, the colors particularly impressed Wang.

'How do you hold and move the paddle?'

Cecil showed him.

'Can you show me in the water?'

'Now?'

'Yes, now, I want to learn. Mr. Shi-liang can buy me a kayak.'

Wang's argument had backward logic, but somehow it made sense then. Being fairly drunk himself should have been sufficient excuse to postpone the paddling demonstration. It never dawned on Cecil to demonstrate right there on the grass.

Stumbling, they carried the kayak to the small jetty nearby. Even then, standing before the cold water, fog now concealing the Cove's entrance, Cecil's inebriated brain refused to consider alternatives. Instead, like a hallucinating maniac, he insisted on briefing Wang that 'kayaking is much more than paddling, safety is critical and first you need learn how to do an Eskimo roll.'

Wang nodded sternly. Cecil had no idea whether Wang was grasping his words. He grabbed his lifejacket, got into the kayak and paddled around for a few minutes. Even then, with the fog clouding the water, he failed to see what a lunatic he was.

Wang watched from the jetty as Cecil paddled around in a loop.

'Can I try now?'

'No, you need to learn first. The water is bloody cold, and it is not that simple.'

'Can I just sit in the kayak?'

'Sorry, Wang, the answer is no.'

'Please?'

The foggy cold wind hadn't cleared his brain; he vaguely realized it was incredibly stupid when he said it.

He gave in.

While Cecil was unzipping his life jacket, Wang stumbled into the kayak. Holding onto the jetty, he sat down and looked trium-

phant.

'Get out, Wang, you aren't wearing a life jacket.'

Wang grabbed the paddle. His unzipped life jacket hanging from one shoulder, held in place by his hand clamped to his chest, Cecil lunged for the paddle with his free hand but missed, almost falling into the water. Wang pushed the kayak away from the jetty, balanced it and copied the paddle moves.

'Wang, come back, this is bloody dangerous.' His shouts didn't register at all. 'Come back, you drunken idiot, you don't know what you are doing.'

Wang kept paddling, away from the jetty, and Cecil kept shouting. After what seemed an endlessly looping Marx Brothers movie, Wang rested the paddle in front of him and waved, from a distance, looking proud.

'*You see, I can!*'

Those were Wang's last words.

The fog had entered the Bay during their walk to Cecil's house. While the importance of the Eskimo roll was being explained, it had obscured the hills and the navigation light. Swathes of fog were now rolling down the hills behind them, moving across the beach towards the shoreline.

Wang waved again at Cecil, initially without any sign of distress. Meanwhile the wind pushed the kayak still farther from the shore, and the fog started to shroud the jetty. Wang appeared satisfied he had made his point and tried to paddle back, slowly at first, then increasingly frantically as the kayak gyrated wildly with every pull.

Fear and anger cleared enough of Cecil's brain for him to realize that Wang could not manage, he needed help. Sprinting to his neighbor's powerboat, moored at a jetty a little farther down the road, Cecil looked back over his shoulder at Wang, tripped on a rock and fell flat on his face. When he crawled up, the red bottom of the kayak flashed between rippled waves, obscured intermittently by globs of fog.

Cecil panicked, didn't know what to do, decided he needed help to save Wang and ran back to his house. Reading a newspaper in the study and listening to classical music was his father's regular Saturday routine.

'Wang is drowning!'

It was the only thing he could shout. His father looked up, displeased his quiet afternoon had been interrupted until he saw his bloody face.

'What the hell?'

Without waiting for an explanation, he followed Cecil and they ran to the water, now barely visible even from the street.

'Wang was out there, he rolled in my kayak.'

His father didn't ask why, told him to be quiet. They heard no shouts, nothing. It took them a couple of minutes to get their neighbor's boat to move; the cold engine didn't start immediately.

Cecil's father steered carefully along the shore, afraid of losing his way in the fog. As Cecil tried to explain where he last saw the kayak, they reached their jetty and his father turned the wheel to steer straight away from the shore, then turned around. Away and back, away and back they went. Cecil called and called, standing at the bow, but no sound, nothing, came back. They finally found the kayak, still turned over. It was empty. Wang's body was discovered later, farther down the Bay, by the Coast Guard.

After he had finished his PhD, Cecil left for the prairies, where he stayed for a long time because he could no longer face the water in the Bay, the hills or the damp fog. The words, the scenes, and the feeling of utter helplessness and despair he had felt on that day stayed with him. He wanted to learn to accept what had happened, tried to project the horror movie, like the navigation light, to the dissolved horizon, let the clouds racing across the prairies dispose of it. They didn't. He moved to ITI in Washington DC, believing he could leave his memories behind when he stepped on a plane. No such luck. He thought women could help him, but sex is measured in minutes not days, and his trick to forget proved no basis for a lasting relationship. Like the rusted sign of the old road to St. John's, the bar and the shop are long gone, replaced by white shingle-clad houses with neat drapes and well-tended rooms behind their windows. Bland buildings that have wiped out the history of that day, leaving no clue as to what happened.

Cecil paid for the upkeep of the grave, behind the church, between the tall pine trees that whispered in the wind. Engraved on the tombstone were Wang's name, the day he died, and four words:

YOU SEE, I CAN

23
Washington DC, September 1992

Flying across the Atlantic Ocean at thirty-nine thousand feet, she was sure the horizon bent slightly above the distant edge of the water's glittering liquid pewter surface. It reminded her of the day when for the very first time she held her grandfather's hand and climbed over the dunes on the Dutch coast to watch the setting sun that seemed to bend the horizon over the North Sea. She let go of his hand and kicked off her sandals to run down to the water, still reflecting the sparkling red and orange of the hidden sun. The sea was cold and wet, not as comfortable as the warm hand of her grandfather, but at the same time it felt inviting. She rushed confidently into the water, clothes and all, until a wave hit her legs, pushed her back and then gently pulled her away from the beach. She resisted, standing firmly in the sand retreating from under her feet, but the sea proved stronger and she fell. Her grandfather, splashing in his black shoes and gray overcoat, grabbed her and pulled her back. It was the first time she tasted seawater and experienced its siren call. Now, when adult friends ask why the sea fascinates her, Katharina Mulder—*Kate* to her closest friends—will always recall that day with her grandfather and her first run alone into the surf. The sea's duality and mystery intrigue her: the sun and clouds claiming the color of its surface, the veil that hides the world below.

The ocean's duality mimics her own. Growing up poor in an extremely proper and evangelical provincial town, home to the country's only theological college, she felt it was nobody's business to look beyond the version of herself she presented to the world, but all the neighbors were familiar with her mother's story, and prejudice about children born out of wedlock felt as natural to them as feeding the ducks on the town's canals. In a community dependent on fishing and trade, Kate's mom sold train tickets in the morning and cleaned classrooms at the Theological College in the evening. She wrapped Kate as best she could in cotton wool, but Kate found her refusal to talk about her father at first infuriating, then during her teenage years depressing. From the small window in her bedroom

tucked under the eaves, Kate had a view of roofs and walls, for many buildings were taller than her own home, and of the town's multiple church towers, from which the bells marked the quarter and full hours day and night in quick succession, the lack of synchronicity illuminating the tiny doctrinal differences that riddled the town. When she felt irritated by the clocks' approximation of punctuality, she blamed the bells for not ringing out who and where her father was. Tall, even by Dutch standards, Kate felt confined in the small room, only spending time there to sleep or to study hard. She often escaped to the quay on the River IJssel, watching the fishermen set their nets and the river barges moving against the currents or the wind. The river let her breathe; walking along its banks, she could think. In high school she always stood out in a crowd; her parentage and height predestined her to score low in the constant popularity test. Making the most of what any teenage girl dreads—looking different and being typecast as odd—she played volleyball from a young age. Talented and persistent, she had the stamina and height to excel, and ultimately played in national competition. Here, she developed her sense of self-belief, blossoming amid the camaraderie and team spirit. Sport taught her to bounce back, to overcome a loss, to enjoy a win, to fight.

Being tall now adds to her public persona of comfortable self-assurance. Her auburn hair, with a few streaks of gray, her high cheekbones and green-gray eyes give her a slightly mysterious aura. Having only one set of grandparents, she was able to visit them often at their home by the sea. She admired her grandfather, a tall man more inclined to listen than to speak, and during their long walks along the beach Kate benefitted from his attention. Her grandparents avoided talk about her father, but otherwise Kate felt their easy warmth. In the company of the sea, Kate felt invited to take some distance from day-to-day frustrations, to regain her sense of balance. It wasn't hemmed in like the river between its banks. It always welcomed her, eventually becoming her professional home; she became a marine biologist. Now, as the senior scientist at the Dutch Fisheries Research Institute, she relished the unending mysteries the sea offered for exploration; its complexity spurred her to think

creatively, to invent alternatives to standard research theories. Her scientific colleagues, initially jealous of her rapidly growing list of scientific publications and fearing her blunt peer review judgments, were no longer embarrassed to call on her mature skill and she was often asked to design and lead particularly challenging surveys by the Institute's research vessel *Trident*. Younger scientists called her the *Trident Queen* behind her back. She knew and felt proud. Now, flying from Amsterdam to Washington DC, she felt the same excitement as when she let go of her grandfather's hand and ran towards the sun looming above the bent horizon. In the mix is the apprehension she would feel before a critical match.

She received the large, ivory-colored envelope bearing a US stamp and blue airmail sticker a week ago, as she was heading out of her apartment in Amsterdam. Her address, printed in slightly slanting calligraphic blue letters, had been written with a fountain pen. No return address, just a P.O. Box number in Maryland. She'd almost thrown the letter in the trash, assuming it was one of those luxury scam invitations to participate in the free viewing of an apartment in some yet-to-be-built vacation complex, or a sob letter asking for money. Her job got her on the mailing lists of far too many NGOs caring about the environment, animals and the oceans. But the handwritten letters fascinated her and she opened the envelope as the door to her building fell shut behind her. The envelope didn't contain the usual donation return card with preselected amounts to choose from but a sealed brownish envelope with her name on it, crudely addressed in pencil, an ivory-colored note typed in blue ink and a white business card: International Trade Institute, *Claudine Maufort*, Senior Administrative Assistant. At the corner cafe beside the small bridge across the River Amstel, a few blocks from her apartment, she sat down on a stool at the bar. Without asking, the red-haired owner, Truus to her regular customers, placed a mug of coffee in front of her.

'New or old friend returning your toothbrush?' she asked, pointing to the envelope.

'I don't know yet.'

Years ago, on a cold spring day, Kate had sat out on the terrace of the coffee shop as the rain started to fall. She had watched pedestri-

ans hurrying over the narrow bridge across the river, drinking too much after signing her divorce papers, feeling disgusted with her former spouse and the world in general, as well as immensely sorry for herself. When Truus finally decided her wet customer had had enough, she convinced Kate to come inside, offering her a rum-laced hot chocolate. In the end, they had talked until well after closing time and Kate's spirits had lifted. She recalled scenes with her former abusive husband and the alternative: coming home to an empty bed at night. She told Truus about working all day in a lab with a dud supervisor who, when the unraveling of her marriage became known, had made blatant sexual advances, and had had the temerity in her annual evaluation to postulate that she had been too *assertive*—meaning had refused his recent advances—and too *critical* of some of his reports, something he really didn't appreciate. She didn't reply then but in her misery vowed revenge. She took his job a year later.

'Where have you been?' Truus asked. 'Haven't seen you in weeks.'

'Counting herring near the UK coast. More than usual for this time of year.'

'Happy?'

Truus turned away, cleaning glasses, leaving the ambiguity of what she was referring to for Kate to figure out. Like everybody else in Holland, the cafe owner loved *maatjes* herring.

'Don't know, sometimes.'

'Do you want anything to eat?'

'No thanks.'

'Secret stuff?'

'I have no idea.'

Truus raised her eyebrows, dried her hands, and watched the river outside, with its houseboats lining the quays and glass-covered tourist boats passing by. She knew Kate needed time to agree to talk.

Bethesda, Md

October 5, 1992

Dear Ms. Mulder,

You may, after reading this letter, be tempted to believe that I am engaging you in some sort of scam. Let me assure you that my proposal is genuine.

My name is Claudine Maufort; administrative assistant at the International Trade Institute in Washington DC for the past fourteen years.

A week ago my office received a package from Cecil Coulthard, a former staff member of the Institute with whom I worked extensively, and whom I understand you have met. It contained handwritten notes, scientific and economic papers, a journal and a sealed letter addressed to you. In his covering letter, he asks me to send you the letter and hand you the other documents and further instructions in person.

Please call me to discuss your travel arrangements, which I will handle.

Yours sincerely,
Claudine Maufort

Claudine's signature artfully expressed control and determination but also revealed a hand tremor. When Kate opened the brown envelope, it contained a page crudely ripped from a spiral notebook. The gray-lined paper had the faint smell of coconut oil; the hastily penciled sentences seemed to have been written on some soft surface, pencil holes pushed through at every dot. She recognized Cecil's handwriting.

Kate,

Can't keep the promise I made to Liliane, please help. Contact Claudine and meet her in person. She will explain why my rough draft and notes need to be massaged into a presentable paper, and the rest.

I really need your help.
Love,
Cecil

Promise I made to Liliane? Who's that? thought Kate. The words

knifed her, a reminder that Cecil hadn't stuck around long enough to make *her* any promises. A goodbye would have been nice. Cecil had evidently moved on. The sentences were innocent enough; this wasn't the first time somebody had asked her to edit a rough draft of a paper—she was really good at it. She sipped her coffee and looked at the gray paper, at the odd way Cecil had made his request in crude penciled letters. Why couldn't he write the paper himself?

'Could I have another coffee and a sandwich, ham and cheese?'

'Sure,' Truus smiled knowingly. 'So, you did get a toothbrush?'

'Kind of.'

'Nice guy?'

'Nice enough.'

'Want to talk about it?' Truus didn't hide her curiosity, a common trait among people who made a living by owning a cafe in Amsterdam.

'I met this guy some time ago, at a conference. He was good-looking, kind, quite tall, almost as tall as I am.' She hesitated, glanced down at Cecil's letter. Why talk about a fling that hardly was?

'He wanted information, about my research. Now he wants me to edit a paper for him and to collect his notes in Maryland in the United States.'

'You don't want to meet him again?'

'I don't think he's going to be there. It seems his assistant is going to explain the job. Last time we met, he left suddenly, I don't know why,' she said, revealing more than she intended. She recalled Cecil's note saying he was sorry but could not explain.

'So he wasn't just a casual acquaintance?'

'It was all purely professional!'

'Then isn't this the perfect excuse for a short holiday, with unlimited potential for something more?'

'Stop it.'

'Okay, just a visit. Have you been there before?'

'No.'

