

Flores Girl :The Children God Forgot

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Version 1a

Dedication

To My Nancy,

You gave me the opportunity, and that is all anyone could ask.

Your Loving Erik

Prologue

On October 28th, 2004 scientists made an announcement regarding a startling fossil hominid find they had recently made. Their discovery, called *Homo floresiensis*, was seemingly a dwarf variation of an early human ancestor called *Homo erectus*, who inhabited the Indonesian Island of Flores some 18,000 years ago. The adults stood three feet tall and they lived on the island with modern humans for thousands of years. Perhaps coincidentally, perhaps not, the islanders also have a local folk legend regarding a dwarf race of people that they called the Ebu Gogo.

Since the announcement scientist have been in a fervent debate as to whether or not the hobbits, as they were called by the press, were a new species or were, in fact, a group of diseased human beings. Anthropologists are now scouring the island trying to find where *Homo floresiensis* made their last stand when faced with the continuous onslaught from humanity. This is one account of their rediscovery, and the repercussions of introducing such innocents to our less than brave new world.

The most important scientific revolutions all include, as their only common feature, the dethronement of human arrogance from one pedestal after another of previous convictions about our centrality in the cosmos.

Stephen Jay Gould (1941 - 2002)

Sarah's Island

“Why am I here?” Sarah cried aloud to herself while shaking her head against the spiraling winds. To her embarrassment, she observed the two native guides watching her, and she wondered if they had overheard her lamentable outburst. Damn it, she didn't want to create a scene, not now and definitely not during this furious storm. As the dark clouds encircled the boat, Sarah could only look up and silently exclaim, “Just my freaking luck!”

As the guides looked back, they could see that their passenger was uncomfortable, and was doing all she could do to hang onto the side of the small boat. The storm chop was worsening, and the spray washed over the open boat in a continuous, unrelenting shower over the boat's occupants. The small American brunette, dressed in her customary khaki long sleeve shirt with shorts, was soaked from head to toe. When the first spray soaked her shirt, Sarah was initially concerned about giving the guides an unintentional show as the wet shirt clung to her breasts. Now, her only concern was to survive this ordeal. Goose bumps covered her exposed, tanned legs due to exposure from the cold ocean spray, and she fought hard to avoid shivering.

She could hear the boat struggling against the swells, and a dark, pungent diesel smoke poured from the ancient motor. Supar looked back at Sarah, and he observed how sad and lonely she appeared. Sarah, in turn, caught Supar watching her and she managed a small, brave smile for him that said everything was going to be all right.

As the vessel bounced from swell to swell, Sarah refused to relinquish her grip on one of the old rusty cleats. The grey, violent storm was rapidly closing in about the small boat, and Sarah was seriously questioning her sanity for agreeing to go on this research trip in the first place. What sane primatologist would travel in a boat that wasn't large enough for safe passage in a second rate theme park, let alone a vast ocean? For Sarah, all of the scientific research and good intentions meant little to her in the middle of this tempest. It was then that she realized the whole boat trip had become a metaphor for her sad and rather lonely life.

Their journey began earlier that morning with little fanfare as just another routine island-hopping trip. They were traveling from Maumere to one of the many local islands that littered the Flores Sea, and the trip would take a half-day, at most. It was just Sarah and the two guides aboard a small wooden boat that totaled less than thirty feet in length. As they got underway, the two guides were preoccupied with the operation of the boat so Sarah sat alone and busied herself with the updating of her journal. The weather began as a beautiful tropical day, but as they made their way into the open ocean, the clouds rapidly moved in, and the water started to get choppy. She could hear the small motor straining against the waves, and more smoke than usual was filling the pristine ocean air.

They soon spotted their island destination and Sarah gave an outward sigh of relief at their apparent luck. However, as they got within a half mile of the island, the boat's ancient motor started to sputter with the strain of its task. The chop continued to get rougher, and to their dismay, the motor failed entirely. The two guides became frantic in their efforts to restart the motor, and the strong ocean waves began a ferocious assault on the small boat. Within minutes, they started to drift away from their island destination, and back into the vastness of the raging Flores Sea.

The powerless boat drifted for about an hour as the seas continued their violent attack. In the far distance, Supar spotted another, much smaller island and pointed it out to Sarah. Sarah grabbed the old tattered navigational charts from the hold, and found that the island was absent from the charts. Unable to help, she watched helplessly as the guides struggled with the motor in the inclement weather. After much effort and an unending torrent of unintelligible curses, they finally coaxed the tired motor to start. With the storm continuing to strengthen and after an animated debate in Bahasa, the guides decided to bring the boat into the small island, and wait out the rampaging storm. A nervous Sarah tried to use the radio to get somebody's attention, but the weather was playing havoc with the radio as well. She now understood that they were truly alone in the middle of this horrific squall. The boat rode up and down in the twenty-foot swells causing Sarah to become violently ill with the unending motion. They were out of options and taking shelter on the unknown island was their only possible salvation.

As they approached the island, a small voice within Sarah cried an alarm, "No Sarah, not this island, get away from here!" As she often did, Sarah ignored the small voice of reason and dutifully noted their location on her GPS device while mechanically writing the entry into her journal.

The skies continued to darken as the boat made its halting approach into the relative calm of a small bay. The motor sputtered and hissed the entire way as the boat crept slowly towards the shoreline. After much struggle with the waves, the two guides managed to ground the boat onto the beach and Supar lifted Sarah off the boat. The wind had picked up considerably, and Sarah decided to make her way up the dark, sloping sands of the narrow beach. An intense lightening storm lit the skies above the island, but Sarah barely noticed the theatrics. Instead, she sat on the beach holding her chin to her knees as she fought the waves of nausea that swept over her. She was huddled on the beach for almost a half hour, still feeling the seas riding up and

down within her body, doing anything she could to make the ill feeling go away. While she sat, she watched the guides struggling to keep control of the boat while they simultaneously worked on the motor. Feeling guilty that she could not help, Sarah turned her attention to the gathering storm clouds that were swirling about the beach in a maelstrom of angry green and gray colors. In the distance, she could see dark heavy rain bands advancing over the ocean, but the heavier rains appeared to be retreating away from the island.

A half hour later the storm finally exhausted its fury and the skies surrounding the island began to slowly brighten. Feeling a bit better, Sarah stood up and decided to help the guides with the boat. As Sarah approached the boat, a busy Supar waved her away, and she decided instead to take a shaky walk to the tree line that demarcated the end of the beach. The tree line was populated by a number of tall, slender palm trees and the ground was covered with dense, impenetrable underbrush. As the storm winds subsided, a feeling of normalcy returned to the beach and the sounds of nature began to fill the air. Sarah recognized the calls of some of the native birds, and started to make her way into the underbrush to investigate. As a trained naturalist, the petite brunette was very comfortable with exploring a strange forest; it was something she had done hundreds of times before without the slightest hesitation. She ignored the numerous branches that scratched her bare legs as she purposely made her way to a suitable sitting location. The restless birds sensed her approach, and they quickly stopped their calling while taking the time to spy on the intruder to their island world.

Sarah found a good spot for observation and calmly settled in to watch nature. Once her movements stopped, a few quiet moments passed, and the birds resumed their songs. As she listened, she was surprised to hear the call of the Flores Green Pigeon. Sarah sat and listened to them for a few minutes as she strained to hear if they were singing a different song dialect from the birds she had heard on Flores Island.

Then there was silence.

“That’s strange, the birds stopped their singing,” she thought to herself. “Strange?” Sarah was baffled, since she had been careful to remain motionless in her current sitting position. At that moment, she sensed it, the very thing the birds had sensed. Something else was now present, and that something was in very close proximity to her. The winds blew in from the beach, and the palm trees began to sway in rhythm to the strengthening wind.

More silence. As she sat quietly, Sarah had a sudden moment of realization it was a “someone” and not a “some-thing” that was close to her! Sarah’s experience told her she was being watched, and she could tell if an animal was checking to see if she was a predator, or perhaps potential prey. She could even distinguish the inquisitive glance of an intelligent creature such as a great ape. The forest just sounded different when the great apes stopped to observe her but there were no great apes on these islands, and, for all she knew, no people either, “great” or otherwise.

“Mmmrppooohhhh,” a voice murmured, followed shortly thereafter by the low, hushed tones of several other voices floating in the humid tropical air. The sudden onset of the voices startled Sarah and she looked about to find their source. She heard whispering coming from the brush, and felt as if somebody’s curious eyes were focused upon her but she couldn’t see from where, or for that matter, know how many were watching her.

The voices continued for several minutes, always comprised of several low, hushed tones. She was positive that there was more than one voice, maybe as many as three or more individuals conversing, or rather murmuring about her from only a short distance away. They were hushed, definitely male voices that she could not clearly hear or understand. They were communicating, but it was not a language that she could readily recognize. No, not quite the coherent voices of people, but more like the low, unintelligible mumbling of the insane. Their

cadence reminded Sarah of another time, perhaps the voices of the damned, souls living in a grey nether world parallel to her own world of light. The voices would rise up and down, grow quiet for a moment, and then continue their hushed dialog among themselves. To Sarah, this went on for what seemed to be hours but, in actuality, it lasted only for a couple of minutes. Like any frightened animal, Sarah's senses were at a peak as she continued to feel their presence closing in about her.

From her vantage point, all Sarah could see was a wall of green foliage, and she felt entirely defenseless in her sitting position. She was desperate to escape, but her limbs had become paralyzed with fear, and she found herself frozen in her vantage point. As the hair on her arms stood on end, Sarah now knew she was starting to panic. Her breathing became rapid and shallower, as fear overwhelmed her normally rational demeanor. Finally, there was a reprieve: the murmuring stopped.

Maybe the guides were nearby, maybe even looking for her.

Silence.

Were the voices gone? Yes, but no, she could still sense someone watching her from the depths of the forest. "Who's there?" she called out in a small, barely audible voice that quivered in the wind.

Sarah was about to cry out when she heard the frantic calls of the guides looking for their missing American guest. "Sarah! Sarah, where are you?" Supar yelled out.

"I'm over here," she said in a whisper but her voice was too small to be heard above the rising wind. It was too late for rescue, as she knew they were closing in upon her. She tried to see, but now her vision had become cloudy. She tried to run but she could not feel her legs. Like any scared animal, she remained motionless, overcome by a primordial fear that she could

not name nor see. This fear bred deep within her bones, a lower form of being that supplanted all traces of the logical human essence that was recognizable as Sarah.

Red of tooth and fang, the unseen menace surged from the brush. Rather than fight, she offered her throat to the horrors but their bloodlust would not be satiated with a sudden and clean kill. No, they were attacking her frail body with a bloody fury that would tear and slice her soft flesh into small, unrecognizable pieces of shredded red meat. She opened her mouth wide to scream but no sounds were emitted. In turn, her body began to violently twist and shake as if to throw off her attackers but still she could not escape the horrific onslaught. Each of her senses began to leave her: first her sight, followed by her hearing and, finally, her sense of self. Her attackers were a faceless, nameless, universal terror that she could only surrender to; her flesh devoured for the continued existence of another. There was no pain, just a sad inevitability to her timeless sacrifice as she offered her herself to her attackers. The weak of the species was giving up to the strong, and she was swallowed whole into the darkness. After the feeding was over, Sarah existed no more and a large, damp red stain marked her brief passing along the parched jungle floor. She had become food for another!

Sarah's Promise

Sarah jumped up and awoke thrashing about her bed, while bathed in a deep cold sweat.

Struggling to catch her breath, she realized that she continued to exist despite the momentary horror of her dream. She looked around to get her bearings and she tried to focus in on her immediate surroundings. She was still groggy from sleep, and looked up to see the comforting familiarity of her alarm clock. Through the darkness, her eyes began to focus on the large red LED numbers. It was only two o'clock in the morning. She sat up in her bed and while touching the front of her gown, she felt the dampness of the cotton cloth against her skin. As her heartbeat slowed, she noticed that her once pristine sheets were now soaked from her recent bout of night terrors.

“Damn, how many times am I going to have that same stupid, cretinous nightmare? How many times can I go back to the same island, and relive that same, stupid incident?” she said aloud to herself in the dark. The dream had subsided from her life for a while, but it was back with a renewed, almost hellish vigor.

The stupid nightmare was always the same and, yet, it was always so very real to her. A sudden storm overtakes the small boat, and forces them to the mysterious island. It didn't matter that in reality the storm was no where near the biblical proportions of the dream, and it didn't

matter that the incident on the island happened more than two years ago. It didn't matter that the guides found her alone in the woods, and it didn't matter that all three had left the island safely together that day. No, it did matter, because deep in the forest there was a presence Sarah couldn't see, didn't understand and, that for some reason beyond rational explanation, had scared her more than any other time in her life. It mattered a lot because the incident scared Sarah, the normally 'dispassionate' scientist, out of her wits.

"Why did it always have to be some strange, mysterious island with bad weather?" she thought to herself. "This is so pathetic; my life is a freaking montage of other people's inane clichés."

Even with that rationalization, she knew she was scared.

If only she could talk to more people about the incident, then, maybe, she could face her fears. Who knows, maybe what she really needed was quality time with an experienced therapist. But that was the problem with being an intellectual; she knew all of the psycho-babble that would be directed at her. The therapist would just tell her that the recurring nightmares were symbolic of her worst fears: that of being alone, and having no one else to turn to. Hell, Sarah knew she was truly alone in the world. She was alone on that island, and she was alone now in her bedroom at two o'clock in the morning. Nothing in her life had changed since she left that damn island. Most of all, there was nobody sharing her bed and, if truth be told, every solitary night she went to bed alone was a constant reminder to her of her intolerable loneliness.

For Sarah, the nightmare had become a sad metaphor for her dull, and seemingly, pointless life. To begin with, Sarah knew she shouldn't have been on that stupid island in the first place. Sarah was a primatologist but, no, she wasn't going to have much primate research to do on Flores Island. Flores Island in Indonesia may have been famous for Komodo dragons and giant rats; however, it had little to offer in terms of primate study. Worse, the limestone caves of

Liang Bua were strictly off limits to her as well. She was such a fish out of water that the other graduate students would rag on her, even commenting on how the Komodo dragons would “go ape” every so often. It was just another example of their unending juvenile humor, and it always at her expense.

Sarah's departmental associates had told her that this trip would add nothing to her resume, and that the time spent on the island was career suicide. What they had to say didn't matter much to Sarah. She was there to assist her old comrade and mentor, Professor Brightman with his study of island speciation. Brightman was an enthusiastic follower of Charles Darwin's work, and by visiting some of the smaller islands, Sarah had hoped to identify some new fertile grounds for Brightman to continue his ongoing studies of island bird speciation. With the recent fossil discoveries in Liang Bua, Flores Island was quickly becoming the new Galapagos Islands for biologists looking to do evolutionary field studies on island biology.

For Sarah, it was all good theoretical science, and island speciation was once again a hot topic among biologists. As any casual student of Charles Darwin would tell you, islands are nature's great evolutionary laboratories. Take a small population of animals from a single species, isolate them on an island, and you'll have a virtual explosion of new species, as they try to occupy the new niches that the island was affording them. That is assuming they do not go extinct first adjusting to their new island habitat. This process, called species radiation, is a major driving force in the evolution of all living creatures, even human beings. Moreover, Sarah was confident that the island research would help her with her own studies of the great apes, and the mounting ecological pressures they were facing in their own forest habitats. In this manner, Sarah tried to find some good cause for her banishment to her island purgatory, away from her beloved chimps and gorillas that were prisoners in the university research centers.

As she thought about it, the vicious truth hit her. “Oh my God, it all seems so boring and tedious.” Sadly, as she reviewed her logic for the trip, Sarah realized that she was very accomplished at rationalizing her dull, rather submissive life. Sarah knew the real reason why she was there on that island. She was acting, once again, as a very serviceable doormat for Professor Brightman, doing yet another “big” favor for him. Now here she was, years later beating herself up at two in the morning for being a doormat.

There were other reasons for Sarah’s bitterness and loneliness. When the other students got out of hand, Professor Brightman would put a stop to their nonsense by lecturing to them. He also had the unfortunate habit of pointing out to them how impeccably clear and concise Sarah’s field observation techniques were while chiding them for their own shoddy work. This, of course, had the undesired effect of making Sarah less than popular with the other graduate students; well that plus her normal glacial demeanor did not help matters either. Here Sarah was, a grown woman past her middle twenties, being subjected to taunts about being a teacher’s pet. Outwardly, it seemed all so juvenile but the sexual innuendos were never far behind the childish taunts. Sarah pretended it really didn’t matter much to her; after all she was so close to obtaining her associate professor position. To Sarah, the other graduate students just seemed so young and immature, not worthy of her attention nor of her friendship. As always, Sarah managed to find herself alone even amongst a group of her “supposed” colleagues.

The day had started innocently enough; it was just another one of her routine island hopping trips from Flores Island. Accompanying her was two of the expedition’s most trusted guides, but she was the only American researcher going on this day trip. In the beginning, this would give Sarah the creeps, especially with the way some of the Indonesian men would gaze at her. However, Sarah soon learned that the Flores men were just staring in amazement at her pale

skin since many of them had limited exposure to western women. Overall, she found most of the Flores natives to be extremely friendly, and polite almost to a fault.

Moreover, Sarah felt good about the day trip because one of the guides going with her was Supar, which was short for Superman. Supar was a relatively undistinguished looking islander. Short and dark skinned, like most of the other Flores natives, only his graying black hair gave away his advanced years. A wide flat nose dominated his large oval face and, in a similar manner, his missing upper premolars would be prominently displayed whenever he smiled or laughed. Yes, he was undistinguished looking but Supar was special because his deep voice conveyed an excellent grasp of English, and he was truly one of the more qualified guides. He was attentive, and his innate intelligence allowed him to understand what the researchers were trying to accomplish with their fieldwork. Supar was also very personable, and he had gone out of his way to know Sarah on a first name basis. Every morning he greeted her with a big hello, and he would inevitably ask the despondent Sarah to smile. It wasn't much in terms of human companionship, but compared with the frosty relationships Sarah shared with the other students; it was a welcome change of pace.

Sarah also appreciated the respect Supar garnered from the other native guides, something she couldn't get in turn from the other grad students. He exuded a quiet dignity, and it was clear to Sarah that when Supar spoke the other native guides paid very close attention to him. Under his seemingly friendly veneer, Sarah knew that Supar was sheltering a much stronger will and ego; one that he carefully hid from the other American researchers in the expedition. As for the other native workers, Sarah didn't have much use for them, and those feelings only intensified when the camp suffered through a rash of stolen equipment.

It was two-thirty in the morning, and Sarah's brain raced to resolve the questions and puzzles in her life that she knew were unanswerable. "Why was she alone that day?" Sarah

asked. As Sarah recalled the day's events, she felt a degree of bitterness towards Patti, the obnoxious graduate student who was to be Sarah's traveling companion for the day.

Unfortunately, Patti wasn't in any shape that morning to be traveling anywhere. After having spent a week in the forest, counting various bird populations, the freakishly pale Patti, used her day of freedom to cavort topless with some of the male grad students on one of the many isolated beaches that Flores featured. The insipid slut Patti neglected to use a sun block and after several hours of exposure to the blazing equatorial sun, a painful, lobster-red hue had seized control over most of Patti's body. To make matters worse, the incredibly stupid Patti spent the night drinking at a local bar in a failed effort to try to kill the pain from the sunburn.

When Sarah greeted Patti in the morning, Patti's essence consisted of little more than a raging burn with a wicked hangover. The funny part was that Sarah found this a vast improvement over Patti's normally sour disposition. Sarah quickly recognized that Patti, in her present sad shape, wasn't going anywhere that morning. Sarah didn't even bother trying to find a replacement for Patti, knowing the smug attitudes of the other grad students, and Patti's antics had already delayed her departure by an hour. Consequently, Sarah found herself alone when the incident happened because some other stupid and immature soul had decided to frolic in the sun the day before. When was she going to frolic in the sun, she wondered?

When she returned to Flores, Sarah was unable to talk to anyone at the camp about the incident. Why? She didn't trust anybody, and because she was so unsure of what really happened on the island. "Feeling" that you were being observed by an intelligent presence really didn't exactly qualify as a "lucid" scientific observation, even in her books. Indeed, most people would be fairly dismissive of the incident in question, ascribing the event to that of an imaginative young woman sitting alone in the wilderness. After all, the two guides had not seen or heard anything and she asked them several times if they had. No, Sarah felt that it was best to

keep the incident a secret until her return to the states where she hoped she could find the right person to confide in. Professor Brightman had already left camp the week before, and she really didn't know the other academics well enough to trust them with her story.

When Sarah returned to the states, she did share her curious encounter with Professor Brightman. He, of course, asked, "Why didn't you go back to the island to investigate some more?" On balance, it was a perfectly logical question he was asking of her. She told him that with the rash of thefts occurring in the camp the GPS device with the coordinates was among the losses; at least that's what she told him. She didn't tell him that even if she had the coordinates she couldn't go back because the entire expedition had become somewhat uncomfortable for her, and in reality, she was actually too frightened to return to the island alone. Really, how do you begin to tell your mentor you are an antisocial coward?

The other night an even more curious dream came to her, one that was just as vivid to her as her nightmare. The research team had just broke camp and Sarah headed with the other members to Maumere. As they waited for their respective flights home Sarah decided to leave the hotel to take a final walk in the market space. As she walked among the vendors, a small native middle-aged man with a shaved head attentively followed behind her as she wandered from stall to stall. He was dressed in a crisp white short-sleeve shirt with dark shorts and his staring was so intense Sarah stopped and curtly asked him, "Can I help you?"

She stared directly into his eyes take care in not averting her gaze from his brown eyes. She was several inches taller than he was so she didn't feel physically threatened by his presence; in fact, she was more irked by his constant staring. As she waited for his response, Sarah fidgeted with her clothes in the slim chance that her apparel was somehow amiss.

"Perhaps you can. Are you Sarah?"

"Yes."

“Very good, nice to meet to you.”

“Huh, okay same here I guess.”

“Good, are you happy?” he asked eagerly.

“What? What is it to you? Who are you, the happy police?” she said sarcastically as she walked away from him.

“I’m interested in all sentient creatures; I’m happy, I hope you are?” he said as he pursued the escaping Sarah.

“This is ridiculous; of course I’m happy, if you mean life in general,” she curtly responded and she turned to face the brazen little man.

“Are you happy now?” he asked.

The man looked at her while measuring her response and began to look into her eyes. Suddenly, Sarah felt guilty for her abruptness and her apparent lie.

“Are you happy this moment?” he asked again.

“No, strike that my answer, that’s wrong. I am not happy at all but this will change. But why should you care?” Sarah asked.

“I’m happy now, you should be too,” he stated. “All we have is now. Your life is not what you want?”

“I guess. I could, no, I should be doing more.”

“Not better? Not now?”

“No more, it’s not just about me personally. I should be doing more for others.”

“You study animals?”

“Yes, primates in general, who are you?”

“A friend, can’t you tell?”

“No, but how do you know me? Have we met before?” but she asked this time with less anger. She was warming up to the small inquisitive man with the thin-rimmed glasses and a ready smile. She suddenly realized that he could be a simpleton so she found it easy to smile back at him. As she looked into his eyes, she could hear a large bell sound several times in the distant hills echoing distinctly above the din of the marketplace.

“No, we haven't met before.”

“Did you just hear that church bell?” she asked.

“No, I did not. Have you had dreams of your past lives?”

“Huh? I don't believe in that. You mean like reincarnation?”

“Yes. So do you believe in fighting?”

“No, I believe in non-violence.”

“But would you fight to protect innocents that cannot defend themselves?”

“Strange, in all the time I have been here on this island I have never heard that church bell before. As to protecting others, of course, not to fight would be cowardice.” Funny that wasn't the commentary you would expect from a simpleton.

“You know, I don't get this, first I get the hell scared out of me on that stupid island and now I get a visit from mister happy. No offense but what the hell is going on here?” she asked.

“Why the answer is quiet simple: your destiny! Look in your pocket.”

Sarah dug through her the pockets of her shorts and a found a paper with three pairs of number scrawled on it.

“What's this?”

“You know what it is, look closely,” he commanded.

“Shit, those are the coordinates to my island but how?”

“Good, I am glad to help. Well, I'll be on my way.”

“Are we done talking? Who are you?”

“Yes, I am on my way and so are you, be happy now!” he said while turning and walking away.

“You know this conversation makes absolutely no sense to me?”

“It did to me and maybe someday it will to you. If I told you everything it wouldn’t be your future, it would be your past. Frankly, where would be the surprise? Where’s the choice?” And with that comment he disappeared into anonymity of the crowd.

Flustered by the brief encounter Sarah turned away. “Now, where’s that church?” she thought to herself as she surveyed the surrounding hills.

Nevertheless, the dreams and nightmares kept coming back to haunt Sarah, as a constant reminder of her spiritual timidity and of her failure as a scientist to seek the truth. She knew that the recent news from Flores about the digs being halted had awakened the nightmare once again, and here she was at two-thirty in the morning realizing that the totality of her life had been reduced to a simple combination of her intolerable loneliness, and her myriad fears. The whole damn island nightmare was a stupid cliché but, then again, so was her desperate, tedious life.

Sarah had expected so much more from herself, and this empty shell that now masqueraded as her life couldn’t be allowed to stand. Always present was the gnawing feeling she was not living the life that she could be destined for. Moreover, she didn’t know what was worse; was it the tedium or was it the loneliness? In contrast, at least the dreams and nightmares offered the promise of adventure and, who knows, maybe even purpose, to her staid existence.

As Sarah debated each option, an inner voice told her “to go back to the island!”

Crap, that strained small female voice had returned, the very same voice of reason that told her to stay away from the island in the first place, was now telling her to go back.

“Coward, you have to return to the island,” the voice commanded.

“Stupid, schizoid voice, make your freaking mind up,” she thought as she debated her future in the darkness and whether or not she should renew her Prozac prescription. That settled it, at two-thirty in the morning, Sarah did the unexpected, and she embraced her nightmare as though it was a glimmer of hope.

She turned the lamp on and sat up in her bed while retrieving a small note pad from her nightstand. On the pad were a series of three numbers she had written down from the previous night's dream with the curious small man and she studied the three pairs of numbers for a couple of minutes. To her surprise, she did recognize them; it was the coordinates to her mystery island. She realized that her subconscious was telling her through her dreams that she had to return to the island. Clutching the paper Sarah made a solemn promise to herself to return to the island of her nightmares, one way, or another. She wanted to face her terrors and to witness, for once and for all, what she couldn't face alone that day on the island. And surprisingly, that was a destiny she could readily embrace in the early morning hours as she left her bed and diligently went about changing the damp sheets on her bed.

Richard's Nightmare

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.

Genesis 1:26-28 (King James Version)

The early morning light danced about Richard's face as if it was toying with him in a concerted effort to wake him from his sleep. Richard grumbled and cursed as the light continued to intensify, until finally, it shone full blast onto his haggard face. As the fog slowly lifted from his brain, he smacked his lips as he tried to identify the gunk that was plastered in his mouth. He couldn't remember last night, and before he would get up, he carefully sniffed the air several times.

"Ah good, no smell of cheap perfume or cigarettes," he thought to himself. As a final prelude to sitting up he stole a peek across to the other side of the bed.

"Please let the bed be empty, please, please, please!" he pleaded. He took a glance and all he saw was a crumpled pillow, and in the distance, a half-empty J&D bottle; a good sign for him that he had exercised some temperance with his drinking the previous night. "Thank you," he said, but not knowing to whom or to what.

He just did not want to deal with another young trailer park girl, the kind that seemed so prevalent at his usual local watering holes. They were easy to bed, but so damn difficult to get rid of the following day, and their early morning histrionics made his hangovers unbearable. In his normal state of mind, he would never bother with such sad and vulnerable girls, however when he was inebriated any attractive female was fair game for his drunken charms. Moreover, with the loss of his teaching job, he found that the frequency of his drinking sprees had been increasing at an alarming rate. Like all people with a serious addiction, he kept kidding himself that his drinking habit was just some benign hobby that he could readily turn on and off; only now he was becoming too scared to try the on-off switch out of fear that he might be wrong.

He was glad that this time he had listened to himself and that he had focused on a singular goal for last night: getting drunk! He had to face it at some point that liquor was his addiction but just not today. Like others of his generation, he had tried both pills and pot but liquor was just quicker and more in tune with his overall Irish-German temperament. Moreover, he found alcohol to be a convenient lubricant for sliding girls into his bed.

He wearily got out of bed and made his way to the small kitchen. This was a particularly good day for Richard, because his hangover was relatively mild, and the pounding in his head was merely a timid throb. "How had this come to be?" he said as he surveyed his crummy apartment, and the wreckage that comprised his present existence.

As he seated himself at the kitchen table a bleary-eyed Richard poured himself a glass of orange juice in a belated effort to re-hydrate himself, and he turned on his laptop to review his email. It wasn't like he got regular emails from friends so he moved quickly past the numerous boner spams to check his email alerts. He skimmed through several alerts on the ongoing local town corruption scandals, and had moved past the first screen when a small, curious headline caught his eye: "Indonesian Government halts digs on Flores Island".

“What the...again?” Richard thought to himself. The alert had a link to a blog post and he read on:

“The remains of a new human species called *Homo floresiensis* found on Flores Island continue to spark debate among scientists so intense that the Indonesian government decided to intervene. The government halted all digs and evacuations at the famous Liang Bua cave as they reviewed the controversy.

The “dwarf” skeleton of this new species was discovered in a limestone cave, and the miniature size of the adult female surprised scientists. This new species was barely three feet tall as an adult, and their body structure resembled older, ancestral forms of man. What also amazed scientists was the size of the small skull and the tiny brain contained within. The brain size was roughly comparable in size to a chimpanzee’s and was just a third of the size of a modern human’s. Adding to the surprise, the 3-foot tall female dated back to only 18,000 years ago, making it contemporary with modern humans on the island. The discovery calls into question previous assertions about when man gained control of the planet from the other lines of human ancestors. The find promises to rewrite human evolution, and suggests a complexity in human evolution that up to now had only been hinted at.

Other scientists contend that the discovery is that of a community of diseased modern humans and, in fact, is not a new species. They say they now have confirmation that the individuals found were definitely diseased and they now had proof of their microcephaly. Recent protests at the site prompted the government intervention.

With the digs suspended once again, scientists were clamoring for the Indonesian government to open the island to further digs rather than to exclude other research teams. A lone quote from an independent researcher said “this debate is bordering on the cretinous, so now is the perfect time to investigate other opportunities on some of the other so-called non-primate islands in the region.”

Richard had been following the soap opera in Flores for years and not surprisingly, the discovery and research in Flores had degenerated in an academic pissing match, one so full of ill will and rancor that the Indonesian government now felt compelled to step in and mediate. What a freaking mess but what really caught his eye was the so-called comment from the other independent researcher.

He read it again, “This debate is bordering on the cretinous, so now is the perfect time to investigate other opportunities on some of the other so-called non-primate islands in the region.”

“Cretinous?” Richard said aloud to himself, but as he said the words, a strange feeling of déjà vu passed over him. “Cretinous? Who the hell else talks like that?” he asked himself. Couldn't be but could it be her?

Richard stared off into the distance for a few minutes, unsure what to make of the blog article. This debate had been raging for years and there still was no resolution. The two anthropologists responsible for the discovery mentioned several new cave complexes that they had in mind for their next expedition. There were a number of limestone caves in Sumba and Sulawesi that were of particular interest to the original team, and the work would begin next year. Still, there was no mention of visiting other islands from anybody in the scientific community other than the lone independent researcher.

Richard knew all about the find and the local legends. The indigenous human population on Flores had a number of local legends regarding the other people that once lived on the island. The most striking tale was about a dwarf people the Flores natives called the “Ebu Gogo”, a translation that literally meant “grandmother that eats anything”.

The Ebu were small creatures, standing approximately three feet tall with long hair, and resembled humans except for their exceptionally long arms. The Ebu Gogo had voracious appetites and would devour any uncooked food, including the occasional human baby. Humans

were tolerant of the presence of the Ebu Gogo, that is until they developed a strong appetite for human flesh. Once that happened, the islanders had enough of the Ebu, and they were driven away from human habitation toward the limestone caves of the island. The native folklore describe the Ebu living among the Flores Islanders up until the arrival of the Dutch explorers, just a mere four hundred years ago.

“Wow, she was a strange intense girl, wasn't she?” He could not believe what he was reading, and he returned to his online research with even greater intensity.

To all anthropologists, this was an incredibly important find. Why? Because another species of humanity was contemporary with modern humans, and they lived side by side not that long ago. Many scientists had inferred that humans had existed with other hominin species; however, this was proof positive of that coexistence. Adding to their delight was the obvious fact that the hobbit's island environment had directly impacted the evolution of these dwarf humans. Challenged by a scarcity of food in their island habitat and lacking natural predators, evolution gave a sizable survival edge to the early humans that were small in stature. Earlier scientific thinking stated that man's tool use and culture made him immune to the normal rules of evolution but these hobbit's fossils were a mute testimony to the fact that man was subject to the same rules of nature that governed all living creatures.

However, it was the other inferences that a few renegade scientists were making that really got Richard's attention. They were suggesting that there could be other major finds out in the wilderness, some even younger in age than 18,000 years old. They even held out the promise of the ultimate find; the unlikely possibility that tucked away in some remote primordial region of Indonesia, there could be a band of Hobbit survivors still alive to this day!

Richard went back to alert and stared at the screen for a while allowing each line to sink in. In one way, he could not believe his luck, and he wasn't quite sure if it was good or bad. It

was as if fate was tantalizing him with a new lease on his life. If he could just get a sample of that fresh “Hobbit” DNA, he would have the ammo he needed to support his dissertation theory for high rates of speciation radiation among the group hominins. Richard was a DNA anthropologist, a field so new most people didn't know it existed, nor did it receive the proper recognition it merited from the university system. Richard could get work as a forensic scientist, but that would mean spending his lifetime digging through the dirty work of killers, rapists and the other deviants of human society, and that certainly wasn't the type of work Richard wanted to lose himself in. He was a deviant all right, but nothing that bad.

No not Richard, his interest was in unlocking the secrets of the past, the distant past, and that meant working in a lab with a computer as much as he did in the good earth. Based on current human DNA analysis, Richard's research postulated that the human family tree was once fairly bushy, and that many relatives may have gone extinct in recent years. Richard had found a number of key genetic markers in existing human DNA that he believed supported his high-speciation theory. Richard knew that after death an organism's DNA quickly breakdowns into thousands of small, incomprehensible segments. Richard's greatest skill was making probalistic sense of those fragmented DNA remains and connecting the isolated strands to traceable evolutionary markers. Moreover, with the Ebu Gogo, this process of speciation could still be going on to this very day.

For his peers, this was all very interesting academic fodder but Richard felt there were also some very dramatic, real world consequences to his research findings. To Richard's way of thinking, this intense competition with other human species was one plausible explanation as to why modern humans were so practiced at killing one another. It would appear that we had a lot of practice over the millennia!

Richard's theory was somewhat controversial because the existing fossil record did not support his findings. Instead of finding hundreds of different human species, as Richard was predicting, the fossil record contained just a handful of human species. The whole exercise was similar to putting together a large puzzle of a road map with just a handful of pieces and then trying to discern the overall map. Only the final destination was certain with every stop in-between being open to question and endless speculation. If you assume 5 million years of human evolution, with a generation being equal to 20 years then the puzzle consists of almost 250,000 pieces. So far, scientists have discovered maybe a hundred different human fossils, roughly equivalent to having a hundred pieces of the 250,000-piece puzzle. To make matters even more vexing, researchers keep finding additional puzzle pieces that may not even belong to the human puzzle or at some point become extraneous to the design of the overall puzzle. The entire exercise could be quite maddening which is maybe why so much of the American public opted to believe in Creationism. For Richard the scientist, it was easy to forget that the public really did not comprehend the concept of millions of years, after all, look at the number of lottery tickets they continue to buy every week under the misguided notion that they could actually win the big one.

The same challenge existed for paleontologists trying to understand the Cretaceous extinction event that wiped out the dinosaurs and that paved the way to our own evolution. The scientific and public focus had always been on the large specimens, hell they were easier to find and let's face it, pretty damn spectacular to look at. Besides, any field scientist will tell you that it is much easier and probably more fun to boot, to find a 6-foot dinosaur femur than it is to search for a two-inch proto-mammal jaw. You have to use a real man's tools such as construction equipment and dynamite to remove a dinosaur fossil from rock, whereas you use tweezers and a magnify glass to extricate the tiny mammal remains.

Nevertheless, large animals don't always tell the true story about what is going on in an ecosystem, particularly regarding energy movement and biomass. In the present day artic, much of the animal biomass is predominately comprised of tiny rodents called voles and not, as you would think the massive, thunderous herds of caribou. Richard felt a similar paradox had occurred in the Cretaceous period with the dinosaurs getting most of the glory, while much of the biomass mass actually consisted of small mammals and the dinosaur cousins called birds. Every boy's perception of those times was that the small timid mammals were constantly hiding to escape the hungry jaws of the thundering dinosaurs. Now that they were looking, paleontologists found small baby dinosaur happy meals contained within the bellies of the carnivorous fossil mammals. From all appearances, the dinosaurs grew large and matured quickly to escape the voracious appetites of each other and their numerous smaller competitors such as the birds and mammals. In a stable ecosystem, growing large fast is an effective competitive strategy and once mature, dinosaurs could get the upper hand and, in turn, hunt the smaller mammals and birds for food.

What made Richard so screwed up was that he envisioned these antediluvian worlds at the oddest times. He'd be in a bar talking to some young chippie with her ta tas hanging out of her halter top and suddenly her breasts would remind him of the Chicxulub asteroid destroying that lush, stable prehistoric habitat. As food became scarce, the impact would suddenly turning advantage into disadvantage and acted as a cruel culling machine that killed all the large fauna, including the spectacular dinosaurs while allowing the much more numerous, less energy demanding, smaller animals to wrest control of the planet from the fallen giants. Any colossal disruption to the ecosystem is going to take its toll first on the larger animals before it affects the smaller. When times are tough, it pays to be small and that was just the evolutionary stratagem that Homo Floresiensis had employed to survive on Flores Island. Of course, by the time he

would snap out of it the chick would be gone and Richard would be left alone wondering why the hell did her breasts remind him of the asteroid impact in the first place?

