

MARDIN ARVIN

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Pokun the Little Black King

Like royalty, like sovereignty.

The moon, I mean. An illuminated sphere in the midst of absolute darkness, amidst the dominion of night.

The calm zephyr encircles my body. It spins. I enjoy being beneath the heavens, I enjoy being under the tall coconut trees; their broad, long leaves cover my head. The leaves cast shadows under moonlight. The *nabis*—beach,¹ it becomes so lovely at night. At this time the waves start to clash with dry land and resonate in one's ear like a symphony.

I take little sips of the local liquor. It tastes different from commercial brand liquor, the kind with lots of varieties to choose from, liquor of all different prices. There is still so much I need to see even though something unbelievable happens every day. Unbelievable for me, that is. Not for the locals. Other than the bashing of the waves against the

¹ This text includes many Tok Pisin terms in italics (translated from Farsi by the author). For the first time a word appears in Tok Pisin we have included the English word after it separated by a dash. The reason for italicising the words in Tok Pisin in every instance they appear is not only to distinguish them from English; our aim is also to use italics as a mark of respect and disrupt the English text by highlighting Tok Pisin.

shore I do not hear anything else. I am alone, I enjoy being alone. Solitude is a blessing. Just being by oneself, just being alone. After all the highs and lows in my life, after all the hardships great and small, this solitude has a good feeling about it.

I lie back on the *nabis*, my upper body sprawls over the tiny grains of sand. Soft, comforting. Warm. The grains of sand have not yet relinquished the midday heat of the sun. *Spak*—drunk and relaxing in this fashion. Alone, I am enjoying this. And on such a beautiful night, a clear sky, its stars are brilliant. My God, it is perfect.

The sky has become like a piece of black velvet adorned with white jewels; the brilliance is blinding, the beauty is blinding. I twist the cap off a bottle of *wara glas*, a local bootleg alcohol made of *kokonas*—coconut and *painapoi*—pineapple; the smell is extremely strong. Anyway, it is good stuff and I bought it cheap. Poyonou tells me this liquor is so strong that I need a mixer. The strong smell will remain in my nostrils for a long time—the scent sends tingles up to my brain.

Poyonou ... he was right. When I entered this territory of dry land out in the middle of the ocean that local man became a good companion.

I sip at my drink; it is so strong that I now understand his point. I mix it with the bottles of beer I brought with me. I see an empty bottle next to me and use it to mix both of them. Now it is easier to drink. It tastes better, I enjoy the sensation of being *spak*. This *spak* feeling that increases more and more. After a few years I have the chance to taste alcohol again. It brings back wonderful memories. Not like a bar with high counters and maybe with a barmaid who fills an attractive glass while soft European music plays, or maybe American rock; a barmaid who serves my drink in a shot glass. No.

It is like this place right here. A place most could not imagine.

Time passes by. I am not in the mood to think about how long I have been here staring at that black velvet cloth with its blazing gems, a cover that is not a cloth, it is the heavens. I take the last sip from that bottle, I listen to the music that the waves play for me.

I see a large tree in between the *kokonas diwais*—coconut trees,² but I am too much in my own world to notice properly. I hear a disturbing sound. Someone keeps calling my name.

“... Mardin, Mardin ...”

The sound seems muffled, it is coming from someone who I do not recognise at first. Oh man, I am so *spak*.

The sound is coming from Poyonou, I recognise his voice now. I hope he realises that I am in a good place at the moment and he should not disturb me. But I turn my head to look at him. I can hardly keep my glassy eyes open. I see his dark skin, it becomes one with the darkness of the night. In contrast, the whites of his eyes rupture this all black scene. He rushes over so quickly that he is out of breath, the relatively wide nostrils on his face open and close rapidly. As he approaches I see his shorts, they are flapping in the wind. I still cannot get a hold of myself, this state that I am in. I still do not understand this sudden acceleration in time and space. He reaches me and bends over towards me. He takes my hand and tries hard to drag me out of my *spak* state.

“Get up, Mardin. Get up boy, you’re not supposed to be lying on the *nabis* this time of night.”

² Tok Pisin does not make nouns into plurals by adding a suffix like most English nouns. However, for the purposes of this short story we have added a suffix to some Tok Pisin nouns to make plurals like in English; otherwise we would have had to modify all or most of the sentences in order to use the plural form in Tok Pisin.

I fix my half shut eyes on him, I am incapacitated. Like a piece of meat that has some remnant of life in it—not much but still alive. I cannot get up; in fact, Poyonou lifts me up.

“*Wanem*—What are you saying? Why can’t I?”

He is frustrated by me. His arm takes my arm and holds me up, he pulls me along after him. He keeps saying: “Damn, a *masalai*³ lives in the tree that was above you. It will drive you *lonlon*—mad, unless you die first.” I am taken aback, I am shocked, I cannot work out what I am hearing.

It will kill me? A *masalai*?

Poyonou is still helping me to walk. I turn my head back. I do not see anything except for the tree with its leaves blowing in all different directions. No person living in a house, no *masalai* looking back at me. I take a deep breath and continue walking with Poyonou’s aid. In between blind *spak* and conscious, I guess that I have encountered another one of their wondrous and marvelous beliefs.

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Last night it seems I was so *spak* that I cannot remember how I got here. I cannot even get up. I look out the rectangle window of the little wooden *haus*—hut where I have been sleeping. The sunlight crawls inside ... the sun is out. What time is it?

I look around a little and realise that Poyonou has brought me to his house. It is an old *haus*, the walls and ceiling made out of woven leaves from the *kokonas diwai*. The *haus* is made out of leaves and wood from the *bush*—jungle; there are pillars holding it up but the rooms on top of them

³ Malevolent spirit that inhabits particular places and natural phenomena.

shake. It is like every other *haus* one finds on the *ailan*—island. It stands on high pillars, I imagine they are built this way due to the heavy rainfall. I walk down the stairs with caution, the house shakes and frightens me. I feel it is too frail to move around too much.

I see Poyonou. He is chopping wood with all his might, I think not having gas connected like in town makes life hard, especially when you have to cook with a wood fire. In my view this place is alienated to a great extent, it exists far away from the modern world.

I walk down the steps and Pokun sees me before anyone else. He is thin with dark skin, he has curly hair that I think would be hard to comb. He smiles and I know he is thrilled by the football I have brought for him. He is already really naughty. His row of white teeth stand out more than other features on the rest of his face. He is about ten years old. I stretch out my arms and back to help get rid of the hangover—get over the drowsiness of sleep and last night's drinking.

Pindramon is not paying attention. She is totally focused on her garden, just working away. She is calmer than her son, even calmer than Poyonou. Pindramon is the only women in this *famili*—family. She is a little grumpy and serious; unlike her brother, Poyonou. For me, I think raising Pokun has not really been easy, even though her brother Poyonou has been here to help.