'Hey, you can visit America, but you don't sound too happy about it. What's wrong?'

'It feels odd. The letter, his scribbled note, the invitation to fly there, it doesn't add up.'

'So you aren't going?' Truus sounded incredulous, hands raised.

Kate smiled. 'Are you kidding?'

From the descending plane, Washington DC looked like a petri dish: clumps of high-rise development spread between a sea of suburbs. Trees of green, yellow, brown and red in the autumn sun. The autumn red stood out; there wasn't any in Holland. Standing amid the endless curved roads running between straight highways, tall buildings seemed trapped in a schizophrenic experiment in town planning. Shopping malls with their humongous black parking areas—the melanoma of large cities—seemed to lack the frivolity and relaxed randomness of European history as seen from the air.

Having landed, her surrealistic mood quickly evaporated as yet more elderly passengers, expectant mothers and hooded teenagers were sardine-pressed between bespoke-suited businesspeople into the cabin of the people mover taking them from the plane to passport control. The passport control hall was equally crowded; baggage collection took forever. Passing through customs with her bag, she was appraised from head to foot by a bored customs official and waved to one side.

'You have been randomly selected for a secondary inspection. Please step to the line on the left.'

'*Randomly?*' she asked, mildly amused.

He didn't respond, except to shrug.

Her delight at being on US soil disappeared during the hour she spent waiting in line behind four South Asian mothers with multiple children, each with two huge suitcases full of saris and local food the customs agent didn't approve of. The mothers argued vehemently for their textiles and their children's food. When Kate was finally asked to put her suitcase into the X-ray machine, she felt she was proving her innocence having been presumed guilty. The agent barely looked at his screen. In the public arrivals area, dozens of people watched her and her fellow detainees from behind barriers after she stepped through the exit doors.

Cloned office blocks lined the airport road. Traffic jams didn't usually bother Kate, but the slow movement on the Beltway irritated her

and further dampened her excitement at taking this deliberate leap into the unknown. Once in leafy suburbia, she found her irritation quelled. Trees punctuated the curving streets filled with McMansions fronted by huge lawns.

When the taxi stopped, Claudine's house seemed particularly modest, sandwiched between two identical copies of pretentious three-car-garage homes clad in what appeared to be fake granite, both with 'for sale' signs at the end of the driveway.

The front door opened after a while and a small figure stepped out. Claudine Maufort looked French with East Asian accents. She was carefully manicured and dressed fashionably in black. Her voice paired the slight cynicism most French reserve for personal but distant greetings with the telltale signs of smoking that Kate remembered from talking to her on the phone. She looked younger than the veins on her hands suggested.

'Claudine Maufort.' She did not offer her hand.

'Hi, Claudine.' Kate wasn't sure what to say next. She put her bag down on the ground and smiled. 'Kate.'

'You had a good flight?'

'It was fine, customs are a bit archaic here.'

'Yes, the joys of creating the impression you are welcome. Anyway, you are here now, and I am really happy you could come at such short notice. Please…'

She waved towards the front door. Inside, Kate was struck by the exquisite interior of what was a roomy but relatively small house, sparsely furnished with black and gray chairs and glass tables in white rooms, thick black carpets on the white-stained floors. Maroon flowers dominated the black lacquered dining table; large Hokusai block prints of the wave at Kanagawa and the poet Li Po dominated the walls of the living room. Yet something was lacking, a personal touch; nothing was carelessly thrown down, even an open book had been placed right in the middle of a side table. In her own apartment, Kate usually lived in a barely contained mess. This house breathed taste and full control, period. Claudine showed Kate to the guest room, which was similarly stylish, only the large bunch of mixed fresh flowers hinting that Claudine might sometimes relax.

In the dining room Claudine waited, standing at the black table with a pile of loose documents before her, envelopes and a tattered cardboard box.

'Would you like something to drink?'

'Yes, juice please.'

'Cranberry?'

'Sure, thank you.'

The formality did not encourage Kate to feel comfortable; the female-to-female vibes weren't resonating somehow. Claudine seemed nice enough but as controlled as the house interior. Scary but also intriguing.

She returned with two tall slender glasses; dark red juice without a trace of ice.

'It's my version of cranberry juice: full strength with a little bitter lemon.'

Claudine sat down at the table, only her hands showed modest trembling as she pushed a paper away.

'As I wrote to you, I work at ITI—the International Trade Institute.' She paused, sipped her juice and pushed the paper a little farther away before folding her hands in her lap. Then, as if reminding herself:

'I used to work for Cecil Coulthard, after he joined ITI. I understand you know him.'

'Cecil, yes, we met at a conference, about three months ago.' Kate smiled, hesitated.

'And any contact more recently?'

'No.' The denial was abrupt. 'No, nothing since then. Not until the letter you sent me.'

'But you know him quite well?' Claudine looked tense as she watched Kate.

'No, we only met that one time.' Her intonation gave her away. Claudine noticed. She nodded, as if there was nothing more to it.

'These are Cecil's papers, are they?'

'Yes. Yes, they are. Kate, I…'

Kate looked across the table at the pile of papers.

'Cecil has disappeared.'

'What do you mean, disappeared?'

'He was traveling for work and he's gone off the radar.'

Kate stared at Claudine. 'What's going on?'

'I don't know. Maybe if we talk, we can piece this thing together. And I want you to know how much Cecil means to me.'

Baffled, Kate settled down to hear Claudine out.

'We used to be together; Cecil was at ITI for a while and then we hooked up. He traveled a lot, I think he had flings, but eventually we became a couple and I was over the moon. I had been single for too long in this city; there just aren't enough suitable men to go round. I was ready to make a commitment.'

She spoke quickly and softly, as if programmed to reveal this highly personal information in carefully edited sentences. In silence Claudine studied the figure of Li Po, walking along the mountain road with the vertical blue wall beside him. She felt like him, moving along a narrow path beside a sheer cliff, not knowing where she was going. She brushed hair from her forehead, finished her juice.

'I had only ever read about it, never experienced being head over heels in love. I had a year of euphoria, living on a cloud, before I fell back to earth. Cecil could be unreliable and sometimes he would omit the truth if it suited him. He never talked about making any long-term commitment.' She breathed heavily. 'Day to day what really upset me was that he could switch off, as if he wasn't there. His mind just went somewhere else. On one of those occasions I decided I'd had enough. We stopped seeing each other socially and I asked for a transfer to a different department. He said he was upset about it, but we separated on good terms. Obviously, we continued to meet professionally, ITI is a small outfit.'

'Do you want something else to drink, coffee?' Claudine stood up.

'No thank you.'

'Then a year ago something happened,' Claudine said from the kitchen. 'He was sacked. He took it really badly, started drinking and gambling. In no time at all he'd spent a small fortune. One day he came to my house, still drunk. He needed a place to crash; he had lost almost everything, including his apartment.'

Kate fidgeted in her seat. 'I had no idea, but I really don't think this is any of my business. I could just take the documents…'

'Well, let me just finish. Are you sure you don't want to drink anything else?'

'Your cranberry juice tastes wonderful.'

Claudine headed back to the kitchen, calling over her shoulder. 'I told Cecil he could stay on two conditions: he had to join me at AA, and he had to find a job, fast.'

'AA?'

'Oh yes, sorry: Alcoholics Anonymous; I used to drink a lot.'

Kate's intake of breath was lost in the noise made by the coffee machine.

'He agreed. After months of AA and odd jobs to earn some money, he appeared much like his old self, still preoccupied with whatever was hounding him but in control of his drinking and gambling. He applied for a consulting job with an outfit in Brussels to review current fisheries management theory.'

'He told me. Does someone called Liliane work there?'

'Yes. After he left for Brussels he called me once, about five weeks ago, from his room in Colombo. He was going to Male and seemed in a hurry to leave Sri Lanka. He didn't explain and I didn't ask. He mentioned that he had met you, a fisheries scientist, and in his usual indirect way suggested he might ask you to publish something for him. No explanation as to why he was telling me this, and why he couldn't contact you directly, only that he would send me details later. Then he rang off.'

Claudine served Kate another glass of juice.

'You said he has disappeared,' said Kate, frowning at Claudine, who was still standing, a tiny cup warming her hands.

'Yes. I received this box three weeks ago. In his letter to me he mentioned the telephone number of a club in Colombo; I called. He left a suitcase of dirty laundry with them, but he hasn't come back.'

Claudine showed Kate the first page of Cecil's letter, written in pencil on the now familiar gray-lined paper. He asked Claudine to contact *Katharina Mulder*, stated her position at the research institute and asked Claudine to advance the money for Kate's ticket; he would pay her later. Between brackets he apologized that he had left Kate's telephone number and home address back in Colombo. Claudine should brief her in Bethesda and 'Tell her to check my unfinished

draft, use my notes, and without scientific dillydallying question the prevailing theory.' He had underlined the sentence with thick pencil strokes. The letter ended abruptly, without name or signature.

Claudine's spotless *Interior Design Monthly* house wasn't her only vaguely unsettling accomplishment. Her cooking was equally perfect. At the dinner table Kate did most of the talking, about her flight, her job, her surprise at receiving Claudine's letter. She even talked about the town where she grew up, her school and how tough it had been for her mother without a man in the house. At the mention of the town and her mother, Claudine glanced up. After the meal of small Vietnamese delicacies, presented as if the Michelin inspector was expected, Kate ran out of stories and jet lag hit. Claudine suggested she might like to rest, and Kate thankfully agreed.

At four in the morning Kate was wide awake in a bed barely long enough for her to stretch her legs, thinking about Claudine and Cecil. Something in this perfect house, the box of papers or the story about Cecil didn't make any sense. It wasn't Claudine's formal demeanor or the sudden revelation of her affair with Cecil. It was Claudine's reaction after she mentioned Cecil's disappearance. It wasn't a lack of emotion, rather a lack of surprise, as if this were Cecil's fate. Now, in the dark morning in the small bed, Kate pondered why the letter ended abruptly. Had Claudine withheld the next page? Why? Why had she been invited to Bethesda? Why not call and forward the papers? What else did Claudine know about Cecil? Her covering letter had mentioned a journal.

She switched on the light and examined the contents of the manila folder, Cecil's draft paper and supporting notes. Most of the notes were clearly typed, some handwritten on yellow legal paper, all neatly stapled by subject and labeled in pencil on small green cards attached to the top of the first page of each batch. She read some of the batch titles: *Why question management theory?, Mauritania sector history, Pacific tuna industry, Small-scale fisheries.* At the bottom of each batch were notes on gray paper torn from a notebook, scribbled in pencil, clearly added later, and written in haste. Notes with large exclamation marks:

'Don't rely on simplistic single objective modeling of small pieces of a complex system!'

'If recruitment is so unpredictable…!

'Without accurate fish prices and unknown value chain data, economic rent analysis is a joke!

'You need humility and compromise to weigh up economic, biological, political and sociocultural objectives against human morality… NO OPTIMIZATION!

She was familiar with some points; a few publications and conference presentations by critical marine biologists had made somewhat similar observations, without the certainty of the exclamation points. She didn't know enough about economics or politics to concur with some points; she deliberately avoided the political games that regularly occurred after she submitted her scientific assessments. If she was going to edit Cecil's paper, she would have to do some research.

Male, Maldives was clearly printed on the post office form pasted on the box. So he had moved to Male, or more accurately, the box had been sent from Male. Why had he been in such a hurry, and if he had planned to come back to Colombo—he gave Claudine his Colombo number—why hadn't he?

When she heard the stairs crack, she cleared away the papers and eased herself out of bed. Claudine had left her a housecoat neatly folded on a chair. The coat was short. She walked to the kitchen. Claudine, in a similar housecoat, was pressing buttons on the coffee machine.

'Hi, it's a little early…'

Claudine looked up at her, winced when she saw the housecoat, and waved in the direction of the dining table. She joined Kate.

'I need to give you something that I couldn't give you yesterday. You were tired, and I wanted to be sure.… Cecil wrote something for both of us. It is about his family.' She took a large brown envelope from the table.

'It is a long story.' She handed Kate the envelope.

'Could you give me a coffee first; I need to wake up.' Kate suddenly felt tense, not sure what to expect on this early morning with the darkness peering in at the windows.

'Of course. I'm sorry, I am not very hospitable.'

'Claudine and Kate' was written on the envelope. A blue notebook slipped out onto the table; most pages had been written in pen, the last few in pencil. On a loose page Cecil had scribbled:

Kate and Claudine,
I believe Kate should know what I found out about my parents.

Kate,
These notes about my parents and their marriage I wrote for you, although I am still not entirely sure the story even concerns you. If not, please return the notebook to me. When you mentioned that you grew up with your single mother in Kampen, I should have told you what I knew. I couldn't then.

Cecil

24
Washington DC, September 1992

Dear Kate,

I owe you an explanation, long overdue. I left because I didn't want to hurt you, and I planned to call you with an explanation when I got back to Brussels at the end of my trip. But I've just found out I don't have your telephone number or address—I've left the list of conference participants at the Club in Colombo. Dumb. Writing the story of my family these past few weeks has given me time to order my thoughts and helped me put on paper an explanation for what happened between us. What I don't know is whether what follows actually involves you at all. If it doesn't, I apologize for having been rude and for drawing the wrong conclusion.

I'll start towards the end. My mother died three years ago. After her death, my father changed. He became friendlier towards me. I guessed it was because, finally, the fissure between him and my mother had ended. When I was young, you see, he had shared his interest in nature with me. He taught me to enjoy the outdoors, took me on hikes, showed me where to go, what to avoid, and trained me in survival skills. But his interest in nature started to wane at about the time I started high school. He was worried about his business not doing well and used to spend long days in his office. After I left home to go to college, we were never that close again and my infrequent visits to my parents didn't change that.

My mother was a stern English language teacher, occasionally sarcastic and rather distant at home. Her school was always the center of her universe. Months before she passed away, she told me about her life, how she'd grown up with two older brothers and didn't want to be treated as the baby of the family. She fought with her brothers and insisted she wanted to study and become a teacher.

She died of a heart attack. She had planned her own funeral, meticulously. My father and I followed her instructions. Far more people showed up than anticipated. I didn't expect any of her students would be genuinely sad she had passed away but many were, some cried. Yet it wasn't a particularly somber affair; students talked about the jokes they had tried to play on her, most of which

didn't pan out. The principal expatiated on the special events in their long professional relationship. My father thanked everybody, and then he said he had loved her all his life, but they hadn't been able to make up. He didn't explain, and when I asked him afterwards, he said I would understand, eventually.