Richard had long concluded that if you only look at a few random fossil finds you could get many erroneous interpretations, especially when you couple in the vagaries of human character and ego. Moreover, Richard had personal knowledge of the frustration of digging in the dirt, after all he wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty, and he also knew that many of these extinct human species during their hey-day never had populations in excess of a few thousand individuals. It was no wonder to Richard as to why their fossils were so damn hard to find, and why as a physical anthropologist he turned to DNA research in the first place. Because deep in our DNA, Richard knew he could find the secrets of our animal heritage that the earth was refusing to give up.

Consequently, Richard dismissed the human fossil record as being hopelessly incomplete, and felt his DNA research would tell the true story of human evolution. To Richard, there was nothing divine about humankind's ascent from the lower animals. No, man's creation was a simple matter of human evolution through a combination of selection, speciation, and ultimately extinction, just like any of the other living creature on this planet. As they say, evolution is a tinkerer, and after two billion years of tinkering, human beings were simply the latest invention. Moreover, as was the case with the Ebu Gogo, the tinkering was continuing to this very day.

Shit, how would he ever get a sample? Richard's request for samples had been rejected or ignored numerous times from the teams that did the initial work in Flores. In fact, they would keep much of the findings to themselves, as was the norm for this me-generation of scientists. Furthermore, Richard was no longer affiliated with a major university, meaning he now lacked both creditability and academic leverage. Scientists made crucial discoveries, and would sit on them for years before releasing critical information to the larger scientific community. In that

fashion, they made entire careers out of a single fossil find. Richard admired these researchers for making their announcement fairly early in the game, and they were being especially bold in doing so. Didn't matter, he knew the Homo floresiensis remains were a soggy spongy mass that did not resemble hard bone and consequently were a poor candidate for a decent DNA sample. Accordingly, they were not about to donate a single tooth for his cause when they needed the samples for their own work.

Over the years, the debate over the find was becoming even more complicated, almost Byzantine in nature. A native scientist, with close ties to the Indonesian government, was keeping the newly discovered fossils for his own private research while the original research team was being barred from a return to the caves. None of this surprised Richard, professional rivalries and petty jealousies were commonplace in the scientific community and no amount of protest otherwise would change that basic ingredient of human nature. Despite all the rumors to the contrary, scientists were human after all, something Richard knew all too well after his brief tenure in the Ivory Towers.

He sent an email to the blogger asking:

“Who made that quote about investigating other islands?”

Later that same day the reply came back, “I don't recall her name; some associate professor chick mentioned it to me at a conference a few weeks back.”

Was it her?

“What did she look like?” he emailed back.

An hour later a simple three word arrived.

“A smoking brunette :)”

Shit it was her and that drunken little jezebel was still cruising the academic conferences looking to get laid. With that comment she had to be planning an expedition back to her island. But what the hell was her name?

It was really pissing him off that he could not remember her name. He really needed a diversion then maybe her name would come to him. Frustrated, Richard knew there would be some additional entertainment value to be found from the announcement so he couldn't wait to read the Internet response from the Creationists, those ardent believers in the Biblical interpretation of man's creation. He knew they loved to take advantage of any sign of academic bickering and he wasn't disappointed by their wacky response to the recent events in Flores. While other people read comics, Richard loved to their mangled interpretations of evolution, and he would sometimes catch himself chuckling aloud like a madman at the absurdity of their convoluted logic.

Richard had heard every Creationist argument a thousand times before, but at the very least, you had to admire their zeal in denying reality. First, there was the classic, "It wasn't an ancestral form," but rather it was the skeleton of a singular, deformed human being afflicted with a crippling disease. In this case, they described the individuals found on Flores as being microcephalics, a serious medical condition where the afflicted individual has an exceptionally small skull, or in lay man's terms, sort of a pin-head. Unfortunately, they neglected to mention that the medical record never associated with the disease a set of extra long arms as found on the Flore Island Hobbits, nor do microcephalics normally stand at three feet tall, and somehow they conveniently forgot to address the other six skeletons found at the site. "Damn disease must be catching; better start a telethon for it!" Richard chuckled to himself.

Of course, there was the old chestnut about the strange shape of the skeleton being attributed to normal variations within the existing human population. They would cry out, "Look

at the pygmies for example”, while easily ignoring the fact that most pygmies are more than five feet tall and they don't have skulls the size of a chimpanzee. You could sit next to a pygmy in full native dress on the subway and not bat an eye, especially if you lived in New York City. However, if one of the Hobbits sat next to you while they wearing a Brooks Brothers suit on the train you would be running for the subway door faster than Martha Stewart bidding adios to her West Virginia prison cell.

They would say anything to avoid admitting that man had evolved like the rest of his animal brethren: by selection and by chance. There was an old quote that said, “Science has proof without any certainty. Creationists have certainty without any proof.” No, all the Creationists had was their faith, and that wasn't nearly enough for a wise-ass iconoclast like Richard.

Richard realized he must have looked quite the lunatic as he sat in his underwear while searching the net and chuckling aloud. All he needed was some complementary drool on his chin and his look would be complete. He just didn't care, as he continued to shake with excitement at the find, and it wasn't just the after effects of the usual Friday night hangover.

The biggest story in paleobiology of the last century was breaking and Richard was now a spectator on the sidelines watching the story unravel. He knew he wouldn't be allowed official access to these fossils so he had to find another way. On the surface, this should have been a professional and personal disaster for him; however, Richard knew that he had an ace up his sleeve. A few years ago, Richard had met a strange girl who had just visited Flores Island. Cute but very intense; she told him a curious story about a personal encounter she had experienced on one of the local Indonesian islands. If she knew where the band of Hobbit survivors could be found, and Richard knew that was a damn big “if”, he would be right back in the game. Her recent quote to the blogger indicated that she was perhaps considering a revisit to her island.

Everything was possibly coming together for him or so he was hoping. Hell, he had nothing else to go on but why didn't she go back to that island sooner he wondered?

Richard had to get to Indonesia and his only ticket out was to remember the name of that strange Flores girl. His mind raced through a thousand thoughts trying to recall the name of the girl he met briefly only a few short years ago. The mental gymnastics continued; was it Marianne or Sally, possibly Kristen? It was something common, but damn, what the hell was it? Brenda? No, that was the name of his last girlfriend, idiot. Damn, who, amongst his ever-dwindling list of professional contacts even remembered her name?

Like so many other failed pickup attempts, the entire encounter had been discarded to the deepest dustbins of his mind. "Ah, how did the song go, she wasn't a beauty but she was all right." Actually, he found her kind of cute, which was saying a lot when compared to the usual sorry lot of women who occupied the ranks of scientific academia and another reason why he remembered her. It was no small wonder why he preferred to hit on the English lit majors, and why he left the women science majors to the truly desperate. Damn it, again his mind was wandering off the subject. Was it the alcohol doing this?

"Focus, Richard!" he said yelled to himself as he struggled to reign himself in.

Richard just couldn't recall her name, and it was driving him crazy. Richard wasn't one for much organization; he felt that too much structure was the mortal enemy of his ability to free associate ideas. Unfortunately, having no organization at all wasn't exactly stoking the old noggin, either. He went through his papers, and as an act of true desperation, to his pile of old business cards that he kept in a pitifully stained, brown paper bag. As he rummaged through the pile of cards and assorted napkins, he found traces of long forgotten meals and the cell phone number of a particularly ugly heifer he once met when he was drunk but nary a trace of the strange Flores girl anywhere.

What should he do? It was clear drinking wasn't going to help fire the old neurons, and, in fact, it usually had quite the opposite effect. There was only one option left to Richard: go for a run. Richard always had one of two bi-polar solutions for the adversities he faced in his life: go for a drink or go for a run. It was his healthier remedy for indecision and procrastination because running would get the blood flowing, and hopefully, in turn, get the old neurons in his brain firing. It had been his escape for years, and as he tried to give up his prodigious drinking habit he found that, in a strange way, running was helping to fill an unhealthy void in his life. In one sense, he found it relatively easy to give up one obsession for another, at least momentarily. Besides, Richard found that any excuse was a good enough reason to get out of his depressingly small and craptacular apartment.

He threw on his favorite yellow shorts with his battered running shoes, and he started to vigorously stretch his legs. Unfortunately, he noticed that the shorts were acquiring a distinctive odor of their own. Never the mind, he didn't have time now to be concerned about his personal hygiene, and besides whose delicate sensibilities was he offending other than his own? "Now where the hell is my stained T-shirt?" he said as he searched the floor for the missing shirt.

The only thing he liked about this sad, little town was the nearby woods where he could run at will nearly year-round. Running cleared his mind but only if he ran alone. It was a short distance from his apartment complex to the imagined safety of the woods. As he ran, he could feel his Achilles tendon in his right leg beginning to tighten up. As was the norm, he couldn't be bothered to stretch properly such was his haste to escape his dreary apartment. He convinced himself, as he always did, that the leg would feel better once he got into his run.

As he made his way deeper into the woods, he enjoyed the feeling of being alone and unencumbered. More than anything, when he was in this splendid isolation, he hated running into other people. This time, about ten minutes into his run, he spotted a young man neatly

attired with dress shoes walking along the same path he was running on. As Richard ran by, the young man exchanged a weird, dirty little smile with him, a smile that Richard had seen before and one that almost always gave him a frisson. Dress shoes were always a good tell about a person's motivations for being so deep into the woods.

Richard didn't mind the occasional, friendly, stray dog that would accompany him on his run. That was an impromptu, mutual relationship with no strings attached, one that he actually preferred to most of his long-term human relationships. Rarely, he would encounter a dog with a different, meaner temperament, one that would eye him as a possible game animal. He had to, on more than one occasion; arm himself with a club to protect himself from the likes of that kind of stray. However, it was the "people" that always gave him the biggest reason to pause and hesitate while he ran.

On a really good run, he would lose all sense of time, and he would find himself deep in the woods running along paths that only a few knew of, never mind dare taking. When he ran along those paths, he could literally hear small animals furiously scurrying to get out of his way. He would never see them, though occasionally he would catch a glimpse of their tails as they hurried into the safety of the brush. On more than one occasion, he had run into a clearing, and there would be a herd of bewildered deer staring back at him. Their look of surprise delighted him, and within an instant, the deer would be off to even deeper and darker sections of the woods.

Yet, the animal encounters paled in comparison with some of the chance people encounters he had experienced in the woods. He would get his fair share of elderly walkers who were enjoying a brisk foray into nature. They usually greeted him with a friendly hello, and, in this manner, announce to the world their joy at still being alive on this sorry-assed planet. Or he

would encounter other runners, who were usually so self-absorbed, that they would barely acknowledge his presence other than with a quick nod or dart of their eyes.

And yes, there were the other people, the one's not meant to be seen, like that young man he had just encountered. People, who when you came upon them, were startled by your presence; people who were keeping secrets deep in the woods. People with dirty little secrets, perhaps some small transgression that was quite forgivable, such as grabbing a smoke, but then there were the others who were concealing deeper and darker secrets. Perhaps they were doing drugs or, worse yet, concealing some dirty, little sexual secret that they felt they could only do during the light of the day if they were deep in the woods. Whatever, it was always some transgression against either humanity or nature. When they saw him, they tried to conceal their faces, or they would shoot a weird, dirty little smile at him. These were the people who really did need a personal and omnipotent god to watch over them, and to keep their secret, dirty transgressions in line. Yes, they did need a god who could see deep in the woods much like Richard was seeing today.

As he turned the corner on his running path, Richard saw the dress from the corner of his eye. It was a small girl's white dress, and Richard's imagination ran wild trying to figure out why it was lying here in the middle of the woods? Would he find the body of a young girl off to the side of the path? Was the young man who had just passed him a sexual predator? He struggled to reign in his thoughts, and he felt his anxiety rise within him as he ran in the direction of the dress. It was just something about the woods and the nature of humans that brought out the worst in some people.

The dress was lying on the ground, off to the side of his running path and as he approached Richard could now see a large dark object lying next to it. He held his breath and he saw a large, black plastic garbage bag obviously stuffed with something!

Was it a small girl?

He cautiously sniffed the air and smelt a whiff of decay. Richard knew that odor all too well from his gross anatomy studies as a graduate student. The sights and odors of the decaying human bodies were so disgusting and so obviously repulsive, but like a car wreck you suddenly came upon in the middle of the night, you just had to look. So compelling were the grisly sights it was not all that unusual to observe students casually viewing the cadavers in the university anatomy lab. One time he actually observed a couple of pre-med students holding hands as they walked from one cadaver table to the next, viewing the dissections together. The young man solemnly led the girl as if they were strolling the grounds of a grand cathedral. From all outward appearances, they appeared to be a fairly normal looking couple but Richard couldn't help but wonder how freaky was their sex life?

The white dress started to flutter in the light breeze forcing Richard back to reality. He grabbed a long stick from the ground and as he began to peer over the bag he caught sight of it! His heart was pounding as the haze from the hangover was lifting and Richard could clearly see a limb or was it perhaps an arm emerging from the bag? As he poked at it, the straining black plastic bag ruptured under the load causing him to jump back. As he retreated, a strange mass escaped the confines of the black bag and poured onto the ground.

“Oh shit, how stupid!” Richard yelled.

As he looked closer, he observed a collection of old clothes that was bursting free from the overstuffed bag! The bag had been unceremoniously discarded in the woods, and the dress had spilled out from the bag with the other articles of clothing including a pair of tattered blue jeans. As he poked around the bag, he spotted a moldering dead squirrel among the clothes that was adding its own fragrance to the unsavory mess.

“Shit! This was stupid, really, really stupid!” A dirty little secret all right, it was the telltale signs of a morally bankrupt civilization; the ever increasing piles of garbage and debris that littered the local woods. Man was soiling his pretty, little planet faster than it could heal itself, and he was too busy either procreating or stealing from it to notice. It didn't matter how far he ran into the woods the dirty little secret of civilization followed him wherever he went and, above all else, when he most wanted to be alone from people.

“Why the hell would people go to the trouble of dropping their garbage this deep into the woods in the first place,” Richard wondered. Couldn't they just be content to soil their own little corner of the world?

“Fuck me!” Richard said.

Besides the garbage what really annoyed Richard was the way his anxiety would suddenly spiral out of control at a moment's notice. It was just a stupid dress, but his imagination was far too strong, and he never felt in control of his life or of himself. Moreover, whenever he overreacted in this manner, he would recall his father telling him about how a coward dies a thousand deaths. Clearly, his anxiety was one reason why he drank so much; to him it was a clear and cut case of self-medication on his part.

While Richard ran, his dark thoughts continued to follow him through the wooden trails. Richard, like so many men, was not very comfortable within his own skin and consequently wasn't big into personal reflection. Frankly, he preferred to think of life as something that just happened. However, when he ran the surging blood would open the floodgates within his brain and for whatever reasons he was more tolerant of his introspection.

Richard's exile, as he called it, to this small backwards town in South Carolina, was an unmitigated personal disaster for him. His career was dead at the university level, having lost his associate professor position due to a lack of diplomacy on his part, and a convenient series of

state budget cuts. Well, his lack of diplomacy was more an act of brazen stupidity, since he decided to score with the department head's daughter at a university function. She was such a pretty girl, and the head of the department was such an ugly, prodigious ass. How was he to know that the two were related? What were the odds? As he ran through the woods, the events of the past two years rushed through his brain, and he felt himself shudder as he recalled his unending string of career missteps.

Why the hell did he remember every fuck-up he ever did in his life, but never bothered to remember one moment of personal glory? Had those moments of glory really been that few and far between? He was so damn close to finishing his research, though that might as well have been another lifetime the way events were unfolding for him. As he ran, he felt the failures gather behind him and doggedly pursue him as he wound his way through the woods. No matter how fast he ran they continued to follow him and when they caught up to him each whispered into his ear a single word: loser! It wasn't meant to be this way but wasn't that the lament of every loser?

Inspiration Goes for a Run

Without tenure, Richard lost his associates position at the university, and he reluctantly sought work in the public school system. Richard ended up in middle school, of all places, teaching biology to the southern masses. The kids were so mediocre and so disinterested in biology he might as well have been speaking a foreign language, perhaps something like English. The soft southern drawls of the Carolinas were taking a toll on him as well, and he found himself fighting hard not to acquire an accent. It was just something about the summer heat in the south that made you want to slow down a bit, and Richard fought that temptation at every possible turn.

Richard's northern arrogance managed to keep him apart from his neighbors, and instead he looked for that one kindred spirit amongst the students, one bright kid, one enlightened soul amongst the dross that would share his love for biology. Richard certainly couldn't find it amongst his brethren. His other fellow teachers were a dull lot, and were almost as disinterested in nurturing their inner child, as were their students. It was as if the entire lot was chosen for a purgatory called middle school, and they were waiting to put their time in before moving on to their next destination. The only thing was that they hadn't a clue as to what the next destination was going to be, or for that matter, as to why they were waiting in the first place.

Richard found it rough going into class every day and seeing the same dull faces repeatedly. He spent the summer between school years looking for a new tenure, and working at a part-time job to make ends meet. He had hoped to use the summer break to complete his paper; however, his present circumstances sucked all of the inspiration from him. At least, that is what he told himself. Not only was the school torturing him; they were doing so for a pittance. He knew it was an excuse but what else could he do? What a loser he was becoming!

The second year was even worse, because he came to the sudden realization that the faces of his students were getting younger, or at least staying young, while he had just spent a year going nowhere and growing older. He feared this temporary teaching position was going to become permanent, and depression hung over him, coloring his world in gray monotone shades of despair.

Richard's maverick attitude and demeanor ensured that a steady stream of confrontations would keep finding him during the course of that school year. Tom Gibson, the other so-called science teacher, loved to get on Richard's case. Tom was a goofy, middle-aged, religious nut who had to be related to somebody on the school board. There absolutely was no other excuse for him being a science teacher. Tom could sense a changing tide in the school's curriculum, and in the process liked to score a few points off Richard. Richard wasn't quite sure why Tom liked to go gunning for him; he just assumed that professional jealousy was playing a big part in their supposed rivalry. Richard had a stellar academic record at an ivy-league school, while Tom had barely made his way through the ranks of the local community college by copying the homework of a dopey girlfriend. It was either that or perhaps Tom was a bed wetter as a child and had been tormented by the other kids, at least that was the rumor Richard liked to share with the other teachers.

Richard walked into school that fateful day on time for a change. He approached the faculty area and Margaret peered from her desk and gave him a frosty look while looking him up and down. She was a large white, middle-aged woman with dyed red hair and her once curvaceous figure was now settling in some very unfortunate areas. Like her figure, her once sassy disposition had also settled into a more truculent phase but Richard enjoyed bantering with her anyway.

“Richard, you weren’t out chasing some skirts again last night were you?” she asked with slight scolding twang.

“Now where else would I be Maggie?”

“When are you going to settle down boy? You can’t go on like this forever.”

“Maggie, I have to keep looking knowing that you’re off the market,” Richard said with a grin.

“Boy, that flattery is getting you nowhere and besides when I was younger you wouldn’t have been able to keep up with me.”

“You know I kinda like that challenge, so are you interested in taking on a younger man?”

“No and stop dodging the issue. You are late.”

Richard looked at his watch again.

“Can’t be, I’m on time for a change.”

“No you are not; Jim wanted every teacher in early fifteen minutes today to discuss the results of the school board meeting.”

“Oh, please, to discuss what, the latest funding cutbacks along the road to mediocrity? So where is everybody?” Richard asked.

“Where else? They’re all in the sanctuary.”

The sanctuary was the euphemistic name the teachers used for the teacher's lounge. In the old days, the smoke would pour out of the room as you opened the door but now it was just a convenient watering hole for nervous coffee drinkers who were too cheap to buy a decent cup of coffee from the local Starbucks. A couple of the teachers were preparing for the day's lesson but Richard's usual preparation for the day consisted of trying to get some sleep before wearily trotting off to his first class. Richard muttered a few hellos and went to his usual lounge chair to close his eyes.

"Hey Richard, big announcement today coming from the Kansas City Board of Education, huh? You must really be excited about that prospect?" Tom asked.

Through the grogginess, the words struck a chord in Richard. He immediately recognized the steely voice as Tom's, after all Tom was the only other non-southern voice among the faculty. "Ah gawd, why is this clown talking about Kansas City? This guy can barely read, never mind paying attention to a regional issue like the Kansas City school board," Richard is thinking to himself. Richard decides to play along with the fool's game.

"Yeah, what about it Tom?" Richard asked.

"Hey, you know that a group of respected scientists are saying that your boys got wrong it all about the theory of evolution," said Tom.

"Oh boy, here it comes," Richard thinks to himself.

"Some are actually saying that DNA is the result of an intelligent design and that the diversity of life itself is proof of the hand of the creator," Tom said.

"Diversity? I'm not sure what Creationist's blog you are reading, Tom, but most respected scientists are going to boycott the upcoming hearings in Kansas City," Richard said.

"That's one man's interpretation, I think others would disagree with you," Tom responded.

“Tom, why do I have to keep reminding you that we are teachers not preachers and that this is a public school and not a Bible school?” said Richard.

“What do you have against religion, anyway?” Tom stammered.

“Nothing at all, though to me it’s all just a matter of faith and not a matter of science,” Richard said. “To my way of thinking, there are hundreds, maybe thousands of religions, and either most got it wrong or on the other hand, as they say, they are just different variations of praying to the same God. In any case it is not science.”

“What are you an atheist? Just figures,” Tom said with a look of disgust.

“No, maybe I’m agnostic; better yet I’m a practicing Druid. However, that’s the point, Tom; it shouldn’t matter because I’m a teacher of science not of theology. Mind you, I’m not saying there isn’t a God, but for most religions, it’s just a simple matter of man creating God in their own cultural image. Think about how many street corner preachers and messiahs claim to personally know the word of God; and, you know, some of these guys actually start major religions. Is it really that important to you that I believe in the same imaginary friend that you do? Frankly, I just don’t think it’s that easy to divine the divine and if that is true I’m probably safe with my own belief system though that doesn’t mean I should subject the kids to my beliefs, nor, for that matter, should you subject me to yours,” Richard said wearily.

“It’s going to take more than your little speech to convert people to evolution,” Tom said.

“Wait here,” as Richard ran from the room.

He went to the mailroom to pickup a package that had been waiting for him. He grabbed the small package and raced back to the teacher’s lounge, plunking the package on the table with an exaggerated thud.

“There, take a look.”

“Take a look at what? What the hell is that?” Tom asked as he shied away from the table.

“Hey, will you grow a pair or I am going have to insist on you using the ladies room from now on?” Richard remarked as he tore open the package. He removed a small object that was covered in foam and as he ripped the foam from the object, a small, brownish human-like skull was revealed.

“It’s a cast of an Australopithecine skull, dating back 2.3 million years or so. Look at the small cranium, even a layperson could see that it is decidedly non-human but the teeth are small and look very much like ours, definitely not ape-like. Notice the location of foramen magnum under the skull, which is a strong indicator of the bipedal nature of this specimen. Tom, care to explain away how this transitional skull fits into your Intelligent Design Theory to me? Huh? Does ID explain anything other than saying God did it?” Richard asked.

All of the other teachers crowded around to look at the specimen as Tom stepped away.

“Where did you get that?” Tom asked accusatively.

“What do you care? I got it at ‘Skulls R Us’ with my own money, not the school’s, so relax reverend,” Richard smirked.

The other teachers were listening intently to Richard’s commentary about the skull but Tom just stood there and was actually smiling back at Richard. Richard could tell that this goober knew something and Tom was about to spring it upon him.

“Why are you annoying me anyway?” Richard asked.

“Because I want to point out to you that when you show your students your little skull next time you are going to have to include a conversation about some of the other alternative explanations for it such as ‘Intelligent Design’,” Tom said with a goofy smile.

“Tom, what the hell are you talking about? Have you been sniffing the formaldehyde in the lab rooms again?” Richard asked.

Tom is smiling and sensing a rare opportunity for victory. “The school board just voted yesterday and the new science agenda this year is now to include a discussion regarding ‘Intelligent Design’. It’s all here, Richard. Take a look,” Tom said. From across the table, Tom throws a copy of the school board agenda paper at Richard.

“You know if you came to the school board meetings once in a while you could keep on top of these big issues. It would also appear you’ve got to change your curriculum a bit this year. Oh yes, and don’t forget to tell the kids that evolution is a theory this time around will you? And this is effective immediately,” Tom said.

Richard reads the meeting notes, observing that the school board had approved, by a vote of five to nothing, the new Creationist-Intelligent Design agenda for Biological studies.

“This is bullshit! I can’t teach that crap! Where the hell is Jim?” Richard asked, as he stormed from the teacher’s lounge.

Richard was really pissed. As far as he was concerned, Intelligent Design was just another name for Creationism dressed up in semi-scientific bullshit jargon. The idea that a benign creator was guiding evolution to the ultimate goal of humanity was just as bad science as the Biblical account of man’s creation. The Creationists had lost big time with the debate on the age of the earth and even the Vatican was embracing evolution, so they were grasping at any other theory they could find that would negate the role of chance in man’s creation. These teachings were becoming so fanciful, that some creationist clowns were even claiming, of course, in keeping with a six thousand year old age earth, that the dinosaurs occupied the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve. What the hell type of Garden of Eden has a T. Rex roaming around it with teeth that are over 9 inches long? What was it, a pet for Adam and Eve? Richard wanted to retch at the thought of teaching this pseudo-science crapola. No benign creator would allow this level of ignorance to resurrect itself, and besides, what was next for a comeback? The

Spanish Inquisition? To Richard, it was so moronic the way people would grasp at any explanation of the world that didn't require them to think or question their role on the planet. Yet was it really laziness or rather was it more the arrogance of man, and the desire for security that drove so much of man's offensive behavior?

Richard managed to track Jim down in one of the science labs. The school's science department head was a tired, older gentleman named James Hyde, and he had little energy left for Richard's personal rants. "Jim, I don't get this. You didn't bother telling me about the school board vote? And I thought this was the twenty-first century, not the nineteenth century," Richard said.

Jim looked up and sighed. "Let me guess. That idiot Tom shared the news with you first, huh? Richard, I have asked you repeatedly to attend the school board meetings and you couldn't be bothered. That's fine, but because you don't like the way a school board vote went you think you have a legitimate beef with me?" Jim asked. In the past Jim's soft accent had a way of soothing Richard's edginess; however, Richard was having none of it this time around.

"You've got be kidding with this change in the curriculum, Intelligent Design? Even the Catholic Church, which has not exactly been the most enlightened or progressive organization in recent history has acknowledged the existence of evolution and I can say that as a Catholic."

Jim stared at him somewhat incredulously and Richard suddenly felt awkward with Jim's staring.

"What, you're shocked I'm a Catholic? I guess you just assumed with the last name 'Staller' I was Protestant, am I right? Talk about religious intolerance, would it be easier if I was a Baptist?"

"No Richard, it's not that at all, I just can't imagine you belonging to any organized religion," Jim quipped.

“Whatever Jim, I’m a scientist and unless you can deliver for me the son of God Almighty here to verify this so called Intelligent Design theory, I’m not teaching it!” he shouted.

Jim was both a teacher and a God-fearing Baptist, so he had little troubling go with the flow of the school board. Dealing with the ranting Richard was an entirely different matter.

“Richard, it was voted on by the school board, and that’s the direction we are going. Besides, what’s wrong with an alternative teaching to Evolution? It will either stand or fall on its own merits,” he said slowly.

“What’s wrong? I’ll tell you what’s wrong!” Richard yelled as he glared at Jim and grabbed one of the large sample fossil rocks that he had given Jim a while back. He lifted the rock above his head, and for a second Jim cowered thinking Richard was about to strike him with the rock. Instead, Richard struck the rock against the desktop with a loud thud and the soft, sedimentary rock splintered easily into several smaller pieces. Richard looked at the broken shards and grabbed one to show Jim.

“Look at the shells in this rock. Look, damn it,” as he shoved the rock near Jim’s nose. Inside the rock, there was a collection of tiny shells, or more precisely, the imprints of some small half-inch shells that were jumbled and cemented together over eons of time. They were small mollusks, tiny clams that you could find in any bay today; and, looking at them you could almost hear the ocean gently washing over them. However, unlike their modern day cousins, the faint whisper of their existence was forever imprisoned in this rock during the age of the dinosaurs.

“What’s wrong? It’s not science but it’s faith. If you can give me one reasonable explanation as to why God would hide the imprint of shells in rocks created tens of millions of years ago or spend a couple of billion years designing us, I’ll teach your damn Creationist

dogma. Until that day I'm teaching evolution as the only reasonable explanation for theirs and our own existence!" Richard said.

"Thanks Richard for showing me what a fossil is, I've almost forgotten," Jim said with a sarcastic smile. "Richard, regular folk just don't know how to reconcile religion and evolution; they are still trying to work it out."

"Yeah, a hundred years later and they are still in denial," Richard said. "Look Jim, one of the premiere minds of the last century was Albert Einstein. You know what his biggest failure was? It was saying 'God does not play dice' with the universe. He got hung up on trying to resolve Quantum mechanics and its concept of chance with his preconceived idea of a universe designed by an intelligent creator. He wasted the better part of his lifetime to trying to reconcile the two and failed miserably. The greatest mind of our time failed to resolve the element of chance! So do you think these folks are up to resolving the idea of chance and our own evolution? Fat chance. Look, the Church eventually adjusted to a universe that didn't have the earth at the center. Yet the minute you suggest man's creation isn't by divine intervention, people go ape-shit. You wanna know why? Because it knocks us off our divine pedestal, and calls into question many of our most cherished assumptions. Most of it is just sheer arrogance on our part. This fight was never about God's divinity; it's about our own, so-called, right to divinity!"

Richard stops for a second when he sees Jim rolling his eyes, but Richard decided to continue the rant anyway. "Let me guess, we're getting new biology books with an Intelligent Design section?" he asked.

"Why, yes," Jim replied.

"Figures, I asked for some new lab equipment over a year ago, and I'm told there is no money left in the budget. But the school board can give the okay to spend tens of thousands of

dollars on this abomination of a biology book to satisfy some asshole who has to be told how to think by some church.”

“Richard, to be honest with you, your speech would have been a lot more useful in front of the school board,” Jim said.

Jim could see the look of dejection in Richard’s face.

“What’s the big deal, Richard? You are going to sell evolution in a big way to the kids, and you’ll give a short shrift to the Creationist section. And knowing you, you will do it all with a smirk and a wink in your eye. Richard, you are one of the best teachers we have in this school. You’re smart, energetic, and funny. I know you think your talents are wasted here, but I also see how those kids respond to you, even if you don’t. You haven’t lost anything and you haven’t lost those kids. Just get in there and fight for the minds of those kids instead of fighting with me, okay? Or better yet, take your fight up with the school board,” Jim said.

Jim was about to step away, but then he interjected, “You talk about arrogance? You know, you’re also telling people what to think as well all, except it’s under the guise of science. Science is not entirely objective either, I know you know that.”

Richard was about to protest, even though he knew Jim had a small point. It didn’t matter; he had already heard Jim’s “you are a great teacher” speech before and consequently he had already discounted anything Jim was going to say to him. Richard was a true believer and it would take more than the likes of Jim to persuade him otherwise. That was always at the core of Richard's problems; he made friends quite readily, however he never managed to keep them for very long. He was trying Jim’s patience, he knew it, but he just didn’t care anymore and that was the story of Richard’s life: a never-ending series of strategic retreats and burning bridges.

Jim sighed and was glad to leave the lab without any physical injury. “Why fight with Richard when the curriculum wouldn’t touch on the topic of evolution until later on in the year?” he thought to himself.

That night, Richard was particularly motivated to drink himself into near oblivion. He arrived early at his favorite watering hole, settled in and was drunk in record time as he gathered about him a small clique of women that he continuously lavished with liquor. He was soon without pain but as the night darkened, the moment he always dreaded arrived, as a sudden jolt of sobriety pulled him away from his alcoholic revelry and caused him to stop and reflect on the assortment of frivolous young women he had assembled around him. Tattooed and drenched in cheap knock-off perfume, most of the women gathered about him were in their later teens and they were finding his intoxicated ramblings very amusing.

“When had his choice in women turned to young, vapid girls?” he pondered aloud. One of the less inebriated girls overheard his acerbic comment asked “What did you just say?” and as he focused on her young, wholesome face, he suddenly became petrified that she could actually be one of his students. Richard had one and only one hard and fast rule about bedding women: they could not be one of his students. He was so drunk he couldn’t be sure and he abruptly left the girls at the bar and staggered alone into the darkness of the warm spring night.

The last and the sorriest chapter in Richard’s stint as a public school teacher exploded during a parent-teacher’s conference. Some of the more ardent fundamentalists, who also happened to be parents to some of Richard’s students, came to the meeting with an agenda, and they were intent on forcing the department’s hand on the use of the new biology book. One parent, an obstinate redneck type, made a loud point of wanting to talk to the biology teacher about evolution. After entering the school, he began the process of systematically hunting Richard down. Richard was busily talking to another parent about her child’s progress and the

parent's own debilitating learning disabilities. As an animated Richard spoke to the parent, his accent became very pronounced, giving away his northern roots. The fundamentalist parent overheard Richard speaking, and knew he had found his quarry.

When the mother left, the fundamentalist parent flagged Richard down. Richard took a long hard look at the man who apparently wanted his undivided attention. The parent was dressed in a mechanic's uniform topped off with a jacket that was lightly stained with grease. A tall, thin man, his blue eyes were small and he resembled a red-necked Randy Johnson while speaking with a pronounced drawl. He was a hard-working stiff who was actually fairly larger, and a bit taller than Richard. As Richard eyed his opponent, these physical attributes were all-important factors to consider when engaging in a possible physical confrontation.

"My kid is in your Biology class this year. What do ya'll think of the new biology book?" the parent asked.

Richard was one not to back down from a confrontation; he felt had a little too much Irish in the blood to do so. He looked the man in the eye and asked him, "Who's your son, sir?"

"Steven Boyle."

Richard knew Steven immediately. He was a dull, disinterested student who had a tendency to play with himself in the back of the classroom. He wasn't much of a bother; though it was clear to Richard that Steven wasn't going anywhere fast during this lifetime unless, of course, masturbation was on the fast track to becoming an Olympic sport.

"Ah, Steven. For whatever reasons, he doesn't seem to be particularly motivated about biology other than his own, that is. Also, to answer your question, I don't think much of the new biology book. It is an abomination of learning, and I have little use for religious doctrine disguised as pseudo-scientific fact. Unless a theory can be tested, it has no place in a science

class. Until we define a test for determining the existing of the Lord, it can't really be called a theory," Richard said.

"Yes, you can! We call it faith. Don't you believe in the Bible? Don't ya believe in anything?" the parent asked.

Richard said, "No, not literally, I don't think God is that easy to divine," while skirting the entire issue of a personal god with the outraged parent.

The clearly agitated parent said, "What? You know evolution is just a theory, and it's not proven."

Richard was ready for this comment. "Mr. Boyle, that's a bit of a misnomer by most lay people. By theory, we mean in science a theoretical framework for an explanation that describes and supports our observations of nature. Gravity is by definition a theory, too, and yet you have no problem observing it as reality. In fact, I would say that you're fairly grounded with it, if you don't mind the pun. Nonetheless, within the gravitational theory, there have been numerous changes, as for example, when Einstein described the mechanism of gravity as the result of the warping of the time and space continuum. The mechanism may change as our knowledge base grows, but the results are still good old gravity," Richard said.

Richard knew he was being a smart ass and once again, he found himself referencing Albert Einstein, knowing that in any debate he could count on the reverence many average lay people had for the physicist's name. Besides, how many people knew the names of any evolutionary scientists or for that matter, the names of any living scientists? Had they even heard of Richard Dawkins or the late Stephen Jay Gould? No, probably not but there was a good chance they might know the name of Oprah's latest beau. Their world was constantly changed and shaped by the men and women of science, though most people spent their lives living in blissful ignorance of science, and frankly, they preferred it to stay that way.

The parent's jaw dropped at the changing course of the conversation, and he wasn't armed intellectually to put up much of a fight. Richard was finding it hard to remain interested in this battle of wits with what appeared to be a genuine conscientious objector on the part of the redneck parent. To make matters worse, a small gathering of other parents began to encircle the two antagonists. They were sensing the growing tension between the two, and they didn't want to miss a word, or more importantly, the possibility of a good fight. Likewise, Richard saw this as his opportunity to put on a good show and perhaps teach the goobers a thing or two about evolution.

"But it's still a theory!" the parent exclaimed.

"Not if you mean theoretical or unproven," Richard said in an annoyed manner. "It's a construct for describing our observations of nature. Animals and plants live and die, and in time will evolve into new forms all without the direct intervention of God. We can even create new species in laboratories that has nothing to do with God directly, unless, of course, you count us as instruments for God. You probably had some of those new species for breakfast this morning. We invest billions of dollars in technologies that manipulate DNA, the very building blocks of evolution."

"But what... the parent tried to interject.

Richard interrupted and said, "Jeez, there are even things call wolphins that exist because killer whales and dolphins got it on in one of the Sea World tanks. As far as I know, that was man's doing for the tourists, not God's, unless Jesus is making a comeback during a Sea World show on the back of a killer wolphin." Richard knew he was adding a touch of the sacrilegious into the debate, but he was on a roll in front of the audience that had gathered about him.

"The earth just isn't that old. It's all a big lie," the parent yelled. "The Bible is the truth, and man is not the result of some accident. Man is God's work and we have to accept that!" Jim

overheard the angry words between the pair, but he couldn't make his way through the growing circle of parents to intercept the two combatants.

“Hey buddy, it's not just the biologists making this stuff up, it is also the physicists, geologists and the astronomers who are doing the dating of the earth. Most of those guys couldn't give a damn about the theory of evolution, and yet they all have this planet pegged for being about four and a half billion years old, not your six thousand years,” Richard said.

The parent shook his head and muttered, “All lies, all lies. You're teaching lies to my kid.”

Richard is tired of the fight, and an angry torrent of words emerged from his mouth. “And, I'll clue you in on something else! The earth isn't in the center of the universe any more, and I don't care if your politicians don't know if evolution is true or not. If evolution is all a big lie, how come you never find a bunny rabbit fossil in a Pre-Cambrian rock? It's rough when facts get in the way of fiction, huh? Think man, will you, that's all I ask of the kids,” Richard said.