I need to use the toilet now more than anything else. I want to use a ceramic toilet with a roll of toilet paper hanging on a wall beside it. But I walk over to the *bush*. I have no idea whether I will ever see that kind of toilet again. It is funny, it is humorous. Over in the *bush*, between the trees, where I am alone, I pull down my shorts and squat. Until a few years ago going to the toilet like this was unfathomable for me. When I finish and return to the home Poyonou sees me and asks Pokun to bring the bathing

utensils, basically nothing more than soap, a towel and tub. But I have come equipped and pull out some shampoo from among my things. I get it and follow him along the *nabis*. There is not a sound except for the thumping of waves on the sand and the occasional seagull passing over our heads.

That big tree catches my eye, the one that Poyonou said has a *masalai* in it. It seems now that I know about the *masalai* that simple tree from last night appears frightening. It is really big with branches like roots all twisted together.

I wait. Pokun returns and walks towards me, I stare at that very tree and ask in a curious way:

“Pokun, what is the name of that tree?”

He looks at it in a regular way, it is as if this tree and the story behind it is only strange for me. He replies: “Pikus. It is the only pikus tree here on Isi Isi beach.” The name also seems foreign to me. Slowly but surely I get used to the fact that this tree with the thick trunk and long twisting branches is terrifying.

We arrive at the *wara*—river, it is full of long green grass on either side and with taller trees. The end of the *wara* reaches the infinite blue of the *solwara*—sea. A fusion of the green *bush* and the blue *solwara* with the image of the fragmented clouds of the sky displayed on the *wara*. Large and small waves emerge and disrupt this exhibition. They ruin it. Nature always reveals the most beautiful artworks before our eyes.

A few kids of all sizes are splashing around in the *wara* together while some women *wasim*—wash their plates and clothes. I can hear them talking. They are speaking in their *tok ples*—local language. Pokun says we need to wait until they finish what they are doing. I listen to him, I am not in any hurry. Pokun comes up close to me: “Mardin, shall we go to the

solwara for a swim?” I laugh and bashfully answer the little kid: “I don’t know how to swim.” He laughs. It is as if he now considers himself older and more mature than me. He is bursting with pride now: “You’re a fully grown man, you don’t know how to swim? It’s not a problem, I’ll teach you myself.” I smile. I want to object when one of the women calls out with an elegant voice and in the accent of this region: “Pokun.”

Pokun goes towards her quickly and she tells him something. This time Pokun returns and says: “She said they’ve finished, let’s go.” As I go a bit further out I take off the baggy T-shirt I am still wearing from last night, the smell of sweat and liquor has been embroidered all throughout it. I enter the *wara* wearing the same shorts I had on last night. The cool water hits me and travels between my toes, after being out in a heatwave I now take pleasure in cooling down. A bit further down Pokun gets in the water—he is fooling around in a fashion all his own. I have brought some shampoo with me, but Pokun scrubs his body with soap and *wara* water. I call out to him: “Come and use the shampoo!” His eyes indicate a kind of desire, he peers at the bottle of shampoo, but resists: “I *wasim* my hair with water.” I laugh. I go further into the water and pour some shampoo onto his head: “Now massage your hair with your hands, run your fingers through.” He laughs, he listens. The fact that he has built up a lather is new to him. He is thrilled.

Pokun is making the most of his time in the water and I walk in until the *wara* reaches my knees. I pour water over my head using the bucket that Pokun brought with him. But Pokun comes towards me with a disapproving look and says: “We need to go, others are coming to use the *wara* water. And I have to get water from the tanker as soon as possible for my mum since she needs it to make lunch.” I listen to him, to be honest I respect the fact that he is so responsible. Ten-year-old boys usually live

carefree and are unconcerned with these things. But he is not like that. I wrap the towel around me and hold it up around the waistband of my shorts. I follow Pokun and pass a few *hauses* just like the one he lives in.

People of the same ethnic group with the same colour skin see me and look over with surprise and curiosity. I am strange for them. It is the difference in skin colour. My hair is light brown and straight and my skin is fair, my sunburnt skin. For them it is rare to see someone like me, I am probably a fascinating specimen—they often ask Pokun about me in their *tok ples*. It has been a while since I have been here and I can understand some things when they speak. They are asking him: “Who is this white man, Pokun?” It is as if Pokun has something valuable with him, he is proud of himself and wants to show off. He responds with pride: “He is *Kandereh Poyonou*—Uncle Poyonou’s friend, he wants to live with us.” I smile at his childish glee, especially when he takes my hand and says again with pride: “Mardin, let’s go.” However, the look on the faces of the people around us and those particular people who questioned him is not really friendly. I can tell by the way they are looking over that they are jealous. On the way home we collect two gallons of water from the tanker. At least twenty families acquire water from this tanker for their day-to-day needs. I help Pokun by carrying one of the gallons and walk back to the *haus*.

When we arrive I change my clothes and take the firewood that Poyonou chopped over to the kitchen. However, it is not exactly a kitchen. Just imagine a small pergola with a table and a wooden bench, a gas stove formed by a few truck rims on top of each other. The fire is made on top of the rims and the food is prepared on top of a hotplate placed on that. A stove! Poyonou returns after catching a few *pis*—fish for our meal, Pokun quickly takes them from him. He gets to work cleaning and gutting the *pis*. I sit down and wait. My stomach is aching from hunger as I anticipate

lunch. I see Pindramon who is frying the cleaned out *pis* in coconut oil, she places them on a metal dish which sits on top of the rings, above the fire, and sprinkles something white over them. I am curious, I ask: "What is that white substance?" She adjusts the *pis* on the dish and answers me while still looking at the *pis*: "*Saksak*—Sago." I raise my eyebrows, I am even more curious now: "*Wanem?* *Saksak?*" They laugh as I remain in wonder. Poyonou says: "We plan to pound a *saksak* tree tomorrow. Come with us and see." My smile quickly starts to quiver. The colour of the *saksak* on the hot dish and over the heat starts to change over time; I find it interesting that it turns brown. Then she mixes in some *kokonas*—or better to say grated *kokonas*—with the *saksak*. Pindramon prepares the food quick and easy, she calls us: "Pokun, bring the plates, the food is ready." He gives me my plate first since I am the guest. They are so warm and kind to me that I am extremely comfortable here. So much so that I feel it is my own home. She fills my plate, *pis* on top of *saksak* with a bunch of *vorita*—octopus. They put my plate on the table in front of me. To be honest, the food does not look so appetizing. *Vorita?*

I am in two minds and with hesitation I move my spoon towards the plate, I take some *saksak*. The others are looking at me. It seems they want to see my reaction to the food more than anything else. The starch has now turned brown and no longer looks powder-like. The heat has turned it into what looks like small beans all stuck together. I taste it—*saksak* is not bad. It tastes good, it is sweet. I turn to look at Pindramon: "When you extract this from the tree is it sweet?" Pindramon answers indifferently: "No, I strain the grated coconut to extract the oil and blend it with the *saksak* so that it tastes like this." I must have a satisfied look on my face, I smile: "No doubt, you're a good cook. This meal is extraordinary." Pindramon is pleased to hear this compliment, everyone else is happy to see her response.