After Mother's funeral he seemed eager to have me around, asked me to stay on longer. He talked a lot, about his business, the few friends he'd had over the years, and about my mother, but he never explained why there had been this rift. I didn't want to upset him and during my visit I didn't pry. He appeared reluctant to decide what to do with her personal possessions; in the end, he asked me to take care of them. Her clothes went to an agency for the poor and her books ended up in a second-hand bookstore. A few days before I left, I discovered an old shoebox behind a stack of bed sheets. Inside were letters that my mother had kept, a bundle tied with a red ribbon written by her, and a bundle tied with a yellow ribbon written by him. When my father saw me with the letters, he grabbed the box. He seemed agitated, embarrassed and angry all at once and claimed the box belonged to him. When he took me to the airport, we had coffee and when we shook hands, he said I could read the letters after he died. Then he turned around and left. He didn't say goodbye.

Two months later, while I was traveling in Africa, I got a telegram that my father's car had hit a moose at night. It took me a couple of days to get back to St. John's; he died a few hours before I arrived at the hospital, his bed was already empty. He'd been in a coma and never regained consciousness. I didn't have much time to deal with the funeral and all the administrative stuff that stealthily accompanies a passing. Mother's funeral had been a success and because Father didn't leave any instructions, I copied the arrangements. The result, if one can say that about a funeral service, was disappointing: attendance was sparse, the atmosphere somber and the speeches, including my own, forgettable.

Later I took a few weeks off work, sold most of the furniture, kept a few things for myself, put the house on the market. In my father's desk I found our only tiny photo album—a few pictures of my father serving in the Canadian Army in the Netherlands, just liberated from the Germans, and of my mother, looking after toddler Cecil at

home. Father seemed to be having a great time; one picture has him sitting on top of the cabin of a truck full of women. He is waving at the crowd. Another has him drinking with some buddies in some dark place packed with people. The glue behind one picture had come loose over the years; on the back Father had written Z. At first, I thought Z. referred to a person, but now I believe it could also have meant Zwolle, the town in the north of the Netherlands where his unit was stationed. When the movers had almost emptied the house, I rediscovered the shoebox full of letters, this time in a rusty toolbox in the shed. I am still not sure why Father put it there: to make discovery difficult or hold it for later destruction. All the letters were sent in 1945.

Those letters represent their marriage contract. My father's first letters were love letters, veiled references to their short courtship. The war was still going on, letters were censored; he couldn't write what he really felt or was actually doing until May 1945. In later letters he wrote about the defeat of the Germans and the liberation of the northern provinces of Holland. He wrote every week but didn't in July. In his first letter in August, he apologized for not writing sooner, and in the next he wrote mostly about his job: sorting out a temporary local administration with various resistance groups and representatives of the former Dutch government in exile—they didn't like each other; the initial setup was a mess. He also reorganized a detention camp for people accused of collaboration. He wrote that he loved my mother, but the language, in hindsight, while more explicit, seemed labored. In September he wrote that he had met a young woman during one of the many liberation parties that spread across the country like wildfire during the summer of 1945. Books about that period describe Dutch girls eager to flirt, dance and more with good-looking Canadian boys who, in the courtship stakes, had an advantage over the emaciated and broken Dutch competition, amplified by their easy access to precious nylons, cigarettes and chocolates. His young woman got pregnant and my father believed the right thing to do—he didn't use the word honorable—was to ask my mother for a divorce. That letter still shocks me; the rest of his life he was a man who took his time to consider things before making a decision. He must have been utterly smitten when he wrote it;

he hardly apologized, just mentioned he would remain financially responsible for my upbringing, and would be happy to accept my mother's conditions.

Mother seemed genuinely in love when she married my father, in her letters she would often recall their honeymoon and the months they were together before he joined the army. She usually replied immediately, but this time she waited three weeks.

Her reply crossed his next letter. In her letter she asked him to reconsider, for my sake, but said that even if he did, she would never again share his bed. In those three weeks my father found out that his Dutch girlfriend was already married and her husband had joined the Dutch Waffen-SS Division. My father's unit checked mail from Germany and the Soviet Union. He noticed her name on a Red Cross letter, it confirmed her husband's death in a Soviet prisoner of war camp. My father changed his mind and in his letter he asked my mother to forgive him; it was all a huge, stupid mistake on his part.

Mother confirmed her earlier reply—she didn't get her reputation as a strict disciplinarian for nothing—and added two more conditions: that he told her what happened, *really* happened; and that he would never contact the woman or the baby again.

He accepted. In the next letter he wrote how he had met her, at a big first of July party, and that she stood out because she had a new dress, unlike most of the other girls. Zwolle was a party town in July 1945; loads of Canadian soldiers had nothing more to do but couldn't leave yet. She came from a nearby town, Kampen. Travel was still difficult immediately after the war, but she always insisted they meet in Zwolle. He had a Jeep and could have picked her up or driven her home to Kampen, but she refused, always took the train. He never mentioned her name. In one evening of thoughtless exuberance, my father managed to warp the lives of two women and his children.

Some girls and women who had been intimate with or married to Dutch collaborators or SS members were arrested immediately after the Germans capitulated and kept for months in special camps. Others were marched through town, their hair cut, shouted at by whipped-up spectators calling them German whores. My father's lover didn't receive this treatment —I don't know why not, he didn't say. Maybe she and her husband had lived in another town and she

was able to hide in Kampen until the revenge mob had run out of steam.

Kate, I panicked when you mentioned you were born in Kampen and grew up with a single mother. I was totally confused by the possibility that you could be my half sister. How could I find out whether you knew about your real father without hurting you? What could I ask? How could I tell my father's story? I couldn't figure it out that evening and after a sleepless night I decided to leave early the next morning. Later I realized I was hurting you either way, and especially by not explaining my sudden departure.

I hope to see you after I get back from my work trip.

Cecil

25
Washington DC, September 1992

Motionless, her lips pursed, Kate pushed her palms against her eyelids. Suddenly her shoulders rocked; she cried, silently. Claudine watched, offered tissues. Kate, squinting, blew her nose repeatedly.

'I'm sorry…'

'No, don't be. I wasn't sure how you fitted into all this. It must be a shock.'

'We compared birthdays; I told him I was born April 2nd 1946, in Kampen. He looked startled for a few seconds, stopped what he was doing. Then he said he had to go. He was fidgety, didn't look at me. He slept in his own hotel room and left the next morning, early.' Kate sobbed again.

'He was confused, clearly, didn't want to hurt you.' Claudine looked at Cecil's short note on the table. 'Did you know your mother's story?'

'That she was married to somebody in the Waffen-SS who was killed by whoever, and then got herself pregnant by a Canadian soldier in July 1945? No, that's news to me as well!'

Claudine stiffened. 'Your mother never remarried?'

'No, and she refused to tell me who my father was. All the kids I knew had fathers and I didn't.'

'Nobody else said anything, your grandparents, other family, friends?'

'No, nobody said anything. Only my grandfather told me once that the whole family had stayed in the house in Kampen during the last years of the war; the Germans forced all the inhabitants of the towns along to coast to evacuate; they were building the Atlantic Wall. After the war it took a while before the buses and trains were running again. My grandparents returned to the coast, where they still had a house; it survived the war.'

Kate blew her nose again. Claudine looked at her, then spoke softly.

'What do you know, you have a Canadian father who has passed away and a half brother who is missing.' After a few seconds she whispered, 'What else is new?'

'What else is new?' Kate felt her sorrow transforming into a wave of uncontrolled anger.

'A lost father.' Claudine spoke the words absent-mindedly.

'No, a lost brother, my brother. Why couldn't he tell me in Holland? Why has he disappeared? Or whatever he's done.'

Kate felt as if she were in free fall. Her anger overwhelmed her. She needed to regain some sense of who she was, needed a floor on which she could land, regain control.

'I'm going to lay down.'

'Yes, yes, of course.'

In her room she looked at herself in the mirror. A family sorely missed had unexpectedly arrived and left; she could not touch or speak to them, not even see a picture. She wanted to scream at something, at Claudine, who had so neatly summarized her new family members: a dead father, who had evidently never looked for her, and a lost brother. *What else is new?* How breathtakingly callous! She hammered the wall with both fists. The drywall muffled the sound, but her violence shocked her back to reality. This wasn't her house, and compared to the stone interior walls back home, this American drywall sounded and felt flimsy. Claudine knocked on the door.

'Are you alright?'

'No, I am not. Please let me be.'

Reticent, Claudine stayed put outside the door, listening to the cadence of Kate's words, 'Father, brother, father, brother.' Finally, she knocked again.

'*Yes*.'

'Let me tell you *my* story. I'll explain what happened to my two fathers.'

A ray of early morning sunlight struck the glass table in front of her, bounced to the wall between the Hokusai prints. Kate had regained her composure and accepted a glass of mango juice with a small white flower in it; a peace offering. A shower and an early breakfast had cleared her head.

'What I am about to tell you has to remain between us, nobody, *nobody else,* should ever know this.' Claudine, pensive, sat up straight, her hands clasped around her empty coffee cup. 'It is a long story.'

Kate nodded. She noticed the ray of light moving almost imperceptibly along the wall towards the top of Mount Fuji. The earth still turned, life went on.

'My grandparents on my mother's side moved from Le Havre to Vietnam during the late thirties, after my mother finished elementary school. My grandfather became the deputy harbormaster for the port authority in Haiphong, near the Chinese border. My mother spent her teenage years in a Catholic convent. The school's culture perfectly prepared her for, what shall I say, her bourgeois future.' The brief movement of Claudine's lips suggested irony, but her eyes did not smile.

'My father once told me Vietnam and China are like two magnets, put them together wrongly and they cannot touch. For 2,000 years they fought endless conflicts; for centuries the Chinese dominated parts of Vietnam. Most Vietnamese don't like the Chinese, never have. The Vietnamese also fought each other, ferociously. My father is Chinese, grew up in Haiphong. His Chinese ancestors moved there when the Dutch were helping the Thrinh lords to fight the Nguyen lords in the south, who had the support of the Portuguese. For once, the foreign traders had a positive influence. In the wake of this war, unlike the bloody wars of previous centuries, some kind of peace was maintained for the entire country for over a century. This allowed my father's family to stay. Most Chinese were traders, my father's family had a store. Still, the Vietnamese remained suspicious of the Chinese, even if they had been in the country for centuries. Sorry, I need another coffee.'

Claudine jumped up to work the very American drip coffee machine standing next to a contraption with a steam spout that produced more exclusive coffees.

'My mother was still at boarding school when the Japanese occupation started,' Claudine continued as she waited for the coffee to noisily percolate.

'The Japanese didn't change very much, they allowed the Vichy French to run the city. A few French kept their jobs, including my grandfather. Soon after my mother graduated, she met this dashing Chinese man, the son of a wealthy trading family. They met up, often secretly, and according to my mother the courtship was the

most exhilarating thing that ever happened to her. They married against the wishes of both families, which is virtually unheard of for a Chinese man.'

She returned with a large cup of black coffee, her eyes on her hands clasped around the cup as if the coffee were the magic potion allowing her to overcome her reluctance to tell her story.

'I was born a week after the Japanese surrendered. After the war the Viet Minh took over and "Uncle Ho" declared independence. "Asia for the Asians." Chinese nationalists crossed the border. Fights between Vietnamese mobs and French soldiers occurred daily, the real war started in the south.… My French grandparents didn't appreciate the fighting and escaped to France.'

Claudine sipped her coffee, contemplated its black surface, swirled the cup around slightly. Her face moved imperceptibly from distant to pensive, eyes closed; she was quiet for a while and Kate watched her.

'My parents supported the communists. My father's independent streak and his difficult relationship with his father must have played a role; we only visited my grandmother when my grandfather wasn't there. He never forgave my father, refused to meet him. My mother's very proper and disciplined education at the convent made her despise the bourgeoisie and favor any alternative, including the communists. So my parents stayed, despite the guerilla war, outsiders in three worlds. We lived above our family business, near the train station, despite our disapproving Chinese family and a few French families still on visiting terms—we went to their houses, nicely dressed, they never came to ours—and we lived in the twilight zone of the Viet Minh.'

Claudine walked a few paces into the room, turned suddenly as if remembering something.

'My life, since then, has always been in the penumbra of societies, in Vietnam, and later…until, well now, really. Always dancing in and out of the shadows, wary of what was happening in the darkness, things I never really knew or properly understood. You have to bear that in mind for the rest of the story.' Like a model on the catwalk, she turned back.

'My mother looked a lot like I do now. She had a fairly dark

complexion, black hair; she spoke Vietnamese and later in her life quite a bit of Mandarin. She could dress as if she had just been to Paris, while at some meetings she looked like a communist cadre, which she was. I went to some endless Party meetings as a kid and attended a communist elementary school after the French finally left.'

Kate raised her chin.

'I am sorry to interrupt; it is quite a story. But what does your childhood in Haiphong have to do with Cecil's disappearance?

'Everything!' Claudine snapped, and in the next instant regained her aura of distant formality.

'It was I who.… Could you let me finish?'

Kate retreated and observed; only her eyes showed surprise.

Defiant, Claudine returned her gaze, then pleaded, 'You have to give me time, it is a long story; everything goes back to what happened in Haiphong.'

Kate nodded, hesitant.

'North Vietnam suffered years of guerilla warfare even before all the French left. As a kid I was warned about the dangers, to hide in stores and avoid the street. There were regular attacks, often at night. You couldn't trust anybody. My father had his own small trading company; maybe his office was spared because my parents were Party members—that is what my mother often said. It was confusing to me, so many factions, so much fighting. The Viet Minh finally won after Dien Bien Phu. I was still in elementary school when the French officially left. The whole city celebrated. The school closed for what seemed an eternity, soldiers held big parades, all dressed alike. Party cadres gave speeches. I remember some official on a high platform making an endless speech—I was totally bored—but the fireworks afterwards were amazing.'

Claudine stood erect, as if listening to the speech, and Kate glimpsed a pretty convincing example of a Party cadre, a figure in shapeless black.

'The North became a republic and suffered some housecleaning of class enemies, mostly wealthy landowners, intellectuals, and the Chinese, of course. North Vietnam had a debt to the Soviets. This was an appetizer for what was going to happen in China. My parents'

position in the Party became an issue. Party cadres questioned my father's commitment, possibly because of whispers from the business community and his marriage to a French woman. My parents were interviewed, first in private, later in large public meetings. I wasn't there, but they talked about it, although they tried not to involve me. For months they never knew what was going to happen next. That uncertainty, day after day, week after week, it really changed my father. He felt betrayed by people he admired in the Party and thought he could trust; they proved doctrinaire sophists. He slowly lost the joie de vivre that I remember him having when I was little. He talked less, explained less, didn't have time to play with me, didn't kiss me goodnight anymore.'

Claudine inhaled deeply, as if to gather courage; closed her eyes and her voice became monotone.