There was an awkward silence among the large gathering of parents. “Now if you will excuse me, I have another meeting to go to,” Richard said as he snarled a quick smile at the parent that said “go ahead fuck with me and see what happens”.

The abrupt ending didn't sit well with the fundamentalist parent, and he grabbed Richard's arm as he was stepping away. Richard quickly pushed the parent's hand off his arm, and in the process of deflecting arms, they began to jostle each other. Richard finally extricated his arms from the parent, and began to walk away again. The parent, frustrated with the ordeal, realized that his foe was evading him, and he shoved Richard in the back as he stepped away. Richard fell forward, and caught himself before completely falling to the ground. There was an audible gasp from the gathering of parents as they saw Richard stagger forward.

With that, Richard has had enough from his opponent, and he turned around while letting loose with a big overhand right that caught the charging redneck square in the nose. The nasal cartilage fractured with a crunching noise, and blood flew from the broken nose, splattering the crowd of horrified bystanders. The taller man crumbled to the ground, and Richard was being restrained by several other parents, as they tried to separate the two combatants. Some of the women started screaming in fear as they wiped the splattered blood from their faces, and there was a mad rush for the door as the parents tried to escape the ensuing melee. Several other teachers finally intervened, and they pulled a struggling Richard from the room. As he left the room, Richard could overhear the incoherent cursing of the fundamentalist parent. As Richard waited, he examined his bloodied hand, and he noticed a large cut that he had opened on his knuckle.

Jim stepped closer to Richard and angrily asked him, “Are you nuts? Have you completely lost your sanity?”

Richard nodded his head in the affirmative. “That asshole started it! I’m out of here as of now,” Richard yelled. “I didn’t start this fight, but I sure in hell will finish it. You teach these morons, they don’t want to be taught; they just want to be reassured.”

The whole episode left Richard feeling cold, useless, and stupid. Besides losing his job, he had to wait out whether or not the redneck parent was going to charge him with aggravated assault. And, of course, there was the cloud of a lingering civil suit that continued to hang over his head. The only thing that was saving Richard was that any lawyer reviewing the case would immediately know he had no assets to speak of, so it was more a matter of pursuing the school district for damages. So far, the parent was content with having Richard out of the classroom, though that status quo could change at a moment’s notice.

Richard's enduring bout of depression was now going on for several weeks. Worse, depression for Richard was truly anger without the enthusiasm, and each day he felt his spirit slowly ebbing away from him. However, this morning everything had changed for Richard. The article this morning had given him something he hadn't had in a long time: a sliver of hope. But what the hell was the girl's name?

Richard was not an elegant runner and his stride wasn't very efficient; even his breathing technique was all wrong. Instead, he made up for these shortcomings by transforming his body over the years into an enlarged heart and lung machine that gave him an endurance edge that few other people possessed. He approached his running with the same manic commitment he once reserved for his drinking habit. He also knew he was fortunate so far in avoiding the usual chronic injuries that crippled so many other distance runners. As he ran, the blood from his heart was pumping vigorously throughout his body, surging into his limbs and, finally, deep into the dustbins that littered his brain.

"This is what millions of years of evolution had designed the human body for, an efficient machine for walking to the next food source and for running after wounded prey," he thought to himself. During a good run, each stride for Richard was a perfect, effortless, rhythmic step that made his soul and body feel like one, rather than the usual state of constant warfare with one another.

As he ran, he remembered her face. She was an attractive lady; pretty actually, with small features and who wore a little makeup, a small brunette with light-colored, almost green eyes, a little bit older, and she had a nice, curvy shape. She had a tan at the time and she had good, firm legs, if he recalled correctly that were accentuated by her heels. That's right, she also smelled good as well. These were all key elements in his checklist for remembering any woman of sexual merit.

He then remembered one other distinguishing characteristic about her. “Man, she was such a pain in the ass!” She was very bright, yet so opinionated and she possessed absolutely no sense of humor about herself. She didn’t even find him amusing, and that was particularly insulting to Richard’s fragile ego.

“Come on, how could that be?” he thought. Richard knew that every 9th grade girl in his school had a crush on him for as much as his looks as his smart-ass ways. A sense of humor was critical in his short list of admirable qualities in a woman. With Richard’s childish behavior, it was actually a necessity in order for a woman to tolerate him for any length of time.

As Richard ran, he approached a steeper slope and he immediately shortened his stride to accommodate the challenging gradient. As he looked down to check his footing, he caught a glimpse of a discarded Sara Lee pound cake lid that he decided would be best to avoid stepping on.

“Stupid garbage, that’s all I need to do, is to take a spill on that lid,” he thought to himself. He knew that a fall this deep in the woods would mean an excruciating, long walk back to the apartment. And with the blood surging through the vessels in his skull it came to him, seemingly out of the void, but actually deep from the recesses of his brain. “Shit, that’s it, her name! Sara, Sara Levine!” And that’s why Richard ran, not to run away from his sad, tortured life, as he did with his drinking but to somehow remember the fragments of his life. With Sara’s name firmly fixed within his consciousness, Richard picked his pace up and barely noticed the abyss that loomed before him.

The Rest Will Follow

It took Richard less than an hour on the Internet to track Sarah Levine down with the correct spelling of her name to her most recent university posting. Later that day, he managed to find a phone number for her, and he began calling her obsessively. Reaching her voice message, Richard would hang up repeatedly, wanting instead the opportunity to talk to her directly. Later that afternoon, he finally caught Sarah in her office.

“Sarah Levine?”

“Yes, who is this?”

“Professor Staller, Richard Staller, we met at the Cleveland anthropology conference a few years ago.”

“Why, yes, I do remember you, Richard. How is it going and what have you been up to?” Sarah said in a forced cheerful tone.

“Well, not up to much, a little teaching at the public school level, though to be honest with you Sarah, I am not really calling you to catch up on old times. I’m sure you’ve heard the press announcement regarding Homo floresiensis and Flores Island?” Richard asked.

Sarah felt a sinking sensation in her stomach. It was one of her momentary lapses of judgment when she shared with Richard the details regarding her trip to the mystery island and her so-called incident in the jungle. She wasn’t even planning to go to the social mixer that ran

after the most boring academic conference Sarah could ever recall attending. Nevertheless, for some reason that stupid small voice told her to get out that night and have some fun.

Sarah was alone at the mixer and she spotted him standing by himself surveying the room. Richard was a somewhat attractive guy, at least compared with some of the other university dregs that had attended the conference, and she caught him scrutinizing her. Richard was tall, somewhat on the lean side with a somewhat boyish face and a square jaw line. He had brown, thick hair and, unlike his brethren, his hair at least appeared to have during the past week. His clothes were cleaned and pressed; overall, he made a respectable presentation from a distance. Most of all, she liked his light blue eyes and the hint of mischief that danced within them. In short, he had all the earmarks of being a typical one-night affair type guy and that suited her temperament perfectly, after all she was looking for some fun not a relationship.

Most of the other men at the conference were barely capable of rudimentary grooming such as bathing and shaving, never mind having a full social discourse with a woman. When totally bored, Sarah often made a game of spotting the man with the widest variety of food stains on his clothes, trying to guess, for example, what they had for lunch. Previously, she had tried to figure out who had went without a shower the longest, but the body odor would take too much of a toll on her sensitive nose. And this was from a woman who worked regularly with apes; she could excuse the apes but not people for smelling like animals. No, viewing stains from a distance was a much safer diversion. Even so, this game too had its perils because if they saw Sarah looking at them, they automatically assumed she was flirting with them.

No matter how slovenly they might appear Sarah could always count a healthy dose of male ego to fill any conference room. If they did approach her, she found that her best defense mechanism was to either play dead or to challenge them intellectually. Most of the men she met felt challenged by her intellect; after all, she was a bright person, and she wasn't about to dumb it

down for some fragile male ego. After shooting down some of the other academic wrecks, Sarah set her targets on Richard. For whatever the reasons, she felt like flirting that night, and Richard was the only male in the room that appeared to be of the same species as her.

Richard spotted the quiet brunette eyeing him and he confidently walked over to her and smiled while asking her, “How many evolutionists does it take to change a light bulb?”

Sarah looked at him and said “What? Duh, only one, but it takes her eight million years,” she said chuckling while shaking her head at his lame joke.

Richard was undeterred by his initial failure. “Alright, you heard that one before, so how many creationists does it take to change a light bulb?”

Sarah gives him a quizzical look while Richard presses ahead. “Only one and you damn well know that it takes him no more than seven days,” he joked.

Sarah continues shaking her head and commented, “Really, I haven’t heard such riveting humor since grade school. That’s your pickup line? So what are you working, a pity angle with me?” Sarah asked jokingly.

“Why, would that angle work with you?” Richard asked.

“No, not really, I don’t do charity work,” Sarah said.

“All right, those jokes sucked, I’ll grant you that, but you did laugh. Besides, I didn’t know if my standard pickup lines would work with you and I had to make sure you weren’t one of the pod people at this conference,” Richard said.

“No, I am not and I was laughing at you, not at the lame jokes. But, you are right though, these people do make tedium seem exciting. So that’s your best shot?” Sarah asked.

“I was going to ask what a fine looking babe like you was doing in here with these losers?” Richard asked.

“What, I don’t qualify as a hottie?” Sarah responded as she shot him a big smile.

Richard realized she may have been quiet but she wasn't shy, not by a long shot.

Emboldened by her flirting, he decided to press ahead.

“To be honest with you, any adjectives I use you to compare you with this crowd is damning with faint phrase,” he said.

“Very well put then, I'm Associate Professor Sarah Levine,” and Sarah extended her hand for a collegial handshake. Richard grasped her small hand with his and held onto her hand for a few extra moments while looking into her eyes.

“Actually, I didn't know what line to use since I observed you shooting down all the other guys here.”

“You know they deserved to be shot down, so please don't disappoint me,” she retorted with a seductive smile.

“You got a deal but this usual works a lot better for both of us if you're drunk so allow me to get you another drink,” a smirking Richard said and the two headed over to the bar together.

Richard liked the spunky little brunette, and after the introductions he gave her a brief overview of his research. Sarah could tell that he loved talking about himself, and she actually understood his work on species radiation in hominins through DNA analysis. Most other women would have chewed their right leg off to get away from that conversation with Richard. “Bright kid,” he was thinking to himself even though she was actually several years his senior. Sarah talked about her work as a primatologist, and some of the papers she had published making it clear to Richard that she was no lightweight. Smartest kid in her class they would say about her, and she knew it.

Richard was impressed with her work but not enough to keep the academic talk going. He wanted to have some fun and, after all, she was an pretty girl, in anybody's room, boring or

otherwise. For Richard that was only type of girl truly worth pursuing because if you were going to be tortured by a woman, and they all do torture you at some point in your life, you might as well be tortured by a pretty woman.

Richard interrupts her by commenting, “That’s a hell of a nice tan you have going there girl. I would love to see your tan lines sometime.”

“Hmmm, that was a bit obvious Richard. Anyway, spend two months in Flores and you develop a darn good base coat. For now, I’m going to keep the tan lines to myself, thank you,” she said.

Richard wasn’t dissuaded from his pursuit. As she continued to talk, Richard interrupted her once again and asked her, “You went to Flores, huh? So you did visit the Caves at Bin Laung?”

“No.”

“What, you’re a primatologist and you went to Flores and didn’t go the caves? I’m not an expert, but there are no primates on the island, other than the two-legged human kind, am I right? That had to be a big career move for you. So why were you there?” he asked jokingly.

He as being a smart ass and maybe it was the second glass of wine but she decided to show off. No, tales regarding the bird studies would not do in this case. Sarah smiled at Richard while looking at him straight in the eyes.

“Oh, I wouldn’t be so sure about that if I was you. You know there can be more than one species of two-legged primates,” Sarah said. Richard grew closer to her and he noticed that as she spoke her nostrils flared ever so slightly.

“Yeah, maybe 18,000 years ago on that island,” Richard replied.

“Don’t be such a cretin Richard, that’s such boring, old conventional wisdom,” she said.

“What?”

“It may not be that long ago,” she said with a big smile.

“Get out of here, where?” Richard asked.

“Well, I can’t say but on one of those so-called non-primate islands, I think there is a major discovery to be made, just ripe for the taking as they say.” Maybe it was the wine but Sarah found herself talking more loudly than usual.

“You saw something on Flores?” Richard said as he pressed closer to her. He loved the look in her eyes with the pupils widening; this girl knew how to flirt. He started to notice her perfume, and he struggled to place the scent. This cute girl also smells good, and she was wearing a white blouse under her blazer that nicely offset her tan. The top buttons of her blouse were undone, and he found himself fighting hard to resist the temptation of looking down at the shorter woman’s cleavage. For a small girl she had a nice pair and he wondered about her cup size before he regained a modicum of self-control. As he did, he repeated his old mantra: “Focus on her eyes, Richard, the rest will follow.”

Sarah commented, “No, not on Flores but on one of the other islands off Flores, there is something on that island.”

“Come on, what Bigfoot?” Richard asked.

She continued in an excited, hushed voice, “More like I felt something while I was in the woods, I mean it was an intelligent presence. It was far different from what I’ve sensed when I’m in the jungle with other apes such as chimps or gorillas! I heard murmuring coming from them, some type of vocalization, very non-ape like,” Sarah said.

“You’re being a bit vague for me. Just what the hell did you see or hear, kiddo?” Richard said with a smile.

“I didn’t see anything, but someone is there, and I’m going back to find them” Sarah said with great determination, that is she could ever remember the damn coordinates.

She said, “Have you ever heard of the Ebu Gogo?”

“Yes, what about them?” Richard asked.

“Well, think about destiny,” Sarah said as she smiled at him with that sparkle in her eyes.

“Destiny?” Richard thinks to himself. Great! This chick is spending way too much time alone in the jungle on some God-forsaken island. Now he was beginning to question what was that wild-eye look in her eyes a few moments ago? He had assumed she was flirting, but now he was having second thoughts about her true motivations. Was she a flake or maybe she was a member of some weird cult? Whatever the case, horniness would always win out over personal safety for Richard, and he decided to press ahead with the cute but strange brunette.

They talked a little more, and Richard started to tease her about working with apes. That was a big gaffe on his part since that was tantamount to attacking her family! Sarah found his humor to be somewhat juvenile, especially when it was at her expense, and she was getting tired of the flirting game. Sarah gave Richard the dreaded good-bye look and told him she was calling it a night despite his adamant protests. Before leaving and as colleagues, they politely exchanged email addresses.

A few days after the conference, Richard had the opportunity to read some of Sarah’s research in the journals, the very same professional journals that he was hoping to submit his work to! Richard had expected to find her articles to be a mix of some soft, touchy-feely, humanist anthropology. Much to his surprise, Sarah wrote her articles and observations on primates with the cold, unblinking eye of a scientist. Observations, facts, and deductions were the mainstays of Sarah’s publications, not subjective feelings.

Sarah’s research on the great apes centered exclusively on the study of empathy. Empathy, the ability of one sentient creature to put themselves in another creature’s “shoes” is a critical ingredient in the unique makeup of human beings. That unique human ingredient also

seems to be an important characteristic of primates in general. Research in macaque monkeys identified a region of the brain that fired in response to their own activity, or even if they watched another monkey perform the same action. Called mirror neurons, their presence suggests an innate ability of primates to put themselves in another creature's frame of mind. Research was indicating that much of the primate's brain is wired specifically for interaction with other primates. The ability to predict the behavior of other individuals in the troop would give an individual a decided edge in manipulating others. Even in chimps, there have been suggestions that they know how to lie to other primates, even to their human researchers!

Sarah's work was continuing the research of others in the field in suggesting that this basic primate capability was integral in understanding human behavior. Moreover, the same ability to manipulate, can give the individual the ability to empathize with another creature leading to some of the greatest good and evils seen in humans. Empathy allows humans to feel pity and sorrow for others; while on the other hand, it allows a man to join others of his kind in fighting a war, truly a double-edged sword. It also was clearly the first step to a "Theory of Mind".

All of these readings on human emotions made Richard feel a bit dirty since he was a meat and potatoes type of science guy. Furthermore, even Richard had to admit that he was somewhat of an emotional cripple, and he disliked analyzing his own feelings. Still, Sarah's work couldn't be ignored, and the ramifications were far reaching. Damage to certain areas in the human brain could result in a variety of neurological diseases, with autism among them. Autism is a "mind-blindness" of the individual that doesn't allow the afflicted individual to connect or properly interact with other humans.

Richard then reflected on the full spectrum of classic sociopath behavior that was manifest in the essence of a solitary, mean child that tortured small animals for a vicarious thrill,

to the secretive sexual perversions of an obsessive serial killer and finally, to the demonstratively public displays of genocide perpetrated by any war criminal. The ability of some people to intimately kill others, without the slightest hesitation or remorse, perhaps to even enjoy it, is a trait that most humans have some considerable difficulty in understanding and coming to terms with. People just assumed these behaviors were the product of a flawed soul but what if all of these horrific behaviors be attributed to similar deficiencies of the brain, leading to a means of detection and finally, to an inevitable remedy? It sounds almost flippant but could future Hitlers and Stalins be cured with the proper medications?

No, as Richard saw it, Sarah's work was important in linking the evolution of primate emotions to our present human behavior. Science was the dominant theme in her writings, despite her deep respect and reverence for the great apes. She certainly wasn't a flake, and for Richard that made her comments about the "intelligent presence" on the island even more puzzling and vexing to him. Several months later the Flores discovery became big news and Richard knew he had to stay in touch with the brunette but then life happens, like a sledgehammer. That is why he remembered meeting her. Plus, he had to admit it to himself; he always had a thing for small, dark-haired girls with a good pair of boobs.

Upon hearing his voice once again, Sarah wished she never said anything to him and she suddenly felt nauseous.

"I see that you like giving anonymous quotes to bloggers about finds on non-primate islands." He said.

Taken aback by Richard's boldness, Sarah decided to play it safe and she gets defensive about the topic.

“What do you mean, Richard?” she asked in a somewhat agitated voice while wanting to hang up on him.

“That night you told me that you sensed an intelligence presence on one of those Indonesian islands and there are a few anthropologists thinking there are more than just bones to find in the area. Hell, they are talking about searching the caves and forests, not just for fossils but also for living specimens! You’re the one that mentioned the Ebu Gogo that night!” Richard said.

“You are getting way ahead of yourself, Richard. I didn’t tie this into Homo floresiensis; you just did. I had too much to drink that night at the conference. And besides, of what concern is this matter to you?” Sarah asked.

Richard’s ear picks up on Sarah’s phrase “this matter.” To Richard’s ear, her last comment was a “tell” and that’s why Richard hated phone conversations. If he could see her face, he would know instantly if she was planning a trip back to Flores. Richard knew she was playing defensive ball and doing anything she could to stonewall him.

“Come on Sarah, please don’t bullshit me, I know what you are planning, your blog comment was a dead giveaway!” Richard pleaded.

“Richard, I have to go. Bye!” and Sarah abruptly hung up on him. Sarah realized that was not too polite of her but she was shaken by Richard’s call. Sarah knew Richard’s meddling could queer the entire expedition for her.

There were many ways to describe Richard. Angry, impetuous, arrogant, and sometimes even stupid but he was never a quitter. Richard decided to catch up with Sarah, and meet with her face to face at the university. Hell, he had no job after the incident with the redneck creationist parent, so a road trip was not out of the question for him. Richard looked her address up, and decided to drive the following day to Sarah’s university.

Richard spent the day tracking Sarah down, and he finally caught up with her at the university's primate lab. As Richard went into the Biology building on campus, he asked one of the security guards if they know where Sarah Levine could be found? He shows the old guard his expired university card and explains that he has a meeting scheduled with Associate Professor Sarah Levine. The guard, who was more interested in the reading of his copy of the National Enquirer, ignored the card while looking over the preppy looking Richard and he gruffly pointed Richard in the direction of the primate labs. As he entered the lab, Richard noticed the distinctive ripe odor of caged apes, an odor he found repulsive even as kid when he visited the local zoo.

Sarah's had been working with several chimps, taking some time to feed and play with them. While feeding them, she had taken it upon herself to clean their neglected cages. The other graduate students responsible for cleaning the cages were to be found slacking as usual and Sarah decided to pitch in to help her animal friends.

She is on her knees as Richard enters the lab and at his first glimpse of Sarah in over two years, he literally takes a step back at her grubby appearance.

"Gawd, how drunk was he that night when he first met her?" After having spent two hours cleaning the excrement from the chimp cages, Sarah looks like a homeless person in her filthy sweats and dirty hair. She is sweaty while smelling of disinfectant and ape shit, never mind her missing makeup and tan. A startled Richard tries vainly to remember what he saw in her in the first place.

Sarah, likewise, is surprised at the sudden arrival of Richard. She quietly lets Jojo, a five-year-old juvenile male chimp out of his cage as she moves nearer to Richard. She is horrified that Richard is seeing her in her present disheveled state, and she is even more horrified that Richard has been brazen enough to track her down. Plus, the look of undisguised disgust that

registered on Richard's face did not go unnoticed by Sarah. No woman wants to receive that look from any man.

"Sarah, how are you doing? Richard Staller," as he extends a hand to shake with her. However, Sarah's gloved hands are covered in a mix of fruit mush and who knows what else. Sarah graciously declines to shake while gesturing to the mess on her hands.

"Richard, how did you get in here? You know you caught me at a really bad time."

"Why, you look great!" he said with a smirk and knowing he had her at a decided disadvantage.

"Huh, thanks a lot," Sarah said.

"No really, what is that beguiling odor in the air, is that a new perfume you are wearing?" he asked as he faked a sniff. "No, no let me guess... is it Monkey Business?"

Sarah makes a small disgusted face at the comment. "Trying out new material I see. So besides being the straight woman for your new standup act, is there any particular reason why you are here, uninvited I might add, to see me?" Sarah asked.

"Well Sarah, you kind of ended our conversation very abruptly so I figured I would look you up. I remembered your story about the island and the intelligent presence. Or should we call that presence the Ebu Gogo or Homo Floresiensis? You know, how somebody intelligent was watching you in the woods and, even more importantly, how you know where they are," Richard said.

Sarah decided to change the subject on Richard. "Public school, huh? You must have really enjoyed teaching biology to the great unwashed. I mean a man of your superior learning and capabilities shouldn't be allowed to lower himself by having to mix with the local yokels," Sarah said.

“Thanks for the sarcasm but I guess I deserve it. It wasn’t that bad until I banged heads with one of the Born Again fanatics. They didn’t care for the way I refused to call Intelligent Design a theory. I had an altercation with one of them one day during a parent-teacher’s conference. The jerk actually shoved me,” Richard said.

“Let me guess? You weren’t the least bit belligerent?” Sarah was amazed how easy it was to sidetrack Richard.

“A bit, but that jerk really was asking for it. It really became a small donnybrook. I bet that they are still talking about it to this day,” Richard said. He was glad he used the word donnybrook, brouhaha sounded too much like a fight breaking out during an Oktoberfest.

Sarah shook her head and said, “I’m not quite sure what a donnybrook is but I’m pretty sure that it’s not Latin for a scholarly debate. Allow me to guess again, your scholarly debate with the parent turned into a fist fight, am I right?” In response to her question, Richard hung his head down in apparent shame.

“Ah, good times, huh Richard? Richard, you are such a cretin, that’s exactly how they wanted you to react,” Sarah said.

Richard was about to speak but he paused for a second. Richard had been subjected to a variety of different curses before, even called an idiot and moron at numerous times, but cretin was now becoming a regular addition to the list of disparaging adjectives people had used to describe him. Interesting choice of words from a strange little girl, he thought to himself and she didn’t even pronounce it right.

“Perhaps, but you know it could have been just the excuse I needed to get the hell out of there. I kind of felt trapped there. A heretic amongst the true believers, I guess,” said Richard.

“Well, you missed a perfect opportunity to win converts amongst the less committed,” Sarah said as she smiled at him. He started to hate that stupid, little smug smile of hers.

“Sarah, do you know what it’s like to teach the great unwashed? You sit here in the Ivory Tower preaching gospel to the choir. They’ve already bought into evolution and all of the iconoclastic ramifications those beliefs entail. Out there, in the real world, they haven’t. They still believe in angels, saints and miracles and, most of all, they hate you for trying to upset their perfectly stupid little world! They don’t want to think and they sure in hell don’t want you to challenge them. I guess I don’t quite fit the bill as a missionary for evolution,” Richard said.

“You don’t fit the bill for much, do you Richard?” Sarah asked.

Wow, Richard thought that comment was uncalled for; she was really letting him have it with both barrels. It was quite apparent to him that Sarah wasn’t quite warming up to his boyish charms. Must be her sweats talking.

“So besides catching up on old times, why the visit now, Richard?” Sarah questioned.

“I know what you saw that day on that island off Flores—”

“Wait a minute, I don’t even know for sure what I felt, so I’m positive you don’t know,” Sarah said. “If you recall, I didn’t see anything!”

“Well, I figured we put together an expedition and search outside Flores where nobody else is looking. I figured you can use my help with—”

“Richard, I don’t need your help, thank you,” Sarah said abruptly interrupting Richard.

“But you are going; I mean you are planning to go back to your island aren’t you?” Richard asked.

“I rather not say Richard. I try to keep my lies to a minimum; it just makes it that much easier to keep track of the occasional lie,” Sarah said.

He knew it! He was right about her and what was even worse; she was deliberately shutting him out from her expedition. Richard felt his stomach tighten, and he was starting to feel a bit desperate.

“Look, just add me to the team as a junior member, and give me a chance to work with you!” he pleaded.

“Richard, Dr. Brightman is putting together the team, and he has already invited a DNA anthropologist. I’m not sure there is a position open but I can check for you.” That would be a cold day in hell she thought to herself.

As she said those words, Richard thought he detected a trace of a smile on her lips. Figures! No lipstick, slightly chapped and thin lips to boot he noted to himself. Richard picked at his hand as he tried to gather his wits about him. A sense of panic was starting to grip him, and there was little he could do to regain control of the conversation or of his destiny.

Out of desperation, Richard blurted out, “Well, maybe I could keep you warm at night, you know bumpin’ uglies!”

The minute Richard said it; he knew it was a stupid, rude remark that wasn’t at all funny, especially to her. Too late, the damage was done. As a rejoinder to his last comment and breath, Sarah scrunched her face again and pursed her lips as if to chastise him with a single, fleeting look.

“Really, that’s not necessary, thank you. I’m perfectly capable of staying warm on my own, especially on a tropical island. And I’ll keep my uglies to myself.” Sarah said.

As they talked, Jojo, a male chimp, was sitting docilely in the corner busily playing with a piece of fruit. The chimp was getting bored and he wanted attention from Sarah. Adding to his anxiety, he was sensing the growing tension between the two bipeds in the room. He started to get unruly by making loud calls and he soon escalated into a full rampage by throwing his toys about the lab. Richard did not even realize the animal was free from his cage, so he is taken aback by the chimp’s outburst, and he instinctively takes a step back toward the other end of the lab. The noise from the enraged chimp becomes deafening in the confined space of the small

lab. Richard knows all too well how strong chimps are, and, ouch, as a reminder, he remembered a news story about how a rampaging chimpanzee had ripped apart a man's scrotum. The ape begins charging at the two, and Richard freezes for a moment not knowing how to react to the apparent onslaught from the crazed chimp.

Sarah stood straight up and faced the chimp. "Jojo, stop it now, damn it!" Sarah yells and stares him down. The juvenile male backed down giving a small whimper as he scampered away from the two. The rampage ends, and a relative calm returns once again to the lab.

Richard is thrown off by the attack, and was visibly shaken by the rage display of the male chimp. "I wonder if that bitch planned that display?" he thought to himself.

Sarah turns to Richard and said, "You know he's like most of the males I have met in my life; a lot of show and all bluff. You know all noise and very little substance."

Richard smiled in an exaggerated manner at her, as if to say ha, ha. "Very funny, I bet you staged this just to see what I would do..."

"That's fairly paranoid of you especially since you are the one visiting me without an invite. Sounds to me like somebody is off their meds today." She spoke without looking at him, busying herself with the preparation of meals for the other animals.

Richard felt his career opportunity slipping away from him, and he was drawing a blank on what next to say to her. He sat down and put his head in hands, at first rubbing his eyes then his head. Sarah paid scant attention to him, and continued with her work in the lab.

A few awkward minutes passed and Sarah asked, "Excuse me Richard, do you have anything more to say?"

He did; in fact, he had much to say, words that were far too vicious to utter. Richard felt the blood pounding in his head, and his anger building until his face flushed a warm red, a sure indication of how conflicted he felt. He was angry with Sarah for her righteous, schoolgirl

attitude, and he was angry with himself for having to go to her with his hat in hand in the first place. He wanted to let her have it so badly, but the small voice of reason within him restrained him, and finally, it muzzled him. Here he was with one identifiable moment in his life that could make or break his career, no, actually his very existence, and he stood at the precipice wondering what to do next. Usually, those moments passed right by him, identifiable only by his terrible hindsight, but this moment stood out, stopped and challenged him to make the right choice.

Finally, Richard made his decision, and he decided not to explode, thereby avoiding his usual scorched earth policy of human relations.

“Ah, fuck me,” he muttered under his breath.

“Richard, did you say something?” she asked.

“I think I should be leaving,” Richard said while trying not to scowl at her. “I’ll leave you my phone number in case circumstances should change with your team. I mean you’re not totally opposed to working with me if the something should change, are you?” Richard asked.

“Of course not, Richard, and if things should change you will be the first person I contact. Goodbye Richard,” Sarah curtly replied.

Richard wrote down his phone number and left the lab muttering to himself. The lab door slammed behind him and an eerie silence fell over the caged animals. After Richard left the lab, Sarah gathered Jojo and ushered him in the direction of his cage. Before putting the chimp in the cage, Sarah stopped and gave the chimp a big hug.

“Good boy, I can always count on my Jojo to make a scene! Now tell me, did that big ape scare you?” she cooed to him.

Nobody of Consequence

The day after Richard's unfortunate visit to the primate lab Sarah decides to make a hasty call to her mentor and friend, Professor Daniel Brightman. Sarah heard about the Flores Island news weeks before Richard through her university grapevine, a connection that Richard was now sorely lacking. After hearing about the Indonesian's government intervention, Sarah had immediately contacted her old mentor for a meeting to discuss her proposed plans. She wanted to move quickly fearing that Richard's interference could wreck those very same plans.

Sarah pulled up to Brightman's colonial house and practically ran to his front door. Once there she meekly knocked on the large red door. Brightman's wife Helena answered the door and seeing it was Sarah rolled her eyes at the sight of the younger woman.

"Oh, it's you. Dan, she's here again," Dan's wife called out disgustedly in manner befitting the arrival of a stray cat rather than an esteemed colleague.

Sarah meekly thanked her and waited in the foyer for Dan. Dan was expecting Sarah's visit and he was genuinely happy to see her as he greeted her. He ushers Sarah to his cherry wood den and the two take a seat in some old Queen Ann style chairs.

"Your wife doesn't like me, does she?" Sarah asked.

"Never mind Helena, that medusa doesn't like anybody including me and besides we have urgent matters to discuss."

“Professor, have you given any consideration to my proposal about putting together another expedition to Flores Island?” Sarah asked. Sarah was nervous and little unsure of how Brightman was going to react to her somewhat strange request. Would he consider her request an imposition on his time and his department’s resources?

Dan was the only person other than Richard that knew of Sarah’s bizarre experience on “Flores 2” as she called it. Dan knew where the conversation was going, and he had anticipated Sarah’s call shortly after the latest Flores announcement.

“Sarah, first call me Dan; you are making me feel ancient with that Professor crap after all of these years. Yeah, I’ve been following their discovery for some time, and it’s great stuff. Imagine another species of hominin living at the same time as modern man on that small island. The stuff of dreams and legends, that’s what this is. Mind boggling what we don’t know yet isn’t it?” Dan asked.

Dan paused for a moment while eyeing Sarah and he asked the question, “Sarah, are you still having those dreams about your island experience?”

“Yes, but, frankly, they are more like nightmares. Professor, I mean Dan, I was hoping to get back, ah, you know...” Sarah trailed off hesitating to complete her sentence.

Sarah never used the phrase “you know” unless she was nervous, very nervous. Dan looked at her and asked, “You want to go back to that island don’t you?”

“Yes, I do, I know it’s there,” Sarah responded.

“What’s there, Sarah? The Ebu Gogo, our little Hobbit friend?” Dan asked.

“I don’t know, something very different is on that island, and I need to find out what. To do so, I need help to put an expedition together. Most of all, I need your help Dan!” as she looked right into his eyes and managed a small smile for him.

Dan looked at her and he immediately knew that he couldn't say no to her. Sarah was his brightest student; she always stayed in touch with him through the years, and he considered her a genuine friend. In addition, he couldn't help but notice that she was young and very attractive albeit a bit too serious for his taste in younger women.

"I trust you Sarah and I trust your hunches. "I assume you have the location of the island tucked safely away?" Dan asked.

"Of course I do," Sarah said.

"So nobody else knows about the island, Sarah?" Dan enquired.

"Nobody of consequence."

Dan noted the peculiar comment but he decided to leave it alone. "I assume you want to be co-heads on this expedition with myself?" Dan asked. Sarah nodded affirmatively and knew this could be the biggest sticking point with Brightman.

"If that is okay with you?" she said demurely deferring to her senior partner.

Dan sighed, "I'm fine with that, and frankly, you've earned it. I'll call in a few markers and see what I can do! But we need to come up with an alternative excuse; I mean rationale for this expedition. We'll just say we want to do some more bird studies. We can't very well let people onto the fact that we are big game hunting now, can we?" he said with a wink in his eye.

Sarah's usual quiet demeanor erupted into squeals of delight and in the process of hugging Dan she nearly knocked him off his chair.

"Dan, what's going on in there?" his wife yelled from the hallway.

"Nothing dear!" he yelled back as he motioned to Sarah to tone it down.

"Well then, I'll start putting this trip together right away? You do want to go right away, I assume?" Dan asked as he found himself getting caught up in Sarah's enthusiasm.

She smiled and surprisingly, kissed him on the cheek. “Absolutely, we can’t waste a moment. Let’s put this dream team together as soon as we can.”

The following morning, Dan is driving his car to his campus office and he is feeling incredibly upbeat. Dan is mentally running through a list of key contacts he will need in order to pull the Flores 2 expedition together. As he goes through his mental gymnastics, he puts the car radio on and he settles on listening to a pop love song. He finds himself actually enjoying the song, which is somewhat out of character for him when listening to such apparent drivel. Then he understands why; the thought of spending several months with Sarah on this expedition is starting to excite him, and he is only beginning to realize that he is attracted to her even though he is twenty years her senior, and is already married. Her sweet face appeals to him and the smell of her perfume continues to linger in his mind. He knew it was wrong, but it was fun to fantasize about her, and he convinced himself that it was nothing more than a harmless flirtation. Besides, wasn’t he more of a father figure to her he thought to himself?

Dan stopped his car at a main intersection and waited patiently to make a right hand turn onto the road. The light turned green and as he turns the car, he remembers one time watching her in the lab feeding some of the animals. She was attentive and caring with each of the chimps. Normally, Sarah is a bundle of nervous, occasionally noisy energy, but this time she was exhibiting a quiet grace he had never been witness to before. As she was bending over one of the cages, he had a clear view of her décolletage as her old and loose fitting sweatshirt fell away from her shoulders. As he politely turned his gaze away, he could not help but notice that her pale breasts were hanging downward and pressing forward in her white bra. Just as he turned away, she looked up at him and she smiled at him like an innocent angel. He instinctively smiled back at her. Dan had not looked at his wife that way for nearly a decade, maybe even longer.

Ever since that day, Dan convinced himself that Sarah never caught on that he was looking at her breasts, or so he hoped. After all, he had two daughters that were nearly her age.

“Why are breasts such a potent sexual signal for men?” he wondered as the scientist in him wrested control from his genitalia for a brief moment. “Oh to heck with that nonsense, let’s face it; she really is a very attractive...”

Tires screech, glass breaks and a loud metal thud filled the early morning air. According to the police report, witnesses said they heard a loud “banging noise” and saw that a large, dark SUV with blackened windows had plowed into the much smaller compact sedan. The force of the crash had moved the driver side a good two feet into the middle of the silver car while the momentum of the impact pushed the smaller car onto the shoulder of the road. The SUV hesitated for a few moments, and then sped off without stopping to inspect the resultant carnage.

The small car was resting along the edge of the road, surrounded by small plastic and metal fragments that littered the asphalt. A sea of broken glass shimmered in the early morning sunlight barely suggesting the devastation contained within the car. As traffic stopped, the morning air became still again except for the hissing of steam escaping from the ruptured radiator. A fire started in the engine compartment, and before a Good Samaritan could approach, the car began a slow but increasingly furious burn. The radio continued to play the mindless love song until it too, was consumed by the flames. After the fire was extinguished, the local coroner was called the crash site to retrieve what they euphemistically call “a roast”. Dan’s remains are unrecognizable by his family members, but dental records soon confirm that Professor Daniel Brightman, noted researcher, devoted father and husband, is indeed dead that brilliant fall morning.

A day later, Sarah called Dan's house and after repeated busy signals, reached one of his daughters.

"I'm sorry, I guess you didn't hear, but Dad died yesterday in a horrible car crash," the young girl sobbed on the phone.

"What..., Dan? When?" Sarah asked.

"We don't know who, maybe a drunk, a large SUV, it just took off," the girl muttered between sobs. "The car caught fire..."

"Oh God, I'm so, so sorry, I didn't..." Sarah said.

Sarah quickly said goodbye to the daughter, and she hung up while staring into the distance. Sarah has lost her mentor, friend, and her dreams, all in one careless accident. A few moments later, she then realized that without Dan, her expedition is finished. Dan is the only one who knew and believed her story, and without Dan, Sarah has nothing in her life. Alone in her small room, Sarah sobs uncontrollably for the loss of her friend and for herself.

