

*This is a love story. A story about an island that called me, like a lover, and I went, recklessly seduced. Would it be a fling or a long-term relationship? Would it love me back? Would I be adored? Betrayed? Would I find myself in a gentle, sunny rhythm of work and play, or would a fierce passion shake me to the bones and leave me wanting? Even now, a year later, I wonder what the calling was all about and why I heeded. Why indeed.*

## THE CALLING

It began simply enough with a phone call from Benson, my Cook Islands rep. "I've found it!" he exclaimed. "It's perfect for you."

I argued awhile, buried in work, "I'm too busy...don't need another investment right now ...can't take the time..."

"It's a honey with upside," his voice spiked enthusiastically over the crackling phone lines. "It's the oldest house on the South side of the island, and if you don't take it, I'll sell it to my best client." He hooked me right then. Within a week I was on an Air New Zealand flight, headed for Rarotonga to inspect a 120-year old home. Benson knew the owner, as he knew everyone on that small eye-candy of an island and had arranged for me to stay in the home during the week while I waited for my return flight.

The house was creaky yet sweet, situated carefully between a mountain which immediately took on the appearance of a woman's profile, peering languidly towards an immense sky and a breathtaking lagoon, which was gray on arrival but morphed into an iridescent turquoise by mid-afternoon. Off the rear deck stood an enormous rubber tree, obvious queen of the place. A banana grove separated the back property line from the neighbors behind who entered from the main circle-island road down a small easement lined with giant bamboo. An overgrown garden ran from the deck around the east side of the land where the owner also had trays of seedlings he was sprouting from the agricultural college. A large, framed verandah made of rimu planks from New Zealand ran the entire breadth of the house at the front and looked out through fragrant gardenias and plumeria, a profusion of ti plants and ruby red hibiscus to a sandy beach, a cerulean lagoon, and the deep blues of the sea beyond the breaking reef.

The present owner had been with government for many years, was a scholar and consultant, retiring now to his noni farm. Tap had been alone for many years since his young daughter died of leukemia and his young Polynesian wife had left ceremoniously for Sydney, and he wore his sadness over his entire body despite a natural twinkle in his reckless sapphire eyes. I had met Tap on my first trip to Raro, years before, and was impressed by his connections and warm intellect. But then I am always seduced by intelligence.

Inside coral-lime walls about ten to twelve inches thick and well over a hundred years old gave a rustic feel to the interior of the main salon with its high ceilings and tall French windows. A stained glass piece made with rich hand-blown Blenko colors fit the transom of what back then was a rear door and which now was a passageway through to a hallway, separating a small rustic kitchen and a collapsing bathroom on the left from a large room which served as bedroom and office on the right. Bookshelves, loaded to bending, hugged two walls floor to ceiling. So while I hung out, I read. And this is what I read:

*"Circa 1880 a small schooner sailed from northern Europe, with young William Vander Vleck, a Dutch trader, bound for the Society Islands. He sought a passage through the new Americas,*

*through Tahiti and on to the Spice Islands, but heavy storms besieged the captain and his crew, and missing the Society Islands, they ran aground on a coral reef and were shipwrecked. Nearly three days later, exhausted, dehydrated and nearly hopeless, William alone washed ashore.*

*He was warmly welcomed by the royal Takitumu of the Hervey Islands, befriended and given shelter. Before long, he became betrothed to a niece of Queen Makea Takau, who, in 1880, gifted him a small plot of land by the sea on the southern side of the island. William built the home, using as a main girder the mast of the schooner, which just months before had saved his life.*

*He and Tatia lived a long and happy life on the sunny shores of Avaavaroa. William became active in the trading of copra, cotton and coffee from these islands, but he never traveled on to the Spice Islands, ever grateful to the fates who interceded and brought him to his island home."*

As a workaholic broker from Hawaii, granddaughter to a Dutch trader and Cherokee Indian princess, something resonated deeply as the story spoke through my blood. Was it all coincidence? And is this the way it works? Something called me. I had been visiting this island for many years. First on a weekend jaunt, vacationing in Samoa with friends from Paris, later on business. Guiding clients to safe investment havens throughout the Pacific isles, I had occasionally landed here. We all find ourselves shipwrecked from time to time. Like William I thought about taking refuge here, enjoying this home and the sweet paradise of Rarotonga for a couple months. Besides it was a dynamite investment.