Pokun says: “Mardin, you don’t eat *saksak* with a spoon. You eat it with your hands.” He laughs as he finishes saying that and Poyonou responds: “He’s not used to eating without a spoon, don’t tease him.” I also laugh at Pokun, I raise my eyebrow playfully and remove my spoon from my plate placing it on the table. I start eating with my hands. Everyone encourages me with their glowing faces, Pokun is enjoying the fact that his comment has influenced me.

I have only eaten a few mouthfuls when I feel something stuck in my throat and start coughing. Poyonou immediately pushes a bowl of soup towards me and says: “Always eat soup with *saksak*. It’s a heavy meal and it gets stuck in your throat.” I listen to him and taste the soup. It tastes nice. The *vorita* is placed along the side of the plate—it is my first time eating it. It is not bad, it tastes nice.

It is my first time to try a lot of things here. I believe that one must take the road less travelled instead of the well-beaten path. One needs to just travel down that road, not once but many times. I have now had so many first-time experiences now that it is normal for me. I am used to it.

At the table Poyonou speaks about his fishing with delight. He talks about the special fishing equipment he has made for himself. But Pokun is a more joyful conversationalist than me. He makes a big deal out of the fact that I cannot swim and jokes around—actually, it is only the case that I cannot swim well! They treat me with warmth and compassion, I smile when I am among them. It makes no difference that I am a “white man” and they are black. We are all human and I have no problem at all, I respect this difference. I will always cherish these moments when I could not help but just smile.

I am walking along the beach, the shore is full of hard sand, cream colour. I am walking barefooted, some of the sand tickles between my toes.

I look at the sun, I look at the orange glow as it starts to set. I look at the waves that become more violent as they start to sense the night. I am like an ill-tempered person who cannot put up with anyone when set off, it is time to lash out and what better sacrifice than the beach. The tranquil beach, it absorbs the rage—holds it deep inside and accepts it.

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I look over at the children of all ages laying out on their long thin wooden planks and riding the waves. They look like kings riding their horses. I smile at those little Black kings who are enjoying life away from the outside world. No television, no smart phones, and not even board games like chess. It may seem strange but they are cheerful. Pokun, this cheerful boy, wearing just long white shorts down past his knees. He runs towards me as soon as he sees me. He is excited to see me. He asks me to ride the waves with them. I resist, I did not want to go and tell him I cannot swim very well. But he keeps insisting to go wave riding and so I follow him.

By the time we are fifty meters out from the shore Pokun asks me to wait, a huge wave is coming. “When the wave arrives lie on the board with your back to the wave.” I make sure I do not forget that sentence. I follow his advice, just like that. To be honest, I was once also a delinquent. I start laughing. When the wave comes I go under the water but I am unprepared, my nose and ears become blocked. They have filled with water. I am terrified. I cannot deny the fact that I am in fear—I am struggling. I keep telling myself that I am about to drown. The height of my dread occurs when the narrow, long plank of wood slides out from under my body and the wave propels it back to shore ahead of me, then the wave takes me with

it up to the smashed and flattened sands, up to the sands that remained insentient.

My face pale, I lie out on the sand. It is not long before the children reach me. A few dark skin children are above me, I notice their frizzy hair and wide noses. They are checking out this exhausted man who is terrified out of his wits.

When Pokun describes my wide-eyed terror and the shocked looked on my face Pindramon starts to laugh. Poyonou chuckles and says: "Mardin, even imagining that scene is something else." I answer him: "But I didn't hold back, I tried it more than ten times so I could learn." I told the truth, I had learned how to do it. And without a standard surfboard. Poyonou says with a smile: "So let's go for *saksak* tomorrow, the starch substance, sagu, that Pindramon made for lunch, the one you like." I raise my eyebrow and look at him thoughtfully. Pindramon places her hand on Poyonou's hand: "Don't tease him." But I am curious now and a bit proud: "No, actually I'd like to see how this *saksak* is prepared, this food everyone is talking about."

Sometimes Painim⁴ acts spoilt and circles me, moves between my legs. She is a cream coloured dog that Pokun found and raised. Now she has made friends with me and follows me around. Pokun walks a bit behind Poyonou and me, following us. I pay attention to everyone's bare feet, Pokun catches up and points something at me that resembles a bow. I take it from him examine it. I say: "For hunting or for the *saksak* tree?" Poyonou laughs, he is accompanied by a few people. They are reveling in the fact that I am new to this and know nothing: "No Mardin, wait till we arrive. You'll understand then." I follow them in silence, wearing my white,

⁴ In Tok Pisin painim means "found."

brand-name sneakers. I am also distinguished from the rest by the T-shirt I am wearing. I stop in my tracks, Painim also stops and is breathing heavily. Her abdominal muscles are pulsating rapidly and she wags her tail. Her tongue is out and she raises her head to see me. I bend over and take off my sneakers. I say to myself under my breath: "Man, they consider you one of the locals now." Poyonou and the others wait for us a little further on. Pokun says: "Can you walk?" I tie the shoelaces together and throw the sneakers over my shoulder. I walk towards the others and say: "Yeah, don't worry about me." We continue walking on again, this time Poyonou smirks and says: "I don't think you'll give up until you learn all there is to know about *saksak* today." I laugh. We walk along the *nabis*. The sun is just rising, we left the house early in the morning. The sun is at the end of eternity, pulling itself up. To exhibit its power it first distributes an orange glow across the blue waters of the ocean. To me, this inimitable sunrise is possibly one of the most extraordinary feats of nature.

We walk on for half an hour and we finally pass between local *hauses*, as we travel through we hear whispers from the inhabitants. They are surprised as they look at my bare feet. I realise that the Indigenous peoples always look at foreigners in this way. They consider me that way, a foreigner. We finally arrive. They point out a tall tree in the *bush*.

Saksak!

I am in awe looking up at the farthest reaches of that tree. Its height is around six or seven meters. Poyonou and his friend start chopping, so much so that the trunk will split and the tree will fall. The formidable sound of its fall makes the very heart of the *bush* quiver. As it falls its branches break, Poyonou walks forward ahead of everyone else. Carrying the *tamiok*—axe he walks up all the way from the bottom of the tree to the head. He measures it right up until the end and gauges how to split the

bark of the tree. Like peeling a piece of fruit in order to reach the pulp, make it ready to eat. He peels the skin, but does not remove it. So that the bark does not close in he places a few branches between the bark and the wood. The bark remains open, he has easy access to the body of the tree. The body of the tree is white and looks raw. The others also walk forward. I am totally ignorant regarding that bow, they carry it along with them. They then begin pounding the tree with it.

Pokun puts his hand on my forearm and says: “You also have a *bunara*—bow, you can go pound the tree.” Enthusiastic, I walk forward. I stand next to Poyonou and start pounding. Now we are all standing around the trunk, even Pindramon is busy pounding the tree. The only sound we can hear is the bashing of the tree with the *bunara*.