A day later, Sarah attended the wake for her old mentor. The university crowd is out in force for the wake as waves of faculty and students arrive to pay homage to a great educator. Sarah mingles in while trying to talk shop with some of her old colleagues. The room is crowded with people at the back of the chapel with few venturing to be up front and near the closed casket. Surprisingly, few are talking about or even interested about the discoveries in Flores. Sarah tries to talk about the recent headlines but she can sense that her colleagues are somewhat put-off by her boldness at the wake. Instead, they are all exchanging memorable stories about Professor Brightman and his incredible warmth that he readily shared with both his fellow faculty and students. Sarah feels awkward among other people, particularly with casual acquaintances and strangers. She didn't want to talk about Dan because she is so close to falling apart emotionally.

She is also failing miserably in her quest to try to find out if Dan had spoken to anyone about the expedition to Flores.

To make matters worse, Sarah is not well received by Dan's surviving family. She had spent too much time with him, and was not the least bit shy about calling his house whenever she felt necessary. Dan's wife and daughters have little tolerance for Sarah, for they all, at one time or another; had viewed her as a threat to their domestic tranquility. Sarah gathered her strength, and approached Dan's wife so she can give her condolences to the family. Dan often joked about how frosty his Helena could be, and her intimidating looks bore Dan's comments out. She, too, was a professor with her own singular career, and it was amazing that they had found the time to conceive their two daughters. Helena has seen far too many young girls come and go through the university ranks, and Sarah was just another one that seemed to have overstayed her welcome at Helena's house.

As she approached Helena, Sarah nervously picked at her freshly cut nails and digs deeply into her skin. She had cut her nails in anticipation of the rigors from the expedition and that now seemed liked such a waste of time. Instead, now she was confronting Helena, and Sarah was actually drawing blood from the cuticles. Helena was a tall, thin woman whose frame suggested a fragility that was more than compensated for by her nasty disposition. She never seemed to smile as though if she did she would lose her edge on the world.

As Sarah began to speak, the taller Helena hastily pulled her aside and commented, "Dear, please save your tears and condolences. I never really liked you from the start. You always seemed so needy; you were especially demanding of Dan's time. Moreover, I didn't appreciate the fact that Dan knew more about you than his own daughters. Really, did you ever sleep with him?" Helena asked.

Sarah was stunned by boldness of the question. "No! I—"

“Oh, it doesn’t matter dear, it’s not like you would be the first one. Please go now and leave my family alone. Don’t come to the burial tomorrow. Say your goodbyes to Dan and leave us alone. Thank you.”

Sarah was devastated by the conversation with Dan’s wife. She had never considered the depth of ill will she had engendered with Dan’s family. Red faced and in tears, Sarah made her peace with Dan and she headed home alone.

Once home, Sarah replayed the bitter words from Dan’s wife in her head. As bad as that was, Sarah was more upset with her own display of blind ambition at the funeral, in particular with her own awkward efforts to talk with her colleagues about Flores. For God’s sake, the man had just died, and her blind ambition had her talking shop with her peers. “What a great human being I am, huh?” she thought to herself.

Sarah calls her mother for a comforting word but she really did not know what to say to her mother. Her mother exchanged a few trite words with her, but they are of little comfort to Sarah. Since the death of her father, Sarah had come to rely on Dan as the father figure in her life. For as long as she could remember, her mother had been a shadowy presence during her childhood, there for her, but never a significant force in her existence.

Several days later after the wake, Sarah is back in the primate lab cleaning up once again. She feels at home with the chimps and they readily accept Sarah’s lavish attention. Sarah sees the sadness in their eyes and their complete dejection at being caged and imprisoned for their entirety of their earthly life. She understands their despair and feels at one with the caged primates in the oppressive lab.

As she moved about the lab, Sarah found the paper with the phone number that Richard had hastily written down before his sudden departure that day. Adding to her recent embarrassment, Sarah’s face reddened at the remembrance of her own shabby treatment of

Richard. Despite his apparent boldness, she could have treated him better. All sentient creatures deserve some measure of respect and Richard almost qualified as being sentient.

With nothing to do but to reflect on the strange turns in her life, Sarah realized that few people would believe her story particularly with the media frenzy surrounding the Homo floresiensis find and the possible link to the Ebu Gogo legend. If she approached others about her incident on the island, they would just dismiss her as an attention-seeking crank. Nobody would believe her story, that is, but Dan and Richard. "I've got nothing to lose, I might as well call Richard and at least apologize to him," she thought to herself.

Sarah called Richard several times and had no luck in reaching him. She hesitated to leave her name but on the third call, she decided to leave a message. "Richard, it's Sarah Levine, we've got to talk. About the other day, well, I'm sorry, I was a bit surprised by..."

Richard was screening his calls in a vain effort to avoid engaging with the lawyers involved in his civil suit. "Sarah, is that you? What is it?"

"Well, first let me apologize for being such a bitch to you at the lab the other day," Sarah said.

"That's all right; you were just being a bitch to my being a complete and total ass. Surprise, surprise, it happens; I mean I did catch you at a bad time. So Sarah, why did you really call? I assume it wasn't just to exchange regrets," Richard asked.

"You're right. I've made a complete mess of everything. Dan is dead..." And then Sarah does the unthinkable; she starts sobbing on the phone to a complete stranger.

"Dan who? You mean Professor Brightman? How?" Richard asked.

"A car accident, a hit and run. He's gone, the expedition is gone, it's all turned to ahh..."

More tears and Richard had to wait a minute for Sarah to compose herself. He couldn't understand what she was saying, and once again Richard doesn't know what to say in return to

Sarah. The raw emotion Sarah is displaying has taken him off guard, and he is ill prepared to comfort her especially after he had been wallowing in his own self-pity for the past two weeks. Since the incident at the lab, Richard has resumed his nasty drinking habit and had been tucked away in a perpetual alcoholic fetal position hoping that his nightmare would soon pass. Sarah was fortunate to catch him during one of his more lucid moments.

“How does this damn Flores girl always manage to keep me off balance?” he asked himself.

“So what are you planning to do?” he asked.

“What do you mean do what? I’m doing nothing. The team was never put together! Dan hadn’t spoken to anyone before his death, so as far as I know, I’m screwed. With the recent press coverage on Flores nobody is going to believe my story, short of you and Dan,” Sarah blurted out.

There is an awkward silence on the phone. Richard is quickly thinking about ways that he can turn the situation around to his advantage, and he struggles to free his brain from the alcoholic haze. “Just keep talking, say anything,” Richard is thinking to himself. Then the words that could only be described as the desperate words from a truly ignorant man emerge from his mouth.

“Let’s put it together ourselves, we’ll plan and run the expedition.”

“With what? Are you nuts?” Sarah asked.

“Look, all we need is some money and some minimal equipment. All we have to do is prove they exist! Maybe some camping equipment, some small excavation equipment, video, sound and cameras, nothing crazy. I’ve got access to camera equipment that I can borrow from my brother Steven,” Richard said.

“Richard, I’ve been on these expeditions. They cost a fortune in time and money—”

“You’re right, if you’re talking about a planned university expedition. Look, a standard academic expedition is put together by mob of lazy bureaucrats spending other people’s money. They haven’t a clue about being lean and mean. And really this isn’t a big dig, we’re just looking for critters,” Richard said. He wasn’t sure if even he was buying this line of bullshit, but what did he have to lose at this point.

“As for money for the trip, we are going to have to get really creative about using personal funding. You know I could never so no to a big fat, cash advance. Plus, I can sell my SUV. It burns a little oil but hell it still runs pretty good. You’ve got to have something, anything we can use to raise money to hire guides and, you know, bribe the occasional government official?”

The bribing comment made Sarah chuckle. “That’s crazy! How do we get the clearance?” she asked.

Oops, she had a good point there. Quick, think of something Richard, anything. Then without missing a beat, “Okay, babe, you and me, we are just two tourists taking a tropical vacation to Bali. You got a passport right? We’ll pack and take as much equipment as we can with us, and then take a side trip to Flores from Bali. Don’t forget the suntan lotion! From there, we’ll charter someone to take us to your island, find whatever we can, and ask permission, or beg for forgiveness later,” Richard said.

“This is nuts, Richard. You really expect me to take this proposal seriously?” Sarah asked. There is silence on the other end of the line and then they both turn silent for a brief moment.

“Damn, what other options do I really have?” Sarah thought to herself. Any other choice meant that her dreams could slip away, seemingly into oblivion and perhaps with it, any possible meaning to her boring life. Sarah didn’t know what idea of the two was crazier; putting together

an unsanctioned research expedition with no funding or throwing her lot in with Richard, the complete and total cretin?

“Some dream team this would be, more like a team of miscreants,” she thought to herself. Sarah knew that the prospect of a Richard-led expedition would be a nightmare in the making for her. There was an old proverb that said wishing for suffering makes the suffering disappear but this new arrangement bordered on the sadomasochistic. Yet at this point in her life, all that Sarah had left was her nightmares. Really, how bad could he be?

Sarah broke the silence by commenting, “Let me think about this for a day or so, okay Richard? I’ll call you back, and by the way, thanks for the pick-me up. You’re not a complete ass after all, are you?”

Richard laughed at the comment and said, “We’ll see what you say a few weeks from now. Goodbye Sarah Levine.”

After the call, Sarah pondered the strange twists and turns her life was suddenly taking. Jeez, in a few short days she went from a fully sanctioned academic expedition with Professor Brightman to a Bali road trip with an apparent reject from a second-rate frat house. After a night of tortured internal debate, and much to her own surprise, Sarah called Richard back the following day.

Richard answered the phone and was somewhat amazed that Sarah had even bothered to call him back.

“I really didn’t expect you to call back so soon after I threw that crazy proposal by you. Hey, I know what I said sounded a bit nuts but I was kinda of talking out loud...”

“Richard, let’s cut to the chase, I’ll do it but with one stipulation, okay?” Sarah forcefully said.

“Shit, you must be desperate. Great! So what’s the stipulation?” Richard asked.

“I’m the head academic on the team, which also means I’m in charge of the expedition, in fact, of everything and I do mean everything. Okay? Is that going to work for you, me being top dog?” Sarah demanded.

“What ever you say boss, just as long as you give me access to some fresh Ebu DNA!” Richard said, with the certainty of a man who thought he was going to get his own way.

“I’m so glad to hear that Richard. Let’s meet tomorrow and get this expedition going as soon as possible,” Sarah said.

“You got it and one other thing, how much money do you have in the bank, boss?” Richard asked.

Corporate Citizen

The large laboratory facility occupied several full city blocks and was oddly situated in the middle of a vast virgin farmland. On the sprawling campus, there were several large, new buildings that dominated the rural horizon and they gleamed brightly in the scorching afternoon sun. It was the new home of GendMeds, a promising biotech company that was enjoying a somewhat chaotic ride on the stock exchange. Their pharmaceutical offering, which relied heavily on touting new treatments based on stem cell research, was controversial, but was also extremely profitable.

To handle their meteoritic growth, the GendMeds board had decided to buy an entire town for their own private development. Their target was a small, quiet backwater town with few employment prospects and with an even dimmer future, one that was located far from inquisitive government eyes. The GendMeds CEO figured he could buy a town on the cheap with the right persuasion of the local politicians, and besides owning your own town was a source of considerable corporate pride for the company. Collect the right politicians and you'll find getting the zoning variances for a high tech construction site becomes a mere paperwork formality.

So GendMeds secured, with their shareholders' dollars of course, a small town call Centreville and bought permission to rename the entire town to GendMeds City. Several

thousand associates/employees were persuaded to uproot from their existing homes or face the daunting prospect of finding new work with another employer. The vast majority decided to make the move, and they found themselves cut off from their families and friends, while in turn, they were embraced by an entirely new community, one that had been completely subjugated and controlled by their employer.

Reginald Frey, or Reggie to his acquaintances, oversaw the operations at the facility, supervising every facet of GendMeds production from research to the final manufacture of their meds. He was the right-hand man of the CEO, and he was, for all intents and purposes, the acting COO. He was just under six feet tall, with thinning dark hair and non-descript facial features that were not necessarily masculine in their overall nature. Taken as a whole, he was somewhat innocuous looking, that is, if you were able to avoid looking at his eyes. If you did look, Reggie possessed a pair of brown eyes that was practiced at looking right through people, friend, or foe alike. They weren't so much cold and dark like a shark's eyes, but rather they burnt brightly like the eyes of a playful big cat; announcing to all the world their joy at entertaining a possible kill. A glance from his eyes told the wary that he was an accomplished predator, and what he lacked in physical size, he more than made up for in sheer intimidation.

With Reggie, anybody could be a potential opponent; or if they were a subordinate, subject to his bountiful wrath. Even to the casual observer, it quickly became apparent that Reggie's attitude and demeanor was more befitting a prison yard rather than a corporate entity dominated by academic types. Moreover, that was the key to Reggie's success at GendMeds: there was a decided lack of Alpha males within the corporate walls to challenge his authority or his will.

Over the past year, GendMeds was having some difficulties with getting viable medicines from their research facilities into the marketplace. Their hype machine had done an excellent job

of creating shareholder excitement, but the small number of viable new drugs in the pipeline was becoming a major disappointment to their Wall Street followers. In fact, after the hype had settled down, analysts were becoming dismayed that there were no new significant treatments in the offing. In response, the CEO tapped Reggie on the shoulder, and made it clear that the status quo was no longer to be tolerated. Reggie, in turn, decided to lean heavily on William Donaldsen for a new product launch. Bill was an exemplary research scientist, but he was also a particularly poor power player in the corporate hierarchy. One had to conclude that Bill's ascent to his current position was both a testament to his ability to think differently from the herd, and to having Reginald Frey as his improbable mentor.

Right from Bill's humble start at the company as an assistant researcher, Reggie noticed Bill's bright and industrious nature. It didn't take long for Reggie to peg Bill as his go-to "idea" guy. Thus, Bill was one of the few people allowed to think on his own within the corporate walls, and that was a freedom Bill freely reveled in. It was generally understood that the cattle could have original ideas but only if you allowed the upper management to take credit for them. Challenge the upper management on the true origins of an idea and you either were quickly repatriated to the corporate gulags or terminated altogether for being a poor culture fit. After all, it was far easier and much better for the bottom-line to reward one upper management type rather than reward an entire team of researchers.

Consequently, Bill played his own version of the corporate game and freely gave his ideas up to Reggie. Or as he put it, "Render unto Reggie the things which are Reggie". For his compliance, he was free to envision strange what-if scenarios while recombining improbable ideas in an endless eddy of creativity. Such creativity occurred as he was reading about a strain of bacterium that showed an incredible sensitivity to the presence of certain sulfa drugs. Bill's next thoughts were of creating unique pairings of the bacteria's DNA with different human

genes. A break-through occurred when Bill combined parts of that very same drug-sensitive bacterium genome with human stem cells to produce a new prostate cancer treatment that specifically targeted the malignant cells.

The continuing Hobbit announcements from Flores were another exciting mental exercise for Bill. Most biochemists would have looked right past the academic argument or given it a quick “that’s cool” nod of the head while turning the page. Not Bill, as he was amazed to read about the find in the cave and the relative youth of the Hobbit bones. The idea that clumps of hair from the Ebu may have survived opened the door to all sorts of radical new genetic research. Bill wondered how intact the DNA strands were, and how much did they differ from the existing human population? Bill knew that DNA was a relatively weak molecule that can deteriorate very quickly in a harsh climate. However, in the right environmental conditions, DNA molecules could theoretically last thousand of years. A case in point, scientists had recently been able to extract sixty thousand-year-old DNA from the ancient dung of ground sloths. Getting gold from the crappiest of situations was the norm for research scientists. All right, it wasn’t quite the same as yielding dinosaur DNA from prehistoric rocks or amber, but there was a small chance that the hominid DNA from the Flores cave could still be viable.

As creative minds always do, Bill took his mental gymnastics a step further. The accepted wisdom was that chimpanzee DNA only varied anywhere from one percent to five percent from human DNA, and that the two species separated from one another about five million years ago. What would be the difference in DNA with a relative of Homo sapiens that had diverged from us less than a million years ago? More importantly, what differences in the Hobbit DNA could lead to new scientific breakthroughs? Like many indigenous native tribes in recent history, the Hobbits could be more vulnerable to certain diseases. On the other hand, could there be some diseases that the Hobbits were more resistant to? Bill was intrigued by the

idea, but really didn't know how to execute on his musings. Instead, he stayed in his lab diligently completing his written reports, while his mind was light-years away trying to solve a problem that prior to today did not even exist.

In the executive suite, Reggie was approaching desperation mode because he needed to have some ideas for the CEO and it had to be pronto. To spur the research team to action Reggie called a meeting of the key research department heads, and instructed them in his memo to think differently for the next monthly meeting. Bill shuddered slightly at the possible consequences of this meeting with Reggie. Like Bill, Reggie also thought out of the box and but Reggie's musings were more in line with the ramblings of a sociopaths. Wait, what was the correct PC terminology for sociopath? "That's right," as Bill thought to himself, "Reggie was afflicted with an antisocial personality disorder."

Whatever you called the affliction, Reggie had it in spades. Not only did the norms of society not apply to Reggie; Reggie could honestly say he was unaware of the norms. Reggie's stock answer to the timid who were concerned for the norms of society was always a robust "Fuck'em!" It would almost be comical to the uninitiated, but Bill knew that Reggie actually meant it!

Rumors and innuendo flew about Reggie as though as he was a member of a crime syndicate rather than a key officer in a public corporation. Rivals to Reggie, within the organization, would often crash and burn or would completely disappear from view all together. Their favorite story was that of a corporate high flyer named John Barnes who made it clear to all those within an earshot of him that he was about to become a major power player at GendMeds. To back his boasts, John made good on his deliverables no matter what the challenges were before him. John was also unabashed about directly challenging Reggie's management style, and he had no qualms about exposing some of Reggie's miscues to the rest of

the company's upper management. That didn't sit well for Reggie, but to everyone's surprise Reggie didn't initially react to the challenge. In fact, rumor in the office was that Reggie had begun to turn a new leaf; in fact, he had become a kinder, gentler Reggie. Bill was having none of this; he had known Reggie for way too long to think that a personal reformation was even a remote possibility for Reggie. Bill knew that Reggie was biding his time waiting for the right moment to strike down his unwary opponent.

That moment came in a big way during an annual industry convention in Vegas, an event that allowed the pharmaceutical industry the opportunity to talk with new customers and key suppliers. It was also a good excuse to socialize, and catch up with old acquaintances in a non-stop party atmosphere that lasted well into the early morning hours. Reggie was unusually reserved during this convention; he had been known to mix it up, and to inspire other associates of the company to act like complete asses. No, not this time, Reggie was all business, and kept quietly to himself, away from the action and away from the nightclubs.

John was out with a team of his people at one of the local dance places along the strip. Everybody was drunk and in relatively high spirits. John was a tallish, Anglo-Saxon type who had attended an Ivy League school, the correct pedigree for running a major Fortune 1000 company. Despite being married to a typical blond trophy wife, John had made it known about his taste for the exotic and, in particular, a fondness for small Asiatic women. That night John's team was scattered throughout the club's numerous dance floor and bars. At around midnight, several members of his team observed John approaching a very attractive Japanese lady that he had spotted sitting alone at the bar. They talked for a while, and the two left the club together a short time later. That in itself would have been good fodder for the water cooler gang, but events would take a much tawdrier direction for John. As the story goes, at around four o'clock that morning, there was a loud knock on John's hotel room door. It was the local Vegas police. They

were making a drug bust, and despite John's protests, they were intent on making their way into his room. John's exotic Asian paramour, besides being a hooker, was also a crack ho, and as the story goes, they were caught by the police enjoying a few rocks together. The hooker was later released on a desk ticket and John was never seen at GendMeds again. The following Monday, the contents of John's office and desk were unceremoniously deposited into a number of brown shipping boxes and quietly removed from the complex. And, of course, the rumor mill attributed the entire, unfortunate incident as the direct result of Reggie's machinations. In short, Reggie was known in GendMeds as a man not to be trifled with or as Reggie would put it, "I'm not to be fucked with."

The day of Reggie's head research meeting came way too fast for Bill. The entire research management team was gathered in one of the large, luxuriously appointed conference rooms that typically were reserved for the corporate honchos and their sycophants. The thirty-foot long conference table was actually made of real wood with marble inlays, and the chairs smelled of the finest leathers. It was unusual for the lab rats, as Reggie liked to call the researchers, to be assembled in such a grandiose setting. As the team sat down and scanned their opulent surroundings, Reggie made his grand entrance. A quick silence fell over the room, and all eyes were riveted at the head of the conference table where Reggie sat. Reggie calmly adjusted his papers, and he boldly stood up to begin his speech.

"Gentlemen, we have enjoyed incredible success at GendMeds thanks to your hard work. I want to thank you each personally for your diligence over the past couple of years. But now we are facing an important turning point at GendMeds. Do you know what we desperately need at GendMeds?"

Reggie hesitated for a moment allowing the rhetorical question to sink in with his audience before answering. "We need new products, new blood for our product offering. How

do we get new products? They come from new ideas and vision. And where do new ideas come from people? Think. They come from thinking outside the box. They come from people willing to take chances. I need ideas people, GendMeds needs ideas. Gentlemen, have you looked at our product pipeline lately? It's somewhat thin and the shareholders are beginning to notice. This has to change, and this has to change very soon. Who are the risk-takers among you that are going to come forward in our time of need? I need bold men with a clear, extraordinary vision! If you are not a risk taker, if you are among the timid, then please, I repeat, please do not waste my time during this meeting." Reggie was so excited he was almost hissing the words of his speech.

"Now, I ask you this gentlemen, what new ideas do you have for me today?"

From the far end of the room, one of the more experienced researchers, Sam Watkins, began to speak. "Mr. Frey, this isn't how we normally do product research. Shouldn't we be reviewing market data reports, and analyzing trends before we commit to researching and funding a new product offering?" Bill could only shake his head at the stupidity of the remark, but personally, he felt a little relief that somebody else would soon be the object of Reggie's sizable indignation.

Reggie glared at the man and struggled for a few seconds to retain his composure. "You are right Sam; this is not about how research is done. And, no, this is not how medicine is done."

Reggie pauses waiting for the opportune moment to drive home his point. "No, this is how money is done! And, no, we are not going to do this by committee so that whatever we come up with ends up being a useless piece of shit! Gentlemen, I want boldness from you, and that doesn't come from a market report, damn it! Fuck the market reports!"

Reggie wanted to spot the leader of the herd so that he could target him and take him down quickly. In that manner, he could coward the other cattle into an early submission, and

doing his bidding. Sam wasn't entirely stupid, and he quickly fell silent, in effect announcing to the group his acquiescence to Reggie's tirade. Much to Reggie's sadness, he found there wasn't another bull to strike down; just a collection of lab rats being led to their inevitable slaughter.

"Any ideas gentlemen? I'm waiting!"

The quiet of the room overwhelmed the team of squirming researchers. Nobody wanted to speak first on the fear of actually have to engage in a real conversation with Reggie. One researcher began to hesitantly talk about new variations in their present prostrate cancer cure offering, but Reggie was having none of it! He sternly told the researcher to be quiet and to stop wasting his time.

"Out with the old, in with the new! New, that is the operative word. You got nothing new for me?"

More silence punctuated by a feeble cough. Reggie noticed that even the coughs were weak from this group.

"Okay, so what is new in the world of science?" Reggie asked in an effort to kick-start the conversation.

Bill wasn't sure if it was out of fear or just the awkwardness of the moment, but Bill began a long rambling talk about the discovery in Flores and, in particular, about the recent find of hominid-like creatures that were contemporary with modern man. "You know the addition of archaic DNA samples from other hominids may expand our existing gene pool thus affording us new insights to disease treatment. For example, our ancestors may have been stronger than us, perhaps impervious to certain diseases and malnutrition or, on the converse side, more susceptible to certain diseases. They certainly were shorter than us. We could learn, I mean learn, a considerable amount from their DNA. Perhaps even combine the new genetic material with our existing stem cell line to offer some new therapies."

When Bill was done with his little monologue, he was shocked to see the stunned look from the other researchers in the room. The room had grown even quieter than before while Reggie appeared truly perplexed by the strange monologue from Bill.

“Well, I liked the ‘earn’ part, but Bill but how do you propose going about finding this archaic DNA material?” Reggie asked.

“Yeah, this isn’t Jurassic Park after all?” was a remark from one of the other researchers. A small chuckle emerges from the group, and even Reggie is amused by the strange turn of direction in the meeting.

Bill continues, “These DNA materials maybe more resilient than what we originally realized. In one instance, they actually found soft tissue within a fossilized T-Rex thighbone. What’s interesting about Flores is that we have an archaic hominid species that is separated genetically from us by almost a million years but their physical remains are only 18,000 years-old. There maybe so some viable DNA in those bones after all, then again there might not be. I really don’t know. There is even a legend on Flores about a short people called the Ebu Gogo. Hey, if we’re really lucky, there might even be a tribe of these hobbit critters running around the jungles of Flores that we can take direct samples from.”

With that comment, Reggie starts to chuckle giving a cue to the others that they could join in and laugh as well. The laughter swelled from one end of the meeting room to the other, and Bill felt a strange flush race across his face. Was he actually embarrassed for having made these stupid comments to his cohorts and Reggie or did he just feel vulnerable?

“These freaking Oboe things were only three-feet tall? Intriguing Bill, we will discuss this topic offline. Okay, what else do you have for me?” Reggie said with a smile on his face.

They had nothing to offer to Reggie, nothing to offer other than the usual, variants on old tired ideas that had gotten the company into trouble in the first place, forcing Reggie to

reconsider all of his options. For some reason, Bill's insight was intriguing to Reggie. Perhaps he could get a sample of the DNA from the original anthropologists at the dig, and he immediately began to investigate. As Reggie dug deeper, he realized that Bill's comments reflected the thoughts of the overall scientific community, and indeed, Bill's monologue was not entirely unorthodox.

Reggie decided to visit Bill in his lab for a private meeting after business hours. "Bill, I have been giving this Flores proposal of yours some additional thought, and I'm thinking of exploring going ahead with this project with you as the lead project manager."

At first, Bill doesn't react hoping that he heard Reggie wrong and then he is shocked at the suggestion. "Reggie, this is just some mental doodling on my part, and I'm not confident about the viability of doing this. I don't know if we can find the DNA in the remains of these creatures, and even if we did find some viable strands, how could we use them?"

"Bill, I'll be frank. I have nothing in terms of other projects, and in two quarters, this company is going to hit some hard times. We have no viable products in the pipeline!"

"Surely our prostate cancer treatment looks good?" Bill asked.

"It's going nowhere with the FDA. Mind you, this is not common knowledge yet, but the trials were not convincing enough to allow them to give the go-ahead with the full scale treatment populations. Now you understand why we are sunk. Everything else we discussed at the meeting was so tired and hack. But your idea was so off the wall, so novel, I think it could capture the imagination of the investors. You have to back me on this one Bill. Will this new DNA create a breakthrough for our research?" Reggie demanded.

Bill wasn't stupid and with a quick glance at Reggie's face he understood that was the end of any real conversation between the two. The decision was final and Reggie wanted

obedience from his subordinate, and Bill finds himself stammering in response. Bill manages to clear his throat, and replies, "I believe it can."

Reggie yells, "Damn it, that's not good enough Bill!"

"But you asked for ideas that were out of the box, and this is what I came up with. You cannot even consider this a long shot," Bill said.

Bill wanted to take the words back but before he could Reggie grabs him by his white lab coat and starts yelling. "How much are your shares worth in a year's time? Several million dollars? Well, how much will they be worth two quarters from now when this FDA announcement comes out? Nothing, damn it, nothing. Like your wife and kids? Do you like your lifestyle? Well, say goodbye to all of it. I've seen your wife Bill, and I might add she is way over your league. That warm look in her eye is going to disappear pretty quickly when she finds out the money is gone. You know, I've overlooked the sabotage business in your lab; that's what friends do, Bill. Now respect me and return the favor!"

Bill looked surprised by Reggie's comment. "What you didn't think I knew about the goings on in the laboratories of my favorite lab rat? Come on, Bill, really, you are disappointing me. Your choice, Bill. Now, make your damn bed and lie in it!"

No reply comes from Bill.

"Bill, I'll say it one more time to you. I really need you to back me on this venture; I would mean a lot to me, old buddy." Reggie began to press Bill for the answers he wanted to hear. "Now, drink it Bill, damn it," he thought to himself.

"Bill, you have to really sell this proposal, tell me that you believe this DNA will help our research, benefit mankind and all of that other happy horseshit. And Bill, if you don't believe it, then don't even bother to sell it. This trip could cost the company minimally a million bucks. We can't sell this crazy scheme with a 'I think so' God damn it!" Reggie said.

“Now once again, Bill. Will this new DNA work for our new research?”

Bill responds without hesitation, “Absolutely, in fact, this will open the door for a variety of different cancer treatments.”

“Good boy, Bill. For a moment there I thought I was going to have to get myself a new lab rat,” Reggie said with a small smile on his face.

Yes, much better Reggie thought to himself, only Reggie did not necessarily believe that this archaic DNA was going to make much of a difference in terms of a new drug offering. No, Reggie only had to find a source for this DNA, and let Bill and the boys extract a few strands from it. That bit of magic alone could be sold to Wall Street, and, in turn, buy a temporary reprieve from the investors. He figured that the dog and pony aspect of the story has had to be worth at least a year or two of headlines. And a year or two was all he needed, because by then the bulk of his shares would be vested, and he could walk away being a rich man, well at least a richer man than he was now. You could never have too much money in these uncertain times, Reggie thought to himself. Besides, as a last resort, he could always throw Bill under the wheels if things went sour.

And a year or two was all that Reggie could ever ask for. No, Reggie didn't buy Bill's story, and he didn't have to. Reggie understood that it wasn't his job to drink the Kool-Aid. Instead, it was his responsibility to mix and serve, and to ensure that all of the others drank their fill of the Kool-Aid, whatever the flavor was for that day. Be sure to drink up, Bill!

Reggie never drank the Kool-Aid because Reggie didn't have a need to believe in anything, just himself. No personal God, no dreams, just the here and now. Immediate and total self-gratification was his mantra. He just liked the act of doing and making others do his bidding. He was guiltless as well as fearless and he was the personification of economic Darwinism in its worst possible incarnation. Obtaining money and power wasn't the goal in his

life; it was the actual pursuit for money and power that excited Reggie. The rewards that came with that pursuit, the wife, the house, the boat, they were just mere mementos in his twisted journey.

“Good, Bill please make the preparations necessary for this trip. Remember, you’re in charge so take no bullshit from anyone. If they ask questions or get in your way, you just have them see me. Put two crack teams together. One for the actual trip, the second to begin the research once we return with some Oboe DNA. We leave in two weeks,” Reggie said.

Bill starts to leave but Reggie stops him. “Oh Bill, before you go we’ll also need a half dozen holding cages as well for the specimens.”

Bill looks puzzled but he quickly catches on. “Reggie, come on, I don’t even think they exist. Even if they do exist, all I need are a few tissue samples. If we take too many Ebu from the existing troop, the remaining group maybe too small in number to sustain a viable breeding population in the wild.”

Reggie looks at Bill as if he sprouted a new growth from his head. “Fuck’em, I don’t give a shit about their breeding viability. I want their DNA and I want a number of them alive and ready for... Reggie trails off. “Fuck the Oboes; they can go extinct for all I care, especially if I have few in my own personal collection.”

This was going down an unexpected path for Bill.

“What are your plans for Ebu?” Bill asked.

“What Bill? Oh come on. I’m outsourcing some of the lab work to them, what the fuck do you think? I’m going to exhibit them. I’m exploring options with a third world country as we speak to host the exhibition. Don’t tell me that this prospect actual bothers you?” Reggie asked.

“Why yes, I mean if they are somewhat human this could be conceived as inhumane treatment, maybe even slavery,” Bill said.

Reggie explodes, “Damn hypocrite, you can build your research on a pile of aborted human fetuses, that’s okay. But I want to show a few freaks, and you get moral on me? Let me ask you this, who’s going to stop me? The U.S. government? I don’t think that’s going to happen. What are they going to do? Protest that we are keeping these creatures in bondage because they’re human or related to humans. I don’t think the current White House administration is going to be too quick to acknowledge that they are human, and in turn upset this country’s conservative constituency, who doesn’t even believe in their existence? Yeah, this president is going to call them our cousins, and accept evolution as a matter of fact. Not in my lifetime, and certainly not in yours,” Reggie said.

“But won’t the shareholders be concerned about our little side project?” Bill asked.

“This will be my own personal project. GendMeds will get their cut but I’ll take personal responsibility for this project. It’s the least I can do to repay my benefactors. You let me worry about the Oboes. After all Bill, like you said, they probably don’t even exist, so what are we arguing about?” Reggie asked. “Bill, why don’t you go home now and see the wife and kids, okay? It’s always good to remember what you are working for.”

Several days before their departure Reggie summons Bill to his house for a meeting. Reggie’s house is palatial, and a middle-aged Hispanic house cleaner greets Bill at the large entrance door. She quietly guides Bill into Reggie’s study. Reggie is on the phone talking to somebody and he motions Bill to sit down. Bill had only met Reggie’s family once before when Reggie’s wife visited him at the office, so this is a revelation for him. Bill is also relieved to find that Reggie is not screaming during his phone conversation, as is his norm in the office. Still, Bill is on edge, for he has no idea as to why Reggie has taken the unusual step of giving him an invite to his

house. After five minutes of quietly conversing, Reggie gets off the phone. He offers no apology for the phone call delay, and gets straight to the business at hand.

“Bill, how are the preparations going? Are we set to go this Thursday?”

Bill decides to be positive and firm. “Yes, everything will be ready and in place. People, equipment, clearances, all of the arrangements have been made, and the team is willing and ready to go!”

“Good!” Reggie said, while peering at him.

“Got a question for you, actually more of a concern of mine. These ‘Oboes’, how are we securing them?”

“Oboes?” Bill thinks to himself. Oh, Bill realizes Reggie means the Ebu. “I’m not sure; we have a number of larger animal cages that we can use if we bait them properly.”

“You’re going to trap them? You don’t have a more proactive means of immobilizing the ‘Oboes’ such as the use of tranquilizer darts?” Reggie asked.

“We do, but that could be dangerous because of their diminutive size. We run the risk of accidentally killing them if the dosage of the tranquilizer is too high and we don’t have much wiggle room here,” Bill said.

Reggie smiles, a cold, dirty smile. “Well, I have a solution for you my friend, its right here!” He pulls from his desk what appears to be gun but its largish shape indicates otherwise.

“You know what this is?” Reggie asked.

“Yes, it’s a Taser!” Bill replies.

“Very good Bill, but this is no ordinary Taser. This is a state of the art prototype only available to certain government agencies and to people with the wrong connections. Now Bill, up to now, what has been the biggest problem with Tasers?”

“Accidental deaths due to overuse by local police departments,” Bill said.

“Well, yes... fuck no, oh really, who gives a shit, Bill! Who cares about some scumbag that dies after being coked up and shot by the police? No, it’s the fact they only work with the wired leads up to a distance of twenty feet. This baby is different; there are no leads. With their patented new electronics, these bullets - they’re not really bullets but rather they are actually miniature capacitors - can release enough of a charge on contact to do their work. No leads, so you get much better distance, maxing out at about 100 feet. The gun keeps the bullets charged until it’s show time. Plus, you get six shots, and you know how these babies work, right? Once they hit you, their electrical charge causes every muscle in your body to convulse all at once. You are helpless like a baby for at least a good half hour. Shit, think I should do an infomercial on these babies?” Reggie asked.

At this point, a young girl bursts into the room. Reggie puts the gun down and hides it back in the drawer. “Heather!” Reggie said. His daughter jumps up to him, and Reggie catches her in midair while seated in the chair.

“Daddy, Daddy the cat got out in the yard. We have to get him in,” she said.

The girl is an adorable nine-year-old with beautiful long blond hair, pale skin, and blue eyes. She must take after the mother, Bill thinks to himself.

“Well, go ask Nina to get the cat for you. She is pretty good at hunting down Pickles,” Reggie said.

Heather sighs in reaction to the suggestion from her Dad about getting the house cleaner.

“Dear, I have a guest here right now. What did I tell you about interrupting Daddy’s work?” Reggie questioned.

“I know, I’m sorry, I’ll get Nina,” the little girl said in a contrite tone.

His daughter kisses Reggie on the cheek and quickly departs his lap while skipping her way to the door. She stops by one of the coffee tables on the way out to look at a magazine

cover. Bill breathes a small sigh of relief. For one brief moment, he had grim visions of a collective Pickles hunt with the new gun.

“So what do you think, Bill?” Reggie asked.

Bill is amazed at how tender Reggie is with his daughter. It’s not a side of Reggie that he has never seen before nor could he have ever imagined existed before today’s meeting.

“Sounds useful, if you ask me, but is it safe?” Bill asked.

“I know, I know, I’ve been thinking the very same thing. You see, we are on the same page. Let’s say we find out!” said Reggie as he picks up the gun and points it at Bill. For one brief moment, Bill was sure that Reggie was going to shoot him with the Taser, but instead Reggie turns away from him, aims, and fires the gun seemingly at the far wall. “Why the hell is he firing at the wall?” Bill wondered.

The gun fires with a strange hissing sound emanating from the spent CO₂ cartridge. Bill flinches from the sound and as he recovers, he realizes Reggie was firing at his own daughter! The bullet hits her square in the back, and she stops moving while remaining upright for a second, her entire body convulsing. She drops the magazine while her small face contorts in a ghastly grimace as she looks upwards. Reggie quickly gets up to catch her before she can slump to the floor. He picks her up and with great care places her on one of the leather couches in his office. He kneels by her side and checks her pupils and pulse for a minute or two.

He walks away from his daughter back to the seated Bill. Seeing the distraught face on Bill, Reggie remarks, “Oh, she’ll be fine...”

Silence then Bill erupts yelling, “What, you shot your own daughter? Are you fucking nuts, you maniac?”

“Bill, please don’t use that sort of language when you talk to me in my house. Besides, I’ve been thinking about this for a while and she is almost sixty pounds, you know she’s tall like

her mother. That has to be close to what the Oboes weigh, right? I would say this gun is safe and we can use these new Tasers on the Oboes. What can I tell you? It was a spur of the moment thing, you know you being here just in case there were any side effects from the gun.”

Bill is now shaking his head and finds himself holding his head in both of his hands.