'Around that time my father met his "acquaintance". I never knew his real name. A Chinese man, from the Beijing area; he had a peculiar accent I haven't heard anywhere else, and he used different names in different places. Once my father told my mother the man worked for a communist office in Hong Kong responsible for relations with the Chinese abroad. I think he recruited them to go back to Mao's China, or to work for him abroad. One day he walked straight into my father's office and closed the door. At first, he came once a week, on a Sunday, then during the week. He changed everything.'

She walked to the kitchen to get more coffee, continued talking.

'For years my father followed what was happening in China very closely. He used to read newspaper articles to me, tried to explain. I remember the pictures of the Chinese invasion of Tibet and the Korean War; I got the fundamentals of my political education before I became a teenager. After all that happened afterwards, I could have gotten a doctorate in political science without ever going to university.' She smiled, as if embarrassed by her hubris, sat down and looked at her hands with their narrow blue veins, their gentle tremor.

'One morning, as I was about to go to school, my father told my mother and me he didn't trust the Party anymore and wanted to leave Vietnam. He wanted to protect her from further questioning and both of us from the war that had started in the South. He wanted to check out China. My mother was livid. She argued. He didn't even

look at me. He left the next day, with his acquaintance, of course. A couple of weeks later he came back, a totally changed man. I still find it unbelievable. My father, the independent revolutionary, the intellectual, who told me funny stories and let me dance on his knee, suddenly sounded like a Party hack on the radio, a true believer in Mao's new policies. What a joke!'

She jumped up, paced about, and turned back to Kate.

'And his timing was terrible! In the spring Mao had started the Hundred Flowers Campaign. I don't suppose you've heard of it. He invited the people to comment on his policies, but the reaction he got totally surprised him, the intensity of criticism targeted at him. It was something he had never allowed before. And he had always made sure that whenever something went wrong, others in the Party admitted responsibility. Worst of all, my father didn't know that Mao had put Deng in charge of a new campaign to attack his critics. He had no clue the Great Leap Forward was about to start. Not bothered by family history, my father, the man I was so proud of as a kid, decided to sell his business and move us all to China. Why? To join the great Chinese people jump backwards.'

She paused, looked at Kate. The occasional drip of the coffee machine was the only sound in the house. Finally Claudine whispered:

'My mother argued with him; she wanted to stay, didn't want to have to follow her parents to France. He was determined to go to China. For millennia it had been the center of the world, he told us, his only, unwilling audience. After being controlled by foreigners for 200 years, China would resume its rightful place in the world: at the top. The Party would make sure of that. His acquaintance came by one evening and told us to pack. We lost money on our house, left our furniture, most of my toys. We went to China without much money. Not that it would have made any difference, having money was a sure ticket to political inquiry and usually a long prison sentence or death. That day I was snapped out of my happy childhood. My teenage years went up in smoke in China.'

She clapped her hands to break the spell of her revelation, walked to her kitchen and switched off the coffee machine.

'Shall we have something more to eat now?'

26
Washington DC, October 1992

With the blueberry muffins and maple syrup warming her stomach, Kate felt drowsy. Claudine stacked the plates and serving dishes in the kitchen and returned to her seat. 'We had just arrived in China,' she began.

'Claudine, it's nine o'clock. I've got about eight hours before jet lag floors me. I didn't get much sleep last night. We haven't even started thinking about where Cecil might be.'

'It won't take long.'

'I don't know if I can stay focused.'

'Then let's get some fresh air. I'll show you around Washington and tell you about Cecil.'

Rush hour traffic had slowed to a crawl on Canal Road. To Kate, grown up in a country dominated by wide waterways, 'canal' seemed a strange name for what would barely have qualified as a ditch back home. On the parallel bike path people were jogging and cycling; beyond them the surface of the Potomac River glittered between the foliage. Claudine drove deliberately, as cars in front stopped and started. A bellicose driver honked behind her.

'This town has a culture of hyperactivity,' Claudine explained. 'But don't be fooled, this cohort of go-getters probably left home too late, assuming the traffic would be okay. Now they are late for the all-important ten o'clock meeting.' She seemed relaxed, even happy, driving slowly.

'You have to see the Vietnam Veterans Memorial; every tourist in Washington does. It is impressive and I don't say this because I grew up in Vietnam.'

'Please, Claudine, let's talk about Cecil. I want to know where he is. You mentioned his dirty laundry. In Colombo. Has he been seen since?'

'No.'

'Well, shouldn't we go to Sri Lanka and start asking questions?'

'Just hear me out. I promise that by the end of the afternoon you'll be ready to book a flight to…somewhere.'

'Okay, as long as we get things moving today.'

'We can park up at the Constitution Gardens.'

'I often eat my lunch here. My office is a few blocks away. The rest of the Mall is a wide open space; this is the only secluded area. With all these trees, you can barely hear the traffic. It feels like you're sitting on a river bank, people strolling along. I meditate here, about my life, my job.'

A semi-circle of low red granite stones sat on the small island in the Constitution Gardens pond. On them, engraved in gold, were the signatures of those who had signed the Declaration of Independence.

'It's a surprisingly low-key monument for those who risked everything when they literally penned the creation of a new nation. Though today they'd be called terrorists,' Claudine explained matter-of-factly.

A few geese were swimming in the water; ducks, their beaks hidden between their folded wings, were asleep on a single leg on the grass nearby.

A plane leaving National Airport gained altitude above the Potomac. Claudine fell silent as the roar of the engines blended with the sound of air buffeting the wings. She looked at Kate, sighed, and settled on the stone rim of a flowerbed.

'So, take me back to China.'

'The whole period I stayed in China was totally confusing, a long blur of dirty beds, lousy houses and bad transport. And later hunger and cold. A lot of hunger and cold. The constant tension has stayed with me, vividly. It was a rolling nightmare. First, we traveled on a coastal steamer to Beihai, and then on open trucks to Nanning. Mao had just given one of his speeches; the city was full of security people, Red Army soldiers. Red banners everywhere. My father's acquaintance happened to be there too. He got us permits and tickets to travel to Peking. My father had known all along we were going there but never bothered to tell my mother or me. My mother always had a mind of her own and when she found out, she refused.'

Claudine walked to the water's edge, kicked a few leaves.

'She wouldn't get on the train. The acquaintance told my father to take me to his car. My father pushed me onto the back seat and locked the door. He went back into the station, told my mother to

either come with me or lose me. She chose me. I lost my father when he grabbed me and forced me to go with him, the father I thought I knew and trusted. After that I had a different father. He is still alive, but I despise him because of what he did to us, and now to your brother.'

In the moment that followed, a blue-colored duck flapped its wings and let out shrill quacks, the accidental sound of an exclamation mark.

'Your father has something to do with Cecil?' Kate could not control her surprise.

'Yes, that is the thread of my story—and it started in Haiphong.' Claudine nodded, confirming her own words. Her hands clasped and unclasped, seeking something to hold onto. 'It took us a long time to get to Peking. The acquaintance drove us to a guesthouse and the next day we took a train. We spent days at stations, waiting, because many trains weren't running. In Peking we lived in a small apartment near a large market. That was the last time in China that I saw and smelled lots of food.'

The noise of another plane taking off from National filled the air. Claudine looked around.

'Where does Cecil fit in?' Kate's tiredness fueled her impatience.

'I need a coffee.'

As they walked to the small cafe across the pond, Claudine didn't speak, looked tense. Somehow the lousy coffee cheered her up. From a bench overlooking the Vietnam Memorial they watched an endless stream of visitors slowly walking along the black walls, older men laying flowers, young girls copying names. She swirled her coffee and returned to China, oblivious of Kate's anxiety.

'After two years in Peking my father had to report to Shenyang, in Manchuria. It used to be called Mukden during the Japanese occupation; it is the main railway hub in northern China. He went ahead, we followed later. The Leap Forward had caused massive food shortages, even for people working for the Party, and particularly in the north. On one of her expeditions to buy food, my mother met Alexander, a Soviet engineer who told us he worked for the railways. He lived nearby. My mother and Alexander became lovers. I knew, initially my father didn't, but I think he found out or my mother

told him. A few months later Mao decided that all the Soviet advisers had to leave the country. Alexander came to our house and asked my mother to go with him. My father did not show up when we left. We arrived in Leningrad in the snow.'

Claudine sprang up from the bench. As another plane rose noisily behind her, she summoned Kate to follow her and marched towards Constitution Avenue. Surprised, hoping for the denouement, Kate trailed behind her, failing to catch up. Confused, Claudine slowed down.

'I have to finish now,' Claudine convinced herself. She turned on her heel. 'Come.' And without another word she headed back towards the island.

A blue heron rose slowly, almost floating across the water, and settled on the little island in the middle of the lake. Standing in the circle of signatures on the island, Claudine spoke again, first slowly, then her words became a torrent.

'Alexander was still married. His wife didn't want a divorce. My mother never expected a wife waiting for him on the cold train platform. I loved Alexander too. My new father, joyous, extrovert. He used to tell me funny stories about life in the Soviet nirvana. In a way he resembled my early father. Like him, he lied to us. He tried to keep us in Leningrad, asked for time to sort out the mess with his wife, but my mother had had enough. We still had French passports. Alexander had the connections to get us train tickets and my mother and I traveled to Paris. No money. My grandparents appeared happy to see us, but that changed after we moved in. My mother got a job at a travel agency; later she became a translator at a bank. I finished the *lycée*. The rest is not important until two years ago, when a Chinese man knocked on my door in Bethesda.'

A plane gained height above the Lincoln Memorial. Kate was about to speak, but the sight of Claudine's distraught face stopped her.

'He introduced himself, but I'm sure it wasn't his real name. He said my father, my biological father, would send me a message. I was shocked; he had never tried to contact us. The man didn't threaten me, just told me to do what my father asked, and nothing would happen to him. It was surreal. A few days later I received an envelope, without stamps, the address written on a typewriter. The note inside

was handwritten in French and addressed to me, *Chère Claudine*, but it wasn't personal. No explanation or regret for not having contacted me before now. No mention of my mother. Nothing about me. He was just using me. The message was clear: I should let my boss know there was something in Cecil Coulthard's past that disqualified him for his job.'

Kate was lost for words.

Claudine closed her eyes, took a deep breath. She walked to the water, watched the reflections of people walking on the opposite bank tremble into ghostly images when the geese rose to shake water from their feathers. She turned, whispering the crux of her story.

'I called my mother, asked her what to do. She still lives in Paris. My parents never divorced. She said I should ignore the letter, wait and see what happened. I felt relieved; after all, I couldn't make a decision, decide somebody's fate. It didn't matter that I thought I hated my father, that Cecil had failed me, the pressure was still crushing. Alcohol made it easier to avoid the whole thing. To avoid thinking about what would happen if I procrastinated. But it was always at the back of my mind; I drank to forget, to get some sleep I drank some more. After two months the Chinese man knocked again. He was courteous, ignored the fact that I was pretty drunk at eleven in the morning. He repeated his message, used formal legal words. "Ensure that Cecil is dismissed for gross misconduct or your father will be arraigned."'

Silently the heron jumped up and flew across the water, slowly disappearing behind the trees. Kate watched the bird, not knowing what to say or do.

'I asked him what Cecil was supposed to have done. The man smiled and said: "He knows". Nothing more. I asked him what my father would be charged with. He smiled again: "That is for the courts to decide". He left the draft of a letter for me to send anonymously to Cecil's boss.' Claudine fiddled with her empty cup, crushed it.

'What was in the draft?'

'Murder.

'I was desperate, called my mother again. A few days later she asked me to send the letter. I did. Cecil's new boss wanted him gone and my letter made him look grubby, made it easy to push him out.

Officially, Cecil resigned.'

'Murder? Cecil? I don't believe it! These people, they just made it up, right?'

'I guess so.'

'I can't get my head around this. What's Cecil got to do with your dad? Why would anyone want to get him fired?'

Claudine looked at Kate. 'I don't have any answers. After Cecil was fired, I lost control of myself. I was managing a bottle of vodka before lunch; I had several in my desk. People noticed. My boss warned me. I joined AA.

Late last year—it had been stormy, dark, all day—somebody rang my doorbell. I was expecting another Chinese man, another letter. It was Cecil, drunk. He asked for a place to crash. I let him in, on two conditions. That he joined me at AA and that he got his life together. I never told him why I let him in.'

They didn't speak on the way back from DC. Kate struggled with her half brother's manipulated dismissal, his disappearance and Claudine's extraordinary role in the whole affair. Question followed question and nothing hung together, motives, actions and consequences. Claudine drove, white knuckles on the wheel, her lips pursed. She didn't get out after parking the car, looked straight ahead.

'One more thing I have to tell you. About Cecil's current job. The vacancy announcement was sent to me. Same envelope, no return address, same typewriter, another instruction. "Persuade Cecil to apply for the job in Brussels." By then he had moved out. I'd found him a housesit. Foreign postings mean a lot of families in DC are away for long periods of time. I didn't know it would take him halfway across the world.'

She didn't release the steering wheel, her hands continued to press and let loose, as if channeling her tension into crushing the rim.

'So you're telling me that his new job isn't part of his *getting his life back together* under your caring guidance? It's actually another step in this bizarre story of manipulation.'

Claudine couldn't speak.

'What is this outfit in Brussels? Have you contacted them to ask where he is?' Kate's voice was cold, quiet.

'Yes.'

'And what did they say?'

'That he had called them from Colombo, as he did me.'

'That was all?'

'No.'

'So, what else?' Kate spat out the words.

'Liliane said he was on edge when he called her, felt threatened by a Chinese man who was following him. She told him he was imagining things, it was just coincidence. When he called me, he sounded tense. I assume he had decided to leave Colombo by then.'

'Ah, this Liliane again. Who is she?'

'Liliane de Bock, she works for URI, an NGO dealing with the oceans; she hired Cecil.'

'Jeez. Is she part of this too? Did she lure Cecil to the other side of the world?' Kate couldn't control her anger.

'Probably,' Claudine said, slowly articulating each syllable.

'You know her?'

Silence. Claudine pulled out her keys, a small metal rooster dangled on the key ring, the symbol of the year of her birth.

'After I got the vacancy announcement, I checked out URI. They're legitimate. I called the contact on the vacancy. That was Liliane. I told her about the second instruction. She said she had no idea what that was all about, but if I could recommend a candidate, she'd be interested to meet him. She asked a lot of questions about Cecil; she knew. I realized afterwards she wasn't curious at all about who I was.'

Kate shook her head. 'After Cecil left Colombo, where was he supposed to go next?'

'Maldives. He did go there. The box of documents was sent from there, but he didn't return to Colombo. He should have been back in Brussels by now.'

'Could he still be in Maldives?'

'I don't know. He was supposed to stay there for about ten days.'

'Does this Liliane have a contact address there?'