Women and men appear, they are walking towards us. From the way they greet us it is clear they are probably related to Poyonou and Pindramon. A woman begins to help Pindramon and they carry away the mashed *saksak* to the *wara*. As it becomes noon, one side of the tree has been fully mashed. Working non-stop without a break, Poyonou tires first. He moves aside. It is better to rest a bit. The others welcome the idea. Each person sits alone, sweat pouring down their foreheads. But I cannot find a place to sit and go looking for Pindramon. More than anything else I want to understand every stage of work. I see them, they are knee-deep in the *wara*. Both of them are next to a base stand with four branches emerging from it. The base is upright, connected to the bottom of the riverbed. They have formed a little well with a net over it and put the bags on top of it. The women take bowls and pour water on them. Pindramon kneads the *saksak* which becomes practically dough; she continues to do this numerous times. After washing it and draining it through the net, they put whatever remains in the bag. That six meter tree with the massive build

is now in approximately ten bags of ten kilograms each. By sunset our work is done.

With his small build that matches the average ten year old, Pokun puts a whole bag on his shoulder. In his other hand he carries a flashlight so we can see where we are walking. An exhausting day, but it was fascinating after all. Maybe I do not have professional knowledge, but I learned how to make the starch that most people will probably never ever see in their entire lives. I am satisfied that I had learned another task, in my view it is important to acquire knowledge. After, I see that the starch we collected is put on a table that is made with a cover of leaves from the coconut tree and is left in the sun to dry. If it is left wet it will rot inside the bags, this is one of the secrets for making *saksak*.

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The military vehicles are made of metal and all rusted by now. Sometimes the tide rushes over to wet them, the sound of the water bashing them reverberates. Right here. Here on this very *nabis*. These are the ruins of war, the memories of World War II. Bullets, bombs, tanks, death and rape ... the violence of war became part of the history of this community. A part of the land, a part of Manus Island. The complete theatre of war makes its performance before my eyes. Not just here. It is not just this land that exhibits the remnants of war. But here there was a war between Japan and Australia and the US.

I step away. I sit on the sandy *nabis*. Painim barks around me, jumping all over the place as though she were looking for something. Something she will never find. I look at Painim and remember the words of Poyono's *kandereh*, I recall what he told me. He is an old man whose white

hair is in total contrast with his dark skin. His wrinkles symbolise all the many hardships that he has suffered until now. Tragedy makes people old. Makes one age faster. He witnessed the World War. He was no more than seven or eight years old, he does not know exactly how old he was then, he does not know how old he is now. Just imagine it. Imagine the women. Delicate women, women who evoke feelings of love. Condemned to rape in front of your eyes. Women who were in the age of innocence. Or just imagine, homes rapidly destroyed. Bombs, you do not know which one of those bombs are destined for your home, you do not know eventually on which day, you do not know when you will be looking at the spot where your home has been bombed to pieces.

Loneliness is enough to make you age. For the children who were lost and had nothing to eat, who would listen to all the sayings of this old man. It always brings calamity, whenever there is war people always experience hardship and death. It is these very people who are decimated without any reason—politicians were after power during those times. The old man said that in order to procure food they would go to neighbouring *ailans*, or they would nourish themselves with *kokonas*, *kumu musong* leaves and *pis*. Starvation is one of those feelings that one cannot even understand until the time one experiences it for oneself. And war has never been a good thing, not for anyone. I shift through the images in my mind.

Painim comes forward and rubs her muzzle on my bicep and whines a little. I smile. I get up from where I sit and roll my neck. Over in the *bush* there is no sign of Pokun. Today we have plans to drink *kulau*—green coconut. Maybe it is odd, even the name. A *kokonas* that has been left on the tree and is still ripe, they call *kulau*. I told them that is one of the things I was ignorant of but now I know. Little by little. *Kulau* is one example. A green *kokonas* with lots of liquid. Or the fruit named *pau*, the inside of

which looks like an almond. Or the red colour *laulau*, that is something like an apple but a totally different fruit. Manus Island is overflowing with new experiences. Filled with unknown things. Like green shells—*sels* of different sizes which you could never find anywhere else in the world. Women and men both use them as jewelry. They use them to make bracelets or necklaces. It is a subtle green colour.

I am looking for *sels* on the floor when I see Pokun. He rushes over and is waving at me to follow him. I walk over, it was not very long ago that I got lost in the *bush*. I got lost between the tall trees, thick vegetation and colourful flowers. I got frightened as it started to get dark. Painim, my little friend, found me just as Pokun was turning pale with worry. He was scared that I got lost. Now I do not dare go in there on my own, I was waiting for Pokun. He was standing by a tall *kokonas diwai*, he is sporting a massive open-mothered grin. He is tying knots into a piece of fabric and making it into a small circle. He says: “Do you feel like drinking *kulau*?” I walk further, I keep a distance. I keep an eye on the tip of the tree. It is tall. Really tall. It looks like a narrow skyscraper that reaches up high. I am still surprised about the fact that Pokun is not afraid of those heights. I answer him: “You suggested it yourself, I like sweet food.” He puts his feet inside the cloth and leans on the tree trunk. He has a long, sharp knife and he stabs it into the trunk. He starts to climb up. He looks like a tiny little koala. I must say he climbed without a hitch. Maybe like a lizard that walks up walls like it is nothing. He climbs up to the top ... up to the tip of the tree. He cuts the *kokonases* from the tree with his long knife. One by one they hit the ground. He is not afraid. Pokun, I mean. He is not afraid of the height, not afraid of the distance. It is remarkable.

I shout: “Pokun! I want to go climb up, too!”

My voice echoes in between all the thick tree trunks. Pokun shouts back down: “Do you want to fall?!” I laugh. Mischievous kid! He is reminding me of the first time I climbed up. I went up seven or eight meters when the cloth gave way and I came down and hit the ground. Lucky, that time I landed on the sand from the *nabis*. I think that during the whole time I have been here I have been the butt of this little rascal’s jokes and quips. I am actually scared to climb up, this is why I do not insist. The sky is practically dark, we take the *kokonases* and start walking home. We go between the *hauses* made of wood and leaves. Like every other night, we even see those two *spak* individuals, the ones that Pokun does not appreciate conversing with. *Wara glas* makes them blind *spak*, we just pass by them. We reach home and I see that Poyonou is sitting with one of his friends under the shade of the *laulau* tree, someone I know: they have their backs to us. They are under the extended shade of moonlight. With a *kokonas* under my arm I walk over to them and say: “Here is the *kulau* we got.”

They turn around. My mouth drops and I go pale. My arms go weak and the *kokonases* fall and roll in different directions. I take a half-step back. The broken piece of wood on the ground catches my foot and I fall to the ground. I hurt my hip, I stutter: “*W... wanem* happened?”

I have every right to be scared, both their mouths and teeth are full of blood. They look at me and smile, revealing a terrifying sight. They both look like people who have gone *lonlon*. They are still smiling even though their mouths are filled with blood. But it becomes even more horrific when I hear Poyonou’s friend laugh. He is laughing from behind me. *Wanem* is so funny? His friend stands up. I move back and he laughs: “What’s the matter, boy? It’s nothing. We’re just chewing *buai*—betel nut.” I wait a second. I am still sitting on the ground. I look at him: “*Wanem* are you

chewing?” I am talking to myself, I say this to myself. Poyonou also stands up and shows me the plant. A plant? No, it is something similar to a raw walnut that is still green.