Reggie walks over to Bill and puts his hand on Bill’s shoulder to comfort him.

“Bill, you know that little girl is the most important person in the world to me. You know, if somebody were to hurt her I would personally rip their fucking heart out in front of their entire family. The fact that I would shoot my own daughter tells you how important this project is to me. Without this project my little girl is not getting into the Ivy League school of her choice.”

“Bill, you know what else this little incident tells you?”

“What Reggie?” Bill said as he voice cracked.

“Don’t get in my way and don’t ever fuck with me Bill, is that clear?” Reggie demanded.

“Very much so, I think I understand that now,” Bill said and he left the office visibly shaken by the events that transpired in front of him. He took a quick glance at the small girl on the couch and he could see she was resting comfortably. As he walks away from the house, Bill becomes more upset with himself for having allowed this monster to become an integral part of his life. Bill’s mind struggles to find an escape from Reggie, but his sense of foreboding is heightened as he realizes he doesn’t have the strength or the courage to extricate Reggie from his life. He should just quit and tell Reggie to shove the Taser up Reggie’s own twisted ass but then he thought of his wife and kids. Could he really disappoint them like that? He was stuck on a very slippery slope with only one direction to go and he knew it. All he could wonder was where the hell was Reggie taking him?

Higher Calling

Karl was playing a dangerous game at the GendMeds labs. As the chief lab assistant, he was responsible for the overall care of the tissue cultures at the lab. He did his job well, well enough, in fact, for him to have earned several key promotions over the course of two years. However, he never took a promotion that would take him away from his primary calling at the lab. In fact, his higher calling was to sabotage the lab's research each and everyday.

Karl was a red-blooded Born Again Christian. He came from poor common white people, and he spent his childhood years avoiding the raging alcoholism that had consumed his father's existence. Karl's mother had abandoned the two when he was just three years old after a particularly bad, all-day rampage by his father. He didn't resent her because he knew it was a simple matter of survival for his mother and not some great character flaw on her part. After a while, it got so bad with his father that Karl also left, spending most of his time with his father's sister Patty and her husband John. Karl tried to find some semblance of a family life with his aunt and uncle that eluded him at his own home. Being childless themselves, it was only natural that they would begin to raise Karl as their own. By the time Karl was a teenager, the cycle was almost complete, and he was living with them on a full-time basis. Over the years, his father would occasionally visit Karl as a dreadful reminder of the horrors he managed to escape. The visits became fewer in number but were increasingly uglier as his father began to dabble with a poor man's cocaine: crank.

Karl's life became almost ordinary that is until several days after his fourteenth birthday when his uncle quietly approached him and told him in a solemn voice that his father was dead, killed in a head-on car crash during some late night rampage. Everybody just assumed that Karl's father was drunk or high at the time of the crash, and that he died in the same manner as he lived his sad, miserable life. Karl's father never did acknowledge his son's fourteenth birthday, and Karl was far beyond caring. In a similar vein, Karl never shed a tear for his father, and in fact, he remembered a strange, almost goofy smile emerging from his face as his uncle told him the news. He felt a sense of relief now that his father was finally permanently departed from his life. No more embarrassment for Karl!

Karl's Uncle John was a poor man living in a trailer park but he was, as he often said, a righteous, God-fearing man. He was a Born Again Christian, believed in the baby Jesus, and he raised Karl in the same manner. A strict, literal interpretation of the New Testament was called for, and anything that caused one to deviate from the Bible was to be avoided, forsaken or perhaps even cursed. Like so many fundamentalist Christians, Karl's uncle saw life as a literal battleground between the forces of good and evil. Moreover, it was the responsibility of every Christian to do God's work on this planet. Social activism was the duty of every God-fearing Christian, and there was much work that needed doing! Like so many other disadvantaged white Americans born in this country, his uncle had a problem with being so dirt poor in a land of such obvious wealth. He remembered reading that 10% of the people owned almost 70% of the wealth in America, so he figured for the math to work somebody had to be robbed of his or her American dream to pay for the rich. After John's family had been here for generations, fighting and dying for this land in the waves of endless wars John had expected, no, he actually demanded, a better life for himself, his wife and for his adopted son, Karl.

“Being poor in this country is like having your face in the window while watching others inside having a grand old party, a party, I might add, that you’re not especially welcomed to,” Karl’s uncle would say to him. “It’s unbelievably wrong, but that’s our burden, our lot in life from God. God will make us better people than the others.” Yes, God was the always answer even if nobody was asking the right questions.

Being devout religious people, Karl’s uncle and aunt were always involved in some type of weekly church function. The local pastor was a typical southern fire and brimstone preacher and he knew how to exhort the flock. Their friends were all members of the same congregation, and strangers were kept at a safe distance. Not that many strangers would spend much time with such dirt poor white folks. For other white folks, the feeling was that if you got too close to poor people the poorness might rub off. Moreover, most people felt there really wasn’t that much difference between poor and rich in this country other than life’s circumstances, and perhaps, the play of the cards. You never know, bad luck could be catching!

Most of the townspeople worked at the local mill creating textiles for designer jeans and other expensive clothing. The hot, hard unrewarding work paid little but subsistence wages to the workers. Worse yet, with the illegal migrants taking over, more Latinos were joining the work force, and the white locals were feeling very uncomfortable about sharing their workplace with their Spanish speaking invaders. Nevertheless, that was their common fate since there was little other work in the area.

It became a regular routine for Karl’s uncle to meet up with some of the other men from the congregation on a weekly basis. They would often stop by the trailer, and go into the bedroom while Karl was in the kitchen playing with his homework. Low, muffled voices filled the air, and on more than one occasion, their voices would rise above the quiet dialog, as if in anger or excitement. They were planning something; Karl was smart enough to figure that out,

though he wasn't quite sure what they were trying to do. After spending a couple of hours, the men would leave the trailer, but Karl's uncle never failed to rub and mess Karl's hair on the way out. "Keep working son, you'll get out of this town yet."

The only problem was that Karl was an exceptionally poor student, and he was heading for a brief and undistinguished academic career even for this quiet backwater town.

While he wasn't learning much academically, Karl did learn how to handle a gun and how to hunt game animals. Hunting was almost a religion here, and a man's standing as a hunter was truly based on his own personal merits and not on the cost of his equipment. Karl's uncle made sure that he knew how to safely handle, clean, and shoot a gun. More importantly, his Uncle taught him how to hunt efficiently and track deer while getting into the head of their prey, so to speak. Furthermore, there was the constant reminder from his uncle about having respect for their prey. Every fall, they would go off to the woods for four or five days to see how many bucks they could grab. They didn't have the best equipment, but they possessed a keen woodsman's knowledge of nature. Each year they looked forward to the challenge, but the woods were getting increasingly more crowded with the appearance of the amateur hunters from suburbia. Every year, they would have a run in with some ignorant jerk that didn't know the rules of the woods, or how to handle his gun properly.

When Karl turned sixteen, there was a seminal moment in his life that occurred at their favorite buck blind. Karl and his uncle had spent several hours in their stand quietly setting up and preparing for the hunt. Preparing for the hunt meant secreting themselves while taking care not to smell like men, and being quietly patient for the arrival of the deer to the blind. After waiting a few hours they finally could see a small herd making their way into the clearing, and to their delight there was ten-point buck leading a group of does. Karl's uncle held a finger to his lips, and gestured to Karl that he wanted the boy to take the shot. Karl was a good shot, and this

would be a prized kill for him. Just as Karl started to draw and take aim at the buck, the deer suddenly scattered into the woods. A second later, a crashing sound and laughter echoed throughout the nearby tree stand. A party of suburban hunters had stumbled upon their blind, and they were busily scaring animals for miles around.

Karl's uncle was livid, and he left the blind to yell at the men about their stupid, loud behavior. At first, the party raised their guns in unison but as the man and boy emerged from the blind, they brazenly decided to approach them. As they drew closer, their behavior and breath gave away their drunken state, and Karl felt an uneasy familiarity with their condition. A confrontation began, and Karl's uncle let them have it for their stupid behavior. He even yelled at them for the way they were sloppily handling their guns. The party's belligerence continued for several minutes with Karl's uncle, and Karl was worried that the situation would soon escalate to violence. As quickly as the incident had begun, it ended, as the hunting party lost interest in their argument with Karl's uncle and they stumbled their way into the woods. Karl's uncle was fuming, but Karl was happy the incident hadn't taken a turn for the worse.

"God is going to teach those idiots sooner rather than later that I can tell ya," his uncle said to him. They returned to their blind, but before they could settle in, a shot was fired in the general direction of the departed hunters. Soon yells filled the forest, and a screaming man's voice sounded in the distance. Karl and his uncle ran toward the hunters, and reached the party within a couple of minutes. Upon their arrival, they could see that one of the hunters was lying on the ground, writhing and rolling about as he held his bloodied hand. Half his hand was reduced to a bloody stump and the others were trying to stop him from flailing about.

Karl's uncle grabbed the man, and told the others to hold him down. The man was screaming in agony and the blood flowed freely from the wound leaving a small, bright red puddle on the sandy ground. Karl watched as the blood mixed in with the dirt as he tried to

avoid looking directly at the mangled hand. He had seen his share of cuts and stitches in his time but nothing quite like that bloodied hand. Karl's uncle took off his jacket and ripped up his T-shirt for an impromptu tourniquet. Within a couple of minutes, the heavy bleeding had stopped, and the pale man was slowly rolling about moaning, and crying about his missing hand. The party gathered their friend from the ground and without a word to Karl and his uncle, headed off to seek medical assistance for their fallen companion. Karl was shaken by the incident and the sight of the bloodied hand with its exposed sinew and bone occupied Karl's dreams for many a night after the incident.

Karl's uncle didn't say anything about the incident until their drive home several days later. Just as they were about to stop for food his uncle began, "Karl, just remember God's work will be done on this planet with or without you. I can tell you that for your own sake; with you is a whole lot better than without you. Why? Because if God has to do His will on this planet without you, God sure enough not going to need you in his heaven. Those men were foolish, and they got what they deserved. That was His will being done." They never spoke of the hunting incident again, but this was not the last time Karl would hear this specific sermon from his uncle.

One dreary autumn day, the local sheriff and his men descended upon the trailer while Karl was alone struggling with his math homework. He was seventeen at the time. They burst into the trailer by first yelling their presence, and then by smashing the trailer door open. With shotguns waving in the air, they yelled for everybody to get down on their knees with their hands up. Karl was terrified, and he hit the floor face down while he covered his head with his hands. He had never been in trouble with the law before, and he was trembling with fear unsure what would happen next. They picked him up off the floor, and explained to him that they had an arrest warrant for his uncle. They decided to let Karl go once they saw he was a kid, but they insisted on knowing where his uncle was. Karl didn't know and he wouldn't tell them if he did.

Didn't matter, the sheriff did eventually catch up with his uncle at the local church, arresting him in front of his aunt and the rest of the congregation. Karl's uncle was arrested for the notorious bombing of a local birth control clinic.

When he visited his uncle in jail, Karl's uncle proclaimed his innocence to him. Sure, he knew Samuel, the man with the explosives and timers; after all, they had been good friends for years. And, yes, they did talk about what to do with those abominations called birth control clinics but it was never his intent to go ahead with the bombings of the clinics, because he couldn't reconcile how killing others was going to save the babies in the first place. His indecision had tormented him for weeks, and the others went ahead with the planned bombings without him.

Intentions, good, bad or indifferent, didn't matter; Karl's uncle was arrested with the other conspirators. There was no hiding because the bombings on the clinics had killed one person and wounded three others. It was only a matter of time before the full weight of the law was to descend upon them, and with access to only a public defender, he was given a twenty-year jail sentence for conspiracy.

His uncle's take on the entire incident was to change once his incarceration began. After days of deep prayer, he came to realize that his lack of faith and his inaction in protecting the babies resulted in God's punishment. God was punishing him for not being more proactive in his defense of life. During Karl's many visits to the county jail's visitor center, Karl's uncle continued to lecture to him.

"Remember what I said to you a few years ago, Karl? It's quite simple. God needs good Christian soldiers, not conscientious objectors, Karl." Karl struggled to understand the words from his uncle and his face showed his distress with the conversation.

“Karl, if I thought the bombings were righteous I should have helped Samuel, and if they were wrong I should have stopped him. Instead, I chose to do nothing because I was afraid to make a choice. I should have protected the babies, I should have done something. Instead, I did nothing. And, now we are all in jail, and a person is dead. Like I said, God’s way will be done on this planet with or without you. It’s much better with you, Karl!”

Karl took this incident as a literal message from God; more specifically that as a servant of God he was to do God’s will on earth. But how? There were so few opportunities in his small town but then he heard from a friend about the hiring at the new GendMeds plant some twenty miles away from where he lived. Like so many town people, he flocked to the new facility looking for a job, and possibly a new chance in life. They did extensive background checks on all applicants, but Karl’s surname was different from his uncle so his record was squeaky clean. Moreover, there was nothing in the immediate police records to associate Karl with radical Christian fundamentalists. They needed people quickly to man the new facility so that they could get the pharmaceutical manufacturing lines moving as soon as possible. Speed was often a necessity with the expenditure of venture capital, and GendMeds was moving at a furious pace to meet the unrealistic expectations of their investors. That is the very same expectations the GendMeds hype machine had stoked in the first place.

Karl started as a maintenance man since he lacked a proper education beyond high school. Karl’s lowly start actually gave him greater access to the labs. Because of his white skin, he was given the midday shift, and he would carefully and quietly go through the labs, taking great care not to disrupt the work of the researchers. Racism was still a big issue at the plant and Karl’s white skin was a welcome relief for some of the white researchers because they had found many of the African-American janitors just a little too gangster for their own good.

Karl retreated into the background, and he soon was privy to many conversations about their work, especially regarding the new stem cell lines. It would take a while, but once Karl understood where the lines of stem cells were coming from, he took this as a sign from God that he was destined for higher aspirations.

Karl's good work had earned him a stellar reputation, and a promotion to a position of higher responsibility. The higher responsibility meant learning how to dispose of the biological hazardous waste at the lab. Disposing of the waste was a serious matter at the lab, and the handling of the infectious cultures required great care. Elaborate procedures were in place for the proper incineration of the waste, and for once in his life, Karl became a serious student. After all, he had found a true purpose to his life.

Karl's attention to detail and his overall serious demeanor quickly got the attention of his supervisors, and in particular, by William Donaldsen. Bill liked Karl's straightforward work ethic and Karl's no-nonsense approach to his work. Furthermore, Karl was a quick learner and a self-starter, who spent much of his time reading and acquiring new knowledge and these were considered key attributes to any corporate go-getter. Soon, Bill began to feel that he was doing a noble deed by making this rustic into his assistant, and helping Karl to aspire to a higher station in life than what his education and background would normally allow. Bill soon made Karl a lab assistant, and he found that the lab never ran smoother. Less than two years after joining GendMeds, Karl was made head lab assistant and Bill felt that he now had a proper right-hand man. Some of the other assistants grumbled about a red neck being in charge of the lab, but no could argue about Karl's dedication to the lab's work.

The only problem was that Karl's dedication had little to do with GendMeds, and had much more to do with his calling from God. Karl at first didn't understand the lab's work, never mind knowing what a stem cell line was. However, as he continued to read, he learned how

many of the stem cells were cultured from aborted fetuses. For a Born Again Christian, that was a sin against God, and he immediately thought of quitting. But what would that accomplish? He couldn't allow the work at the lab to go unimpeded and the next step for Karl was obvious. As Karl religiously reviewed the lab procedures, he also studied and practiced techniques to destroy the work of the lab. His uncle's words continued to ring through his head, "God's way will be done on this planet with or without you. It's much better with you!"

Through a tortuous process of trial and error, Karl learned how to expose some of the tissues to critical levels of UV light, and thereby stopping some of the cultures from growing. In the beginning, his efforts were on a very small scale, and there were many false starts on his part. Karl was careful about concealing his intentions, and his caution served him well. He listened carefully to Bill, and he knew what the expectations were for each set of samples. Karl never killed an entire batch outright, but he studied just enough statistics to know what the threshold levels were for negating a significant result from a given test.

Over time, Karl evolved a ritual that he went through as he went about his holy duty of tampering with a sample batch. To begin with, he had to make sure he was alone and that meant working long hours into the night. Karl found the lab to be a cold and sterile place to spend most of his waking day. The bright halide lights made a mockery of any sense of time that he may have had. Night and day blurred into one another as he spent long hours inside the lab. The lights played tricks on him, and to heighten the effect, there were no windows in the facility. There were no windows because of the constant fear of industrial espionage at GendMeds; the GendMeds corporate culture was an incredibly paranoid one. "It was funny how the most corrupt are also the most paranoid," Karl thought to himself.

Yes, Karl's weapon of choice was the UV sterilization chamber. Unlike poisons, the chamber left no chemical signature that could be detected by the lab's spectrometer. The daily

procedure had its own unique ritual. Karl would pick up the sample dish, and as he placed it in the UV decontamination chamber, he would simultaneously utter the Lord's Prayer. Karl never forgot that each sample was possibly the remains of some poor, unwanted child, a gift of life from God that would never have the opportunity to make it to this world. This prayerful reminder added to Karl's sense of self-worth, and reinforced his bond with his God.

Occasionally, he would think that the fallen child was somehow lucky in not making his or her way into this ugly world, but he would quickly relinquish those dark thoughts. That wasn't in keeping with his Christian beliefs of how life was God's gift to man.

Sometimes he never tampered with any of the samples within a batch, allowing Bill one small vicarious victory. Nevertheless, when it came time to test a critical batch of tissues, Karl knew what the critical levels of success were, and with his trusty UV equipment, Karl made sure that the sample would fail a critical test.

This ritual went on for a year, and the poor results left a confused Bill feeling as if he was cursed. Bill found himself so close to a breakthrough yet always falling just short of a key critical goal or milestone. Little did Bill know that Karl had cost the company millions of dollars over the three years he was with them, and nobody was the wiser to Karl's true motivations.

One day, Bill began a rigorous evaluation of his lab procedures to rule out the causes of his seeming curse. One by one, Bill changed the lab environment, and the roster of the lab personnel who handled his precious samples, in an effort to ferret out causes of the curse.

The day soon came for Karl's exile from the lab. Bill ordered Karl out of the lab to take a post at a different lab facility. At that moment, Karl knew for sure that his tampering days would soon be over. He spent the day in the other lab feeling oddly out of place, and knowing that they would soon be coming to escort him from the GendMeds facilities. Certainly, the

prospect of facing jail time was not out of the question for Karl. Several days passed, and Karl agonized as he faced an uncertain future.

Perhaps it was divine intervention, but in actuality the lab assistant chosen to replace him was having a particularly bad day after a fight with her boyfriend and she neglected to add a key nutrient to the sample dishes. Two days later the entire culture was dead, and Bill cursed the assistant's incompetence. "Karl never did anything this stupid," Bill muttered to himself. The news of the spoiled batch made its way through the lab like a wildfire and Bill was confident he had found the culprit. Another person's incompetence was going to save Karl's work and his chosen mission from God.

So Karl returned to his beloved work. His active imagination filled the boring hours he spent alone in the lab. He imagined the identities of the different children that were incorporated into the cultures he was preparing and waves of blond hair, blue-eyed children filled his head. Then he saw an apparition of single dark-haired girl, with a pale white skin and light eyes that waded slowly into a tropical pond, seemingly unashamed of her nakedness.

Wow, he really did he have to get a girlfriend and he immediately thought of the last girl he was with. He would muzzle the nape of her neck, gently kissing her skin while inhaling the perfumed fragrance of her hair. He really did like girls but his intensity and devotion scared away his last girlfriend. Now those simple earthly pleasures would have to wait; he had God's work to do first!

His children would have a better life with God, and he would see to it that no other children would be sacrificed in the name of science; that is until they put the video cameras in the lab. The new camera installation required a bit of doing since the new cameras couldn't be tied into the normal security system. Simply by watching several ill-gotten security tapes, competitors of GendMeds could gain valuable clues into their lab techniques.

Karl was out of the sabotage business or so he thought. As a final farewell, he contemplated the possibility of arranging a massive lab accident perhaps using one the compressed gas tanks in the labs. There were two problems with this final act of desperation. One, he still had to deal with the surveillance camera system. Secondly, in all likelihood he was only going to get one chance to pull it off before they were on to him. It was one thing to tamper with the specimens, it was a quite another issue to create an explosion and possible maim or kill other people. No, this didn't seem right so he decided he would bide his time and wait for another opportunity to do God's work. He knew God would choose the time and place as he eagerly awaited a sign from his savior that would spur him into righteous Christian action.

The Boss

Putting together an expedition on a shoestring budget was a daunting challenge for the neophyte management skills of Sarah and Richard. They decided that it would be best to continue their charade as tourists and avoid going for the official government sanctions. There was a lot of squabbling going on between the original Australian researchers and the Indonesian government and the two Americans didn't want to be caught up in that political mess. Other than their clothes, the only real equipment they would bring from the states would be the video and camera equipment that Richard would borrow from his brother. They still needed thousands of dollars when they arrived in Flores to secure camping equipment, supplies and to hire the necessary native guides. Richard didn't have any of the equipment necessary for a proper dig, but if required, he would improvise on the spot and dig with his bare hands if necessary. And although they seldom mentioned it to one another, they were both hoping to see something a bit more animated than 18,000 year-old skeletons. Apart at night, they had their own visions and dreams of discovering a tribe of living Homo floresiensis thriving in the dense jungles of Indonesia.

They raised the money for the expedition by equal amounts of inspiration, improvisation and a few select acts of total desperation. True to his word, Richard sold his SUV to an older couple, and cashed in a few unsolicited cash advance offers from his friendly credit card company. Of course, he timed it so that he would be out of the country when the initial payments would be due. Sarah sold off her condominium, and from the profit was able to come

up with forty thousand dollars. It would take a few months, but the two managed to raise over seventy thousand dollars for the expedition. Before leaving the states, they tidied up their personal affairs with Sarah arranging with some of the more responsible grad students to care for her chimps at the university lab. As the two placed what remained of their former lives into storage, Sarah wondered who in her life would notice her absence, let alone actually miss her, other than her beloved chimps.

The two left together from Los Angeles to begin their ad hoc expedition. It began as an all day excursion to Bali with a six-hour stopover. Richard vainly tried to sleep during the flight while the ever-practical Sarah attempted to learn Bahasa, the official Indonesian language of the region. As Richard drifted off, he wondered about the sanity of the small intense girl that squirmed in the seat next to him busily mispronouncing the words of a foreign tongue. “Datang, datang,” she repeated over and over again until Richard was ready to implode. Could he really count on the validity of her curious jungle visions?

Ten hours into their journey, Sarah finally quieted down and quietly rested against his shoulder. When she quieted down and wasn't annoying the shit out of him she was actually cute he thought to himself. Besides, it really didn't matter if she was sane, what the hell else was he going to do with his miserable life?

From Bali, they caught a two-hour flight to Flores in some tired, old plane that they were too exhausted to be concerned about. A day later, the haggard pair finally arrived in Maumere, Flores, at two-thirty in the afternoon. The two were exhausted upon their arrival, but with the precarious state of their finances, they just didn't have time to rest. Instead, Sarah decided that she would immediately call upon her old friend and guide, Supar, to lead the expedition.

Maumere was a small town of sixty thousand and, like any small town, everybody knew everybody else, which Sarah hoped would make it easier to track Supar down. The only problem

was that when Sarah started talking she knew just enough Bahasa to either illicit laughter or complete confusion from the natives. Flores Island supported five different language dialects not counting the new one dialect Sarah was busily inventing. Furthermore, it wasn't helping that most of the English from the Flores locals was relegated to a simple "Hello mister" greeting that they would affectionately direct at either Richard or Sarah.

It was a brilliant, tropical day at the small coastal town, but the fine weather was all but ignored by the two Americans. As Sarah approached various merchants in town to buy supplies, she kept saying "buset?" in an effort to find out how much they wanted for their goods. Each time they would change their price in response to her animated request and a flustered Sarah would say "buset" repeatedly. Nobody in Flores had a clue as to what she was saying, but judging from the gathering crowd, Richard knew she was fast becoming a popular local attraction for the natives. Soon, a crowd five deep of interested bystanders, consisting of young and old alike, had surrounded the two Americans and they were following Sarah's every move. When the pair stopped for a moment, one elderly man, who had difficulty-keeping pace with the crowd, began a soft chant and the crowd quickly joined in. A rhythmic chant of "buset, buset, buset" echoed throughout the small marketplace and grew louder with each passing minute.

"You know Sarah, for a team that was hoping to fly under the radar, we aren't exactly keeping a low profile," Richard observed. "Do you have any idea what you are saying to these people?" Sarah shook her head no and a look of concerned bewilderment was flush across her face.

The foreign crowd continued to grow in size about Sarah and Richard, invoking a sensation of claustrophobia and panic among the pair. As the crowd milled about them, a middle-aged native with a furious face dashed from the crowd and ran directly towards them. Richard wasn't sure what to do with the charging man but the anti-American sentiments etched

on the man's face stirred him into action. As Richard began to rear his arm back for one big overhand punch, Sarah yelled "Supar! Supar!" She rushed over and exchanged a big hug with the onrushing man while literally lifting him off the ground. After a few seconds, Supar wrested himself free from Sarah and yelled at the crowd to disperse. The disappointed, mumbling crowd slowly walked away and Supar returned to the pair. Sarah excitedly introduced Richard as "Professor Staller" to Supar and the two men shook hands.

"You two follow to my brother's shop?" Supar said as the three strolled away from the marketplace.

Supar was surprised to see Sarah, but he managed to regain his natural reserve. Supar's demeanor was a bit different from the rest of the Flores inhabitants because he was a Buddhist rather than a Catholic. He was also of mixed heritage. His Japanese father had married a local girl, and how his father had initially arrived in Flores was a mystery to most of the people who knew him.

"Sarah, why you here at the island, wait, sorry... why are you back to Flores? Excuse me, give me a minute, I have to think in English again," Supar said.

"Supar, I have a very special trip in mind. You do remember the day when your boat failed during that horrific ocean squall?"

Supar nodded affirmatively.

"Well, I have to return to the island we stranded the boat on. There is something on that island I have to see for myself, something new, almost miraculous and if I'm right, perhaps the biggest discovery to be made in this millennium," Sarah said excitedly. Sarah the salesperson was out in full force and she was doing her best to sell Supar on her mysterious island trip.

Supar kept nodding his head in agreement and was not at all surprised about Sarah's interest in the island. He never forgot that day either.

“What’s there Sarah?” Supar asked.

“I’m not sure Supar, but as a team we are going to be the first to find out,” Sarah said.

“Who else is here with you?” Supar asked. “Who’s the top dog?”

Sarah looked at Supar and said, “I’m it. In fact, Richard and me are the entire research team.” Supar’s eyebrows rose a little bit at her comment and he shook his head slightly from side to side.

“No, you don’t want to do this. Go home and get a real team,” he said.

“What are you saying? We are a real team; we’re both experts in our respective fields. Richard’s a DNA anthropologist.”

“Where’s Brightman? I only work with Brightman,” Supar said as he looked about.

“He’s dead unfortunately,” Sarah replied.

“Are you sure you want to do this Sarah?” Supar asked. “You really don’t have a large enough team for this trip. I think this could be a big mistake.”

Sarah looked at Supar with her eyes staring directly at him. “Listen to me Supar. I’ve wanted to do this ever since I left that island. Yes, I want to do this, more than anything else in my life, Supar. Do I have to get another guide or are you going to work with me? In case you are wondering, I do have the coordinates for that island.”

The two continued to argue for ten minutes, and it was readily apparent that Supar wasn’t too happy about the nature of their impromptu expedition. Supar kept warning them about the local authorities but Sarah was wearing him down. Finally, Supar had to concede to the resolute Sarah.

“Okay, okay, we go but don’t say I didn’t try to stop you. Now let’s begin to fight over my fee for this trip while I still have some fight left,” said Supar.

After a slow start, Supar's English would rapidly improve and his knowledge of the surrounding islands left no doubt that he was the right man for their expedition. Richard loved another quality of Supar: Supar's ability to handle the super sensitive Sarah, even when he was correcting her.

"Sarah, *buset* means 'damn it' or 'bull shit'. They were giving you a price and when you said "buset" over and over again, they figured you were either a tough business woman or just some damn nut. 'Berapa ini' is the correct phrase, which means, "How much is this?"

Sarah smiled and could only nod her head in agreement while Richard breathed a sigh of relief. Yeah, the Flores natives had it right. "Damn nut," was more like it as far as Richard was concerned.

That night at their hotel, Sarah and Richard decided to grab some dinner together and they were very much alone in the dining room. As a rule, there are relatively few westerners on Flores. As they sat in the small dining room, Richard began their small talk with a simple question.

"How did a nice girl like you get started in primatology in the first place?"

"I don't know," Sarah said, "when I had a chance to work with chimps at the local zoo I just fell in love the very first time. Their eyes did it for me; there so much more going on behind their eyes. They are much more intelligent than what we commonly believe," Sarah exclaimed.

"Hmmm, well that's an interesting answer." Richard senses some touchy, feely anthropology about to be served up for dinner, so he quickly changed the topic.

"So, what do you think they are going to look like?" Richard queried.

"What? The Ebu Gogo?" Sarah asked.

"No, this year's crop of American Idols. Of course, I'm talking about the Ebu," a frustrated Richard said.

“Well, let’s see if they actually exist, okay? I’m not one for mindless speculation,” Sarah said.

“Come on girl, let your hair down, it’s fun to speculate. Besides we don’t have MTV to watch, and I don’t know about you but I have nothing to read other than some old Playboys,” Richard said. Both Sarah and Richard had made it a point not to discuss the Ebu Gogo in front of the crew and that included Supar. It was just a simple matter of reducing the possibility of loose lips among the small native crew.

Still, Sarah wasn’t biting.

“Look, you know how the legends go about the Ebu Gogo, right?” Richard asked.

“Richard, come on, you know I do. I originally told you about them if you recall, so how could I not know the legend? I’ve only been over it a hundred times. Let’s see Ebu Gogo, meaning Grandmothers that eat anything. According to legend, they are small hairy people with long arms, about a meter tall and the women have pendulous breasts that they throw over their shoulders or so the local legend goes.”

“Stop it, you’re getting me hot,” Richard said.

Sarah ignores his outburst and continues to talk despite Richard’s failed effort at humor. “Not surprisingly, on Sumatra there is a similar native legend regarding the orang-pendke or ‘short man’ as they call them in their native language. Flores natives say the Ebu will eat anything, including raw meat, fruit, vegetables and the occasional human baby...”

Richard interrupts, “Jeez, enough already Sarah, I already know you are the smartest kid in the class and that you probably have more horsepower upstairs than I do, but that and a couple of bucks will get you a ride on the subway. Cut to the chase, will you, please? What do they look like?” Richard asked.

Sarah gives Richard a quizzical look. “All right, I’m not sure about the cost of a subway ride nowadays, but the question remains: is this a legend or a shared folk memory? All we know is there are at least two research teams scouring Flores looking for the Ebu Gogo as we speak while others are hunting for the Orang Pendek in other parts of Indonesia. But guess what Richard? Thanks to my earlier encounter, we are looking on a totally different island that nobody knows about. What do they look like? As long as they look significantly different from humans, I don’t care what they look like, but I do know that these little critters do vocalize in the strangest manner.”

Richard decides to interject. “Boy Sarah, you didn’t exactly go out on a limb with that comment, did you? My guess is that they are not particularly hairy and they don’t have pendulous breasts, thank goodness for that. I mean after all, I like a natural breast as much as the next man but down to the floor...”

Richard stopped short after spotting the exasperated look Sarah was giving him. The look said, “Please, stop being an ass, Richard.”

“But I digress,” Richard said, “okay, not much hair, no pendulous breasts, maybe they wear a sports bra for added support, and I doubt that they eat everything. There is some truth to the legend in that they are probably omnivores, and they enjoy eating a mixed diet very much like our own. Based on the remains at Liang Bua, they are about a meter tall, long arms, with sloping foreheads, no chin and a naked skin similar in color to African or dark Indonesian people. Their hands and feet are probably very similar to our own as well. The question is, how intelligent are they, and how did they get from mainland to the islands with the technology on hand?” Richard asked.

“You’re getting way ahead of yourself, Richard. Let’s find them first, then we can answer these questions and ask some more. I do have one speculative question to ask of you.

Assuming that we find them, what are we going to call them? I mean Homo floresiensis is a bit formal as far as I am concerned,” Sarah said.

Richard thought for a moment. “First, we will find them and secondly for now let’s just keep calling them “Ebu”, when we make the announcement we can come up with a spiffier name for them. Besides, what we find on that island could be a potentially new species altogether!”

“Works for me, Richard. I certainly don’t want to call them hobbits; besides being demeaning I’ve had quite enough of that Ring stuff over the past couple of years. Here’s to the Ebu!” Sarah said, and the two toasted to the promise of a strange, new people. They stopped talking shop and the two scientists then became tourists and spent the remainder of their evening making fun of their dinner and their accommodations.

Stowing the equipment aboard Supar’s old boat was a challenge for such a small team. Sarah wasn’t much of a manager and delegation wasn’t high up on her list of personal skills. Being green, she felt that she had to manage every detail, including the packing of Richard’s own equipment. Richard was feeling very oppressed by Sarah’s heavy-handed management style, and to make matters worse, Sarah had become very suspicious of everybody in the crew especially Richard. Sarah was taking micro-management to the molecular level, but what could Richard do? After all, Sarah was the boss, as she often reminded him and any suggestions otherwise provoked an immediate, shrill confrontation with her. Accordingly, Richard would do anything to avoid a confrontation with her, even to the point of becoming a passive-aggressive.

One afternoon it all came to a climatic head when Sarah found the equipment packed and stored the wrong way aboard the boat. She had wanted all of the electronic equipment placed in a waterproof lining, and Richard and the crew chose not to in order to save some precious time. Richard began to protest to Sarah, “I did it this way because it was taking too...”

Sarah stopped him with a large yell, “Richard, this is my expedition and my crew! Damn it, we do it my way, and I do have to tell you once again that you are junior academic on this team! My way, is that clear Richard?” Sarah barked at him.

The ferocity of this small woman surprised Richard, and he had no idea she could yell that loud. For one small moment, he felt as if he was in the lab again with the rampaging chimp. All he could do was shake his head in the affirmative and sigh. In the old days, Richard would have ripped her “a new one” in front of the crew, but that was the older, prouder ego of Richard that had left him a long time ago. Besides, the only thing worse than her yelling at him was when she grew quiet and starting sulking.

“You heard the woman. We’ve got to re-pack all of this equipment,” Richard yelled. The crew looked at each other, shrugged, and began to rip apart the packed equipment on the boat. The natives had seen this drama play out too many times before, and as the natives would say, score one for the majikan. Majikan meant boss in Bahasa, and after that incident, all of the natives referred to Sarah by that name.

Sarah was too sensitive about other people’s feelings, and consequently she wasn’t very good at being a hard ass. A little later that day, she actually felt bad about yelling at Richard, and she pulled him aside to apologize to him. Richard just smiled at her and commented, “That’s okay majikan, I just never realized you could yell that loud.”

Richard realized she was green and didn’t press the issue any further. He actually made it a point to defer to her as much as possible while secretly doing his own thing. Richard had his own agenda to attend to, and, yes, passive-aggressive was a much better strategy when dealing with the “ice princess”. So when Sarah insisted on having a dry camp, Richard made sure he had already secured his own private stash of Irish Mist aboard the boat for those long, lonely island nights.

In a similar manner, instead of getting angry at Sarah about her yelling episode, Richard decided to kid her about the incident, and even suggested that all the employees get together for a “happy hour” when their work was completed. Other than Supar, the mangy crew that comprised most of their team seemed barely capable of staying out of jail, never mind joining them in a social occasion such as a happy hour. Besides, Sarah was constantly complaining to Richard about the endless variety of body odors that emanated from the crew, and this was from a woman who cleaned the chimp cages at the university labs. They were an unsmiling and surly mob, far different from the Flores natives that worked the previous university expeditions and when Sarah protested to Supar about their overall disposition, he would curtly comment, “You get what you pay”.

Often as they worked loading the boat, the flatulent crew would erupt without warning causing Sarah to groan in disgust and scurry to the far side of the dock to seek relief from the ill wind. The outbreaks were so frequent and so brazen, Sarah suspected that Supar was deliberately hiring the gastro-intestinally challenged or perhaps the crew was embroiled in some weird, avant-garde anti-American protest.

During one such outbreak from the crew, Sarah commented to “Richard, what the hell is that odor?”

“Oh, I guess the boys are it again,” Richard said with a smirk. “You got love their tenacity!”

“Just gross!” Sarah said and she stormed away from the boat.

“Hey, I’m going for a run,” Richard shouted to her, no doubt looking to make his own escape from the malodorous crew and she waved the damn runner off with a disparaging flip of her hand. Sarah found herself alone and with little to do until the air cleared so she reflected on her own brittle relationship with Richard. Deep down, Sarah knew why she didn’t trust Richard,

and she realized it wasn't entirely his fault. She didn't trust most men, particular younger, more aggressive men.

“Oh, what the hell, I don't get along with women either,” Sarah thought to herself. Nevertheless, Sarah did have a specific problem with Richard. He reminded her way too much of an undergraduate student she had an affair with while she was in graduate school. There was a striking resemblance between the two men, and for Sarah, that was the original attraction to Richard in the first place. Richard was a constant reminder of a stupid, sordid affair that Sarah spent much of her recent life trying to forget.

Several years earlier, Sarah was a teacher's aide, and not surprisingly, she was responsible for doing most of the menial work for a tenured professor, including the grading of the undergraduate tests. The head professor was a pompous ass who was legendary in the anthropology department for his continuous efforts at self-promotion. The undergrad student, Sarah's lover at the time, tried to leverage her for some better grades. At the same time, ugly rumors about the pair sleeping together flew around the department from a number of jealous female undergraduate students. Yet, Sarah had done nothing wrong in terms of how she treated him, or even how she had graded him. She even tried to get the professor to mark her boyfriend's paper but the professor couldn't be bothered and left it to her. Once again, her actions didn't matter. Public opinion on the campus had already spoken quite forcibly to the entire faculty about the whore Sarah Levine.