'She said he never showed up at the hotel where he had been booked in Male. He did the same in Colombo, found his own accommodation.'

'When did you last call her?'

'The day you agreed to come here. I also called Colombo; he stayed at the Aurora Sports Club. He left suddenly, well before he was supposed to leave.'

The tension inside the small car frayed Kate's nerves. Outside, she breathed deeply and watched a black squirrel race effortlessly along a telephone cable between Claudine's house and an electricity pole, jump onto the branch of a nearby tree, fly to the next one, and stop suddenly, apparently pleased with itself, its tail moving in synchronicity with the passes of its forepaws along the side of its face. When Claudine finally opened her car door, the squirrel jumped into the garden and started digging.

'My house squirrel,' Claudine explained in a monotone. 'He has been burying acorns all over the garden.'

'A black squirrel? We have red and gray ones in Holland.'

'Yes, they are common here.'

Claudine held open the front door for Kate. Somehow the squirrel had defused the tension between them. Inside, Claudine offered coffee and Kate accepted.

Kate sat hunched at the dining table. 'So, what do we do now?' she asked, leaning on one elbow, waving her hand before bringing it to her face and covering her mouth. After a long silence she stepped into the small kitchen and bowed to face Claudine. 'Will you help me find him?'

They planned quickly. Claudine called her office to ask them to find some flight options. 'They are going to get back to me.'

The next morning Claudine was busy at her office making arrangements for her imminent and unscheduled holiday. Kate took the opportunity to visit the Natural History museum on the Mall. They would meet after lunch near the Vietnam Memorial, at 'their' bench.

It was a hot, muggy afternoon, tens of degrees hotter than in the Netherlands in the fall. Kate was early and relieved to rest on the bench after spending hours on her feet. She watched classes of school children disembark from buses on Connecticut Avenue and walk along the black granite walls of the Memorial, all of them well-behaved, some laying flowers, others seeking names. It suddenly hit

her that some of these kids may have lost their grandfathers, would never have known them. A few American flags bearing the letters MIA were waving in the breeze outside a small tent nearby. When she asked a boy what the letters meant, he frowned at her.

'Well, Missing In Action, of course. Many soldiers did not come back; the guys in the tent want the military to do more to find them.' He seemed pleased to know the right answer.

Kate gazed at the flags. All she had of Cecil was his blue book. She felt terrible.

'Have you been waiting long?' Claudine was suddenly standing behind her. 'Sorry, it took longer than I expected. We are flying tomorrow.'

'Let's walk along the walls. I want to read some of the names.'

Claudine, her mind still back at the office, switched gear. 'Sure.'

Back in her car, Claudine summarized their travel itinerary. First to Colombo, then to Male. When Kate didn't react, she paused before continuing. 'The Memorial does that to you: makes you want to touch it. I often run my fingers along it. Then it makes you weep. Were you crying for Cecil too?'

'Don't get me started again. Who designed it?'

'A Chinese American architect still in her early twenties. The design caused an uproar, prompted a typically Washington political battle: it was considered too modern in some quarters, too unlike traditional war memorials. The conservatives lost and it has become the most visited memorial in the country.' Her hands rested on the steering wheel, their trembling increasing. Silence.

'Vietnam built its own war memorial in Hanoi, across from Ho Chi Minh's Mausoleum. Both memorials lay bare the realities of patriotism. In the US, a democracy, a small group of politicians, with an astonishing lack of consideration for what the people wanted, and supported by the defense industry, decided to escalate the Vietnam War. They sacrificed all those names on the walls. In Vietnam, the Communist Party, the representative of the masses, supported by the Soviets and China, sacrificed many more, including hundreds of thousands of women and children. There isn't a single name on the Hanoi memorial. The masses aren't mentioned. I believe there isn't a

single Vietnamese name on the Memorial here either, even though the South Vietnamese fought with and for the Americans. Isn't that staggering?'

'Have you ever been back to Vietnam?'

'No, I read about the Hanoi memorial in the newspapers.'

Kate watched the car in front. When the traffic moved again, Claudine pushed a knob on the radio.

'We have traffic information every ten minutes,' she explained.

Epilogue

27
Colombo–Male, October 1992

Claudine and Kate quickly regretted walking to the Aurora from their hotel. The black smoke belching from buses and myriad motorbikes in the stale, humid air easily explained the absence of people sauntering in the hot afternoon sun. Too headstrong to concede defeat—it was a matter of a few hundred meters—they ignored the taxis, even those that stopped to offer their services. They crossed onto the forecourt, with its few small trees, parking bays and a waiting taxi. To their relief, the lobby felt cool. Claudine gravitated towards the bar. When the barman looked up, his surprised gaze passed over Claudine's head to Kate.

'Good afternoon.'

'You are Henri?' asked Claudine.

'No, madam, I am not.'

'He does work here, doesn't he? I called a few weeks ago, spoke to him.'

'Yes, he works here.'

'Could we meet him?'

'May I inquire what it is you wish to see him about?'

Here we go, said Claudine's glance over her shoulder to Kate.

'Cecil Coulthard stayed here, over a month ago. He left a suitcase, didn't return to pick it up. We are looking for him. Retracing his movements. This is Kate, his sister.' She pointed to Kate, who blushed at being called Cecil's sister for the first time ever.

While waiting in the lobby, Kate admired the perfectly painted names italicized on the teak shield, some white, others yellowing under multiple layers of varnish. Claudine paced about, her steps small, her shoes ticking on the worn wooden floor.

'Could you come to the restaurant, please? Henri will meet you there.'

When they entered, Henri was standing straight-backed beside a table, his hands behind his back. He looked friendly but nonplussed.

'Good afternoon, my name is Claudine Maufort, this is Kate Mulder.'

Henri nodded towards them.

'I called you about two weeks ago, from the US,' Claudine explained. 'About Cecil, Cecil Coulthard. You told me he had left, didn't come back to collect his suitcase.'

'Do you mind if we sit?' asked Kate, feeling the awkwardness of their positions.

'Oh yes, please do.' Henri pulled out a chair for Kate. Claudine seated herself. Henri remained standing.

'No madam, he did not collect it.'

'Could you tell us, please, about Cecil's stay here? What he did, where he went?'

Henri pressed his hands against his sarong. He looked away into the distance.

'Mr. Coulthard came here without the recommendation of a member. Because he was alone, required a place to work for several weeks, we were able to accommodate him. He worked in his room.' Henri spoke softly, slowly, as if repeating a well-worn phrase.

'He worked in his room?' Claudine raised her brows.

'Yes, he took his breakfast and tea in his room. On a few occasions, he dined in the evening in our restaurant.'

'He didn't go out, I mean, leave the Club?'

'No, except on the day he left.'

'Could you tell us what happened that day?'

'When I brought his breakfast as usual, he told me he would enjoy taking breakfast at Greens, the hotel just down the road.'

'And that was the first time he went out?'

'I believe so.'

'And what happened next?'

'He came back soon after, looking flustered, and told me he needed to leave, urgently.'

Kate could not wait for Claudine's next question and jumped in: 'Did he explain why he had to leave?'

'No madam, he didn't.'

The barman appeared in the doorway and took a seat at the edge of the room, behind Kate and Claudine.

'Did you ask him? It must be unusual for a guest to leave so suddenly.'

'No madam, I did not. If I may be so bold, a room boy does not ask

such questions if the guest does not volunteer the information.'

'He didn't say why he had to leave?' Kate asked again, trying to suppress the doubt in her voice.

'I believe he said it was an emergency.'

'He didn't say anything else?'

'He wanted to change his ticket.'

'Plane ticket?'

'I referred him to my nephew who runs a travel agency. I believe he went there.'

'Where we can find the travel agency?'

As Henri gave the directions, Claudine sensed that Kate's aggressive questioning had constrained Henri's responses. 'Please tell me, Henri, did Mr. Coulthard speak with anybody at the Club, members?'

'Oh yes. He had drinks on the lawn in the afternoon.'

No expression of surprise on his face, Thilly rose gallantly from his seat when Kate and Claudine walked into the garden. Jansz and Gunawardena exchanged glances; a long-awaited event was about to unfold. After introducing himself, Thilly gestured to his two companions. 'Dr. Gunawardena and Mr. Jansz are senior members of the Club. I am Thillairajah, the secretary. Please call me Thilly.'

'Good afternoon, gentlemen. I am Claudine Maufort, this is Kate Mulder.'

'Please be seated. Could we offer you something to drink? It is not often that we receive female guests. To what do we owe this honor?'

Claudine looked at Kate. Anxious to avoid questions about being the long-lost sister, Kate nodded back. Claudine appeared at ease in the tropical heat and the post-colonial ambiance of the Club.

'Thank you. I would love a coffee.'

'No, nothing for me, thank you.'

'We are trying to find out what happened to Mr. Coulthard, Cecil Coulthard. He stayed here and left suddenly. I believe you met him?'

'We certainly did. Yes, we spoke to Mr. Coulthard on a couple of occasions. Now, before we go any further, do tell us a little about yourselves. You have come a long way; you must be close to Mr. Coulthard.' Thilly, still standing, was very much the friendly family lawyer speaking in the courtroom.

'Mr. Coulthard was supposed to visit Maldives after staying here.' Claudine waved towards the Club building. 'He apparently did, but he never returned to Brussels, to the NGO employing him. I used to work with him at the International Trade Institute in Washington DC. Kate is his sister.'

'You have not heard from him since he left Colombo?' Thilly raised his heavy brows and looked straight at Kate.

'He called me from Colombo, before he left for Maldives,' Claudine answered. 'And he sent me a letter from Male, together with a box containing his work papers. In his letter he said that something was complicated, but he didn't say what, nor what was happening here or in Maldives. He also called the director of the NGO from Colombo.'

'Did Mr. Coulthard explain anything to his employer?'

As an experienced lawyer, Thilly appeared to know the answers to his own questions. Jansz sat back in his chair, eyes closed, as if the conversation did not concern him. Dr. Gunawardena observed Kate, who felt uncomfortable under his gaze.

'Ms. de Bock, his employer, told us Cecil was anxious about some Chinese people who were following him. She told him not to worry.'

'She said that?' Jansz interjected, his eyes wide.

Surprised, Claudine did not answer immediately, 'Yes, that is what she told me.'

'Did she say anything else?' Jansz leaned forward, looking first to Claudine, then to Kate.

'She called the hotel in Male where he had a reservation. He never checked in.'

The conversation stopped when Henri appeared with coffee. Once they were alone again, Thilly stood up. He raised his glass.

'My colleagues and I are dreadfully sorry that Mr. Coulthard did not return. I fear we cannot raise a glass properly with him still missing, but we are pleased to welcome you. A little background from our side may be in order now.'

He took a sip, held his glass to his lips for a while longer; an actor building anticipation.

'We usually have drinks at this time of day, and Mr. Coulthard joined us twice. We talked mainly about the Second World War;

he was very knowledgeable on the subject, much more so than we would have expected. We had the impression it was a subject that fascinated him and that he had studied extensively, apparently quite recently. He said he was afraid of war, any war, because he believed the outcome remained uncertain. He mentioned complexity as a key factor.'

Thilly relaxed in his chair; he had told the easy part. He motioned to Jansz to continue.

'The first few days he stayed at our Club he kept to himself; he worked long hours. When he did join our late afternoon get-together, he explained he was writing a report. We had the impression he wanted to stay here to avoid being disturbed. Disturbed by what, we asked ourselves? What made him change his mind and leave?'

Jansz took a piece of paper from his jacket and smoothed it out. 'After his sudden departure, which he didn't in any way hint at in advance, I made a few inquiries. According to airport records, on the day he left our Club, he took the late flight to Male.'

Thilly reached for his glass, as if this were the end of the story.

'We assumed he would return to collect his washing,' Dr. Gunawardena added. He didn't continue, as if he felt embarrassed to have mentioned a silly detail. Jansz resumed.

'When he didn't, I made further inquiries. The authorities in Male told me that he had been there, stayed in a hotel called the Lena for about a week. At the end of that week, he took a boat out to visit an industrial plant and returned the next day. A day later he left again, early in the morning, with one small bag. He had told the hotel manager that he would be back the next day, after visiting an atoll in the south by plane. He never took that plane. His contacts in Male have not seen or heard from him since.'

Dr. Gunawardena looked at Kate, the medic assessing the patient's reaction.

'I am so sorry.'

Dejected, Kate stared silently at the view across the garden, at the greenish water in the pool, the whitewashed wall behind. Since hearing about the Chinese instructions and Claudine's role in arranging Cecil's assignment, Kate had feared something unman-

ageable, unfathomable. But its vastness had left room for doubt, for hope. She had remained sanguine, argued during the long flight to Colombo for hope, clung to hope even during the taxi ride through this strange, dirty, clogged-up city to the hotel, and the walk along the dreadful road to the Club. These new details were oddly prosaic, undeniable. The finality of Jansz's conclusion had collapsed the remnants of her belief in a miraculous happy ending.

Claudine got up suddenly and hurried from the garden. Dr. Gunawardena followed her. Henri, waiting in the restaurant, pointed towards the bathroom. She locked the door. Inside, she cried, without making a sound, hands against her ears. She didn't want to hear the accusing voices inside her head. Outside, waiting, Dr. Gunawardena listened. After a while he knocked softly on the door.

'Leave me, leave me alone. *Merde.*'

Several tables in the Club restaurant were occupied. The hushed conversations stopped when Claudine and Kate entered. Thilly arranged a table in a corner and ordered mild curries. Dr. Gunawardena tried to stoke a conversation with Thilly about the Club's history. After a long silence, Thilly asked Claudine and Kate about their flight and first impressions of Colombo. Claudine remained silent; Kate was in no mood for chitchat but equally unwilling to be drawn into a discussion of her family relationships.

'It was a long flight, with a stop in London, but we caught up on some sleep today. We are still recovering from jet lag.'

'You happened to visit Ms. Maufort in Washington?' Jansz's intelligence background was ever present.

'Yes. I live in the Netherlands. Cecil suggested I collect his papers from Claudine.' Kate realized immediately that these details invited follow-up questions.

'That was the reason you flew all the way to Washington DC, to collect your brother's papers?' Jansz leaned back in his chair, stroking his chubby chin, his eyes on Kate.

'Yes. He sent his partially completed paper and his notes to Claudine and asked me to finalize the draft.'

'He did not communicate directly with you?'

'No, *yes.*' Flustered, Kate searched for another answer but

couldn't find a logical one.

'Cecil sent the box containing his papers to me, together with a letter,' Claudine tersely interrupted Kate. 'He asked me to invite Kate to the US to pick up his papers in person. He included a note for Kate, which I forwarded to her. Cecil suggested I arrange her tickets. Anything else?'

Jansz, with a questioning look at Thilly, raised his hands.