“Hey boy, it’s just *buai*.”

I still have not calmed down: “Is your mouth bleeding?” Poyonou sits next to me on the ground and tries to explain until I am convinced. This is a *buai*. You peel the skin with your teeth and chew the seed, you also dip the *daka*—mustard into this powder called *kamban*—lime powder. He shows me his hand and he has some of the *kamban* that was lying next to them on the tree trunk.

“Then you take a bite and chew, in the end you spit it out.”

I frown: “Why do you do that?”

“You just get high. Come try it.”

He holds it in front of me, I push his hand back: “Try it yourselves. I won’t try it.” My rhythm is still out, my heart is not beating properly ... I was really scared. Even Pokun’s laughter is getting on my nerves. But I do not say anything. It seems that I need to see a lot more, things I have never seen before in my whole life.

*

Dark hands and long, bony fingers that weave *kokon*s leaves together with extraordinary skill. I watch so I can learn. But I do not get it, it is hard. More than anything I want to do some work to repay their kindness. Pindramon is weaving the leaves together to make the roof for the little *haus* that Poyonou and Pokun have been making for the last two or three days. They are making it for me to stay in. For me, to have a compassionate heart and to show unlimited kindness one does not need material things,

and it has nothing to do with the colour of your skin. It just requires graciousness and willingness to accept people with love. Every now and then Pindramon looks over at me and smiles as she weaves the leaves and moves her fingers between them. She is smiling at my enthusiasm and desire to learn.

They are also worried. Worried about me. A “white man” who has nothing in common with them. A few days ago a severe storm came through. The men’s *haus*—which is round and large and only men are permitted to enter and sleep in—had its roof blown off. I was really lucky that I was not harmed. I was lucky like other times on this *ailan*, like when I got lost in the *bush* or when I stupidly went wave riding, like cutting down *kulau*, and many other major and minor things I do not have time to go into.

A few days go by, five days at most, and I become the owner of my own wooden *haus* with a roof made of woven *kokonas* leaves. A room that, in fact, is enough for me. It is made of wood that Poyonou chose with a lot of discretion, he believes that the wood is more durable than that of other trees. I trust his judgment. Actually, on this *ailan* I did not have a lot of belongings or goods with which I could repay their kindness. Therefore, I asked Pindramon to call me when she goes to the *maket*—market so I can carry her basket of *painapols*. Pindramon got wind of my intention and did not object. In fact, she expressed joy at the fact that she did not have to carry the large basket full of *painapols* alone.

The next day I wait for her in front of the *haus*, ready to go. I mean, I think I arrived as early as Poyonou who was standing there with his basket filled with a few *pis* and two *voritas*. He is waiting with Pokun who has two plastic bags full of *laulau*. Poyonau is complaining that Pindramon has not come out of the *haus*, he wants to go early. I knew from before that

Poyonou was out of Brus and wants to buy some with a newspaper so that he can wrap the tobacco in the paper and have a smoke. We all walk together. I am sweating as I carry the basket full of *painapols*. It is hard to imagine how Pindramon carries this by herself all the time. I ask myself: How does she manage? I find the answer to my own question. I respond to myself: Simple; in the same way that a ten-year-old child climbs up twenty meters from the ground with very little support in order to drink that green, juicy *kulau*.

After thirty minutes of walking we arrive at a place with wooden tables full of goods for sale. There is a narrow aisle between them for people to pass and look and choose. Men, women, children ... all with something different for sale. Transactions that are not only made with money. In exchange for one's goods one can receive other goods; exchange, for instance, *kulau* for *kulau*. In addition, one is able to purchase using money. For example, ten *laulau* is one kina, or five *pau* is one kina. It is interesting that everyone accepts the fixed terms for bartering. No one exchanges words of disagreement. Everyone brings something, I put the basket of *painapols* next to Pindramon. I stand next to her, at a slight distance. I think to myself that since I do not know what to do at least I should not get in the way.

Their looks make me uneasy. Every time someone passes they ask Pindramon or Poyonou: "Who is that person?" or "Who is that white man?" It is as if I am as interesting and intriguing for them as they are for me. The more I look on the more I want to help Pokun sell all his fruit.

Twilight comes; eventually all the buying, selling and swapping ends. We walk back to the *haus*. Poyonou is holding his Brus and his *buai*; it reminds me of that night, reminds me of how frightening they looked. I cannot help but frown. This time I am carrying a ten kilo bag of rice that

Pindramon obtained through bartering. Pokun earned eight kina from selling fruit. Everyone's life moves on. Life continues everywhere, like on this remote *ailan* which most people have never heard of, even people from this very ocean. An ocean that seems boundless; during twilight it reflects images of stars within its embrace.

*

Poyonou cuts down the *saksak* tree. I help him. Using the *bunara* I start to pound. I have more or less learned how to do it and I want to help him. We cut down the tree to make *saksak* from it. It will become a provision or dowry for approaching a potential wife.

I laugh, Poyonou looks at me. He is breathing heavily from the effort he has to put into this *saksak* tree. Cutting it up is giving us a hard time. Their paternal cousin is getting married. When someone marries a wife here they have to provide a large amount of goods, household products and money for the *famili* of the *tambu meri*—bride.⁵ The *famili* of the groom help him to prepare the dowry. Now Poyonou's *famili* is frantically working to support the groom who wants to get married and start a *famili*. From last week we have been preparing for the day when we travel for the marriage, that day will be tomorrow. We have been collecting the household products in order to help the groom to start a *famili*. For example, Pindramon collected some *pawpaw*—papaya, *potetos*—potatoes and *kumu* for sale, and Poyonou has been getting up early for the last few days to go fishing and collect a large amount for sale. Selling them at the *maket* is Pokun's

⁵ Tambu meri is used by the groom and his family to refer to the bride. The bride and her family refer to the groom as tambu man.

responsibility. Now Pokun and Pindramon have gone to the *maket*, and as afternoon arrives and the weather starts to become moderate we prepare the *saksak*. This is what we have been doing every day during this period. I have decided that I want to engage in a number of these chores to help them.

After we have cut down the tree I return to the *haus* to get the tools to pound the *saksak* and some water. I see Pokun on the way. He is with Pindramon. Both are tired, it is obvious that they have just returned from the *maket*. They are exhausted, but gratified. They sold all the *pis* and are carrying *bananas*—bananas and *potetos*. Smiles of satisfaction beam from their faces. Pokun, poor little kid, has just arrived and he is accompanying me to the *saksak* tree. We pass by both of these trees, I say: “Are you too tired, Pokun?” His black skin is glistening with the layer of sweat that covers him. He wipes his forehead with the end of his T-shirt. I wait for him to respond. All of a sudden he replies in a loud voice:

“Look, Mardin, see the *kapul*!”

I wait a second. See what?