Sarah would have been fired if it hadn't been for her impeccable academic record, and she was soon persuaded by the tenured professor to seek a new school to complete her graduate studies. She never forgot the smell of his pipe in the office, as he told her in a cold and detached manner that her scholarly services would be best served elsewhere. As Sarah was being scolded by this pompous ass, she sat quietly, all the time struggling to suppress the anger that raged deep

within her. She couldn't help but wonder which grad student would become his next hand maiden, and she was glad to be rid of the professor.

As for her ex-lover, the end of their ill-fated romance was a stupid and ugly one-act drama that Sarah never wanted to reprise again. She tried to recall if there was a lesson to be had other than to be leery of any male who spends more time preening at the mirror than a she does. It was also the start of her frosty demeanor.

Sarah drifted off deep into her own thoughts on her past relationships, back to a lonely sophomore year in college and a date with a senior philosophy major that that seemed nice enough. While eating a forgettable fast meal together, they shared an engaging conversation on nihilism and religion. The more they talked about the books they read the more she became infatuated with their shared journey and his incredibly light grey eyes. It took little encouragement on his part to persuade her to return to his dorm room for a few refreshments. Once there they downed more than a few rum and cokes and he soon convinced her into trying some coke. Why she agreed to do the coke was a question she had repeatedly asked herself? She never was a big partaker of drugs before nor was she that curious about them. Was her judgment clouded because of the rum or was she that desperate to connect with someone; she just couldn't decide. Within minutes of doing a few snorts, she was high and he feverishly kissing her while groping her breasts. She eagerly returned his kisses as he removed her clothing and he carried her naked into the bedroom. The sex was spontaneous and uninhibited but as the night progressed, she couldn't separate their lovemaking apart from the freaky drug taking.

Upon arising the following morning she sat at the edge of the bed, naked, agitated and feeling very used. As she slowly climbed out of his bed, she turned back to look at her mistake. He was out cold with his mouth wide open and barely moving from the night's frenetic activities. Realizing the mistake she had made she gathered her clothes together, hastily putting them on as

she literally ran from his room. As she walked across the dark campus in the early morning hours, she realized that perhaps loneliness was a far better choice than dating some of these seriously flawed men. She certainly didn't want to become one of their damaged women. She never saw him again despite his protestations and his best persuasive efforts to get her to join him in another lovemaking session.

Sarah tried to snap out of her mental fog.

"That is the problem with our existence, we get so lost in our own narrative we fail to see the world as it goes by," she thought as she drifted off again.

No, it wasn't all Richard's fault. Richard, after all, wasn't a bad looking guy complete with his very own crude charm. He certainly was bright, and he could be amusing if you were in the mood for his juvenile antics. Moreover, there certainly was no doubt that he found himself amusing. Sensitivity and being caring, well, that was an entirely different matter for Richard. The young boy, smart-ass attitude, kinda of hid those qualities in Richard, and consequently he could become very wearisome to her. But, this wasn't about a checklist between the pros and cons of sleeping with someone. Simply put, having an affair with Richard would complicate the expedition for Sarah. She wasn't sure she could control him if they became lovers, and she wasn't sure if she wanted to control him. No, it was best that she keep this a professional matter and not complicate the expedition with another sordid love affair. Sarah knew herself all too well, and she knew the emotional attachments an affair would bring for her. Right now, she wasn't that crazy about Richard, and that meant keeping Richard on the outside for the duration of the expedition.

An hour later Richard returned from his run and they continued to work together throughout the remainder of day putting their equipment and stores securely in the boat. Two small boys, who were nephews of Supar, had been helping the expedition by carrying some of

the smaller supplies to the boat. They become quickly bored with the task, and during an afternoon break, they begin a small food fight by hurling bits of broken chicken wings at each other. The infectious laughter of the two small boys catches both Sarah's and Richard's attention.

Supar is having none of their nonsense, and he scolds the two small boys for playing with their food. "You should have respect for the animals that have given up their life to give you nourishment. One day your bodies will be feeding others and you would want the same," Supar said. Sarah noted the simple Buddhist sentiment Supar was expressing, and she intently watched the reaction of the two boys. The two small boys hung their heads in shame, the joy quickly draining from their faces and they fell silent. They sat by themselves for a while, not saying a word to one another. Once Supar left, they become more animated, and they quickly resume their childish play.

After several days of preparation in Maumere, the team was set to leave, and Sarah unilaterally makes the decision to depart the following morning. As dusk began to approach, the exhausted team is reviewing the supply list for the third time.

Richard finally stops and holds up his hands as if to say no more. "No mas, that's it. We've been over this a hundred times. If we missed something, we'll find out when we get there. That's the way it always is with these expeditions, no matter how much you plan, you are always going to miss something," Richard said.

Surprisingly, Sarah nodded in agreement with him. "Richard, when you are right, you are right and I'm dead tired. That's it for today. I've had enough, and I'm going to bed early. I'll see bright and early tomorrow. Good night!" Sarah said as she turned away to leave.

Richard is having none of that from Sarah and grabbed her by her arm. "Hey, not so fast young lady. This is our last day in the big city. Let's get dressed up and grab a few drinks

before we disappear into the wilderness for a few months. We deserve, no I might add, we need a night on the town.”

They both knew that was a joke. Flores was not exactly a premiere travel destination for the discriminating western tourist. In some of the smaller towns you didn't ask about air conditioning, you were more concerned about whether or not your room had mosquito netting. Overall, conditions were somewhat primitive and transportation was painfully slow; actually, everything on Flores was slow. It was a different world from what Sarah and Richard were used to, a world where it was more important to be polite, than it was to be punctual.

For a westerner, the food was sometimes quite bizarre and often challenging. The word 'challenging' is almost desirable when used to describe a novel, or a game, maybe even a sexual conquest but not when it's used to describe food! To a western observer, it sometimes looked as though anything that moved was fair game for the cooking pot. In reality, the staple diet for the local population consisted of rice, fish, and vegetables. The local delicacies that the natives loved inevitably entailed the head of some small animal or dog meat. As a treat, entire chickens would be roasted with the feathers left on the hapless bird. Other than some meals consisting of chicken, fish, and rice, the two westerners found it difficult to find enough edible food to eat and maintain their weight. In the week they spent preparing for the expedition, they both had lost over ten pounds, and they spent much of their time racing each other to a toilet. However, the tropical sun, combined with their illness gave the two a distinctive leaner, almost healthier look. Sarah and Richard kidded one another about the possibility of forgoing the Ebu altogether and promoting a new "Flores Diet Book" instead.

Sarah continued to protest about going out. "Please, I really need the rest, Richard."

"Come on Sarah, tomorrow is just one long boat ride, and once we arrive at your island that's it. We are stuck on some shit-hole island for several months with nothing to do but to

watch the Ebu make out and that's if we're lucky. We need a break, you know, a real celebration of life.”

“Okay, we'll do it, just as long you don't invite the crew for happy hour. I have to give my nose a break from those bad boys. Let's meet in two hours, say about seven, all right?”

Sarah asked.

“Fine,” said Richard, and the pair, after saying their good nights to the crew, they walked together to the hotel. The two Americans were oddly quiet during their evening walk as they silently reflected on their strange journey to Flores Island and the prospects of a very uncertain future.

Richard was exhausted from the day's labor and decided to get a quick nap so he could be fresh for the night's festivities. He returned to his room and found it as he had left it, in a total state of disarray and chaos. After a quick shower, Richard briefly entertained the thought of straightening the room, but he decided instead to fall into his sagging bed. The hotel didn't have the greatest of amenities, which made sleeping even more of a challenge. The only cooling air within the room came from a squeaky, old brown ceiling fan that moved so slowly he could count the revolutions on a moonlit night. Flores had a wide range of climates for an island so close to the equator, but since their arrival, the tropical heat had been consistently oppressive.

Despite the heat, Richard soon fell off into a deep sleep until he heard a knock at the door. Richard was startled and he could hear Sarah's voice calling him in the hallway. “What the hell was she doing here this early?” He looked up at the clock and saw it was after seven.

“Oh shit!” he muttered to himself as he jumped from the bed.

“Richard, are you in there?” Sarah asked.

“Coming Sarah!” Richard threw his clothes on and went to the door. “Sorry, I overslept.”

Sarah came into the room and immediately took a step back from the sprawling mess. She decided to take the high road and did not say a word to Richard about the disarray in his room. Meanwhile, Richard was busily trying to pull himself together in the bathroom and he removed his shirt.

“Gee, it’s not too often that I’m ready before the guy,” Sarah said. The bathroom door was open and she glanced in taking in his lean but muscular torso. Not too shabby she thought to herself but then she noted a blue-black razor wire tattoo on one of his arms. She was a bit surprised by the tattoo’s presence wondering how somebody that bright could do something so, eh...lower class.

“Hey, what’s with the tattoo? Trying to look like a tough guy in school?” she yelled to him.

“Nope, just looking like a guy who gets drunk on a regular basis,” he replied.

As she continued to watch, Richard was hastily trying to apply his deodorant stick. As he opened the top of the container, the stick crumbled and fell to the floor in a number of broken white pieces. Richard cursed as he scooped up the pieces and mashed them back into the plastic holder and he then began to apply the mangled stick to his underarms. Sarah rolled her eyes, while deciding she had seen enough of Richard’s grooming habits and looked instead at the unrelenting chaos of his room. “Typical male,” she said to herself. As she walked about the room, she spotted several dozen condoms pouring out of a box and lying among his clothes on the floor.

“Hey, Richard is there something you should be talking to me about?”

Richard saw Sarah looking at the condoms and knew he was busted. “Hey, you never know, I might get lucky on that island with a little Ebu love!”

“You know that’s kind of disgusting even for you, Richard.”

“Great, I still got it! If you noticed, the condoms are not lubricated. They can be used to protect equipment and the muzzle of the guns from tropical moisture and critters.”

“Okay then, just as long you weren’t planning something sleazy like smuggling drugs or something else,” she said. She smelled his cologne wafting through the humid air and surprisingly she didn’t find it that objectionable.

Sarah never wanted to bring guns along the expedition so Richard decided to proactively distract her before decided to go on a rant.

“But since you brought the topic up, didn’t you ever wonder how the Ebu got it on? I mean, was it your basic missionary position? Did they have to wine and dine them? Get them flowers or whisper sweet nothings?” Richard asked.

Sarah wasn’t buying Richard’s rationale for bringing the condoms, since an equal number of them were lubricated as well but she decided to play along.

“Do you want me to go through the evolutionary check list, Richard? They had small brains, probably had a shortened childhood for their young as compared to our own. I would say the Ebu needed less time to raise their young, and therefore, they required less involvement from the male parent. The question is did they have permanent pair bonds? If not, my guess would be that, they were quick, impersonal, back door men. That would still make them better lovers than most men today,” Sarah said.

Richard shook his head. “Ouch! What do you have against males and me in particular?” Richard asked.

“I didn’t say anything about you, but now that we are on the topic, let’s just say you’re lacking something,” Sarah said with a small smile.

“Care to elaborate, Sarah?”

“Let me see, oh I don’t know, how about a personality?” Sarah asked.

“Hey, I got personality up the yin-yang, baby!”

“No, Richard, I’m talking about a good personality. You know, a personality with such noble characteristics such as loving, caring, and affection,” Sarah said.

“Oh, I’m caring, baby! Just try me!” Richard said.

“I’m sorry to let you down Richard, but bringing your own condoms to the party doesn’t automatically make you caring! Come on, let’s go before I change my mind about tonight,” Sarah said.

The bar closest to the hotel is a dark, dank place where relatively few tourists go to except for the most adventuresome. The music in the background reflected the islander’s preference for pop songs, mixed in with a few classic reggae songs. None of this matters to the two Americans as they find two seats along the bar and settle in for the night. Sarah is wearing a tight blue dress with heels, and with her hair up Richard can’t help but notice how stunning Sarah is looking.

“Boy, you are looking so hot tonight,” Richard said as he sniffs the air in her direction. “You smell good too! I have to say your selection of perfume is improving.”

“That almost implies that I don’t look or smell good at other times,” Sarah said with a twinkle in her eye. Sarah is feeling playful tonight and decides to give Richard a run for his money.

“Well, before I go down that road, let’s get a few drinks into you. Unfortunately, it appears that warm beer is the drink du jour at the bar,” Richard said.

“Beer it is,” Sarah said with a big smile.

“Barkeep, dua bir, terima kasih” said Richard. A stunned Sarah looks at Richard.

“You’re picking up the language?” Sarah said in a tone heavy with both surprise and sarcasm.

“Let’s just say I’m filling a void that exists with our present resident linguist,” said Richard. “Supar is teaching me.”

They begin to pound a few beers and they kid one another about the other patrons in the bar. As the night progresses, Richard is a bit taken back by Sarah’s ability to stay even with him.

“Damn it girl, you can really pound them down. I never saw you as a beer drinker,” Richard said.

“Heck, I’ve been in college most of my adult-life so you better get a taste for beer. That’s pretty much all you see in the dorms. I mean when you’re drinking at a party with the grad students, you are not going to drink a 94-point Cabernet Sauvignon. The tenured professors have all of the good wine, but that wine comes with a certain personal commitment,” Sarah said.

They have a few more beers and spend most of their time talking about the expedition.

“You know I named the island. I’ve named the island, Irmã Flores, that is Portuguese for Sister to Flores,” Sarah said with a slight slurring of the words. Richard still had his doubts about Sarah’s language skills but Irmã was a good as any other name to call Ebu Island.

Sarah is sitting close to Richard, and they are both looking into each other eyes. Sarah’s perfume is doing a number on him, and her hair pulled up exposes the long line of her graceful neck. Richard is finding Sarah very appealing and he decides to stop talking shop.

“Hey, how come you never married? I mean you are a damn good-looking woman, and when you’re not being such a tight ass you look like you could be a lot of fun. I don’t get it. Why are you still on the sidelines?”

Before Sarah can answer, Richard asked, “You’re not one of those are you? You know, because if you are, I’m okay with that, too.”

Sarah laughs. “Yeah, I bet you’re all right with that little fantasy. Sorry to disappoint you but I’m just not that trendy.” Sarah hesitates for a moment, shaking her head. “You know,

you are such a cretin, and you are being damn nosy. Why do men always question the sexuality of every woman that won't go to bed with them? No, I am decidedly not, and I could ask you the very same question?"

In seeming remorse, Richard's hangs his head down while he carefully measures his response as Sarah sips her beer. "Sorry about that Sarah, I don't know why we do that but as you probably guessed I'm not quite right, having grown up as an adolescent wondering if I was a normal male or just a well-endowed shemale?"

"What?" Sarah said and she chokes on her beer with Richard's comment causing her beer to unceremoniously spill from her mouth and nose. Richard is laughing at her and helps her wipe her chin clean.

"Girl, got you there with that one. It's really all in the timing."

"Not quite right really does sum it up for you. You know, calling you a complete idiot just doesn't do you justice!" Sarah said, as she dabbed her face with a tissue.

"Are you through playing with your beer missy? To answer your question, it was never the right time or the right girl. My career kept getting in the way of any serious commitment. Every time I would settle down and find a girl, another school posting would call me away."

"Or should you say you prayed for another posting to call you away," Sarah said.

"Yeah, you're right, and am I that obvious? I just keep finding out that most people are assholes; it really doesn't matter what genitals are attached to them. Men, women, it's all the same, we all have a bad habit of disappointing one another, myself most of all. What's the Kafka quote out being a happy animal in a happy herd? I've never been happy to fit into the herd, and I suppose I never will," Richard said.

"Kafka?" Sarah said with a small snort. "Yeah, you reading Kafka."

“No, really. I spent most of my time hanging around the English Literature girls, what can I tell you? They were so much cuter than the girls majoring in science, present company excluded, of course,” Richard said. “And you?”

“No English lit majors for me and, yes, it was never the right guy. Oh, I was serious about some guy several times, only problem was they were less than serious about me. The years go by, and the old scar tissue begins to build up. After a while, I didn’t want anybody, and I was content in the knowledge that nobody wanted me, you know, not for the long term. That’s all, just tired of being hurt. No deep dark secrets other than the years going by. They do fly by don’t they?” Sarah asked.

“Yeah, the years are going by, and I had a career that was solidly going in reverse, that is until I met you! I say here’s to you Sarah Levine and to your bizarre jungle visions,” as he holds up his glass for a toast. Sarah heartily taps his beer glass with her own glass and said, “Thank you sir for that stirring toast.”

“Hey, Levine? You must be Jewish? So did you get a nose job and breast implants for you bar mitzvah?” Richard asked.

“It’s bat mitzvah for a girl, idiot and this is all original equipment. Besides, I’m half Jewish, my father was Jewish and my mother is an Italian-Catholic.”

“So?” Richard asked.

“What?” she asked in return.

“You know, how were you brought up?” Richard asked.

Sarah looks down, scrunches her face, and pauses for a moment before answering.

“Basically screwed up! Yeah, that sums it up pretty well! I don’t observe much of anything. It’s kind of tough to observe any holidays or religions when your family didn’t have any. I can also tell you that my family didn’t bring much fun to the word “dysfunctional” either.

My father died of pancreatic cancer when I was young and, in turn, my borderline mother became severely depressed. My older sister ran off as soon as she had the opportunity to get out of that house. It was just a sad, quiet, lonely childhood. So, I lost myself in my books and my studies. Now, all I have left in my life is my depressed mother and a sister I almost never see.”

“So you had no males in your life, no father, not even a brother to tease you?” Richard asked.

“None, what about yourself? I mean what God do you pray to or should I say, choose to ignore?” Sarah asked.

“Lapsed Catholic, whatever the hell that means. Oh right, I guess hell is the operative word there. The whole church and religion thing just didn’t make sense to me. That’s the problem with being educated and having no faith. You end up asking more questions, and getting answers that you really didn’t want to know in the first place. Sometimes I think it’s just easier to be dumb..., no wait, I don’t mean dumb. You know, just more accepting of things as they are,” Richard said.

“That is not the lot of a scientist, is it Richard?” Sarah responded. “The best science is when you challenge accepted dogma, the older the better but that doesn’t help you win any popularity contests.”

“No, you’re right. Anyway, the way I figure it, religion has one basic shtick. They try to convince you that you should bundle up all of your passions and desires and channel them all into some sort of religious fervor. You know, turn all of your lust into a burning desire for God. And, I don’t know, anything that apparently schizoid in nature, I just don’t want to be a part of. My guess is that for a sense of security most people will do anything, including a belief in a personal God, and buying lots of whole-life insurance.”

“But at least you had the choice Richard. I had nothing, no direction in my life,” Sarah said.

“We all have choices to make, Sarah. You just have to be coherent enough during your life to recognize them when they come around. Unfortunately, most of us are on autopilot for so long, me too by the way, we don’t even recognize the choices we make. So we procrastinate, we delay making the tough choices, but like my daddy always said no decision is a decision.”

“Coming from a self-loathing Catholic, shouldn’t I take all of this homespun philosophy with a grain of salt?” Sarah asked.

“I guess. Hey, I’m sorry about your father and the Jewish crack...,” he said.

Sarah just waved him off with a smile as if to say no big deal but a quick look at the saddening girl tells Richard that he is losing the “fun” Sarah that was with him just a few moments ago. He knows she has begun reflecting on her own sad life and the death of her father. The damn girl had so many personal land mines that he kept blundering into so he decided it was time to change gears again.

“You know there is one good thing about the Catholic Church?” Richard asked.

“What is that, Richard?” Sarah asked while playing along.

Richard becomes more animated and tells her, “I love the way the Church makes sex out to be something really dirty, you know, some great sin. Sex is so much more fun that way. None of that good wholesome, procreation crap for me. Sex has got to be little dirty for me to be any fun.”

“Dirty, huh?” Sarah said while smirking. “You are such a jerk. It just figures that comment would be coming from you, Richard. Did you ever hear of love? Oh, excuse me, stupid question on my part. Goes right back to my comment regarding personality.”

“Hey, I got personality,” he protested.

“Boy, it sounds like you have enjoyed the occasional bad girl in your time. Maybe you even had the occasional lap dance or two with a tattooed stripper?” Sarah asked.

“Who hasn’t?” he retorted. “Besides, Sarah Levine, what do you know about lap dances? You didn’t pay your way through college that way, did you? Any tattoos you care to show me?”

“Oh, you would love that wouldn’t you? No, I’ve heard things, and stop fantasizing about me will you? So have you been with any bad girls? No, wait, I should be asking how many have you been with?” Sarah asked.

“Well, yeah but only during the occasional bachelor party, maybe at a bar, there was that car wash... so what if I did, like women don’t like the company of bad boys every so often,” Richard said.

“Car wash?” Sarah wondered to herself. What the hell was he doing there with a bimbo in a car wash? Never mind, she decided not ask.

Sarah left her musings and commented, “When do we like bad boys? When we’re drunk? Biologically men have a different mating strategy as compared to women. Their goal is to spread their seed around as much as possible with minimal energy and with even less commitment on their part. The more women they have, the better for them. Women have to take a different approach because they get stuck with the child. I know that’s changed with birth control, at least that’s the way it looks with the way some girls act. All I know is that for me the emotional attachments are still there. What can I say; it’s bred in the bone. At some point, you’ve got to nest, and it’s just a question of knowing when and with whom. You have to know who you are, and I have no quarrel with being a woman. The only question mark in my life right now, is the man, that’s even if I need one at this point,” Sarah said.

Richard was about to say something, but Sarah decides that she is not done as the alcohol firmly takes hold of her.

“The real mistake women make is when women confuse men with boys, when the better comparison is with a cretin. Women love that little boy crap in their men. Little boys, yeah right. They wished. A batch of insensitive, thoughtless cretins, that’s all I have ever seen from men.” Sarah starts chuckling to herself thinking about the absurdity of the conversation they were having.

“Hey, I resemble that remark. You know you call me that a lot,” Richard said.

“Sorry, it just seems that you don’t worry very much about what women want,” Sarah sneered.

“To hell with that, I’ve got enough trouble figuring out what I want! Why would I throw somebody else’s wish list into the mix,” Richard said.

“Do you ever listen to yourself and hear how selfish you sound? You are some piece of work,” Sarah fired back at him.

“I didn’t mean it that way, Sarah. You have to admit that Freudian comment is very sexist at its core. Damn it, Freud was a sexist. It’s not a question of what women want, I’m just saying that men can’t figure out what they want; okay, I’ll grant you that there is one thing we always want, but beyond that, we haven’t a clue about our true desires. Individuals have to be responsible for their own wants and desires and not hide behind some sexual stereotypes whenever it’s convenient for them,” Richard said.

“Well, what do you know, am I seeing Richard the feminist for the first time?” Sarah asked.

“Hey, don’t say that too loudly in this bar, the locals may get the wrong idea about me. And please don’t translate that into Bahasa. You’ll end up starting a bar fight, and I’ll end up going back to my room with some Indonesian transsexual knowing my damn luck,” Richard said.

Sarah wasn't sure if it was the honesty of his comments or the effects of the warm beer but for once she actually liked what she was hearing from Richard. There was some hope that there was a man in the cretin-boy, after all. At that moment, Sarah realized she must be drunk, since she was laughing at all of his stupid jokes.

"Well, let's go then before that transsexual picks you up, okay? We don't need to add more issues to your sexual confusion," Sarah said.

"How about a dance, Sarah?" Richard asked.

"Lap?" she asked.

"No, but I'm game for one if you are. I mean a nice slow dance," he said with his ready grin.

"You're not going to hit on me?"

"Should I? You do look great tonight," Richard said.

"Nah, why spoil a perfect evening!"

Richard was undaunted and replied "That's okay, I've got time."

Sarah smiles brightly at Richard and said, "And you're going to need a lot of it. Boy, you never give up, do you? Richard, you know what you desire you may not need!"

"We could find out? Did I mention that I have several dozen condoms?" Richard asked.

"You're quite the sweet talker Richard, but not tonight. Besides aren't we going to need those for the equipment and I'm not referring to your own. One dance and let's call it a night!" Sarah said.

They are the only couple on the dance floor, and an old Bob Marley song "Is This Love?" is playing on an ancient jukebox in the far corner of the bar. Richard holds Sarah closely for a while as they slowly dance to the song, and he gives Sarah a quick kiss on the cheek. It wasn't a romantic kiss and Sarah is puzzled by Richard's motivation for the kiss.

“What’s that for, Richard?”

“A thank you,” Richard said.

“Again, what for?”

“You know, for taking a chance on me and for taking a chance on life, Sarah Levine!”

“Your very welcome, Richard Staller!” she said as they continued to dance slowly to the music.

She is dancing quite closely to him, and in unison, they begin to sway to the reggae music. Richard allows his hand to glide down her back, finding his way to the curve of her buttocks and with one small motion tucks her hips in closer to his own. Sarah doesn’t resist his brash move and finds herself pleasantly surprised by how comfortable she feels in Richard’s arms. As if she was completely disarmed, the emotions and the alcohol overwhelmed her and she contemplated telling him to lie to her and to say that he loved her, to say anything to her that would move her from her glacial indifference. It had been such a long time since she had felt this way and the sudden resurfacing of these sweet emotions bewildered her at first. She was looking for any excuse to take the plunge but then as quickly as the feeling surfaced, the moment passed and the ever-rational Sarah regained control over herself.

“This is going to be a problem,” she thought as she gently puts her head on his shoulder and enjoyed the scent of his cologne.

Pirates of the Flores Sea

The following morning after their night on the town, Richard and Sarah are set to journey with their small team to their destination, the island Sarah christened “Irmã Flores”. They are leaving from Ende, a southern port on Flores and although they are a tiny research team, much of the dock is buzzing with the news of their imminent departure. The wooden boat is loaded with their equipment and a crew of six people, forcing the tired boat to ride low in the seawater. The sight causes Richard to question the boat’s sea worthiness, but Supar insists the boat will get the job done as it has always done.

For the expedition, Richard and Sarah have hired a native team of four guides headed by Supar. Sarah is busily instructing the men about where to place their gear, but her command of the Bahasa language is once again creating confusion among the crew. As she barks instructions, the men look at each other in a puzzled manner trying to decipher her incoherent commands. Supar tries to translate for the men, but then he looks to Richard to intervene. Richard sighs in reply and knows the sacrifice he must make for the good of the team. Richard engages Sarah in an argument about the charts in an effort to distract her, and to give the men time to complete the final loading of the boat.

Sarah has plotted the course to the island with Supar several times over the past few days, and she is not particularly interested in what Richard has to say about the charts. The trip is

going to take several days from the southern Flores port so they will have to stop at a northern Flores port on their way to their final destination. Sarah can barely contain her excitement, and she talks continuously to Richard about their plans upon their arrival at the island.

They are finally ready to depart, and much to Richard's chagrin, several hundred people line the dock to send the research team off. In the background, Richard can even hear a small native band attempting to play a halting version of "Stars and Stripes" for the team's departure. Richard mutters "low profile," to himself repeatedly, as the festive crowd continues to swell in number at the old dock.

Upon their departure, the crowd wave's goodbye in unison to the small boat, and in turn, Sarah is busily waving and incoherently saying goodbye to the crowd. Richard is relieved that they are finally underway, and that they have a beautiful day to travel. An hour passes after they have left Ende, and the old, small boat is lazily making its way across the sea. Richard scans the horizon in the direction of Ende, and he notices that another boat has departed from Ende shortly after they did. For a full hour, the boat is far off in the distance but never quite disappearing from view. The large crowd at the dock is a big tip off to Richard that others know of their expedition, and he is worried that a rival team may have gotten word about their plans.

"Supar, hand me the binoculars, will you?" Richard asked. As he views the other boat in the distance, he hands the glasses to Supar. "What do think?"

Supar looks through the glasses for a few minutes and comments, "I think it's a fishing boat."

"Come on, too high in the water Supar and it has been out there for over an hour," Richard said. "Supar, can you make this tub go any faster?"

"I'll try majikan. You know this is an old boat."

Sarah notices the two talking and asked, "What's wrong Richard?"

“Look out there,” Richard said as he points to the horizon, but Sarah’s eyesight isn’t strong enough to see the other boat. Richard hands her the binoculars. Just as Sarah focuses on the boat, she sees a rooster tail erupt from the back of the foreign vessel.

“Richard, I see them and they just opened up their engines full throttle,” Sarah said.

Sarah was right; Richard could see the rooster tail behind their boat even without the binoculars. Richard didn’t know what to make of this. Perhaps it was authorities getting wind of their unsanctioned expedition, and they were trying to intercept them. The boat was a relatively new speedboat, and an expensive one at that. Whoever it was, they were following them from the beginning, and they were now going at a fast enough speed to intercept them in a relatively short amount of time.

“Supar, get the hell out of here now!”

“Boss, can’t, nowhere to go! They’ll catch up with us in no time.”

“Where are the guns, Supar?” Richard shouted.

Sarah gives Richard a panicked look. Sarah hates guns and never wanted to bring them along on the expedition in the first place. Richard convinced her that they maybe needed for an ornery Komodo, but Richard’s real concern was more with the two-legged variety of animals who could dwell on the island.

“Richard, if that is the authorities, I don’t think breaking out the guns is such a wise idea,” Sarah said.

“Good point Sarah, but Supar be ready with guns just in case,” Richard said.

“You got it majikan!” Supar said.

As the other boat approached, two things were becoming very evident. First, they could not out run the larger, faster boat. Secondly, it was clear that the crew of the other boat, gauging from their scruffy appearance, was not the authorities, and they were clearly not another research

team. The boat's crew consisted of six native Indonesians, and they were particularly hard and mean looking. Their clothes were dirty and they were armed to the teeth with an assortment of AK-47s, automatic weapons and foul-looking knives.

"We have no place to run to," Supar said. Richard saw an island off in the distance, but it was too far away for them to reach in time. A voice over a megaphone told them in broken English to stop their boat.

"Boss, they are pirates," Supar said.

"What the hell do you mean pirates?" Sarah asked.

Richard knew what Supar meant. The Indonesia region with its seventeen thousand islands was a safe haven for modern day thieves or pirates, as they liked to call themselves. The numbers were shocking: one out of three pirate incidents worldwide occurred in Indonesian waters. They didn't have large man of wars to do their plundering, but instead they relied on small, powerful speedboats to hijack ships and rob the local Indonesian ports. Stealing from tourists wasn't beyond them either. Unlike the colorful pirates of old lore, these pirates were most likely to be uneducated, native Indonesians who were petty crooks, terrorists or rebels in opposition to the local government. In any case, they were often can heavily armed, and they could be very violent when provoked. They were facing some lean times due to ongoing publicity and the attendant presence of Western fleets in the region.

"Pirates? Are you kidding me?" Sarah asked.

"No, they are a real problem in the waters of Indonesia," Supar said.

"Supar, you know this information would have been really useful if you told use just a little bit earlier," Sarah said.

Richard is now worried, and more than a little concerned for their safety. He glances over at Sarah and he can see the same worried look in her eyes.

“Supar, get the guns ready just in case. Why do I have the feeling that these bad boys aren’t here to promote safe boating?”

As the pirate speedboat pulled along side, Richard instinctively pushed Sarah down onto the deck. Struggling with Richard, Sarah keeps picking her head up to get a good look at the ongoing drama.

Strangely, as Richard looked at his own crew, he can see no outward signs of panic on their stoic faces. Richard decided to grab a rifle but he sees that Supar has already grabbed one. He then notices the rifle barrel pointed directly at his head.

“What the hell are you doing Supar? That way! You want the pirates, you know the bad guys,” as he points to the pirates. Richard keeps blinking his eyes not quite comprehending what he is seeing from Supar.

“Sorry, majikan, but we got to take your stuff and money. Be cool and don’t resist and we’ll get you out of here alive, I promise,” Supar said.

Richard couldn’t believe what he was hearing from Supar. Richard takes a small step toward Supar and in response Supar fires a warning shot that whizzes past Richard’s ear. Richard backs off.

“Supar? What the hell? You want me to trust you now? Wow, you got a lot of balls, Supar! Why? Look, take what you want but please don’t hurt Sarah.”

“Supar, what are you doing to us?” Sarah asked.

“Like I said, be cool and you’ll have a great story to tell your kids. If you act like a hero, this will go very badly for you and Sarah. These guys are nasty and I know that from my own experience,” Supar said.

The speedboat is secured alongside the old boat, and the pirates hastily climb on board. The pirate chief made it a point to talk to Supar in English. “You’re getting sloppy. You were running late the entire day. Take the boat and all of the equipment back to port.”

The pirate chief shouts in English to his crew, “Shoot the two Americans, and dump their bodies overboard.”

Sarah let’s out a small incoherent cry, and Richard starts to yell but in a moment three additional guns are pointed at his head. Richard quickly gets quiet again.

“Men, do me a favor, and get rid of the loud American first. You can leave the girl on board for a while to have some fun with, but I want them both out of this boat before we return to port.”

“No, that is not the deal, Sukarno!” Supar yells as he intervenes and begins talking in Bahasa to the pirate chief. Supar calls the pirate chief ‘Sukarno’ and the irony of the name is not lost on Richard. They argue fiercely for a few minutes, but Supar appears to be winning the debate. Supar turns to Richard and Sarah and hesitates for a moment.

Supar asked, “Can you both swim?”

Richard and Sarah look at one another for a second, and they both simultaneously mutter a feeble yes.

“Then you should both swim for it!”

“What about the crew?” Richard asked.

“Don’t worry, they belong to Sukarno. Your only concern should be for yourselves. Now go before they change their minds!” Supar said.

Richard looks with disgust at his crew and turns to Sarah to say, “Well, that would explain their odor. Looks like we overstayed our welcome, Sarah!”

“Are you crazy?” Sarah asked.

“You want to stay onboard and party with this motley crew?” Richard asked. Sarah just shrugged in a combination of despair and resignation.

“Before you go, please hand over your wallet!” Sukarno said and added, “No life preservers for them!”

Richard glares at Sukarno as he hands him the wallet. “You know, this is not over my pirate friend,” Richard said.

“Right now, I think you should be saving your energy for your swim rather than making empty threats,” Sukarno said as he gestured with his gun for the two to go overboard.

As the two Americans clamber over the side of the boat, Supar has to stop one of the crew from taking a shot at them. The two hit the water and begin to swim away from the boats.

“Hey, look at the pretty lady swim with a breasty stroke,” Sukarno yells while getting a hearty laugh from the entire crew. The two boats leave with Richard and Sarah furiously paddling in the middle of a vast empty ocean.

While keeping his head above the water Richard struggles to take his boots off, and helps Sarah to do the same. “How good a swimmer are you?” he asked.

“Okay, I think!” Sarah said while spitting out water.

“We have to swim to that island.” Richard points to a distance island that appears several miles away from the two.

“Jeez Richard, I’m not a freaking dolphin!” Sarah cries.

“No choice, Sarah. It’s our only chance out here.”

They hesitate to swim, as if to weigh their limited options, but then they begin to swim, slowly at first, then more purposely. The ocean water is relatively calm and warm, but Sarah tires quickly. As Sarah tires she begins to lower her head, and the small waves begin to

overwhelm her. Every so often, Sarah is choking up seawater from the swim. Richard has to wait for her, and constantly encourages Sarah to go on.

“Richard, are there any sharks in these waters?”

“Probably, but I wouldn’t worry, I believe they have a distinct preference for the meat of a male cretin. Stop worrying girl, I got you covered!” and Richard gives her a big smile.

They swim for about an hour but as they draw closer to the island, a strong ocean current forces the two to double their efforts. Sarah continues to struggle, and she stops several times to catch her breath. Finally, as she nears total exhaustion, Sarah begins to panic, and she stops swimming altogether. The small swells break over her head causing Sarah to swallow and choke on the bitter seawater. Richard, unaware of her struggles continues swimming.

“Richard, I can’t...” Sarah yelled followed by an incoherent series of cries and sobs. Sarah’s head grows heavy as exhaustion overtakes her body and her motionless body slowly descends below the waves. A moment, perhaps two pass, as a comforting eerie quiet fills her being. Finally, a sense of peace overwhelms her and she...

Something lunges at her and she is angry at the intrusion. “Damn scavengers, leave me alone will you! You can pick at the bones later!” A firm hand brusquely grabs her wrist and pulls her unwilling body to the surface.

As her head breaks the surface, Sarah can hear Richard in the distance shouting, “Where the hell do you think you’re going?” He firmly wraps his arm around her torso to keep her head above the water. When she recovers somewhat, Richard grabs Sarah by the shoulders and shakes her violently causing her in turn to angrily spit up the seawater. Richard looks deep into her glassy eyes and then he slaps her face several times in an effort to get her to focus.

“Sarah, come on, come back to me girl. We are doing this together. Trust me; I’m not going to leave you out here. Where you go, I go. You mean too much to me. Trust me; we are making it to that island, together. We’re not done by a long shot.”

The forceful look in Richard’s eyes gives her renewed confidence, and after resting a few minutes, Sarah resumes swimming. Richard’s words of encouragement keep Sarah moving, and throughout the swim, Richard motivates her, jokes with her, curses Supar, and says anything to keep her spirits up. As she swims, her legs start to cramp from the continuous exertion and Richard is there to massage her failing muscles and her shattered ego. Almost by the sheer force of Richard’s will, they slowly, painfully advance to the island one stroke at a time.

After several hours, they make it to shore, and both struggle to make their way up the sloping beach. Sarah stops at the edge of the water forcing Richard to half carry and drag her along the sand. They lie near the waters edge too exhausted to make their way any further up the beach. They are literally panting, struggling to catch their breath, and they are lying very close to one another.

“Any chance, this is your island?” Richard asked. Sarah can barely shake her head no as she spit out some water.

“Damn, too bad! You know we really got to complain to the travel agency about this crappy Bali vacation,” Richard said as he gasps for air.

They are both soaked and Sarah’s white shirt and bra are literally transparent on her. A few minutes pass and Richard finally catches his breath, but he can’t help but stare at her breasts. The cold water and exertion have made them quite pronounced, while her dark nipples were totally erect. After struggling up the beach and collapsing next to Sarah, Richard’s head is only a few inches away from her breasts. Normally, Richard would be discrete in his voyeurism, but this time he was too tired to turn his head away. He always wondered about Sarah’s breasts and

with all of the advances in undergarments plus the surgical enhancements, you never knew what was real anymore. In fact, they were so good nowadays; you could create the illusion of breasts even on a Keira Knightley. Sarah always kept herself covered up but now ‘the twins’ were out in the open in all their glory.