A classic fixer-upper, it clearly needed improvements, upgrading, expanding, but renovations were my forté. I had remodeled homes elsewhere – in California, Oregon, Hawaii, so while I envisioned the historical shaggy house brought back to life and into a new century, I inquired around for the best managers to handle the property as a vacation rental, once renovated. The cash flows looked good. The bank said ‘no problem’. The lawyer wrote it up. And I returned to Hawaii.

But before I left there were dreams -- long, technicolor stories, alive with feeling. How strange it was to suddenly start remembering my dreams and feeling their color and intensity. Then one day I passed a little fawn colored dog, walking on the beach. He seemed so familiar as he ran, hesitantly at first, alongside, stopping to playfully dig shallow holes and bury his nose in, chasing crabs. He clearly loved chasing them more than eating them, and he kept up with my morning pace while unsettling dozens of the curious critters.

The next morning I woke to voice calling ‘Degas! Degas!!’ The voice was neither masculine nor feminine, but was a clear midrange and woke me from a profound and silent sleep. Curious, I mulled it over and over...over coffee, all through my shower and dressing, then brushed it off when Benson's horn sounded as he pulled into the front lawn. We went to town to take care of some business over brie and chutney paninis and a fresh passionfruit lemonade at The Café. Afterwards he dropped me at the tiny public library to wait while he met with a client a few blocks away. Sorting through musty books in a small windowless corner, I opened one on French painters, and my eyes fell on...Degas...and the painting of a small wiry dog on a beach. It was identical to my tan beach dog the previous day. Another moment. Then on the way home Benson suggested we stop in to meet a friend of his who lived about halfway between town and Muri Beach. Judith was an artist, a painter, transplanted from Europe. Like others here she had come to vacation and simply couldn't leave. I had openly admired her hula dancers at a gallery in

town, and Benson thought we'd really like each other. Sharing fresh mint tea in her studio, we wandered speechlessly around the second floor studio. One wall was devoted to dancers, ballet dancers.

"I love Degas!" she exclaimed. "He is my inspiration." I paused. Another coincidence? Or was this a conspiracy? What design, what strange intelligence, was calling me here?

Just a week prior, landing on the island, a small local boy on the plane had smiled, flirted with me, and his eyes, deep pools of liquid brown, said 'welcome home'. I thought this strange since I was just there to inspect an investment, not to stay. Even stranger that I had heard his words without a voice. Then on my last day the house said, 'take care of me.' It wasn't in words, English or otherwise, but I heard it clearly on waking early to catch my return flight. It was unmistakable.

For weeks this calling, these strange 'voices' and dreams haunted me, and over the four months it took to settle the transaction (it not being an easy thing for foreigners to invest in this country) my life took a 180-degree turn as the acquisition changed from a small rental investment to a life-altering fork in the road. By October I was packing up family treasures, my office, and enough furnishings and art to fit the Raro house, finding tenants for my spacious Hawaiian property, and preparing to move from my home of twenty years to a small house on a small island in the middle of nowhere. My business brokering private islands and small boutique hotels took me all over the South Pacific, so the move, I had reasoned, actually shortened my commute time.

Some places have incredible power. I had visited many: the Mayan ruins of southern Mexico and Guatemala, the Oregon vortex and Crater Lake, redwood forests, Angkor Wat and Ta Prohm, other spots where one is changed by being there. At some point in time Rarotonga took on incredible power, taking me away from a life I knew and friends and family I loved.

I returned to Raro, fresh from a business trip settling a small resort transaction in Vanuatu and landed on one of those days where a tropical breeze flavored everything, frangipani filled the senses, the sun shimmered and seared, and birds chorused long past their morning reverie. I was here, and everything was new. Benson's clean-shaven smiling face waited impatiently behind the glass wall outside the luggage turnstile. After hugs and a huge gardenia lei, we gathered numerous boxes and suitcases, cleared through customs. The rest would follow by sea container in a few months. Fragrant, balmy air and the bright turquoise of the encircling lagoon shouted to me, 'welcome home!!'