I take a few steps back. Just the two or three steps that I had taken ahead of Pokun. I sit next to him, we are both squatting down on our heels. I am in shock. My eyes go round. A tiny little animal, it is obvious that it was born just a few days ago. My first sight of it reminds me of the Doctor Ernest cartoon I used to watch as a child. The one where they were stuck on an *ailan* off Australia and Doctor Ernest found a cuscus. A smile emerges on my face. I reach out and hold it in my arms. Its arms and legs are so small. I reflect for a moment and say: “Do you call it *kapul*?”

Pokun has all his attention focused on my arms and that little creature: “What else is his name?”

I reply: “They call it cuscus.” Pokun caresses it with the tips of his fingers. Its fur is a grey colour and short, some parts of its body are black.

Its eyes look like black buttons, it is looking at us with curiosity. It is so weak that it is not even resisting. I say: "We're late, Pokun. Poyonou is waiting for us."

He replies quickly and with agitation: "You want to leave it here?!"

I smile as I stand up: "Why leave it here? We'll take it with us."

We take the *kapul* with us, I want to keep it until it can look after itself. Pokun is pleased that we did not leave it. We walk until we reach Poyonou. When we arrive we decide that Pokun should take the bags back to the *haus* and carry the *kapul* with him so it is not left in the *bush*. This way we can get on with our work. Pokun listens to us. He takes the bags of *saksak*, which has been ground down, to give to Pindramon to *wasim*. What is for sure is that this place does not discriminate based on age, everyone needs to work for their livelihood.

We have been busy up until now ... now the day has come.

We wait near the *nabis*, we are expecting a boat to take us up to an *ailan* where the wedding ceremony will take place. The sound of Chauka is loud. Its cry can always be heard here in Manus, it is a bird that can only be found here on this *ailan*. We are all eager for the boat to arrive. It is wondrous that this bird cannot be found anywhere else but Manus.

The boat is late. Pindramon says: "The goods are heavy, it is hard for you taking them alone."

I look at her and a smile appears on my face: "No, they're not heavy."

Poyonou is standing next to Pokun. Pokun had told me that when we reach our destination he will show me the waterfall. I accepted the offer.

He says: "This period has worn you out, I'm grateful for your effort."

I look back at them, I smile. It is a smile that symbolises that I value and appreciate them. They know that, too. But sometimes it is important to express it with words, important to speak about the impact compassion

has, to say how happy one is as a result of what someone has done for you. “In contrast to the things you’ve done for me this is nothing. I’m happy that I was able to help. I thank you.” Poyonou and Pindramon look at me with massive smiles.

Pokun jumps up and waves us over. Everyone goes towards the sea; we see the boat coming for us. In addition to us there is another *famili* traveling in the boat. We find a place next to them and take off. Thank God most of the gifts are in the form of money and we are taking less food with us. As Poyonou explained to me, it is better that the *famili* of the groom bring money. The *famili* of the *tambu meri* usually bring presents. When the boat takes off I divert my concentration to the surrounding environment. The boundless blue seizes me. The calm, silent ocean. My curiosity will not allow me to sit silently: “Is it far from here, Poyono?” I ask my question while catching sight of the *pis* that appear in the water, they pass by our boat. I also see the small *ailans* we pass. They are so small and so many. They are conspicuous because of the *kokonas diwai* on their rim which transform them into an alluring natural setting, an attractive scene. I am reveling in this beauty.

I hear Poyono’s voice: “There ... see over there?”

I look over. I turn to look where he is indicating. A small *ailan* like all the other *ailans* I have seen in this area. Poyonou continues: “That small *ailan* is called Mendelin. It’s so small that perhaps no more than *faivpla famili*—five families live there. For firewood and *kokonases* they have to visit larger *ailans* by canoe.” I know what he means; those thin, long boats. The ones they make themselves. But no more than *faivpla famili* on the *ailan*! I am surprised. I say: “*Faiv*—Five?!” Poyono laughs at my surprise and what he sees as my child-like curiosity. He shakes his head. We look at the small, sandy *ailan*. We are so close to it ... Mendelin.

We are still a distance from the shore and Pokun impatiently jumps from the boat. He wades through the water. He is laughing and arrives at the *nabis* quicker than us. He walks past the men who saw our boat and have arrived at the shore to welcome us. As the boat turns to the side they approach. They are Poyonou's *famili* members, they share greetings and help move the wares left in the boat. With some uncertainty they greet and welcome me. I do not blame them. I am a "white" foreigner, they do not consider me kin. They are magnanimous, they allow me to join them. I put two bags of rice on my shoulder and walk at a distance from the rest. I go towards the place where the ceremony will be conducted. When I arrive at the area I am stunned. In addition to the people walking past and the noise there are peering stares from the others.

The women there catch my eye. I do not mean their beauty or clothes; I am not talking about desire or anything sexual. I am paying attention more to the special clothes they are wearing. I am enamored by the *sels* they use as jewellery, those beautiful green ones. Also those teeth ornaments that really stand out for me. They are from sharks or other animals, they use them to decorate their *hedbans*—headbands or place around their biceps. And they are barefoot but with *lekbans*—ankle bands that match their other jewellery, their multi-coloured ornaments. No gold or silver. The ornaments are totally different. On upper bodies they only wear colourful chest bands, their biceps and stomachs are bare. Dark, chocolate-colour skin. They laugh boisterously, they talk loudly. Sometimes they point their fingers at me.

The youth stand along the side, they still look like adolescents. Poyonou whispers in my ear: "The bride's *familia* ... these are *purpur*—traditional dress." He diverts my attention. Looking around at everyone, Pokun is nowhere to be seen. Poyonou goes to help the others. I do not

know where he is, I am left standing alone. I look at the gifts and the hundreds of bags of rice and sugar. There is coffee, there are turtles, there are bags of *saksak*, there are large baskets of *potetos*, and there are a few pigs.

So many presents!

I get distracted by something—the relatively large table where everyone puts the money they brought with them. Poyonou also puts the money he is holding with the rest of the gifts. I stare at that table without blinking. That simple rectangle table with its medium-height legs is not particularly fascinating for me. My mind drifts into the past ... there is something else. I recollect times gone by, I engage in some play of memories, memories entertain memories. First a sight of joy, a smile, now these musings culminate in longing, my eyes well up with tears. A memory full of joy. My brother's wedding ceremony ... this table here strongly resembles our own customs. This is similar to my brother's wedding celebration, like today the guests brought money with them. The difference is that in our wedding custom the money is for the groom, but here the *famili* of the groom offer the money to the *famili* of the *tambu meri*.

I take a deep breath, I try to hide my intense emotions. I focus all my attention on the traditional local dance performed by the women in the centre. They are mainly moving their feet in rhythm. From among all the presents they collected here I notice a strange animal. I have no idea what it is. I try my hardest to think, but in the end I ask Poyonou when he comes stand beside me again: "*Wanem* is that?" I point to the water animal. Poyono answers: "That's a stingray." My eyes open wide with surprise and shock. I say to myself: "It's huge." Until now I have never seen one. From behind it looks like a butterfly whose wings and body blend into one. Or it looks something like a triangle with circular ears. It is massive with a long tail sticking out for all to see. Poyonou continues by saying that stingray

protect themselves when in danger by using their tails. Everything is going well, they are serving all kinds of fruit. It is not a luxurious wedding except for the bride's makeup and video recording of every minute of the ceremony.