'This is interesting, Ms. Maufort, but if you would allow me to ask Ms. Mulder: Was this the usual way your brother communicated with you, through a third party?'

Kate looked at Claudine, who shook her head; she didn't want to explain on Kate's behalf.

'My family relationship with Cecil has only recently come to light.'

Having heard enough, Dr. Gunawardena motioned Jansz to stop.

'Your answer suggests there may be elements we are unaware of. Please, don't feel you have to explain. Like you, we are only interested in what has happened to Mr. Coulthard. We enjoyed our conversations with him. We were astonished by his sudden departure. We suspected something untoward may have happened. Our inquiries suggest we were right, regrettably.'

'It's okay.' Kate regained her composure. 'I met Cecil for the first time in my life at a conference in Wageningen in Holland, about three months ago. We sat next to each other, by pure coincidence. We talked. I told him when and where I was born. His father had been an officer in the Canadian Army that liberated the Netherlands at the end of the Second World War; he was stationed near the city where I was born. It seems that Cecil's father had a relationship with my mother but left well before I was born. My mother never told me who my father was. Cecil's mother kept all the letters she exchanged with Cecil's father during that time. Cecil found them after his father passed away. They explain everything.' Kate sighed.

'He told you all this?' Dr. Gunawardena looked genuinely amazed.

'No. He didn't tell me anything. He left Wageningen the day after I told him where I was born. He didn't explain why. He wrote the whole story about his father and my mother in a blue book that

he sent in the box to Claudine from Male. She gave it to me.'

'Like I said, he asked me to give it to Kate in person,' Claudine bristled.

'Cecil was pretty sure his father was also my father. I will ask my mother as soon as I am back in Holland; she is old and has Alzheimer's.'

For a while nobody spoke; curry was being consumed. Jansz touched his napkin to his lips, put his hands together under the table, and asked:

'Do you know why he forwarded a draft *paper* to you? We understood he was writing a midterm progress report for his employer in Brussels. Did he change direction?'

Claudine pushed her plate away, set her napkin aside and stood up, her suppressed irritation finding an escape. 'Gentlemen, thank you very much for the dinner and information. I have no idea why Cecil decided to write a *paper*. He has disappeared and I feel absolutely terrible about it. I would like to go back to my hotel and sleep.'

'My dear Ms. Maufort,' Dr. Gunawardena mollified her, 'yes, it must be very difficult to fly all the way to Colombo only to discover such sad facts. We fully understand that you wish to rest.'

Kate nodded in agreement. She folded her napkin.

'Please, Ms. Mulder,' Thilly added, 'like you, we only want to find out what made Mr. Coulthard behave in what appears to us to be a chaotic manner. We only met him twice, whereas Ms. Maufort knows him, has worked with him. We hope you will find us tomorrow so that we can discuss what may have caused his strange behavior. Please do.'

Fewer buses and motorbikes crowded the road, but as they left the Club, Kate insisted they take the taxi waiting at the entrance. As the driver switched on the engine, Claudine whispered in Kate's ear.

'I did not want to explain, you understand.'

'Yes, obviously.'

'Please take a right, our hotel is about six blocks on the left.'

They collected their keys and waited for the elevator. Kate spoke, 'Do we want to go back to the Club tomorrow?'

'That's complicated. You saw how Jansz reacted when I

mentioned the Chinese?' Claudine shook her head. 'I think he could tell us more. But I know his type. We had plenty of them in Vietnam and China. He obviously has intelligence connections. That makes me wary. Then again, if we don't show up, it would raise questions. I want to talk to the travel agency first. Let's discuss this tomorrow over breakfast; I'm exhausted.'

As the plane turned right to approach the runway, Male appeared out of nowhere outside Claudine's window. It looked like a sugar-powdered pastry surrounded by a few crumbs, carelessly dropped in the middle of the ocean. When the plane seemed to plunge into the water just before touchdown, Kate's hands gripped the armrest, while Claudine sat back, exhibiting no sign of emotion.

'Welcome to Male,' she whispered, after lunging forward as the plane braked violently. 'We hope you enjoy the magical mystery tour.'

'No,' Kate countered, 'don't be cynical about it.'

Claudine remained strapped in her seat. She took her time to answer. 'This place looks unreal. I need a drink. Maldives is a Muslim country—just my luck.'

They were the last passengers to leave the plane. Male felt just as hot as Colombo. A slight breeze, with its welcome fresh scent and salty aftertaste, grazed the tarmac but was no match for the heat radiating off it. They followed local passengers to a traditional dhoni waiting at the departure jetty. Kate felt relieved to be back on the water, her favorite medium, and relaxed as the boat puttered over the modest swell. Claudine sat holding onto her suitcase while around her passengers chatted, mostly in Dhivehi. As the boat approached the island, its whitewashed buildings looked like a film set to her. They disembarked and set off along the boulevard. The ground felt solid under her feet and she drew fresh air into her lungs, listened to the noise of the motorbikes and cars, watched other pedestrians hurrying along. The present moment reasserted itself and she felt the terror in her stomach subside.

Back in Colombo, when they had met the gentlemen at the Aurora

Club for the second time, Jansz had tipped the Lena as the best place to start their search. 'The hotel staff must know who Mr. Coulthard met and where he went.' He looked up at Kate, two heads taller than himself. When she shook his pudgy hand, it felt much stronger than she had expected.

The woman at the reception desk greeted Kate with a smile when they walked into the Lena and asked for two rooms. Passport details were written on cards and in a large book.

'Do you have a bar?'

'No, not yet. As you can see, and smell, the hotel is very new and the contractor is still working on the terrace at the back of the building.'

'Is it possible to get an alcoholic beverage here, in Male?'

'Yes, I believe at the hotel right across from where the boats leave for the airport. And, of course, at the resort hotels on the islands.'

'Could I have a look at the room, please?'

'Yes, certainly.'

Apparently unperturbed by Claudine's curt questioning, the woman first completed her administration and locked the passports in the key safe, then she led Kate and Claudine upstairs.

'The rooms are quite basic, some of our imported furniture has not yet arrived.'

After glancing at the bed and naked light bulb, Claudine had seen enough. '*Une vraie maison d'arrêt*. Are these the best rooms available?'

'Yes, the others are a little smaller.'

'I am not going to stay here, Kate.' She crossed her arms.

Kate remembered a former teammate who could become recalcitrant during training when she got exhausted, and who refused to participate in drills she found silly or pointless.

'Could we get some coffee and sandwiches?'

'Of course. Our espresso machine has just arrived from Italy. Would you like espresso or cappuccino?'

Kate followed the receptionist downstairs. Claudine turned back to the room, closed the door and fell on the bed. Her left hand gingerly touching her right upper arm, she stared at the white wall and heard shrieking as she tried to escape her father's clutches.

The restaurant was empty. The receptionist worked the shiny coffee machine. When the roar subsided, Kate spoke, 'You had a guest several weeks ago, Mr. Coulthard?' She got no answer, her question seemingly unheard. She repeated it when she was presented with the two cups.

'Yes.'

'So he did stay here.'

'Yes.'

'*I'm* here because *he* stayed here. He has disappeared. I am his sister.' Kate spoke the last words softly.

The receptionist made to cover her mouth with her hand. 'You are? Oh no.' She reached across the counter and touched Kate's hand. 'I don't know what to say. The police were here, asking questions about him. About what happened while he was staying at our hotel. I told them all I knew. They came back twice, different people, same questions. I don't know what happened to him after he left. He just stayed here. I am so sorry.'

They walked slowly along the boulevard, the sun on their backs, watching the fleet of small cargo and fishing vessels anchored off the island. In the distance a large airplane took off.

'You are sure you want a drink?'

'If you want me to stay at that hotel, I need a drink.'

'You know I have only three days left before I fly back to Holland. You are upset; I fully understand that, I am too. We agreed to come here to find out what happened. The receptionist is going to contact the people Cecil met. We're making good headway. Let's try to use the time we have as effectively as possible.'

'I apologize and I hate to upset your plans, Kate, but I can't do this. I realized something in the plane. Cecil talked once about feeling like he was in a Punch and Judy show. I feel the same way.'

'Maybe we all do, Claudine.'

'But the sickening difference is that I know the puppeteers, at least some of them. From the moment I left Vietnam as a child, I have been jerked from A to B, sometimes quite literally. First by my father, then by Alexander, by people who got caught up in political upheavals, the nets slung by intelligence outfits. And now…' She paused

and steeled herself. 'I can hardly live with myself because I've become one of them. What happened to Cecil is my fault.'

Kate said nothing.

'But I'm not going to play their game anymore. What started in Haiphong has come full circle. It's over. Now that he's gone—we don't know for sure, but for me he's gone—*I'll* decide where I go, what I do. I'll stay here another day, we'll talk to people, and the day after that I'm leaving.'

'Exit Claudine, stage left. How dramatic of you.'

'I'm only going as far as one of those resorts,' said Claudine, nodding at the islands in the distance.

Later in the hotel bar near the airport jetty, Claudine ordered a Bloody Mary.

'Room number?' the barman asked routinely.

'I'm not staying here,' Claudine admitted.

'I'm sorry, we cannot serve drinks to visitors, only to hotel guests.'

Claudine turned and marched back to the hotel lobby, heading for the reception desk. 'Could you give me a key please, any key, just for a minute; I will give it back, promise.' She smiled brightly, pushed her hair behind one ear. She returned to the bar, showed the key. 'I'll pay cash,' she said triumphantly.

Kate watched the bare bulb from her bed, her hand around Cecil's blue book. She had considered joining Claudine but could not. Cecil had seen the same bulb shining its meager light on the bare white walls while he wrote in the book. Watching the walls and the light gave her a way to grieve, to accept her pain, to say goodbye to the person who had written right here in this book who she really was. She had tried to make her own notes in the book as she sat listening to Shakeeb and Manik. But it seemed futile to add anything. He was gone. Everything they told her suggested that something had happened between the hotel and the airport. Nobody had seen or heard anything. The police had apologized for being unable to close the case. They had even searched through his belongings. She had wanted to smell his clothes, a final farewell, but the police would not release his suitcase.

Claudine kept her word; she took a speedboat to a distant resort. At the jetty she tried to embrace Kate. The gesture felt awkward for them both. They became a muddle of heads, limbs.

'Don't say anything, please,' Claudine whispered. 'Everything has been said and I don't want to cry here. Thank you, Kate.' She joined the line, waved once and boarded. Without looking back, found herself a seat. The boat made a sharp turn and sped away.

28
The Ocean

It takes Cecil two days. Sleep seems the perfect escape from exhaustion. Between dreamless naps he writes. Twice a day a crew member with a knitted cap comes in with rice and water. Just enough. Cecil doesn't edit what he writes; his ballpoint doesn't have an eraser anyway. The story is his reality, spliced into scenes, sentences, impressions he has lived through in too many dreams. He imagines he is the operator of the movie projector, watching the scenes, frame by frame. For Cecil, being a prisoner in the hot cabin, the urge to relive every bit of the narrative of that dark Saturday becomes an obsession. Writing the score, he imagines, will be his last and final effort to erase the movie from his brain, forever. As he writes, he realizes that he should have written this a long time ago.

Empty after writing the last words, he feels his story will satisfy Feng's need to obtain a confession. The story of an observer looking at the scene, the confession of what happened, the facts, the images, even his own intentions. Now it is done. He feels strangely relieved when he closes his eyes and concentrates on the pattern of light and dark shadows gliding about in front of his cornea.

The engine starts, the ship responds differently to the ocean swell. Cecil wakes up; the heat and his thirst hit him, remind him of one of his father's first lessons in survival: look at your situation from above, review all possibilities for escape and prioritize. He probably got that from an army manual. First, prioritize: get some water and find means to de-escalate. Second, escape. Options at present: zero. The only thing he feels capable of is staring at the daylight, still brightly intruding through the narrow slit of the badly fitting steel porthole cover. Outside his cabin people are making noise; on deck people are moving something heavy, he can hear the muffled shouting of commands, can't determine the language. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, the sharp radiance of the tropical sun disappears; only a satin glow remains. Later, as time becomes liquid, an almost full moon rises. The cabin hardly cools off. Thirst becomes an obsession

every time he looks at the last empty water bottle. The foam mattress in the bunk feels wet and thin, exposes the steel base. The sound of a key in his door being turned, twice, gives him a few moments of hope: water, food.

Feng comes in, looking even taller than before. He switches on the cabin light.

'Your confession.'

Cecil takes a while to rise from the mattress, trying to remember the strategic options. Water and slowing down whatever is going to happen seem the better ones—the only options he can think of.

'You don't by any chance have some water, do you? I am rather thirsty.'

'Give me your paper!' Feng doesn't even look at him, just holds out his hand.

'What, may I ask, are you going to do with it?' Cecil asks, in his best academic accent.

When Feng bends forward and tries to grab the sheaf of papers on the table, Cecil plays his last card.

'This is my confession of what happened; it is the script, written by an observer, me, of the motion picture I have played so many times in my head. By writing it down, I've projected the film for the last time.'

Feng looks at him, waiting. Finally, he sits down.

'You write a confession, now, here, take this paper.'

To buy time, Cecil sits down opposite him, and writes, slowly.

Feng,
You are forcing me to write a confession about what happened on a particular Saturday in April 1964. Inside this tropical prison I acknowledge it is to you, and you alone, that I owe an explanation.

Events can spin out of control. Wang's drowning wasn't predetermined.

After his confession to me, that your parents were shot dead in China, I felt I owed him.

That is what made me agree when he asked me to demonstrate my kayak in the water.

I tried but could not stop him when he jumped into the kayak and paddled away. The wind, the fog and his inexperience caused him to capsize and drown.

I do not plead innocence. I told the police about Wang's admission about your parents, although I promised him I wouldn't.

I am responsible for creating the circumstances that caused your brother's death.

The ship's engine stops again; in the silence Cecil writes. He reads, rewrites. Feng sits motionless at the table, watching. His face expresses no feelings except a glimmer of satisfaction.

'This is all you want to tell me?'

Feng still has this funny accent, Cecil notices, that he first heard when his mother taught Feng at the kitchen table.

'Yes,' Cecil answers, leaning back on his chair. 'Why did you not just ask me? I would have happily told you the same story in Washington DC, anywhere.' As he talks, looking at Feng's expressionless face, Cecil grasps the argument's futility.

'No, you wouldn't,' Feng's staccato voice rises, as if addressing the Party faithful. 'A murderer can only plead guilty at the end of the road, when he has listened to all the voices in his head, has exposed false rationalizations, and has become committed to what really happened, not what he wished had happened. He has to find the truth, hidden inside himself.'