“Damn it, I knew it, she had a good pair and they are real, original equipment just like she said!” Richard thought as he took in the magnificent sight.

Sarah finally catches her breathe, and her entire body is shivering, but she manages the strength to start to talk. Initially, she can only utter just a few squeaks but then she starts to say “I want to thank you for...,” when she catches Richard staring at her breasts and not at her face.

Her face contorts in what Richard originally thought was amusement, but as her face reddens he quickly realizes it is anger. “Gad, you know, you are such a dickhead! I wanted to thank you and ugh...”

Sarah struggles to catch her breath, and then continues her scolding. “You asshole, we nearly get killed, and you’re staring at my tits?”

Richard said, “Sorry, I can’t help it,” and he turned his eyes away. “You know, I prefer to call them breasts and they were right there in front of me, and you know they are quite nice.”

“Ugh, cretin...,” she cried again.

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry, don’t you know all men are hard-wired to be assholes?” he said with a small smile. “Besides, don’t I deserve a pass, you know with that whole water episode?” However, Sarah’s anger is unabated and she is angrily sitting up and moving away from him. She is not buying his ‘men are assholes’ story this time and she certainly wasn’t giving him a pass.

“I see you got your strength back,” Richard said.

Sarah is not amused, and Richard is clearly flustered. It is now Richard's turn to redden, and as he mutters a sorry, he changes his mind and gets up mad. "You know, you are such a freaking tight ass!" A torrent of curses emerges from his mouth, but they are muttered just low enough so that Sarah can't overhear them.

As he storms away, Sarah lies down on the beach exhausted with her back to the sand. The imminent danger of the moment had created a heavy adrenaline flow within her body and now she is struggling to recover from her exhaustion. Still, her mind finds some moments of clarity, and she begins to chuckle to herself about the absurdity of the past moment with Richard. She takes the time to pull her wet shirt from her breasts, and she feels a sudden exhilaration that she survived a brush with death. A few minutes pass, and the exhaustion returns and she feels her mood sour once again.

Sarah knew she wasn't mad at Richard because of his staring antics; she had seen enough hungry stares from males during her life so as not to even give it much of a second thought. She couldn't count how many slobbs had given her the modern day equivalent of a wolf whistle by tooting their horns at her when she walked alone on the street. Moreover, she certainly didn't need them or Richard to validate her attractiveness.

Then it hit her as to why she was so angry with him. "Damn it, I nearly died today and that idiot saved me!" she said aloud to herself. She finally realized how conflicted she felt about Richard, how he had gotten her into this mess to begin with, and how he had kept her moving in the middle of that vast, empty ocean. What did he say to her? Something about 'you mean too much to me?' It was the good, the bad and the ugly, all rolled into one cretinous persona, namely Richard Staller and she owed him big time!

Sarah turns on her side, and reflects on her life, all the time watching Richard going about his antics. So this was her hero, huh, her so-called knight in swiney armor? Wasn't he the very

same slob that was staring at her tits a few minutes ago? Really, it was one thing to have a sad, uncertain destiny but did she have to be ridiculed along the way? Not only did her life continuously disappoint her, it continued to do so in the most outlandish manner. As he continued to storm off and mutter curses in the distance, Sarah decides to rename him “Dick”.

Richard continued to mumble a few curses under his breath, and he was moving quickly away from Sarah. “How does that girl go from being in a nearly catatonic state to an erupting volcano in less than ten seconds?” He quickly came to the realization that they pair wouldn’t be doing an erotic remake of “Swept Away” anytime soon on the island.

As he walked about, Richard discovered one positive find on the beach. The island they were stranded on may have been small and uninhabited, but like so many of the islands in Indonesia, there were plenty of coconut trees freely growing on the island. In fact, there were enough coconuts lying on the beach to keep them going for a few weeks that is before a bad case of diarrhea would begin to afflict them. Other than having coconut juice in his Pina Coladas, Richard had little taste for coconuts. “There goes my damn cholesterol,” he thought to himself. All he needed was a sharp object or a large stone to crack them open and the drinking and eating could begin. With a little luck, maybe he would find a case of rum!

Richard spotted some litter on the beach, and made his way to a large unsavory pile of debris. The tide was tired of carrying the garbage for thousands of miles and deposited the garbage a hundred yards inland. As he rummaged through the disgusting pile of garbage at the rack line, he noted the usual mix of wood, paper and plastic bottles. Filthy, disgusting civilization was spoiling even a remote tropical island like this.

This time, though, this disgusting, dirty secret of civilization never looked so beautiful to Richard. There had to be something useful in the pile of debris. A recent storm had pushed the debris higher than usual on the beach, and for weeks, the unmerciful tropical sun had taken its

toll on the debris. The paper, much of it printed with Chinese characters, was bleached and dry from weeks of exposure to the torrid sun. As he picked up the paper, dozens of small sand fleas scurried away from the paper and the paper crumbled easily in his hands. A few yards further down, a broken wood skid lied buried in the sand, and that looked like a particularly promising find to him.

Sarah sat by herself, and soon grew tired of watching the boy and his antics. She found the strength within herself to stand, and she began to walk along the beach away from Richard. As she looked out to the sea, the glare of sun reflected from the waves causing her to squint. The water was a brilliant crystal blue, and the cloudless sky offered no protection from the sun. She felt the water drying off her skin, and the salt remained as a lingering white residue of her recent ordeal. She felt thirsty and tired from and wished with all her might that she was back home in the states with her old boring life. After this mess, she realized that boredom was seriously underrated.

“Great, I’m stuck on this island with that cretin that knows nothing about women,” she thought to herself. A torrent of thoughts and emotions continued to rage within her.

“Did that idiot really think I was going to make mad love to him on the beach after that arduous swim? He is such a boy, didn’t he know that men have sex to relax but women preferred to be relaxed before having sex? And that brush with death wasn’t exactly relaxing!” Damn, she could use a drink to calm her nerves right now.

She remembered that smile of his in the middle of the ocean that he continuously flashed at her. “Damn reassuring,” she thought to herself as she shook her head. “How the hell did I allow myself to get involved in this harebrained scheme with him in the first place?” she questioned herself again and again.

“I’m way too smart for this bullshit,” she aloud.

Sarah surveyed the horizon while spotting the occasional gull slowly circling above the beach. She squatted down to give her back a rest from standing. As she did, a stiff breeze started to blow, and the sand danced above the beach. She felt the sand bite into her face, and then several sand grains made their way into her eyes. They stung her eyes and they began to water immediately. She stood up to get away from the swirling sand, and rubbed her eyes to remove the irritants. After she stopped rubbing her eyes, they slowly began to focus, and she noticed a dark dot off in the distance of the ocean. There was a glare on the dot, perhaps the sunlight off a reflective surface, perhaps a window or some metal on a small boat. She watched the dot for a while. It moved slowly in the distance, but not necessarily closer to the island. Sarah instinctively knew this had to be a small boat, perhaps a local fisherman. Sarah called out to the boy, "Hey Dick, look!" as she pointed out to the vastness of the ocean.

"Dick? Ah, that's nice a new term of endearment," Richard thought to himself.

Following Sarah's hand, Richard looked out to the horizon and, he too, saw the small boat.

"Can we get a fire going?" Sarah asked.

Richard smiled and took a small metal container from his pants. Inside the waterproof container, he removed five wooden matches. Richard ran back to the rack line, and gathered the abundant debris and garbage of a thoughtless, wasteful civilization. "Beautiful, filthy garbage," he shouted, once the bane of his existence and now it was worth its weight in gold to him! Richard broke up the battered wood skid, and stacked the wood together into a sizable heap. He gathered a stack of the dry weathered paper, and added small pieces of kindling to the pile.

While on his knees, Richard struck the first match, and the ocean breeze blew it out instantly. He struck a second match, and tried to cup it with his hands to protect against the wind. Again, the match blew out in the strong breeze. He was about to strike the third match, when Sarah grabbed his hand, and stopped him from striking the match.

“Damn runner, you have never smoked cigarettes before have you?” Sarah asked him.

Richard shakes his head no.

“Just wait a minute will ya?” as she took the matches from him. Sarah tried cupping the match with her hands, but the wind is too strong and the match fails again. “Shit!” Sarah said as Richard tries to recall if he ever heard Sarah curse before, well that is, other than at him.

“I’ve got an idea.” She positions herself between him and the wind with her back to the wind. Sarah squats down while undoing the buttons of her shirt, and then she begins to open her shirt.

“I don’t think we have time for this now,” Richard said.

“Quiet, Dick.” Sarah unbuttoned the shirt entirely, and held the shirt opened with both hands. The shirt was working as a windbreak against the ocean breeze.

“Get it lit, and your name is back to Richard,” she said. Richard smiled at her while looking up at her breasts again as they strained against the white bra.

“Concentrate boy and I mean on the match!” Sarah scolded him, but this time with a small smile on her face.

Sarah’s impromptu windbreak flapped and held against the wind while the match stayed lit for Richard. The paper caught the flame and, in short order, the kindling wood caught as well. Soon the pile of debris was burning at a fierce rate creating a thick, black smoke against the blue tropical sky.

“Sarah, you are a genius, and somewhat of an exhibitionist after all!” Richard gushed while giving her a small hug. Sarah was so happy at their possible rescue she didn’t bother to push him away until she began buttoning her shirt.

“You know we might have time for a quickie!” he said.

Sarah gave him a dirty look and Richard replied, “Yeah, right, bad idea.”

Two local fishermen on the boat spotted the smoke along the beach, and slowly made their way to the island through the breaking waves. The two fishermen spoke no English, but they quickly understood the meaning of the mangled Bahasa words “terima kasih” that the two stranded Americans repeated over and over again.

Resolve

Upon their return to Flores, a distraught Sarah was not sure if she wanted to continue with the expedition. The brush with death left Sarah feeling cold, and her enthusiasm for pursuing her dream was diminishing with each additional day they spend in Flores. Furthermore, they lost all of their equipment, and have very little money remaining between the pair. Even the return home would require a visit to the American Embassy, and for them to beg for some type of assistance. Moreover, the betrayal by Supar had left her faith badly shaken. Prior to their run in with the pirates, Sarah had felt that Supar was the one person in Flores she could trust with her life. She now knew where the stolen equipment from the last expedition had gone and the nasty faces of the pirate crew haunted her at night. Sarah was feeling very alone again, and depression was settling in with the realization that her life savings had vanished with little to show for her investment. And, to add a final insult to injury, she had lost the GPS coordinates to her Irmã Flores as well.

For several days, Richard watched Sarah slowly sink into her small ball of misery hoping she would come out of it on her own. After two days he finally decided to intervene.

“Sarah, what do you want to do?” he asked.

“I want to go home and get away from this horrid island,” she said.

Richard debates his options, and going to the authorities just did not seem to be a viable alternative. He felt it was best if he tracked Supar down and confront Supar personally about his

treachery with the two Americans. In doing so, he was hoping he could force Supar to make good on their stolen equipment and money.

“Before we make any hasty decisions give me a chance to make this right. You stay at the hotel; I’ll be back in a few hours.”

“Where are you going?” Sarah asked.

“It’s time to look up an old acquaintance,” Richard said.

Richard arrived at the brother’s shop and waited outside for Supar to appear while trying to be as inconspicuous as possible that is for a westerner. Hours later, Supar entered the shop, but as he stepped into the small doorway, he spotted Richard lurking outside in the shadows. Supar decided to make a run for it through the back of the shop and into a back alleyway.

“Big mistake, Supar!” Richard yelled. Richard is fast, and within a few minutes, his long strides allow him to catch up to Supar. Supar doesn’t put up much of a struggle when Richard grabs him, and Richard pins the smaller man against a wall.

Richard is visibly angry and is shouting at Supar, “Why the hell did you set us up, Supar?”

There is no answer. A frustrated Richard begins to lose control and he violently shakes Supar but as Richard relaxed his grip, a composed Supar grabs both of Richard’s wrists and forces them back on the taller man. Soon the smaller man has Richard in a painful submission hold. Supar holds him for a while, and yells at the struggling Richard, “Are you going to listen to me or do I have to break wrists? You choose!” Supar yells.

“All right, all right, I give, fuck...” Richard yells and Supar relinquishes his grip on Richard’s wrists. Richard wanted to take an impulsive swing at the native but his damn arms hurt too much.

Several bystanders noted the drama and stopped to watch. Supar glares at them and motions them away with his hands.

“Damn that hurts, you bastard. What the hell gives? Why did you set us up like that you schmuck?”

Supar struggled to regain his breath. “I’ve been working with those thieves for four years now. They’ve been robbing westerners for a while now, and they have been very ugly in the past. Now, I promise to deliver them westerners, and they promise just to rob them and not kill them. I did try to talk Sarah out of this but she wouldn’t listen. Any westerner becomes a big target when they arrive here. So far, it has been a good business deal up to this point. You were in no danger; I had my people ready to pick you out of the water. We make money, and you get to keep your life! It’s a fair deal, better than some of the other choices.”

“Fair deal? Asshole, what’s going to stop me from turning you into the local police?” Richard asked.

Without blinking Supar answers, “Why? Because, at some point, you’re going to have to explain to the authorities why you were putting together an expedition without their okay? I mean that is why you hired me, right? Once my friends get word of your rescue, you will find yourself not welcomed on this island anymore. They will kill you. I can promise you that your equipment and money are long gone.”

Richard looks down and is thoroughly dejected. A few moments pass, and Richard sits on the ground, hands in his hair while mulling his options.

Supar said, “Look, I’ve been thinking about this for a while. I’ll make it up to you. I’ll take you back to the island, and help you find whatever it is you’re looking for. I’ll give you two weeks on that island. That should be more than enough time to scour every cave and tree on Sarah’s island.”

“Why the hell would you help us after you set us up?” Richard asked.

The expression on Supar’s impassive face immediately flushed with concern. “Because I like Sarah, that’s why. She has a good spirit about her. Dropping the two of you in the ocean made me sick, but if I didn’t go through with the deal, the three of us would have been floating dead in the water. You know, I’ve got to change my Karma in this lifetime, or else it’s going to be a rough go for me the next time around,” Supar said.

This half-assed spirituality wasn’t sitting too well with Richard, but he was quickly running out of any real options.

Supar continues, “I remember the location of the island to this day. I even marked it on my chart. It took us a while to find her, and when we left that island, Sarah had a kind of scared look about her. She didn’t talk, and she was quiet the boat ride back. That’s not like her, she always talked to me. What did she see in jungle? Did she see the Ebu?” Supar asked.

“That’s our concern,” Richard said. Richard was trying to figure out how much Supar knew about the Ebu. “And, I don’t know how much she is going to like you anymore. When are you proposing we get started?” Richard asked.

“Give me two days to put together the stuff. We can’t go out of Ende. My pirate friends watch that port for new business like hawks. We need a different port on Flores to go out of so that my friends don’t catch on to what we are doing. If they saw me with you, I’m dead, and so is my family,” Supar said.

“You got any equipment?” Richard asked.

“I know what you are going to need for food, water and a basic expedition. We have to be more careful this time. Oh, how does a HD video camera sound to you?” Supar said with a smile on his face. Richard knew it was his brother’s camera and guessed that was Supar’s share of the bounty.

“You’ll hear from me by the end of tomorrow regarding when, and where. I’ll find you. I give you my word, memberi harapan,” Supar said.

Richard walked back to the hotel with his mind racing all over the place. The words “memberi harapan” played repeatedly in his head. How much is the word of a pirate actually worth Richard wondered in the grand scale of life? More than a politician’s but less than a lawyer’s? Initially, Richard was worried that Supar was setting another trap for them but why bother with the charade of putting together another expedition? Supar had quickly gotten the upper hand on Richard, and if he wanted to, he could have killed Richard with little fear of reprisal. They didn’t have anything else to steal, and Richard could tell that Supar was very genuinely protective of Sarah. That was clear from the incident on the boat. Perhaps, Supar wanted the Ebu for himself or for his associates. If so, why not go to the island in the first place and then rob them? What the hell would they do with the Ebu anyway? Could Richard take Supar at his word and then again, would Sarah? His mind raced with the possibilities and permutations of a thousand questions and found nary a single answer in sight.

Upon his return, Richard told Sarah about the confrontation with Supar. As the story unfolded, the look in Sarah’s face quickly changed from horror to repulsion. When he told her that Supar was going to make it up to them, Sarah kept saying, “We can’t trust him, I can’t trust anybody now. Richard, we don’t even have the fare to get back home, even if we wanted to leave.” Supar’s single act of treachery had turned an ambivalent world for Sarah into a decidedly hostile one for her.

“Sarah, you can trust me,” Richard said.

They were trapped in a very strange world, and they knew that they had far too few viable options. Sarah had tears in her eyes and she was visibly shaken by Richard's reunion with Supar.

"Richard, I don't know what to do. You make the decision for us. I just wish I never came to this horrid place."

Richard hesitated. "I know how you feel, Sarah," and for the first time he felt terrible for her. It just wasn't like Sarah not to take charge, or to at least offer a strong opinion to him. However, the two weeks in Flores had taken its toll, and the loss of everything was weighing heavily on the pair. He put his arm around her and held her by his side for a moment. "Look, just think about it and sleep on it. I'll see you first thing in the morning. We'll do whatever you want," and he left her room.

It was only afterwards that Richard realized he missed an opportunity to have "comfort sex" with Sarah. In the past, comforting a distraught young lady would be a sure invite to bed. A few soft words and a hand around her shoulder followed with a few quick kisses and the next thing you knew she was on her back moaning your name. Now, he wasn't quite sure what was more pitiful: the sobbing girls or the fact this had become a preferred mating strategy of his?

The weird thing was that this time he actually felt so much for Sarah it never entered his mind. For some strange reason, Richard was feeling very protective of her and he was a little unsteady in playing his new role. Maybe saving her life had given him some sort of vested interest in her continued happiness, he didn't know. Whatever, he was aware that this new role had greatly diminished his own personal anxiety. With somebody else to worry about, Richard's own issues were clearly on the back burner, and the need for a daily drink had virtually disappeared.

He began a review of his usual Sarah pros and cons checklist. Okay, on the plus side, she was pretty with a nice figure and she was very intelligent but she was also a stubborn cuss, and she could be the biggest pain in the ass. Moreover, her sense of humor was still pretty much MIA and you would think she was a freaking Ferrari with her high maintenance requirements. It didn't take genius to figure out that she was entirely the wrong woman for him, but the continuous sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach told him otherwise. Normally, Richard approached life on his own solitary terms, and he made it a point to never carry too much baggage in terms of personal entanglements. Now, all of Richard's thoughts and concerns were suddenly focused on Sarah. What a kick in the head!

Sleep did not come easily to Richard that night. The humidity hung like a thick mist in the air, and the feeble hotel fan provided more noise than relief. As he tossed and turned, Richard soon found himself lying in a small pool of his own sweat. No matter where he turned in the bed, he found damp linens waiting to embrace him. To add to his frustration, his disturbing thoughts and feelings followed him like rambunctious monkeys up and down a fruit tree. As he put one thought to rest, it was replaced by another notion with even more disturbing imagery.

As he reflected on his life, it just seemed that everything he touched in his life would inevitably turn to shit, and this whole Flores fiasco was no different when compared with his usual body of work. As the night labored on, Richard did come to the realization that only two things now mattered to him. One, he didn't want to go home in defeat and, two, something that was actually very surprising to him, he found himself not wanting to be separated from Sarah. Her tears were working on him, and he was having trouble coming to terms with his true feelings for her. No matter what, Richard would keep this adventure going for the two of them; all the time wondering could it possibly get much worse? The decision was simple for Richard; he

didn't want to go home, and have Sarah give up on him. They would go to Irmã Flores with Supar. "It had to be the right decision right?" or so he wondered, as he lay awake in his clammy room.

The following morning, Sarah reluctantly agreed with Richard's decision to go back to Irmã Flores. Sarah just couldn't make a decision on her own, and she decided in lieu of her own leadership vacuum to follow Richard's lead. All of their options were equally bad, and she found herself looking to Richard for direction. Richard was actually saddened by Sarah's sullen behavior; it wasn't like Sarah to defer to anybody, especially him. In a strange way, he found himself missing the old feisty and combative Sarah.

Later that afternoon, a small, skinny native boy approached Sarah as she was sitting outside the hotel, and gave her a note without saying a word. As Sarah took the note, the boy scampered off into the crowd. True to his word, Supar had sent them a note regarding when and where to meet. There wasn't much for them to carry since most of their clothing and equipment was now gone. Fortunately, Sarah still had a functional credit card, and they bought what provisions they could. Mid-way through the afternoon, the card was tapped out between their shopping spree, and a small cash advance. With their card now defunct, they decided to sneak away from the hotel in the morning, in order to avoid paying their bill. To do so, they concealed their clothing in an alley so that they could make a discreet exit from the hotel, like any proper deadbeat. Richard spent most of the day reassuring Sarah that everything was going to work out. It was funny, but in Sarah's distraught state, she was taking Richard's newfound sensitivity for granted.

The following day, they took a bus out of Endes and headed for the port town of Maumere. The old bus was slow and crowded with both people and livestock while taking forever to wind its way across the island to their final destination. After their arrival at

Maumere, they went to a small shopping market that Supar had written about in the note. They walked about for fifteen minutes, milling about numerous shops before Supar spotted them. Richard greeted Supar, but Sarah gives Supar a frosty look of death as the three headed to the dock together. Supar talked the entire time, initially apologizing to Sarah, and saying how he would make it up to them.

Sarah looked at Supar straight on and in a very cold voice asked him, “Should I have packed my swimsuit for this next trip?”

“You got nothing that I or the crew would want this time,” Supar said.

“Well, how reassuring for Richard and myself,” Sarah replied in a formal manner.

Supar shows them to his brother’s old, battered boat and throughout the day, he arranges for the loading of supplies and equipment. This time, Sarah steps aside and let’s Richard handle the details regarding the packing of the boat since she wanted nothing to do with Supar. As with the previous packing, the same two small boys assist with the loading of the boat. By mid-day, the two boys take a break and eat their lunch. As if on cue, a small food fight breaks out between the boys and they playfully throw rice and chicken at one another yet again. Supar spots the boys antics and he vents his anger on them. He starts yelling at them to stop and again reminds them to have respect for the animals and plants that gives them sustenance. The entire time, Richard and Sarah are watching Supar with the small boys.

“You know, that’s a funny commentary coming from a man whose business associates are pirates,” Richard said to Sarah. Sarah just shakes her head at the peculiar turn of events and wonders what absurdity will happen next.

Beside the two boys, Supar has enlisted the help of his younger brother Rudy to assist in the packing of the boat. Immediately, Sarah and Richard recognize Rudy as one of the fisherman that rescued them from the island. In a sense, this is a relief to the pair because at least part of

Supar's story is borne out. Still, Sarah refuses to talk to Supar, and she goes out of her way to avoid making any eye contact with him.

It will take a couple of days to pack and ready the boat for their second trip. That night, Richard and Sarah sleep in a local shop, and the two spend the night tossing uncomfortably in their sleeping bags as they try to cope with the heat of the tropical night. Richard tries to reassure her, but Sarah coldly ignores his words and small touches. In the darkness, the pair grows silent and each is left to their own thoughts and a long troubled sleep.

The following day the packing of the boat is completed. There is far less to pack this time, since their trip is scheduled to last just two weeks with a crew that only consists of the two Americans, Supar and Rudy. As the boat departed the dock, there is no crowd or fanfare to accompany them, which greatly pleased Richard. As they get further out, Richard was even more pleased not to see any pursuers in the distant horizon.

The boat trip to Sarah's island would take the better part of a day from this northern port, and they are fortunate, once again, to have good weather and relatively smooth, ocean waters. A weird feeling of déjà vu fills Richard and Sarah with a sense of dread, and for a good half hour, the crew aboard the boat was eerily silent. Nobody dared to speak among the small crew other than Richard interjecting an occasional navigational question for Supar.

Sarah is sitting apart from the crew and is averting her eyes from making contact with Supar. After a half hour of monotonous boat travel, Sarah finally breaks her silence.

"Supar, could you come over here to discuss something?" as she turns to face the smaller man. Supar breathed a sigh of relief that Sarah is finally speaking to him. As Supar approached Sarah, she stared intently at the small man, and as she stands up, she lets loose with a slap that catches Supar off guard. She hits him soundly on the side of his face, and with the sound of the

impact, Richard turns around to have a look. The small man falls backward from the attack with his face contorted in obvious pain.

Sarah yells at him, “You bastard, how could you do that to us? How could you betray my trust in you?”

Richard was about to intervene, but he decided instead to allow Sarah the opportunity to vent her considerable anger. Once again, the ferocity of the small woman took Richard by surprise, but at least she wasn’t yelling at him this time.

Supar hung his head down not knowing what to say. He shook his head saying, “I know, I know. There was little I could do. I tried to stop you from going. I’ll make it up to you. I have to, I’m so sorry, Sarah.”

Sarah then asked the critical question, “Do you remember where the damn island is?”

Supar grabbed his charts and points to an island with a circle about it. As Sarah moved toward the charts, Supar takes a step back.

“Stop being a baby Supar, we are even...for today, that is,” Sarah said. “Now where is it?”

“Sarah, I marked it down that day. I never had a chance to ask you what you saw that day but I knew it was something important. The way you acted, not talking like you did today, told me something bad happened to you while you were alone in the forest,” Supar said.

“Supar, take us to the same beach where we grounded the boat during the gale,” Sarah said. Then the storm passed as quickly as it erupted, and Sarah quickly steps away from Supar to sit by herself on the other side of the boat.

Richard approaches Supar with a big grin on his face. “Well, look at it this way Supar; at least she is talking to you again.”

Supar is shaking his head from Sarah's onslaught. "I never knew American women could be that scary."

"Tell me about it brother, there's an entire country filled with 'Sarahs'. But hey, Supar, better you than me, that's all I can say," Richard said.

Supar is still rubbing his face. "I think she would fit in well with Sukarno's crew. Still, I deserved it. Sarah remains to me a very special person."

"Yeah, you're right Supar, she is special all right. Then there other times when I just think she's crazy. Yeah, I go back and forth on that one quite a bit," Richard said.

"Are you two together?"

"Huh? Oh, you mean romantically? No, just colleagues and, I guess, friends, thank God."

"Don't worry, you will soon be together. I'm a good judge of these things. I see how she looks at you."

"I'm not finding that very reassuring, Supar and if you are such a 'good judge of these things' why didn't you know she was going to slap you in the first place?"

"I did know but it didn't matter to me. She had every right to slap me. Still, it was a bit harder than I thought," Supar said.

Richard chuckles to himself and looks at the forlorn Sarah sitting quietly by herself.

"Well, at least she is quiet for now! You know, it's good to have the old Sarah back," Richard said.

The trip took the better part of the day and as they approached Supar's coordinates, they spotted a small, isolated island that stood tall over the horizon. Sarah was sitting by herself at the stern, completely oblivious to the island, when Richard shouted to get her attention.

“Sarah, take a look. Amazing, that peak has to be a good three or four thousand feet above the rest of the island,” Richard said. As Sarah glanced at the island, she was about to protest that they had arrived at the wrong island. At the center of the island was large volcanic peak that towered over the surrounding landscape, its top shrouded in a veil of heavy, white clouds. On the approach to the peak, they could see a series of several small, undulating hills covered in a lush green forest.

As she continued to look, the shoreline had a haunting familiarity to it and Sarah just nodded a weak affirmative to Richard. The only explanation for missing such a spectacular landmark had to be the inclement weather that day she thought to herself.

The island itself was only a few miles across with most of it consisting of the core volcano. Supar suggested circling the island to get a full survey but the team quickly nixed that idea, since daylight was rapidly fading. Instead, Sarah decided that they should make their way to the original landing spot, immediately. As they moved closer to the small bay, the tree line was all too familiar to Sarah. She always regretted not taking her camera that day, but this landscape was forever etched in her memory.

“Yes, yes,” Sarah said as she looked up at the shoreline. Sarah felt a chill as the boat landed, and she began wondering why she ever agreed to return to this island. She looked up at Richard and with a weak smile said, “Yes, this is it, this is my nightmare.”

Richard looked at her, and tried to talk to her above the roar of the engine. “It’s really too small to be on anybody’s hit list to explore. That’s a good thing. Hey, we’re almost there girl! Damn it, we’re finally here,” he said.

He smiled back at Sarah and she felt a quick lift to her spirits. Then as she thought about it, the renewed confidence actually began to bother her! The past few days were like a blur to her and she had relied heavily on Richard to keep her and the expedition moving. She never

needed anyone before so why did she suddenly need a cretin like Richard? “What the hell is this all about?” she thought to herself.

The team decided to create a base camp on the beach to guarantee a clear line of sight, just in case Sarah was right about not being alone on the island. For Richard, it wasn't a question of worrying about the Ebu. Richard was concerned that there could be some archaic human tribes on island or, worse yet, some criminal types, like the pirates, using the island as a home base for their operations. They quickly unloaded the boat and pitched their tents, judiciously making use of their remaining hours of daylight. Supar and Rudy grab a two-way radio to do a quick recon trip through the woods, just to make sure there were no locals in their immediate vicinity.

They were back to the camp after a half hour with little to report. With little else to do, Sarah was fidgeting and getting a little concerned about her privacy when going to the bathroom. “I have to go,” she said.

Richard points to the woods and announces, “So go, there's no waiting. Do you need a body guard?” he said with a smirk.

Sarah was torn between the imagined dangers that lurked in the darkening woods, and the leering jerks that occupied the camp. Sarah didn't respond while she pondered her options.

“Look, Sarah, just take one of the two-way radios with you, just in case. Just don't go too far, okay?” Richard asked.

Sarah agrees, thinking it would give her a measure of security in the dense woods. Sarah tentatively walks into the darkening woods looking for a spot while listening intently to the sounds of the jungle. As she listens, the sounds of the animals in woods have resumed their usual sing-song chorus, and Sarah quickly gets accustomed to their rhythm. At first, she is afraid but no murmuring is filling the air, and Sarah reassures herself that nobody is watching her this

time. As she settles into a good spot, she begins to lower her shorts and panties. “No, problem, I can do this,” she said to herself. An eerie silence settles in and Sarah concentrates on the matter at hand.

Then she heard something, a loud clicking noise, followed by a terrifying bloody scream that roars next to her in the bushes. “What the hell?” she yells.

“Awkkkkkkkkkkkkkk!”

In a panic, Sarah falls backwards into the bush, and struggles to regain her balance with her shorts down around her ankles. In a moment, she realizes that it is Richard on the two-way radio screaming an incoherent message out to her. The men at the camp can hear Sarah thrashing around in the brushes, and they are roaring at Richard’s stupid prank.

When she returns to camp, the three men get very quiet as if they were schoolboys caught doing a prank. Sarah’s angry face is about to explode and she attacks Richard with a series of furious blows and kicks.

“Cretin! You’re back to Dick head! Damn it; show me a little respect, will you? When the hell are you going to start acting like a professional instead of an immature brat?”

Sarah turns her steely gaze to Supar and yells, “You are still on my shit list!” Sarah retires to her tent, and the men walk away from the camp in an effort to stop from laughing.

The following morning, they break up into two teams to begin their search of the island. Sarah is still barely talking to anybody so Richard takes over the lead. During breakfast, Richard outlines for Supar what they are looking for. “The most important thing, is there any human or other presence on this island? We want to know if there is anybody else on this island. Footprints along trails would be a big sign, and be careful to note their size. And, yes, Supar, as you guessed, we are here for the Ebu Gogo. As you know, the Ebu are supposedly a small people and the males, could be at most, three and a half feet tall, while weighing sixty, seventy or

so pounds. Also, finding the remains of a fire is another big possibility. If you find a campfire or pit, that is a huge find. In addition, stone tools that would be a big telltale sign for the presence of a Homo erectus descendant. Tools would include spear points, cutting knives, cutting stones and arrowheads. Just watch out for any irregularly shaped rocks. There might also be the remains of a meal as well.”

Richard looks at the guides, and they are intently listening to his every word as Supar translates for his brother. Sarah, instead, is off to the side making faces and mimicking Richard as he speaks. “Damn, I’ve been a bad influence on that girl,” Richard thinks to himself.

Undeterred by Sarah antics, Richard continues his physical anthropology 101 course with the guides. “Be on the look out for the remains of any human. Pieces of teeth and jaws are very common but skulls and long bones are a rare find. And if you do make the big find, that is you find any live people of whatever species, do not approach, I repeat, do not approach them. Once we find them, then Sarah takes over,” Richard said. Sarah gives Richard a frosty look at the mention of her name.

The entire time, Supar is translating Richard’s dialog to his brother. “Oh yeah, don’t forget to look for feces as well,” Richard said. The two men look at Richard not quite comprehending what he is saying.

“Feces, you know, shit!” Richard said.

“Oh, yes, tinja, berak! Shit!” the two guides say with a nodding of their heads.

Supar gives Richard a quizzical look. “How do we tell Ebu shit from other shit?” Supar asked.

Richard just shakes his head. “Are you for real? I don’t know guys. I guess they’re smaller. Use your best judgment guys, that’s all I can say. You know, this isn’t rocket science.” Sarah is smirking at Richard at this point and doing her best not to laugh at him.

Richard decides to change the topic and draws up a map of the island in the sand with a large peak near its middle. As far as Richard could tell, the volcano was now dormant. Richard spotted some characteristic volcanic rocks such as obsidian mixed in the coral sands that indicate that it once was active, but he can only guess as to how long ago. These very same volcanic sands gave the island's beaches their distinguishing dark color.

Richard's plan called for Supar and Rudy to head to the flatter lands in a westerly part of the island to begin their search. In turn, Richard and Sarah would search the hills that lie below the central peak of the island. Richard is hoping that the hills may feature a cave complex or two that could provide the inhabitants of the island with shelter. Each team is equipped with a two-way radio and provisions for the day. "Give us updates on the hour, and we'll meet you back here before dusk. Remember, there is no reason to rush. Take your time and look carefully. Oh, yeah. Watch out for any Komodos, you never know. Early in the morning, they are somewhat sluggish, and you could literally fall right over the dumb shits.

"Shits?" Rudy asked Supar.

"Oh no, we're not going down this road again guys. If you find anything just call us right away, okay? Sarah, anything to add?" Richard asked reluctantly.

Sarah looked up at the two guides and started talking. "As you walk, keep your talking down to a minimum. If you listen carefully, you might hear the same murmuring voices I originally heard and keep in mind there was more than one voice. That's all, other than that; the entire lot of you can go straight to hell!"

Supar is busily translating for Rudy as Richard shakes his head. For a few moments, there is stunned silence among the small team.

"Okay then, thanks for that fine inspirational speech, Sarah. On that upbeat note I guess we're off in search of critters," Richard said.

Discovery

Richard and Sarah take off together, and try to retrace Sarah's original stop in the woods from two years ago. The only problem was they couldn't find her original location from her previous visit. Sarah frantically went up and down the edge of the beach a hundred yards in either direction, but nothing looked familiar to her. Two years of growth and tropical storms had irrevocably changed the forest's edge from Sarah's original visit. After thirty minutes of watching a frustrated Sarah pace up and down the tree line, Richard tells her that they should move on directly to the hills and she reluctantly agrees.

As they are walking, Richard begins a hesitant apology for his recent behavior. "Sarah, about that staring bit on the beach, it was just a stupid male visual thing but when you think about aren't we all slaves to visual cues and desires? I mean look at the males in any society where the women have choice in mates. We have to cut our beards on a daily basis, hell I'm shaving everyday on a tropical island because of your presence. And that incident with the radio, well I was just trying to break the tension..."

Sarah immediately stops the halting apology. "Sorry Richard, but over the years I have learned to immediately discount any apology that contains a "but" in it, okay? Moreover, I have little interest in listening to an erudite argument from you about the root causes of your stupidity. As for your shaving please don't do anything special for me. Let's face it, nothing is going to change my opinion about you nor will it exonerate you from your blatant chauvinistic tendencies

as far as I'm concerned, so please just leave it alone. I'm in a good place right now so don't spoil it for me, okay?"

After Sarah's comments the pair grows silent. In the beginning, their walk is fairly easy, but as they clear the beach area the underbrush grows thicker, and there are no discernible trails. Richard takes the lead as he tries to hack his way through the vegetation. The going becomes increasingly difficult, and Sarah is getting impatient with their progress. She takes the lead, and instead of hacking through the brush, she winds her way from spot to spot. The noises of the birds and insects is almost deafening as they move along. Every time they move a few yards, the immediate animals in their vicinity grow quiet, while the others in the distance pick up the continuous roar. After moving several hundred yards, they see what appears to be an opening in the woods. As they move closer, they can see large areas of barren sand that clearly mark a trail as it meanders through the woods.

"This is peculiar. There are no large mammals on this island, are there? Where did this trail come from? I don't see any tracks?" Richard asked.

Sarah is looking at the trail. "I have no idea why this trail is here, unless..." she said hanging on the word as if to tantalize Richard. As they stop talking, the jungle noises engulf the two again.

The two-way radio cracks with the sound of Supar calling in. "Nothing so far, boss. The vegetation is very thick here. You find anything?"

"Yeah, we did we found a trail! I never even considered finding a trail on this island," Richard said.

Supar asked, "That's good, right?"

Sarah yells, "All depends on who made it," as she walks ahead. "Let's keep going, Richard."

The only markings on the trail as they walk are that of some small lizards and birds. As they continue, Sarah points to a different print in the sand. It's a rodent marking, but it's large, almost three to four inches long. As they follow the prints, they hear a thrashing sound off to the side of the trail. They both get quickly become quiet, and haunch down to conceal themselves. Someone or something is thrashing wildly about the vegetation. In unison, they slowly move closer to the direction of the sound, using hand signals to communicate to one another. The thrashing grows louder, and a shower of vegetation is torn and thrown into the air. Over the brush, they see a large komodo with its mouth firmly clamped on the carcass of some unfortunate animal. It was violently throwing carcass about as another smaller komodo tries to get a mouthful. Sarah and Richard watch for a few minutes and they both decide it is best to leave the two Komodos to their catch. As they depart, Richard calls Supar to warn him about the presence of Komodos on the island.