The sun begins to set and we make plans to return. Poyonou asks me to help him carry a few bags of rice. I say with surprise: "Why are you taking your presents back?" He throws a bag over his shoulder and answers: "I'm not taking it back, these are the presents offered by the *famili* of the *tambu meri*, and the *famili* of the groom distributes them among the guests." I bend over and pick up a bag of rice: "You mean they divide their presents among you all?"

"Yeah."

Pindramon is carrying a basket of fruit and Pokun is holding a turtle. We get into the boat. Today the groom was all smiles. I wish the couple happiness.

*

The sound of a *tamiok* pounding a tree trunk echoes, I hear the sound of the split and creak of a tree about to fall. Pokun is still frowning and looking up waiting to see the tree fall as Poyonou chops it. I do not know why he is not talking to me since we returned yesterday. I cannot stop looking at Poyonou as he chops and explains at the same time: "Our canoe is decaying. I hope this one doesn't take more than a week." He is puffing and panting, the tree finally splits and falls. Until a few minutes ago I was doing the chopping and now I put my *tamiok* down. I pick up one of the bush knives Poyonou brought with him. I begin cutting off the leaves and branches of the tree. It has a huge trunk; it is for making a thin and

long canoe that can fit at least two people. Poyonou has to carve out the middle to make room for people to sit inside. He is even working on its exterior.

In the end I cannot hold back, I say to Pokun who is sitting over to the side and holding the *kapui*: “What’s wrong, Pokun?” Still frowning in a childlike manner, he answers: “Yesterday I was eagerly waiting for you so we could go see the waterfall together.” I just realise now the reason he has been so upset. Poyonou laughs at his words, he is still busy carving out the tree. I put the bush knife down and go sit next to Pokun: “I’m sorry, I really wanted to see the wedding.”

Still frowning, he responds: “What should we call the *kapui*?” His lips flourish into a smile in a way particular to children. He continues with enthusiasm: “Yeah, he has to have a name.”

He has forgotten how upset he was a few minutes ago. In my view children have hearts as big as oceans, it does not take long before they drown their grievances in that ocean.

I reply: “In the cartoon I mentioned to you before they named him Merker. Do you think it’s ok for us to use the same name?”

He gestures in agreement straight away and Merker begins to twist and turn while in between Pokun’s arms. I stand up and go help Poyonou, I begin carving out the tree in the way Poyonou taught me.

Finishing the canoe took less than a week. The wind blows, it dances through my messy shoulder-length hair, it moves my hair in every direction. After many years I still take pleasure when I hear the sound of water, and I have gotten used to the sound of Chauka. I hold the wooden gun with the spear and band that Poyonou made for me. I was lucky today, I was able to catch two *voritas* and a few small *pis*. Pokun even says I catch *pis* better than Poyonou. But I know I am not better than Poyonou, Pokun

is just magnifying my skill. I place the fishing gun on my shoulder and carry my large bucket. As I pass between the *hauses* the same elderly woman sits on the same tree trunk, she greets me the same way she does every other day. I greet her back. Friends wave at me, there is no sign of the chatter I used to hear in the beginning. There is practically no difference between me and them.

My skin is darker now, I walk barefooted. I am more or less a professional fisherman, I can guide a canoe by myself, and I can join the others in making *saksak* without any instruction. In addition to these I can speak the language. Manus has 18 *tok ples*. I can speak the official language spoken by Manusians, the language called Tok Pisin. I speak it well. I also speak the *tok ples* here, the Lele language from this area of Manus, I can communicate with the people here. The fact that I can speak the *tok ples* well is fascinating for the locals. As a result of this they accept me in their community.

Instead of going to my *haus* I travel down to the *maket* and calculate whether or not I have been able to earn enough for solar panels in these last six months. Painim follows behind me while Merker teases her at times. The racket they make distracts me, I cannot think straight, I want to consider what else Pokun needs. Merker has grown quite a bit now, he catches up quickly and walks next to me. He latches onto me with his hands and pull himself up onto my shoulder. He swings his tail and sometimes tickles the back of my neck with his snout. His cute playfulness stops me from getting frustrated with him. When we reach the *maket* I sell my *voritas* and *pis*. This time I am really satisfied because in addition to solar panels I can also buy three lamps and a battery with the money I have saved these last few months. When I arrive back home my large parrot flies

towards me and sits on my other shoulder. Her long red feathers cover my eyes; sometimes it is hard tolerating Merker and my parrot.

I bend over and place my purchases on the floor. Pindramon is sitting in front of the *haus* and spreading *saksak* on the table to dry. Poyonou is smoking his tobacco wrapped in newspaper. When my hands are free I take Merker down from my shoulder and say: “Look what I’ve bought.” Pindramon pauses from her work: “You went shopping again?” However, Poyonou stands up to come over and collect the goods from me. When he sees the solar panels and battery he becomes overjoyed and turns to Pindramon: “Look at this, he got solar panels!” Both are thrilled. They get busy setting them up, then the door of the *haus* opens—Pokun is beside himself when he sees the light from the lamps. He hugs me. They cannot stop smiling for the longest time. From now on Pokun can study with the light from the lamp, and sometimes he brings his friends over so they can use the light. I try my best to repay their kindness and generosity. They did a lot for me in the beginning, now I have a plantation of *bananas* and *pawpaw*, I sell them and I use the money to buy new clothes for Pokun and sometimes things for the home. I also want to help Pindramon and Poyonou. They know how much I feel indebted to them, we are a *famili* of four now.

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I throw a piece of wood and Painim chases it, puffing and panting. She returns with it. I do not feel like doing anything today. Today my mood is like a fish that has been taken from a lagoon and condemned to remain in a small aquarium. It is true that the fish imagined that it would leave the lagoon and be placed in the sea, but now its lot is a small aquarium. But in

this aquarium the fish has had some good days. With Painim, Merker and the large red parrot I have notched up some good days. Now they will be taking the fish out of the aquarium this month. The fish does not know what will happen after that, I do not know where I will go when I leave Manus.

I am not a tourist that has lived here for a few years, I am not a traveler, I am not someone who chose to come here. Tomorrow is the last day I spend on Manus, I feel that when I go I will miss my little *banana* and *pawpaw* plantation. I will miss fishing. I do not even want to think about how much I will miss Poyonou, Pindramon and, more than anyone else, Pokun. When Pokun returns from school he looks for me even before visiting his mother or his home so he can tell me what happened at school that day. I have already told him that we are a *famili*, I mean we have become a *famili* now. We stood side by side in order to survive.

“Mardin, Mardin.”

I turn to see who is calling. Pokun arrives, Painim arrives with him holding a stick in her mouth. He was in such a hurry that he leans his hands on his knees and says: “I was looking for you.” I give a sorrowful smile. I am not like I usually am on other days, I do not tease him like I always do: “Why? How was school?” He stands up straight: “School was like every other day, I wanted to say we should go fishing together tomorrow. We can take the canoe.” He is waiting for me to say something, but I just flinch quickly. After I found out yesterday that we will be leaving tomorrow I have not stopped thinking how to tell Pokun about my departure. How will I tell him he will never see me again? But now that I have seen how enthusiastic he is and his invitation to go fishing I cannot bring myself to tell him. I have decided that I will never say goodbye to him. I prefer to just leave rather than tell Pokun and say goodbye.