Feng's blazing eyes betray a hidden rage as he whispers, 'A guilty one needs to wholeheartedly confess, an admission of having failed, of accepting guilt, submitting to his fate.'

Cecil does not answer, is lost for words.

'You write here.' Feng points to the end of the page. 'I CONFESS I AM GUILTY OF THE DEATH OF WANG LAI. You sign below.'

'As I explain in more detail in the papers here,' Cecil puts his hand on what he has written during the past two days, 'many different outcomes could have happened. I did not drown him with my own hands. I showed him that I could paddle, but I never thought Wang would believe he could do it too. To this day, I still don't know what made Wang jump into my kayak, what drove him to go out on the water. I had already told him it was dangerous. I told him again as he was paddling away. Lao Tsu, if I recall correctly, may have said, "Everything is connected, and everything relates to each other." It was, it did on that Saturday, and I still do not know why.'

'Don't quote Chinese philosopher you do not understand.'

'I am probably one of the few people in this world who does understand a bit about the complexity that Lao Tsu was referring to, though he wasn't calling it that,' Cecil says angrily, surprised he feels so upset by Feng's put-down.

'He trusted you, my brother, and you betrayed him, twice. He stayed all night with our parents after they were shot. He promised never to talk about what happened to them,' Feng continues, as if Cecil's remark is irrelevant.

'In China every day we showed our allegiance to the Party; it provided protection, sometimes food. In Canada there was no Party, no protection, only inquisitive high school kids. Wang was scared we would be discovered any day.'

'Maybe he told me *because* he was scared, needed somebody to share his secret, to be relieved of his secret.'

'No, Wang was scared but strong, no need to share. We were strong, together, two brothers, always. Now you write, sign, here.'

Cecil takes the pen, writes, signs. Feng rolls up the paper as if handling a precious picture.

'Give me the other papers,' he orders, reaching across the table.

Feng reads, slowly, page by page. He doesn't ask questions; his face remains emotionless.

'You knew I would come one day?' he asks suddenly.

'When I was drunk, out on the street, I pretended you would not find me; you already had. In Mauritania I feared but couldn't admit it.'

'It took much time to find you. China changed; the Party offered me a position where I could search for you,' Feng says, almost proudly.

'You were the puppet master?' Cecil asks.

'It is part of a much larger operation,' Feng replies, reluctant to accept Cecil's tribute. 'You fit nicely.' Then he continues to read.

When Feng turns the last page, and rolls the pages around the confession, Cecil can think of only one argument he can start.

'Why the charade?'

'You don't know and understand our culture, Mr. Coulthard. The Chinese can only win. About 2,500 years ago the wise Sun Tzu wrote, "Hence to fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting." You took something from me; Wang will never come back. He suffered hunger in China, believed in new future in Canada, suddenly lost everything. You lost the bourgeois pillars of your existence, your job and money. We offered you a belief in a new future, now lost.' Feng nods, confirming his conclusion.

Cecil is quiet as the real meaning of Feng's words sinks in and the strategy of buying time seems absurdly infantile.

'Tell me, were Claudine and Liliane involved?

'Small cogs, only knew what was needed, they followed my orders.' Feng waves his hand, rises from his chair, holds the roll of papers.

'Mission accomplished,' he says with a faint smile. Moving to the door, he turns around, as if he has forgotten something—or did he plan this too?

'My brother was brave. He always was, never showing his fear. I wanted you to feel what it means to be afraid, every moment of every day, for months on end, to feel the gnawing, permanent fear. A long time ago Xun Kuang said, "A person attempting to travel two roads at once will get nowhere." When my brother spoke, he trusted you. You listened to what should never have been said, and later betrayed his trust. My brother must have realized it was a mistake. He traveled two ways. With the kayak my brother wanted to go back, to the single road. You left him alone so the water became his grave.'

Feng knocks on the cabin door. It is unlocked from the outside and two men come in. Cecil is taken from his cabin to the deck and tipped into an inflatable rubber raft tied to the ship. The ship's engine starts, filling the night with a somber monotone drone. A tall shadow of a man stands listlessly by the line that keeps the inflatable close to the ship. The moon lights the ocean, reflecting in the nightly mirror.

As the ship gains speed, Feng pulls a knife from his pocket.

'You also traveled two roads, you betrayed to escape, the water will receive you too.'

He cuts the line, watches as the inflatable drifts away. Suddenly he turns, and without looking back quickly mounts the stairs to the bridge. Waving the roll of papers, he disappears into the wheelhouse.

The ocean air feels cool after the claustrophobic humidity of the cabin. Cecil can hear the whirr of the engine slowly become a murmur as the ship, completely dark, disappears. Time goes by. His body just fits on the bottom, his head against the inflated tube and his feet on the other side. He takes his shoes off; they are of no use here. His eyes closed, he listens to the ocean, the water gently babbling.

The last few hours replay in short flashes: trailers of his capture, the agony of writing, flashes of his rhetoric, Feng's cold face observing him. The memories sting, some terribly, create a silent rage, which he realizes reluctantly is ineffectual, actually quite frivolous given the circumstances. Alternative realities pop up: if he had only acted differently. Why even consider looking at another country or a cold storage facility? He could have taken a plane from Colombo to Brussels, completed his report there, tried to convince Liliane to pay him something. Called it quits. Yet Feng's elaborate planning suggests he had considered alternative scenarios; he must have taken precautions, guarded against these eventualities. The man had tentacles in Canada, the US, Mauritania and even here, in the middle of the ocean.

The soothing sound of the ocean finally calms him down; the undeniable fact of the water surrounding him brings closure within reach. When the slightest orange glow appears, defining the horizon, he sits up, bends over and watches a face reflected in the dark mirror. His own but younger, when he was a student, kayaking, carefree,

escaping from home, from school. Now, surrounded by nothing but water, he feels a sense of relief, his futile running away having come to a definitive end, while fear circles ever closer in his head.

My panopticon, he determines, peering out at the endless dark ocean, one hand in the water turning the raft left and turning her right, ever so slowly; the physical activity keeps his fear at bay. Above, an endless sky, still showing stars; below, miles of ocean water, chock-full of life, from viruses to tuna, patiently waiting to receive him, and in between a 3 mm rubber skin. So this is what you do when you can't play the movie about the more distant future, turn around in circles, he thinks. He smiles, laughs out loud, screams, ends up crying; a spot on the rubber darkens from his tears. For the first time in decades he feels free, truly free, like a lifer being released before his time. The pressure to perform, to control his thoughts and hide memories, has been magically absorbed by the ocean. Swaying gently on the swell underneath, watching the stars fade, he retires to his supple rubber waterbed and slips into a brief slumber.

Being gradually exposed to the unmasked rays of the rising sun wakes him up. Between his rubber walls his lighthearted relief prevails until he raises his head, unable to ignore the watery scenery of his world. 'Prepare,' Father had told him from a very early age. 'Assess risks, the known and the unknown ones, be sure to imagine the latter.' Just like the wind changing the ocean, he is an agent that will change over time. Raising one finger after another, he declares aloud:

'One: prepare for an excruciating struggle and hope that a sailor keeping watch on a ship miraculously sailing in this direction in the next couple of days sees me waving my shirt. Two: if that doesn't happen, accept several more days of thirst, the temptation to drink seawater becoming stronger and ultimately causing death, my death. Three: clouds will appear, even a storm, it will rain and I can sustain my earthly existence for a couple of days more. Or four: at some point during my ordeal I may decide to jump overboard.'

More options he can't imagine. As for risks, the first that comes to mind is not being seen at night by passing ships and being hit. It would be the least of his worries, he reasons. He would be woken up by the sound of the ship's engine well in advance, see its navigation

lights. He could paddle out of the way and scream. Hope they would see the white shirt in the moonlight. This would actually be a highly desirable risk! The chances of this happening are—as is not unusual in complex systems—unknown, and could well be infinitesimal. Or close to it. As he smells the rubber heated by the sun, he considers sharks biting the air-filled compartments. He could reduce that risk by staying quiet, not moving. He concludes sharks might not be very interested in rubber. For a while, a regular urge to watch for ships makes him sit upright and observe the straight line of the horizon around him.

Later stratocumulus clouds appear, rising in the north, and he recalls admiring the complexity of these clouds on summer days in Saskatoon, sitting in his study. The weather presenter would happily show cloud pictures during their segment after the news. Perfect clouds, are they coming closer? Will they create wind, waves and rain? Give him more time? Why is complexity so devilishly impenetrable? Watching the clouds, he believes they might develop across land, or over islands. Or could they develop even here in the middle of the ocean? Am I in the middle of the ocean? Where did they dump me? Near Maldives? The ship seemed to be sailing towards the northeast while I was writing. In the afternoon the sun came through the slit in the porthole, on the port side. How long was I writing? Two days. The ship wasn't sailing all that fast, probably around 6 to 8 knots. He calculates as if solving the puzzle with its assumptions will solve his predicament. What if the ship had been headed for Sri Lanka? The flight from Colombo to Male takes about an hour and a half, roughly 600 miles, assuming slower speeds during start and approaching landing. I may be 300 miles east of Male, he concludes. In the middle of the ocean!

Being engaged intellectually distracts from bodily pain, for a short while. Later that morning the clouds disappear. Even being protected from the sun by his shirt, tied as a screen with the remaining piece of rope, he finds the heat within his rubber cubicle relentless.

Scooping seawater onto his face and body, he carefully avoids getting seawater into his mouth or dropping it into his only recep-

tacle for collecting rainwater. He repeats this action regularly and his urge to drink seawater becomes stronger every time he touches it. The water is poisonous, he forces himself to repeat as his initial but ever weaker defense.

At midday he considers jumping into the seawater for a while to cool off. He initially dismisses the notion as he can't figure out how to climb aboard again; the usual ropes alongside the raft have been removed. Knotting the remaining rope to the outside rings gives him a feeling of achievement. Putting his legs in the water feels great.

After a while, with his stomach on the slippery rubber air tube, the sun right above burns his back and he can't resist sliding slowly into the cool water. The salt water soothes. Seconds become minutes as he hangs onto the rope, and lets himself float alongside the raft.

With his shoulders parallel to the tube he manages to get one leg on top of it. Wet, the rubber proves too slippery, and his leg slides back, once, twice. Rest, take your time. Do not panic! Imagine alternatives. I need to get just one foot on the rope. I have to lower the rope into the water, make a one-step rope ladder!

He loosens one knot, slips rope through, ties it. Being busy with his hands, his legs steadying him in the water, keeps his panic at bay. Once he gets a foothold on the rope, he pushes up, hugging the tube with both arms. They slip once, but when he manages to hold onto the rope close to the ring, he can swing his other leg up and over, and he tumbles inside. Eyes closed, he relishes the safety of the raft. After a while, fear, exhaustion and cold set his body shivering. Here, close to the equator, he can't stop it.

As the sun descends excruciatingly slowly, he decides that giving Feng the satisfaction of his slow death after endless suffering is not going to happen. I will choose my ultimate escape. He realizes he is stating the obvious. Later, at dawn, as his thirst torments him, he isn't so sure.

Nightfall is quick in the tropics; the sun colors the sky purple-red, clouds gather in the dark east. A slight breeze replaces the calm of the day. Small waves lap at the raft. Within his rubber walls the heat

quickly disappears. Using his shirt as a cover, he wraps his arms around his legs to keep warm.

He is pushing Trevor's bed along tree-lined roads. People are watching, cheering him on, it feels awkward. A crowd is waiting in front of the office, people with supermarket carts containing plastic bags holding all their earthly belongings. Trevor wants coffee, really good coffee—'It doesn't make any difference now.' The cafeteria has excellent coffee. As he tries to push the bed through the entrance door, a tall black man in tattered clothes raises his hand and quotes Plato, 'No man who is not an utter fool and coward is afraid of death itself, but he is afraid of doing wrong. For to go to the world below having one's soul full of injustice is the last and worst of all evils.' The tall man raises his voice, 'What do we want?' and the crowd screams, 'Coffee! We want coffee.' The window on the top floor opens and Balmer and Muller stand side by side, waving at the crowd, each with a cup, supposedly meant for him, in their hands. 'When you are thirsty, you cannot bargain,' they sing, and the coffee rains over the crowd below.

The spray wakes him up. The wind blows cold. No moon or stars light the sky. Waves lift the raft and jerk it down. He is drenched, feels cold, sick. His stomach wants to release what is still inside; nothing but bitter fluid leaves his mouth. Shivering, he watches the black ocean resuming what it has done for eons, the wind forcing waves into never repeated, seldom observed patterns.

It is a tiny spark, just a fraction of a second. He watches, staring at the blackness of rolling waves. Something is out there. Then, after a while, he credits his overimaginative brain as he yearns to lie down in the raft. Then again. Now he is certain, a moving light. He crawls to his knees, balancing to stay upright and watch. No light, the ocean remains dark. Shivering, dizzy, he tries to stand up. The next wave throws him off balance, his hands slip along the rubber tube as he falls into the ocean. The water feels warm. He can see the raft being pushed by the wind, not far away. He swims back to the raft, grabs the rope of the one-step ladder. With one foot in the stirrup and both hands near the ring, he pulls. Suddenly the wind gets underneath

the raft and flips it over. He hangs onto the rope, breathes in the air pocket, dives outside. He turns the raft towards the wind, sets one foot back in the stirrup. As he pulls himself up, the raft flips, lands on top of him, the heavy tube hitting his head. As his hands release the rope, the long fingers of Rachmaninoff play; it must be his Piano Concerto No. 3, but even if it isn't, Cecil no longer minds.

29
Amsterdam, April 1993

Fresh leaves on the lime green trees celebrate the river; houseboats clutter its shoreline near the locks and the ubiquitous glass tourist boats pass by. People are strolling along the river, over the stocky bridge, enjoying the sun. Kate watches from her seat on the cafe terrace. Truus brings coffee. She is surprised Kate finally came back; being noticeably absent after her trip to the US for, well, the whole bloody winter. No, she didn't ask, just said, 'Hello, nice to see you again.' She smiles when she sees that this time Kate has two envelopes in front of her, a large brown one and small white one.

Kate has dreaded opening them. She found them sticking out of her mailbox, flashing the senders' addresses. No, not at home! Here, on the cafe terrace beside the river, the place where everything starts or finishes for her, she hopes to find the courage she lost in Male after Claudine left her.

The large envelope looks and smells a bit like Cecil's blue book: oily. She remembers the same smell from her visit to the Club. The envelope has been partly torn and taped. To open it she needs a penknife or a pair of scissors. It makes the choice of which envelope to open first easier. The white one carries the logo of a well-known university in Iceland.

