

FULL CIRCLE

‘Oh no, look at that.’ My sister Gay’s head filled the plane window.

‘What?’

She sat back so I could see.

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

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

‘What about me? My birthplace?’

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

‘So the cyclone season’s not over.’ Gay inspected the gloom we were flying through. The purple blanket was flecked with livid flashes. The rain slanted thick and fast.

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

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

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

Our limited time and narrow budget had been painstakingly shared out among the places we most wanted to visit. No package tours for us. We would stay only in accommodation run by Fijians. Even our one luxury — a three-day cruise in the Yasawas — was to be on an old government yacht run by Fijians. To rediscover Fiji, we had to rediscover Fijians. The place and the people were inseparable: their aura was one and contributed to the lure we had felt since we left the islands in 1948, as children.

This was also a holiday of escape and rest. Away from all our responsibilities. We loved being together and the gap in our ages meant that it hardly ever happened.

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

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

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

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

‘Of course you have,’ smiled Gay. ‘You’re the dreamy one.’

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

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

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

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

Now it was murky.

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

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

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

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

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

When the gangway was lowered they swarmed up, throwing *leis* over necks. A giant took me up in his arms, higher than anyone had ever lifted me. He was the first black man I’d ever seen. I marvelled at his shining teeth, coconut-smelling skin and glistening hair standing out in a bushy halo. It brushed my cheek as he turned his head to see his way down the gangway. I felt a little fearful at being carried off but then saw my parents over his shoulder. At the bottom he swung me gently to the ground.

The Fijian men now standing around waiting in the airport had their hair cut short, but most of them wore the traditional 'sulu', a piece of cloth reaching just below the knees and fastened at the waist. The women also still dressed as I remembered: an ankle-length *sulu* and, over that, a 'Mother Hubbard', a garment the missionaries had introduced to hide bare breasts: roomy with elbow-length sleeves, colourful and flowery. Most of them wore their hair in the old puffball style. As we went past there were mumbled greetings of 'bula' (hello) from the women and the men. We, of course, *bula'd* them back — delighted that this friendliness to strangers still existed.

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

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

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

Some say Fijians are to be envied because they've been able to resist the lure of money-making that in many places has brought only misery. Others say they are to be pitied because they are trapped in an out-of-date feudal system in which the main beneficiaries are the chiefs.

Most people now believe they should at least have the choice. But here was an example of what that could bring. Selita had chosen to earn money in a soulless airport in a row of booth-like travel agencies and now regretted it, yearning for the village camaraderie and easy plenty of her unspoiled Vanua Levu. But she could always go back. Or could she?

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

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

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

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

'Oh I don't know,' the girl replied, turning slightly to look at us. 'A week maybe.' She flung back her head and gave a rapturous smile. 'I love the rain.' A week. She led us up an outside staircase that overlooked the swimming pool. It was brimming over from the rain. I'd seen postcards in the office of hotel guests being served drinks around an enticing blue version. Now the lonely grey pool slopped over and sloshed around the legs of empty chairs.

Our bedroom was more cheerful. Its curtains and bed covers were patterned with parrots and jungle flowers. I noticed my cover had a line down the middle. On one side of the line the colours were bright, on the other they were faded to whispery pastels. The sun. Strong sunlight coming through the window and hitting the bed in the same place every day had faded the colours to nearly nothing. Look at all that sun, I thought. I'm going to believe the man at the airport. The rain can't last. It'll be fine tomorrow.

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

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

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

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

*The early visitors to Fiji,
It seems could only come by sea,
Their voyage here took many weeks,
Their ships were always full of leaks,*

*Reefs and storms and other trials,
Awaited them across the miles,
The food was bad, the decks were hard,
They had to struggle every yard,
And when they reached the distant shore,
They often found themselves at war,
But all these problems they withstood,
To fill their ships with 'Sandalwood'.*

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

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

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

Two hundred years ago a shipwrecked sailor, Oliver Slater, started it all. The crew who staggered ashore with him spread cholera and dysentery that killed thousands. Some of the castaways also succumbed to the disease, others were eaten. But Oliver Slater survived. He'd seen the sandalwood trees, he'd sniffed the money. Lots and lots of money. The fragrant wood, bartered for trinkets and old nails, could be sold at a 600 per cent profit to China. News of Oliver's discovery spread and ships arrived from Europe, America, Australia. Greed grew on both

sides. Trinkets weren't enough. It had to be axes and knives. Then muskets and gunpowder. Finally, the only barter the chiefs accepted was help in their inter-island battles. The scented trade that had begun in the stench of disease ended in the blood of war. By 1813 supplies of sandalwood were exhausted. But the Europeans were well entrenched in Fiji.

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

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

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

That only made me want to go more. I had to see for myself, even if it was going to be painfully disappointing. I had to tie off the loose ends, come full circle.