When we gather in the *haus* for dinner and there is a moment of silence between the sound of our eating, Pokun tells Pindramon: “Mardin and I are going fishing ...” and asks her “... will you make *mumu saksak*—traditional baked sago for us?” Pindramon gives him a motherly smile and wants to answer him, but I say to Pokun: “I can’t go with you tomorrow.” Pokun knows there is something wrong. There is a reason I have been so pensive: “Is something wrong, Mardin?” I hope he does not see the tears welling up in my eyes. Poyonou and Pindramon focus their attention on us, I just stare down at the plate in front of me on the table. I look at the *bananas* fried in *kokonas* oil and grilled *pis*.

“No, I’m just tired.”

Pokun does not say anything else. Even Poyonou and Pindramon do not say anything. But Pokun knows something is wrong and that I am hiding it. He understands. I say a melancholic goodnight. I am choking with sorrow, I want to cry. I go to my room and sleep on my side. I stare out of the small rectangular window of my *haus*, stare at the clear sky, the untainted sky. I can see through the long leaves of the *kokonas diwai* and count the stars in the sky. This is the last night I witness this beauty. The future is always a mystery, especially for someone like me who has been wandering in limbo for many years.

I hear footsteps, I know it is Pokun. He has come to check on me. I pretend to be asleep. Perhaps he has realised that we will be separated. Maybe he knows that I am going to a place where he cannot see me. This is not the last time he comes to check on me. He returns a few more times before morning. When feelings of compassion develop between two people their hearts come closer. I think to myself that Pokun’s heart has been made anxious by my restless heart, so much so that he practically cannot sleep until morning.

When I wake up and go to the kitchen Pokun is not there. He is asleep. Poyonou is smoking some Brus wrapped in newspaper. Pindramon checks on the *mumu saksak* she is making. Perhaps she still thinks I am going fishing. I say: "Poyono, could you come here for a moment? I want to speak to you and Pindramon before Pokun wakes up." He turns his head and comes inside: "Yeah, I also wanted to tell you that I found a good tree. I think the canoe I made for you is getting old. When the weather gets cooler let's go cut down the tree to make a canoe." Poyonou is thinking of me, he is thinking that my little canoe does not function well. I tell myself that I wish they were not so kind and helpful from the beginning. Now it is extremely difficult to leave and go our separate ways.

I take a deep breath so I do not choke up: "After visiting the *maket* yesterday I went to the refugee prison camp."

Both are staring at me. They know by looking at my face that I do not have good news for them. I pause, then continue: "I have to leave Manus today ..."

I lift my head. Poyonou is in shock, he is left just staring at me. He is so surprised that the Brus he is smoking falls to the ground from his lips. He is still staring at me, not even blinking.

Pindarmon is practically in the same state. Taken aback and shocked, she says: "So you tell us now?"

I extend my hand and place it on her hand which is lying on the table. I look at her: "They said that they have to empty the camp within a week. My name was on the list for today." A burning smell wafts in. Pindramon forgot that her *mumu saksak* is on the fire. She does not even get up to remove the cakes. I get up to attend to it myself. The cakes are totally burnt. I remove them and place them to the side. They are still looking at me in shock. I remain standing: "I can't say goodbye to Pokun

and I want to go before he wakes up.” I see Pindramon wipe her cheek with her hand, Poyonou stares at the table. I cannot wait any more. I cannot bear it anymore.

I got to my room to pack my things. I place them in my backpack. I wish I could take my little plantation, or Merker and Painim. The only thing I can take with me is the good memories and the bad memories. Those endless smiles that I expressed here. I look over at Pokun through the window. He is still asleep. I tell myself he is old enough to know that me not saying goodbye and not informing him about leaving is due to the enormous fondness I have for him, it is because I cannot grasp the fact that I will never see him again. I hug Pindramon and Poyonou, this is the first time Poyonou’s eyes have teared up. I do not wait. Waiting any more than this will only torment me. I quickly make my way; I walk away from them.

I am a refugee. Someone whose life in their homeland had become intolerable, someone who has given up everything. Family, everything they loved. Even their dreams. Someone who flees their country but who dreams of better days. After all that hardship, after all that oppression, after all that humiliation, I arrived here in Manus. The compassion of this family on this remote *ailan* was like treatment for wounds I had suffered over a long time.

I walk for three hours until I arrive. One of the guys tells me we will leave within two hours. However, it does not take long before the bus arrives at 3pm. We all queue up to get in. I shed a tear, the wind blows and spreads it across my face. The tear on my cheek feels cool.

I want to get in the bus but I hear someone yelling over and over: “Mardin, Mardin!”

I wait, I pause then turn my head. I see him. His curly hair, his dark skin. Now he is practically a youth. I have been missing him ever since I

left this morning. Now I am certain that this will be the last time he runs towards me and jumps into my arms. He wraps his arms around my waist and cries. He starts talking in a loud voice so the people around us hear, even the refugees in the bus look at us in grief.

Pokun will not let me go: "Why did you want to leave like this? I woke up and you weren't there. Mum said you were leaving, forever."

He steps back from me. Now I'm crying, too: "I just didn't want to upset you."

He wipes his tears with the back of his hand: "Since you're leaving promise me now that you will come back to see me one day. I'm going to miss you, after all. Take a look at this."

He puts his hand in his pocket. He takes out a thick piece of string with a big green *sels* hanging from it. He says: "I wanted us to go fishing so I could give this to you. You like *sels*."

It is not possible ... I cannot be indifferent. I cannot make this departure easier for myself. It is harder than I thought. This separation is difficult for both of us.

The guards take me to board the bus. I get on in silence.

The bus takes off. Pokun runs after it, I see him. His face is full of tears. I stare at him through the window. My sight of him is blurry through the tears that have welled up in my eyes. He even stumbles on a rock and falls over. The bus sends dust and smoke everywhere, I can no longer see Pokun.

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We need to accept the fact that we will never live lives that could really be considered happy. I mean, we refugees. Even in the best circumstances we

will always miss our families. The very people we were forced to leave behind. With all this grief I feel today I also miss my mother. That elderly woman who always wanted the best for me. Like every other mother. But no one knows the destination of this bus, no one knows where it leads, no one can predict how much longer this wondering will continue. As I struggle with stress and worry I long to return and visit the three people who became my temporary *famili*.

I wish I could be with Painim, I wish I could get drunk on the beach, I wish Merker would climb on my head, I even wish that the pikus tree that possibly has a *masalai* sleeping in it would take my life.

Perhaps life after Manus will be harder for me, even though there was no opportunity for a life here. My future is uncertain, this life in limbo is so uncanny.

Translations:

Farsi to English: Omid Tofighian

Farsi to Tok Pisin: Mardin Arvin

NOTES