Dear Dr. Mulder,

Thank you for the abstract of Mr. Coulthard's paper. The international team responsible for the initial review of conference contributions was quite surprised by the unusual analysis, and particularly the conclusions reached. They feel that further study of published papers and scientific literature may lead to quite different results, more in line with the broad body of scientific knowledge supporting prevailing stock assessment and resource management practices. We regret that we cannot accept the paper in its current form.

Yours sincerely,

Prof. Dr. Arnt Hansen
Economist
Faculty of Natural Resources

Resting the letter on her lap and watching the busy water, Kate's first reaction is a feeling of utter deflation. She has never had one of her own papers rejected. All her work to research Cecil's notes, his theories, her exchange of emails with the Santa Fe Institute to gain more papers, and finally finding a conference that appeared suitable for a revolutionary paper, all for absolutely nothing. What are these people thinking? That she is a second-year student to be sent away to do some 'proper' research? As she reads the abstract again, she gets really angry. New scientific ideas or hypotheses are generally accepted in science. Yes, they inevitably invite reaction but also support. Discussion is broadly accepted, even cheered. How has economics become like a religion, with dogmas that cannot be questioned?

She waves to Truus; she needs a beer and a pair of scissors.

She takes her time, enjoys her beer, lets her anger subside. Tourists stroll by, hasty local residents riding bikes swerve past them. An American couple asks her to take their picture in front of the bridge, the river scattering sunlight in the background, the houses and churches on the far bank dancing in the horizontal mirror. She takes her time to focus, trying to frame the pair within their memories of the narrow bridge. When they walk away, she sees they both have terrapins on the back of their sweaters, the mascot of the University of Maryland. The scissors cut through the cardboard. Inside she finds two gray envelopes with no indication of their contents, and a white one bearing her handwritten name.

Dear Ms. Mulder,

It is with the greatest regret that it has taken me so many months before it became possible to forward this letter and its attachments to you. Diplomatic protocol, political considerations and police procedures made a prompt reaction, which I felt perfectly justified, unfortunately unattainable. It is equally with

considerable trepidation that I am drafting this letter, being only too aware of how its contents may upset you.

After your visit to our Club and your letter from Male, Mr. Jansz became aware of certain events that provided further insight into the disappearance of Mr. Coulthard.

A serious accident happened on the road from Galle to Colombo five days after Mr. Coulthard reportedly disappeared. A car collided frontally with a heavy lorry, just after dusk. The three people in the car were seriously injured. One passenger died on the way to the hospital, the driver and second passenger remained in critical condition. The car belonged to the Chinese embassy.

The embassy spokesperson let it be known that the car was on its way to the airport. When the police inspected the vehicle, they found a document wallet belonging to the passenger who died in the ambulance. It contained two passports, a Chinese passport and the passport of Mr. Coulthard, together with a sheaf of his handwritten notes.

The Chinese passengers were part of a larger foreign mission that arrived on the day Mr. Coulthard suddenly left our Club. The group stayed at Greens Hotel. Police inquiries revealed that one of the two passengers boarded a Chinese fishing vessel in Galle harbor. It departed immediately and returned nine days later, at which time the same man disembarked. His colleague in the embassy car was waiting for him. A day after Mr. Coulthard's flight to Male, the colleague flew to Male. He returned to Colombo on the same day that Mr. Coulthard disappeared.

Maldivian inquiries confirmed what you found out from the hotel staff: a Chinese man apparently threatened Mr. Coulthard in front of his hotel. We are quite convinced that this was the same man who flew in from Colombo.

Immediately after the car accident, the Chinese ambassador

approached the Sri Lankan Foreign Ministry complaining that diplomatic protocol had been willfully breached by our police when searching the car, and insisting the second, critically wounded passenger and the driver be medically evacuated to China for further treatment. A special aircraft arrived two days later. It took the body of the deceased and the two patients. Our officers had been unable to speak to them.

The passport and handwritten notes had to be returned to the embassy; our authorities had these documents copied. I am sending you a copy of the passport and the notes. They detail, in Mr. Coulthard's own words, an unfortunate accident in Newfoundland some twenty-five years ago in which the brother of the Chinese man who died in the ambulance apparently drowned. It seems safe to assume, as a hypothesis, that this accident in Newfoundland triggered some kind of highly elaborate reprisal by the surviving brother. Mr. Coulthard's notes indicate that they were written on board a vessel not unlike the Chinese fishing vessel referred to earlier. We have been unable to ascertain what happened to Mr. Coulthard after he wrote these notes. The name of the fishing vessel is not recorded in official registers; its whereabouts since then are unknown.

Dr. Gunawardena, Mr. Jansz and I wish you the strength and faith to face this latest revelation in what we consider your highly regrettable personal ordeal. Our Sri Lankan and the Maldivian authorities regret they have been unable to provide closure on the question of what ultimately happened to your brother.

Sincerely yours,

Thillairajah PC

Kate drops the letter, grabs a gray envelope, uses her nails to try and pierce an opening. Making no progress, she grabs the scissors to cut the heavy paper. A wad of badly copied handwritten pages falls out. Cecil's handwriting, no doubt about it. She reads, struggling with

the partly illegible words. People around her come and go, Truus takes orders and delivers drinks. As Kate travels back in time, nothing can disturb her. She sits reading, slowly, page after page.

Most customers have gone. Kate is still sitting motionless at her table, papers in front of her. When Truus approaches, she shakes her head. No, she doesn't want anything to drink. She watches the river, the disappearing sun behind the churches. She feels the cool wind that, like the fog, comes down from the river, and shivers.

'Here, it will do you good.' Her red hair frizzy after a busy day, Truus pushes the papers aside, puts a rum-laced coffee on Kate's table and sits down next to her.

'What's happened? You seem upset. Why's that?'

Kate tries to maintain her stoic exterior, but after a while Truus's compassion pierces it.

'My brother, he had an accident.'

'You have a brother?' Trying with one hand to straighten her hair, Truus raises her eyes to the sky. 'Holy mackerel! That's news to me. Where did *he* come from?'

'There was an accident, a long time ago. No, he caused an accident.' Kate tries not to interpret the words he wrote.

'Back up. You have a brother, do you?'

'I think so. Please, I know this is a crazy answer, but it's the only one I can give you.'

Kate takes a sip of her coffee, overwhelmed by what she has just read.

'The last time I saw you, you had just met a guy, and you had gotten a letter,' Truus prompts.

'Yes, my brother. I never met him again. He wrote me later about his father, a Canadian stationed in Zwolle just after the war. He had a relationship; I am almost certain with my mother. I believe that I am the result.' Kate's tone is matter-of-fact.

'A Canadian father? He never contacted you, or your mother?'

'No.'

'Where is your father now?'

'He ran into a moose, was killed.' Kate doesn't want to elaborate.

'Okay, and now you've heard about your brother's accident; your family seems a bit accident prone.'

Like every bar owner in this city, Truus loves poking a little fun when customers tell her about their run-of-the-mill tragedies. Her timing is awful. Tears appear in Kate's eyes; she says nothing.

'You went to the US, did you?' She touches Kate's arm. 'I'm sorry, it was just a joke.'

'Yes.'

'You were going to meet your brother?'

'Yes. He wasn't there.'

'He had an accident?' Truus tries to keep a straight face, but her eyes are laughing.

'I don't know. He has disappeared.'

'No accident? Just like that, disappeared?' Truus is truly baffled.

'I tried to find him, in Maldives.'

'You're kidding. Maldives? Where's that?'

'In the Indian Ocean. He went there to do a job. Left a suitcase at the hotel, disappeared one morning. He was kidnapped. He wrote this.' She points to the papers. 'He actually left two suitcases, one in Sri Lanka.'

'Sri Lanka too, you have been all over the place. You managed to get his things?'

'Some of them, yes.'

'But you couldn't find him? Did he escape? Were the police looking for him?' Truus has several regulars with extensive prison experience.

'My brother, his name is Cecil, caused an accident when he was young. A Chinese boy named Wang drowned. The brother of this Chinese boy had something to do with Cecil's disappearance. The brother had an accident the other day near Colombo and was killed.'

Kate has said what she wants to say. She doesn't want to tell the whole story, not with Truus making jokes she can't appreciate.

Truus holds her tongue. This is way beyond the simple stories she is used to. She watches Kate, smiles faintly, waits.

'Look, I have done what I could to find him,' Kate resumes. 'Local people have too. People he worked with in Male went out of their way to help me find him. They were so kind. The same in Colombo, every-

body tried to help. This letter here is from Colombo, Sri Lanka; this is his passport. These papers tell the story of the accident that caused Wang to drown. My brother wrote this while he was being held captive, on a ship. Wang's brother, his name was Feng, was killed, so I can't ask him anything. Actually, I don't understand half of what really happened. The secrets remain; this paper has seen them. I just don't know.'

Kate stands up, collects her papers.

'I'm going home. Thanks for the coffee.'

The complexity of fisheries and implications for their management

Katharina Mulder and Cecil Coulthard

Abstract
Marine fisheries are and function in **complex adaptive systems (CASs)**. These systems reflect the **'emergence'** of the whole being larger than the sum of individual components, and exhibit **resilience** to modest change. They include multiple **'agents'** that demonstrate **adaptive interaction**. Random components with often unknown risk profiles can create **chaotic behavior** and **'rare' events** well outside normal distribution patterns.

Current biological and bioeconomic stock assessment models, which enable optimization of single-sector management objectives—fish population size and exploitation rate or 'economic rent'—fail to assess other potential consequences and the risks of manipulating a complex fishery system. In practice, management of the core activity of fishermen—fishing—has become the tail that wags the dog, and the economic principles of the free market are relied upon to handle other, often painful sector adjustments. As it is by fishermen and coastal communities, a more dependable participatory process is required by fish-processing and marketing organizations, sector suppliers, financial and public institutions—including Ministries—sector organizations and consumers to inform and influence sector management decisions. In that process, political, scientific, financial, institutional, sociocultural, psychological and moral factors, reflecting the multiple interests and risk acceptance levels of all parties concerned, may play a role over time.

Fisheries practitioners have been reluctant to acknowledge the existence of sector complexity and its consequences, citing the lack of appropriate tools, approaches and exam-

ples required to balance multiple interests and achieve mutually acceptable results.

This issue is not new; the fundamental need to better balance the interests of multiple groups involved in the sector was identified in the 1950s and 1960s.

Since then fisheries management has particularly struggled to maintain the robustness of the sector during its early stages of development and avoid excessive investment and resource exploitation. Limiting such excessive exploitation once it has occurred has proven equally problematic as financial, employment and political concerns often trump consideration of the feeble position of fish resources in the management debate.

Maintaining a robust sector at present requires even more attention in view of the rapidly growing global importance of small-scale fisheries and the extensive public subsidy support now available to the industrial fishing sector.

The rapid development of small-scale fisheries in tropical seas, frequently in competition with illicit industrial fishing, is already reducing fishermen's incomes and creating uncertain future employment prospects. Rapid progression of excessive fish resource exploitation in coastal areas may reflect a multitude of ills: opaque local fisheries policies; an imbalance of political power between various foreign and local stakeholder groups and the risks commensurate with this; weak institutions and legal frameworks; and indifference to moral and equity concerns. The uncertain, but potentially rapidly increasing political, financial and human costs of delaying structural changes are often ignored. Some traditional fishing communities in East and South Asia may offer suggestions for how to approach the complex adjustment required to move towards a more inclusive sector management process.

Overextended industrial fisheries in temperate waters may benefit from the scientific assessment of resource availability, executed in combination with the analysis of political, legal, financial and social constraints. Negotiation to achieve a compromise among multiple stakeholders should become the main focus of the management process, together with mitigating potential negative financial and social consequences of decisions.

The adjustment of prevailing scientific models and resource management processes may be guided by five core principles:

- Incorporate a long-term vision for the exploitation of particular (groups of) fish resources, the associated processing and marketing chains, as well as the infrastructure, legal and institutional requirements; acknowledge the need for the frequent adjustment of what should be flexible vision implementation strategies.
- Enable over time the biomass of fish resources to grow in excess of 'optimal' levels as currently modeled in order to enhance the robustness of fisheries and ecosystems.
- Enable fisheries management decision-making, coordination and execution to function at multiple and particularly lower management levels, and incorporate nonbiological and noneconomic concerns when framing decisions.
- Acknowledge global and local public responsibility for the long-term well-being of all marine fish resources and the marine environment.
- Incorporate the principle that up-front sector management and restructuring costs are repaid from future benefits in order to guide the level of financial support for marine fisheries governance provided by private industry as well as by public sources.

The acceptance of the complexity of fisheries systems forces a fundamental rethink of the way fisheries are globally and locally being understood and managed, and may lead to sector management with a far more ecological and human face.

Author's Note

This book contains a novel, written because I feel mankind has long lost the awe it owes to the oceans and the many remarkable creatures that call it their home. To deal with the wicked problems the complexity of our excessive exploitation of the ocean's riches has created, we have turned to theories that provide a questionable elixir.

It has also been written to remember places where I have been kindly received on many trips, places that have changed since then, sometimes fundamentally.

The main characters in this novel are pure figments of my imagination; Cecil, Claudine, Kate, Wang, Feng, their families, Wong Oh, Thillairajah, Jansz and Gunawardena never existed, and any resemblance to existing or historic figures is purely accidental. I do wish to honor others for their contribution to what they understood was the human development of fisheries and for their friendship. Particularly Ali Hameed, who created a remarkable public fishing company in Yemen, and Dr. Müller and Les in Honiara, who understood the difficulties of exploiting equitably the vast riches of the Pacific. Hassan Manik, Ibrahim Shakeeb, Mr. Didi, Adnan, Mr. Ilyas, Bandu, Roger Pearson and Cyrus Hamlin were instrumental in Maldives in developing what used to be a small, traditional tuna fishery into a viable, modern sector.

Writing this novel provided an opportunity I did not want to forego to reflect on war and its many aftereffects. A chance to be reminded that war creates millions of losers—few benefit—and fuses, human and military, that may start the next one are discouragingly plentiful.

I dedicate this book to my wife raymonde and wish to thank Susie Day, my editor, for transforming a rough draft into a polished story, and Pieter Mineur for design and typesetting.

Writing this novel has allowed me to reflect on my own life, in which complexity has played a major role, only understood backwards.

About the author

Gert van Santen was born in 1944. A former fishery specialist, he spent his career at the World Bank and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. He supported the growing global role of small-scale fisheries and initiated what ultimately became PROFISH, the multiagency vehicle supporting the development of sustainable fisheries. He was a founding board member of the Ocean Learning Partnership in Newfoundland, which introduced an ocean-related curriculum in the province's high schools. He lives in the Netherlands.

Other books by Gert van Santen

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The Purple Beret: A novel, 2012

Optimizing Fisheries Benefits in the Pacific Islands: Major Issues and Constraints, 2008 (with R. Gillett)

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