They continue to go further on the trail for a few minutes, and Richard spots something of interest along the trail. A piece of irregular shaped rock catches his attention. He picks the rock up and examines it for a few minutes carefully reviewing its edges.

"It's chert, Sarah. You know flint but not necessarily a tool. It's a flake from a larger rock, it could be natural, but it could also be man made, kinda of hard to tell." After Sarah inspects the rock, Richard puts it into his backpack and marks the location. "Damn, I wish we still had that GPS device," Richard said.

They continue to walk along the trail in a methodical manner. Neither is talking, but each one is carefully observing their surroundings. Each points at various sights, and they stop in their tracks to look from time to time. Every so often, they startle a small animal along the trail, a good sign indicating that they are being quiet in their approach. When they do talk, it is in a hushed whisper so as not to surprise the denizens of the jungle.

As they move along the trail, their sense of hearing becomes more acute. In the dense vegetation along the trail, Sarah can even hear a light rain falling, but the sky above them remains a deep crystal, blue azure color. Sarah has heard this sound before, the sound of a million strong army of caterpillars and insects defecating from the treetops as they digest their meals of leaves in the dense jungle. It sounds just like a light spring rain as the tiny insect feces hit the leaves and ground below the trees.

Another hour goes by as they slowly walk the trail, but they have seen little else other than some birds and some small reptiles. Richard estimates that maybe they have gone about a half mile so far. Walking with Sarah through the forest is becoming a bit of an experience for Richard. After spending two months in Flores, Sarah's knowledge of the local bird life is both amazingly complete and surprisingly annoying. Sarah is busily watching the birds as they walk, pointing out such rare birds such as Flores Green Pigeon. Her silent monologue is not too bad, but then Sarah begins to imitate their call with a guttural 'rawk-rawk, rawk-rawk, rawk-rawk'. This goes on for a half hour, and Richard finds the various birdcalls quite maddening and then he begins to wonder if she is doing this deliberately.

"Well, at least your bird calls are better received by the locals than your attempt to speak Bahasa," Richard said. Sarah is undeterred by his sense of humor. "Look, there's a Hanging Parrot," she points out to him as she begins making another strange call, "Keewrap, keewarp".

"Stop it, will you, you're going to scare the hell out of the Ebu and me," Richard said. Annoyances aside, Richard can sense Sarah spirits brightening with each step they take into the wilderness. Sarah is at home in the wild, and she is clearly more animated.

As they continue to walk the trail, Richard notices a small hatchling that has fallen from its nest, and it lies stranded along the dirt. The chick lifted his head straight up to the sky, chirping a distress call to his mother. Richard knows there is little the mother can do for it, and

that the young bird is as good as dead. No doubt, he was pushed out of the nest by a stronger sibling anyway, and he would soon be dead from exposure. Richard was debating if he should put the small bird out of its misery by stepping on it, but he decided this would be a good opportunity to observe Sarah's reaction to the small bird. Richard steps right over the small bird, seemingly oblivious to its plight. Sarah, in turn, does indeed notice the small bird, and to Richard's surprise, she actually picks the small bird up.

“What the hell are you going to do with that?” Richard asked.

Sarah smiled at him and points to a small nest overhanging the path. “He's going back home!” Sarah said. She returns the small bird to his nest, and walks away with a slight skip in her step. Richard shakes his head in disbelief, wondering how the hell did she know where the nest was located? He decided it best not to ask as he debates whether Sarah is special or just a bit crazy. It really didn't matter; it was just a damn good thing that he didn't squish the young bird in front of her! Then he began to wonder if she had been observing his behavior regarding the small bird?

As they walk along the trail, they can see an opening in the brush. As the two walk toward the opening, Richard spots a marking on the trail. Wow, this is something! Not an animal track, but the impression was immediately familiar to him. Richard's heart is racing because he can't believe what he is seeing. It is a small footprint about the size of child's foot, barefoot and is definitely very human looking.

Sarah sees the footprint too and eagerly asked, “Is it human or Ebu?”

“Can't tell but we're going to find out.” Richard is very excited at the find but the footprint is positioned in fast drying sand and is fairly shallow. “We have to go back and make a casting of this. This is big, it could be a human child but who knows. Let's mark this, or better yet, let's get Supar over here with the plaster...”

Before Richard could finish his sentence Sarah, who was looking about, gently taps him on the shoulder.

“What Sarah? Come on, stop bothering me, I’m trying to get a measurement here.”

Sarah was standing and looking straight ahead, furiously blinking her eyes. Sarah taps Richard again, this time more forcibly on top of his head, and she points to an opening in the woods along the trail.

“Cut it out, will you?” and Richard finally looks up and he can see in the gleaming sun a large, mud puddle that formed during a recent tropical downpour. The mud puddle was rapidly drying in the torrid heat, and it stretched on for ten yards or so. In the drying puddle, a trail of small footprints traces the journey of a band of small people trudging off to the hilltops. It is Richard’s turn to stare in disbelief with his jaw gapping as he stands alongside the stunned Sarah. He counted at least five distinct sets of footprints in the mud, all headed in the same direction.

“Holy shit Batman!” Richard exclaimed.

For several seconds there is a strange silence and then the two scientists react to their discovery. Sarah quickly takes photos of the trail, and Richard crouches down to the ground, measuring while trying to make out the individual footprints.

“They can’t be more than 60 or 70 pounds each, I mean based on the print’s size and depth,” Richard said as kneels down to get a better look. “The short stride indicates that their legs aren’t very long yet these aren’t kids. There are least five of them, and one of them is dragging something along the ground. Maybe it’s the carcass of the animal after a kill. That would be exciting. What the hell are they surviving on? Size of it could a small komodo or is it something else? Is that fur? Could it be a mammal? We better tell Supar, right?” Richard asked.

Richard didn't notice, but Sarah is not listening to him. Instead, Sarah is dancing a slow twist with her weight poised on the heels of her feet with the dance punctuated every so often by a series of small jumps. From all outward appearances, she appears to be gripped by spasms of pain but on her face is a beautiful smile as she repeats quietly to herself "Yes, yes, yes..."

Her strange encounter in the jungle was not her overactive imagination after all but was rather the discovery of a strange, new people! Richard sees her little victory dance and joins the usual reticent Sarah in her brief but exuberant celebration.

"Damn it girl, you were right! You know I never doubted you." Richard said as he picked Sarah off the ground in a celebratory hug and propelled her high into the air. As he did, she flung her arms upward and lifted her head to the sky. It was at that very moment that Richard finally decided that Sarah wasn't crazy after all, just somewhat different and completely misunderstood by all.

They walk another hour following the footsteps of their elusive prey. The day is hot and humid, and they are both soaked in their sweat. Then Sarah notices an odor in the air, and she motions to Richard to stop. Richard notices the odor also. It's the undeniable odor of putrefying flesh, and it hangs heavy in the humid tropical air. The gross smell is undeniable! It is the smell of death, the smell of carrion. It's a sign to be aware, to watch out for the bacterial disease that can engulf a carcass. A human's omnivore system doesn't have the digestive juices necessary to kill the swarms of maggots and bacteria that are feeding on the rotting meat. Yet for scavengers and their powerful digestive systems, it's a call to dinner for a very savory treat.

They follow the odor off the path, and they discover a secondary trail. They move along the secondary trail for about ten yards. The jungle becomes denser and grows quiet with the approach of Richard and Sarah. As they slowly move along, Sarah points out several rock

fragments to Richard. Richard stops to pick up one of the rocks, and as Sarah's eyes adjust to the darkness, she realizes Richard is holding a fragment of a small jaw in his hand. Two small incisors and a single canine tooth sit in their sockets along the gum line. They are tiny but appear to be very human. Richard puts the fragment in his pocket, and places a marker down in the spot where he originally found the fragment. In turn, Sarah steps backward to give him some room, and as she moves, she begins to lose her balance. Sarah stumbles backward into the brush before Richard can catch her from falling and as she falls, a buzzing roar quickly fills the air as a black swarm of a thousand angry flies takes flight.

The putrid odor intensifies, forcing the two to gag, and cover their mouths with their bandanas. Richard steps into the small, cluster of trees where Sarah had fallen, and the horrendous odor quickly overwhelms the pair. They can see thousands of flies swarming and forming a dark cloud above a single carcass. They struggle to see in the dark, dense growth but they soon notice there is more than one carcass lying on the ground. Richard picks Sarah up and as he steps inside there is a crunching sound of brittle bones breaking under foot.

“Shit!” Richard yells as he realizes just how careless he has been.

As their eyes adjust to the darkness, the pair sees a grunting, animated form that appears to be rising from the ground among the rotting carcasses. The dark form was the size of a small dog but jutting from its jaw was a large, single tusk that the beast waves menacingly in the air, something the pair of naturalists had never seen before. Sarah turns her flashlight on and the light causes the form to let out a loud squeal startling both Sarah and Richard.

Richard yells, “What the fuck is that?” Sarah drops the flashlight on the ground in her terror and confusion. The form continues to squeal, and starts to scamper away from them, and then heads back at them. Richard grabs the flashlight and turns it on the form once again. It's almost two feet in length and its grey, mottled fur is clearly visible in the light. At the end of the

creature, they spot a long naked tail. A large island rat was gnawing on a bone when they had the misfortune to disturb it. These stupid rats had survived on Flores and apparently were thriving on this island as well. The rat drops the bone, and Richard shoos the rat away in the direction of the opening in the brush.

With both of their flashlights on, they begin to investigate the dark interior of the dense tree stand. The rat dropped a small humerus and there was still some darkened brown flesh on it. A cloud of flies hovers about them, covering their hair and skin with dozens of trapped and struggling insects. Richard keeps looking while desperately trying not to swallow the buzzing flies. The trees in the dense stand have trapped the air in the enclosure making it even hotter than surrounding the jungle, further intensifying the putrid odor.

As Richard moves the flashlight through the stand of trees, the soft gleam of white, weathered bones shine back at him. Rib bones, scapulas, femurs, and pelvic bones are strewn about the ground as if they were carelessly tossed from a jigsaw puzzle box. As far as he can see, a trove of small human-like bones litters the floor of the stand, scattered about by generations of ravenous scavengers. Among the heaps of bones are the empty eye sockets of small skulls that peer back at them in the darkness in an eerie, funereal silence. The skulls are the size of a small child's but are shaped very differently. The tiny size combined with the sloping cranium bones of the skull make the remains readily recognizable as that of *Homo floresiensis*. To their astonishment, they spot among the bones numerous small stones and seashells, the personal ordainments of the deceased left in place by bereaving survivors.

Richard moves nearer to the deepest concentration of flies in the stand. The flies rise above the ground like a miniature tornado, moving up and down, while dancing about him. Undeterred, Richard uncovers a number of dried palm fronds that are covering what appears to be a small pile of debris on the ground. As he uncovers the form, he shines his flashlight on it,

and the debris takes shape. Empty eye sockets look back at him and, in the dim light, a small, blackened body lies writhing on the ground.

“Richard, that freaking thing is still moving,” Sarah cries out. Richard remains steady because he knows the body is writhing from the myriad maggots that are ingesting the decaying flesh. As he shines a light on the body, thousands of white grubs squirm on the darkened flesh of the deceased Ebu.

“It’s just maggots,” Richard yelled. Clearly, the remains in the stand belonged to a recently departed Ebu. “This is an Ebu burial ground,” but as Richard speaks, he swallows several of the flies from the dense cloud that is flying about him. He instantly starts to gag and choke on the swallowed flies.

The odor finally overwhelms Richard, and he is struggling hard to stop from retching. Richard can taste his own vomit as it surges from his stomach. Sarah sees Richard doubling over and grabs him by the arm, pulling them together from the inside of the stand to the relative comfort of the tropical jungle.

Outside, they struggle to catch their breath. Their eyes are watering, and Richard bends over, holding his sides while he vomits. He finally catches his breath, and looks to take a drink of water from the canteen.

“Wow!” Sarah said as Richard continues to dry heave. Finally, Richard is able to compose himself and breathe normally.

“Yeah, that odor is something,” Richard gasps as he continues to drink the water.

“That’s not what I am wowing about. I’m talking about an Ebu burial ground. Well, all right, they’re not quite buried but we get the idea. This is amazing; I mean they are actually cognizant of death and its implications. Do you think that they could have religious beliefs with those tiny brains?” Sarah asked.

“All I know is, I just wish their belief system included the burying of their dead, it would be a hell of a lot easier on us,” said Richard.

“Richard, do you realize that we have found them! This is amazing! We have our find!” Sarah said.

Richard nods in agreement, as he begins the chore of removing the struggling live and dead flies from his skin and hair. He motions to Sarah to turn around. As she turns around, the entire back of her shirt is covered in a sea of black, squirming flies that lie tangled within her shirt and hair. Richard brushes the flies off her back and picks the more stubborn ones from her shirt. Sarah is so deep in thought she is seemingly oblivious to the dozens of flies tangled in her hair and writhing on her body. After he is done with Sarah’s grooming, Richard carefully marks the burial ground, and he begins to take pictures of the area with his camera.

“I guess I should come back for samples?” Richard asked. Sarah immediately gives him a frosty look as if to say don’t go there. “Okay, we’ll broach that topic later,” Richard said.

They hesitate to stop their exploration since they are so close to their prize, but the sweltering heat is taking a heavy toll on them. They spend ten minutes removing the remaining dead flies from their clothing, and hair while being bathed in their own sweat. As Sarah and Richard continue to walk the main trail they feel a sudden rush of cool air. As they clear their way through the underbrush, they come upon a clearing containing a pool of shimmering, running water. At the far end of the pond there is a small waterfall running down from the mountain slope. Wild flowers cover a wall of lush green vegetation, and the air is crisp and cooler than the surrounding jungle. Richard runs to the edge of the pond and puts his hand in the water. The water is cool to the touch, and Richard realizes that it has to be feeding from the upper slopes of the volcanic mountain. Richard sees a few shadow-like forms swimming in the water, and he realizes that the water is safe enough to bathe in and maybe even drink.

“Just wash off in it, but no drinking till we test it or boil it, okay Richard?” Sarah stated.

Without a word, Richard starts to strip off his clothing, and he is soon naked as he jumps into the water. A startled Sarah can only watch the brazen display. He submerges for a while, his form barely visible and Sarah stands at the pond’s edge alone for a few moments.

“Richard? Where are you? Are you okay?” Sarah asked as she strained to see him.

After a few moments Richard emerges some ten yards from the shoreline while gasping for air and shouts, “Sarah, come on in, the water is fine!”

“Okay, but please turn your head so I can get in,” Sarah asked.

“No way! I’m here for a free show. I gave you one,” Richard said.

“But I didn’t want a show. There is no quid pro quo here!” Sarah said.

“Prude!” Richard yelled as he refuses to turn his head. Sarah grabs his clothes with his boots and starts walking away from the pond into the jungle.

“Okay, okay, I’ve reconsidered being a gentlemen,” and Richard belatedly turns his head. “You know, you sure take the fun out of voyeurism on a tropical island.”

A minute later, a naked Sarah jumps into the water with him. The pond is relatively shallow, and about twenty yards in length. The running water is clear from the cool mountain’s streams that feed it instead of a typical tropical, soupy green that is so common to standing water in the region. Sarah makes sure to keep her distance from Richard so as not give him his free show. As they swim, they startle a few birds that have stopped to drink at the pond’s edge.

“This is beautiful; the running water makes this a perfect spot for any large animal to use as a watering hole. It keeps the flies and mosquitoes down as well. Girl, do you know what we have just found?” Richard asked.

Sarah puts her finger to her mouth to shush him. “Richard, please don’t spoil paradise by yammering on and on. Just enjoy the moment, okay?” Sarah asked.

“You’re right, this is paradise,” Richard said.

Surprisingly, Sarah swims closer to Richard. Richard gets quieter and more reflective as Sarah slowly approaches.

“You hear that, Richard”? Sarah looks intently at him, and she is less than two feet away from him. Sarah’s dark wet hair hangs on her naked shoulders, and Richard can see the outline of her breasts in the water. She has that wild look again in her light blue eyes that Richard can’t resist.

“What?” Richard said while listening and trying to get a better look at Sarah’s breasts below the surface of the shimmering water.

“Quiet boy, close your eyes and just listen,” Sarah said, in a low, hushed tone as she puts her finger to her moist lips.

As Richard strains to hear, he closes his eyes and Sarah hits him with a full broadside splash of water directly into his face.

“Oh, so that’s how we play,” Richard yelled.

The two engage in a splashing contest for a few minutes, yelling and screaming at each other like a couple of kids playing together.

During their play, Richard ends up close to Sarah, so close that he tries to kiss her. She avoids his kiss, but he is gently holding her with one arm. He can feel her smooth, soft skin rubbing against his arm, and he is intently looking into her eyes. Sarah stops struggling, looks into his eyes while smiling her surrender to him and then she... splashes him once again. In the same movement, she swims away from him, breaking his tenuous hold on her. They paddle about the pond for a few awkward minutes carefully keeping their distance from one another.

Finally Sarah looked at the setting sun said, “It really is time to get going.”

Richard looks forlornly at her and then said, “You better get out first, I may need a few minutes to settle down here.”

Sarah laughs and heads out of the water while Richard turns his head. He turns slightly to catch a quick glimpse of her naked back emerging from the water. As Richard watches her, he is half hoping to observe some defect in her physique that will invoke immediate repulsion in him. Perhaps something like a thick layer of puckered cellulite around her thighs, yeah that would do the trick. Actually, he was looking for anything that would temper his desire for her. Instead, he observes a very shapely, athletic young woman with gleaming skin and matching tan lines slowly emerging from the water, and he smiles slightly to himself.

“How could that beautiful piece of ass still be on the market?” he wondered to himself. He quickly realized that the vision of Sarah’s well-rounded butt emerging from the water certainly wasn’t going to help his cause for abstinence. “Jeez, when was the last time I got laid?” he asked himself.

Richard started to turn away but once again he had lingered too long. Sarah catches him looking once again and starts yelling, “Hey, come on, no peeking Richard! Would it kill you to be a gentleman for just a few minutes?”

Busted again! “My bad, I was just inspecting for leeches. Good news, you appear all clear from here. If you like, I can give you a more thorough inspection?” Richard asked.

“That’s fine, I’ll take my chances with the leeches, they’re probably less needy, thank you,” Sarah said.

As Sarah dresses, Richard is slowly paddling in the water, the entire time lamenting his pathetic move on her. Once she is dressed, Richard storms out of the pond, and Sarah averts her eyes from him but not before taking a quick glance in his direction.

It is late in the afternoon, and they both decide that they are tired and hungry. Sarah looks at Richard while enquiring, “Well, do we continue to search for them today?”

“This is the first thing she says to me after that moment in the pond?” Richard thinks to himself. With her detached all-business demeanor, he now knew why she was still on the market. “Oh well, business as usual with the ice princess.”

A frustrated Richard looked at Sarah, and decided to choose his words very carefully. “Uh, I know we’re pretty excited about what we found so far, but if we go running after them we could scare them from one end of the island to another. They could turn on us as well, especially if they feel cornered by our pursuit.”

Sarah looks at Richard, “So what are you thinking, I mean besides the usual?”

Richard ignores the shot from Sarah. “I’m thinking they are going to be back here fairly soon. The entire region has been dry so far this season. It probably hasn’t rained here for a few days, so wherever they are on this island they are going to be thirsty. They’ve been here before, and they’ll be back here again.”

Sarah nods slightly in agreement.

“Look over to the top of that waterfall,” Richard said as he points to the bluff. Sarah looks up following Richard’s gesture. “That bluff overlooking the pond is a great perch for us to watch for them. We can grab some brush, set up a blind, and just wait for their arrival. I can’t think of a better location to watch and wait for them. Tomorrow looks as good as any other day for a little Ebu watching.”

Part of Sarah wants to pursue the Ebu, but she is exhausted from the heated hike through the brush. She reluctantly agrees with Richard to delay the fulfillment of her dream for another day.

Richard sees the disappointment in her eyes. “Sarah, we are almost there, just be patient! No matter what we’ve proved you were right all along. Girl, do you know what we have found?” Richard asked.

Sarah smiles and nods in agreement, while she reluctantly gets up to leave. Their return to the camp is an awkward, silent affair as the two walk slowly along the trail. Neither wants to talk, because as excited as they are about their find, there is still disappointment that they have yet to find their ultimate prize, the living Ebu.

About a half hour into their walk back, Richard decides to apologize for his stupid move in the pool. “Sarah, I’m sorry about that attempted kiss in the pool...” but he does so in a halting, awkward manner that becomes painful for Sarah.

Sarah was a bit confused with Richard’s move because of her own mixed feelings for him, but she is feeling gracious and decides to give him an out. Besides there are some moments, and those moments were still in the minority, she found herself actually liking and wanting the man-boy.

“Look, it was a beautiful moment, and we were both excited about the find. Leave it at that, Richard. No harm done was done, really. And besides, you know what they say about infrequent rewards leading to the greatest habituation,” Sarah said jokingly to him.

“You’re quoting Skinner to me? Now, I’m a lab rat going after a piece of cheese or wait, wasn’t that morphine?” Richard asked.

Sarah saw the somewhat confused and hurt look in Richard’s eyes with her last comment. She wondered to herself how anybody that insensitive could be so personally sensitive.

“What, I really mean, Richard, is that you’ve been great so far. Let’s face it; we never would have made it this far if it wasn’t for you being so persistent. Maybe persistence does pay off in the long run; I mean who knows, right?” Sarah said with a small smile on her face.

“Talk about mixed messages,” Richard thinks to himself. “If this crazy bitch starts singing ‘High Hopes’ I’m going to have to kill her right now. I could do it, who would know? I could say a Komodo got her and nobody would be the wiser!”

Richard realizes that on the positive side, at least she is not calling him “Dick” anymore. He was going to ask Sarah a question about her feelings for him, but he decided after her comments to leave well enough alone. Richard was on such a high about their find, he found himself confusing that high with his own feelings for Sarah. The two events were rolling into one emotional whirlwind that he was ill equipped to deal with.

They return to the camp and excitedly update Supar and Rudy about their amazing find. That night the small camp is buzzing with excitement about the day’s discovery. As a team, they decide to get up early in the morning to make their way to the bluff to set up their blind.

As they get the equipment ready for the next day’s hunt, Sarah starts asking Richard questions.

“Richard, I know you only got a brief look at the skulls scattered at the Ebu cemetery, but the Ebu here the same Homo floresiensis they found on Flores?” Sarah asked.

“Yeah, I think so Sarah. From what I could see in the dark the skulls look almost identical. The real question is how did they get to Flores and this island in the first place? That’s a real mystery to me, especially without a land bridge,” Richard said. Richard stops a moment before treading in dangerous waters with Sarah.

“You know now that you mention it Sarah, at some point, I have to go back to the cemetery, and get some real specimens,” Richard said.

Sarah looks at Richard with an annoyed look. “Not again. You realize that you are disturbing their dead; I mean should we be doing that if they have some primitive belief system?”

You do know the courts have recognized the rights of native tribes to retain the physical remains of their deceased?”

Richard looks down at ground and dreads where the conversation is headed. “I know, I know. You know I’m not familiar with the ethics of this, this is sort of uncharted territory for me, I mean for all of us. I mean how often do we come across a living fossil people? But at this point, I just don’t think the Ebu are at the stage in their evolutionary development where they are ready to ask for a lawyer, at least not yet.”

Richard looks at Sarah and he can tell Sarah is unmoved by his plea.

“Come on, I need some physical samples, and I’m going back to get some. You need the evidence too! Your work is useless without some hard, physical evidence that these little buggers are still alive and kicking. Our word and a few pictures alone are not going to cut it nowadays, I think we can both agree on that. And we sure in hell don’t want to have to bring somebody back to this island to verify our finds,” Richard said.

Sarah is torn. Disrupting the site could also upset the small tribe, and as a result, they might not trust her. “Richard, they are not living fossils but a breathing, living people. I’m tired of this argument, let’s find them first and we can resolve this argument later, okay?” Sarah asked. Richard doesn’t argue, and he decides to hold his tongue for now.

The following morning, the small team sets up the blind by the bluff near the waterfalls, as Richard had originally instructed to the team. The bluff itself was on a rocky outcrop littered with loose debris. Each step upward was followed by a succeeding slide downward as the loose volcanic rock gave away. Supar decides to climb ahead of them, and he secures a rope to a tree at the top of the bluff. The small team, in their efforts to secure the bluff, is generating too much noise and Sarah is concerned that their raucous activity will scare the Ebu. The decision is made that Sarah and Richard will occupy the blind above the falls while working the camera. Sarah

instructs the guides to remain at a secondary camp within five minutes of the bluff just in case their assistance is needed. The guides have two small-bore rifles and Sarah instructs the two as to how and when to use their weapons.

“Supar, listen to me. Look, I expect the Ebu to be docile and fairly non-aggressive, I mean I think so. However, just in case this gets ugly, you shoot in the air. Only shoot if the Ebu are actually attacking Richard or me. Do not shoot the Ebu! I repeat, do not shoot any Ebu, Is that clear! I don’t want any misunderstandings about this instruction at all. We are expendable, not the Ebu,” Sarah said. The two mutter a small yes in response to her commands while Richard, in turn, gives Sarah a weird look. Sarah, the boss was back, and she was firmly in charge of the expedition even to the point of deciding who was expendable.

By ten o’clock, the blind is secure, and the camouflage is in place. Sarah is excited and breathlessly watches the pond for hours. After a while, her enthusiasm begins to wane, and she grows reflective. Richard notices the change in her demeanor and asked “Okay Sarah, what’s wrong now?”

“Nothing, Richard. I was just thinking how Professor Brightman, I mean Dan, would have gotten such a big kick out of this find. It’s a shame he couldn’t be here to enjoy this moment.” Sarah hesitates but then adds, “But that said, I’m glad to be sharing this moment with you.”

“Thanks, same here kiddo,” Richard said not quite knowing if Sarah’s remark was a backhanded comment or not.

More quiet time passes and Sarah breaks the monotonous silence. “Richard, I’m beginning to realize that you’re not one of those homosocial types are you?” Sarah asked.

“Huh?” Richard grunted. “I really don’t like the sound of that at all, so I’ll go with no.”

“Silly, it means you got to hang out with the boys all of the time, you know your ‘homies’. You like girls but only for procreating and not for socializing. But you, I don’t think you get along with anyone,” Sarah said.

“Sarah don’t do that!”

“Do what?” she said.

“Puhlease, ‘homies’? Girl, don’t ever talk gangsta to me, will you? Can either one of us be anymore white bread? Besides, I like girls for more than one thing. I tolerate you, don’t I?”

“It’s just that you seem...” Sarah replied.

Richard decided to cut her off. “Jeez, I know you’re getting bored but will you stop analyzing me. You know, if you keep scratching below the surface you’re just going to ruin a perfectly good finish,” Richard replied in a somewhat annoyed manner.

“Hmmm, I’m not sure about that!” Sarah responded with a small smile.

“Look if I answer your questions will you go to bed with me?” he asked.

“No...” Sarah replied with a laugh.

“I got nothing for you then,” and Richard folded his arms and turned his head away from her.

“Oh, that’s real mature,” she said.

For the remainder of the day there is no sign of the Ebu, and Sarah is concerned that the frenzied activity about the pond may have scared them away. As dusk approaches, the two vow to return to the bluff the following day.

The following morning is equally uneventful, and there are no signs that any large animal has approached the pond. On occasion, small flocks of birds make their way to the pond’s edge, and gingerly make their way into the cold water. Once in the water, they splash about madly allowing the cooling water to soak their feathers. The ritual typically ends with a preening and

cleaning of their feathers. Sarah watches this ritual for hours, and is beginning to feel more like an ornithologist rather than a primatologist.

Richard is bored watching birds, and has taken to napping on and off in the relative comfort of the cool waterfalls. He offers to alternate watches with Sarah, but she is too excited to doze off. Sarah keeps looking and checking her watch as if she was a commuter waiting for her train to arrive. Richard is not sharing her excitement, and is concerned that a weather front is approaching that could bring a good rain to the island. If that is so, Richard is assuming that the Ebu can gather enough water in their home territory to drink and, thereby, forgo a trip to the pond.

“Richard, what’s the longest time you’ve been in a relationship?” she asked.

“I don’t know, a couple of months, a couple of years. Time flies when you are being tortured,” he said.

“What was she like?” Sarah asked.

“Enough of this, it’s time to go,” he said in disgust.

Sarah doesn’t want to leave. “Please, let’s stick it out for the remainder of the day,” Sarah said.

“Fine, we’ll hang out for a while longer but no more psychoanalysis, understood?”

Richard asked.

Sarah nodded in agreement and the pair returned to their watch over the pond. By mid-day, both of them are now tired of the waiting and watching game. Bored, Richard swats at a hungry fly that is busily hovering about him. It takes him three or four swats, but he finally nails the annoying fly against his arm. It remains smeared on his forearm, and he flicks the recently departed insect remains in the direction of Sarah.

“You are such a cretin!” Sarah yells.

“Who says I don’t socialize with women?” Richard asked while laughing at his stupid prank. He was desperately looking to do anything to break the oppressive monotony of the moment.

More time passes with nothing to do, but sit and wait for the Ebu to arrive.

It is mid-afternoon and the torrid afternoon sun combined with the continuous monotony is weighing heavily on the pair. A loud crashing noise in the underbrush close to the pond breaks the unbearable quiet. Plants are furiously moving as if some demon had possessed them yet they cannot see the cause of the motion. Both Sarah and Richard jump up to get a better look at the pond’s edge. The noise continues, but something is wrong; the disruption appears too low to the ground, and as the creature emerges, they can see it: a giant island rat rooting around for food by the pond’s edge! Simultaneously, Richard and Sarah slump back in disappointment. The rat is almost three feet in length, and is an ungainly, ugly looking creature. The wet rat’s mottled grey fur adds to its unattractive demeanor. The rat clumsily makes its way about the pond looking for food.

“Damn that’s a big ugly rat!” Richard exclaims as he settled in again.

After a while, Richard tires of watching the rat and decides to look for more mischief. “Hey, do you want to make out?” he said.

Sarah grimaces at the suggestion. “Yeah, that is going to happen real soon. Richard, please don’t make this day any more disappointing for me. Do you ever give it up?”

“No, just like you said, I find persistence is a virtue on to itself. One day you’ll give in, I promise you that,” Richard said.

Sarah rolls her eyes at the comment while making a barfing motion with her hand at Richard. She then continues her silent vigil of the pond. Richard chuckles to himself, and is happy at having provoked such a childish display from the usually proper Sarah.

“Oh, real mature,” he said to her.

A few more minutes pass like an eternity for the pair. Like a schoolboy with too much free time on his hands, Richard grabs a few loose rocks and starts to throw them at the foraging rat.

“Leave the poor thing alone, will you?” Sarah asked.

Richard laughs. “I’m not even close to it hitting the stupid rat,” as the rocks are ineffectually raining down in the middle of the pond.

“Richard, stop being an ass, will you?” Sarah demanded.

“All right, just one more,” Richard said.

He hurls the last rock with even more force, and to his surprise, hits the rodent square in the back. The rat lets out an incredible squeal, and curls onto its side forming a tight ball. Sarah is horrified by the results of Richard’s antics, and slugs him one in the arm. “I told you to stop, you stupid cretin...” but then Sarah ceases her attack.

The animal falls over on to its one side and there is blood clearly visible. “Hey, I didn’t throw it that hard...” Richard said. As they look closer, they can both see a spear protruding from the side of the rat.

“Holy shit, they’re here!” Richard exclaims as he goes for the camera.

“Mmmrppooohhhh.”

Sarah hears a familiar sound from the brush that starts her trembling with excitement. It is clearly the same murmuring sounds that she heard during her original visit to the island. In between the murmurs, there are a few clicking sounds as well, but the thick brush at the pond’s edge is still concealing the source. Richard is about to speak, when Sarah sternly puts her finger to her mouth to tell him to remain silent. It is Richard’s turn to roll his eyes, but he dutifully remains silent. Then he hears the murmurs as well, and his eyes open wide.

Richard carefully starts the video camera, and aims it in the direction of the fallen rat. Richard was hoping that the noises from the bluff couldn't be heard above the roar of the small waterfall, but he wasn't sure about that assumption. Both strain to see the Ebu, but there is nothing in view.

"This is wrong. Why can't we see them?" Sarah says in a low voice to herself. A minute passes with no sight of the elusive Ebu as if they were toying with their audience.

As they watch, the unfortunate rodent is going through its death quiver near the pond's edge. In a final spasm, the animal falls into the pond and a red color slowly tints the water. Three small, upright figures emerge together from the brush. As they emerge, they are looking upwards toward the falls at Sarah and Richard. Both Sarah and Richard instinctively move their bodies lower to secret themselves from the prying eyes of the small figures.

Sarah and Richard both struggle to comprehend what they are seeing. From a distance, they look almost human, but they are small, standing a little over three tall. Their dark, naked skins glisten in the sun and their black scalp hair is surprisingly short. They are very naked, and are definitely male with a dark patch of pubic hair. They are slender with a pronounced belly, and they have relatively long arms that extend past their knees. Their hands are surprisingly human looking and they each carry a short wood spear, about three feet long, armed at the end with a nasty looking stone tip. Yes, they do look human until you look at their sloping foreheads and their missing chins. Then the view takes a different turn and resembles an image from a fun-house mirror.

The first Ebu male to emerge from the brush goes for the dying rat in the water. He give the quivering animal on more thrust of the spear, removes his spear and starts dragging the dead animal to the shore. The other two Ebu are chattering to him, and they take out from the brush what appear to be animal skins. The skins are actually the stomachs of prey animals that are

secured at one end. The two Ebu use the skins to collect water, but as they do so, they continue to gaze up at the bluff in the direction of Richard and Sarah.

Sarah and Richard are about sixty yards away from the Ebu, and Sarah is struggling to see them. She grabs the binoculars, and as she peers at the Ebu, the hunters once again look up at the bluff above the falls. Richard is busily taking pictures, but he realizes that they may be seeing a reflection of the binocular lens in the sun. He tries to say something to Sarah but it's too late. As suddenly as they appear, the three Ebu disappear into the brush with their catch.

Sarah is both ecstatic and upset. "Richard, you cretin! I can't believe you were throwing rocks as they were approaching."

"Hey, if I didn't do something stupid like throwing rocks, they never would have appeared," Richard said.

"I don't know if you are being funny, or if you are just a complete ass. You are so damn unprofessional, I can't take it anymore!" Sarah said.

"Before you go on a rant it wasn't the rocks that chased them off. This is a consumer video camera. We forgot about the lens cap and the sun glare. It's not blackened, and we don't even have a filter on it," Richard said.

Sarah stops her verbal assault. "Oh, oh, that does make sense," said Sarah. "That's why they kept looking up." As they begin to put away the equipment, Sarah notices the binoculars. "We should do something about these too, right?" At that moment, Sarah realizes she may have scared them off when she looked at the Ebu with the glasses.

Sarah is quiet for a moment. "Hey, I'm sorry about the unprofessional remark. You know Richard, you can let me know when I'm being a cretin as well," Sarah said.

Richard sees Sarah in her sad little girl look, and shoots a quick smile at her. “I think I can speak for all members of this expedition when I say we only have room for one designated cretin, and that job is already taken. Union rules, you know boss,” Richard said.

“I still can’t believe it but they really do exist. Now what do we do? Go after them?” Sarah asked.

“Nah, it’s almost four, and it’ll be a half hour by the time we get down there, and secure the video equipment. We only got two hours of daylight left and we will lose them fairly quickly in the dark. Let’s find the trail, mark it, and go after them tomorrow,” Richard said.

“God, this is unbelievable. Richard, you realize they cut their hair?” Sarah stated.

“Very stylish too, I might add!” Richard said.

“No, you don’t understand. They don’t have much facial hair, either. They have sense of self. The burials, the hair cutting, it all indicates a heightened awareness,” Sarah said.

“Yeah, and all with 500 cc’s of brain matter,” Richard said. “Not exactly gourmands are they? I mean, what’s for dinner dear? Oh, no dear, not rat again!”

Sarah starts giggling to herself.

“What?” Richard said after realizing she wasn’t just laughing at his comment.

“Nothing,” Sarah said hesitating to speak her mind.

“Amazing, they are fully bipedal tool users and they clearly have at least some rudimentary language skills. What? Come on, you got a dopey look on your face, I mean dopier than usual,” Richard said.

Sarah’s giggling gets louder and as she tries to suppress her giggles her face turns red and she begins laughing.

“What is it?” Richard pleaded while beginning to chuckle himself from her merriment.

At this point, Sarah lost all control and in between laughs and gasps she blurts out, “They got such big hands and feet but their...”

“Their what?” Richard asked.

“Their tiny..., I mean they’re not particularly well-endowed, are they?” Sarah said as she pealed into more laughter and rolled onto her side.

Richard laughs at the comment while shaking his head. On second thought, they did kinda of make him feel like a porn star.

“Sarah Levine, I’m shocked at you young lady, and you call me unprofessional? Now I know why you grabbed the binoculars so damn fast. What I want to know is that all you women ever think about?”

“You wish!” as Sarah continues to laugh. “This is way better than making out!” Sarah said between laughs.

Later that night a strong tropical rainstorm batters the island and its inhabitants. The members of the small team are stuck in their respective tents as sheets of rain deluge the camp. An entire new Ebu world waits for them, except the weather keeps them huddled in their small tents wondering if the rain will ever break.

The following day Sarah and Richard go back to the pond but the previous night’s torrential rains washed away all traces of the Ebu.

“Damn it, I can’t find a sign of them anywhere. Let’s head off in the original direction we saw them leave,” Richard said.

They continue to search, however they have trouble finding a trail, never mind the Ebu. The trails surrounding the pond have entirely disappeared, covered by a mountain of debris from the furious storm. They spend the next two days searching the island with few results. They find

an occasional trace of a trail, but it appears that the Ebu have disappeared once again into the depths of the island.

“Why and where?” Sarah wonders aloud.

By the Sea

-The sands takes lines unknown-

D.H. Lawrence

Richard was stretching in preparation for his daily run on the beach, and he asked Sarah if she cared to join him.

“Are you suggesting that I’m getting fat?” Sarah jokingly replied. Sarah is usually not one to talk about her looks. In truth, Sarah knows that she is looking considerably thinner since losing ten pounds from the combined effects of the heat, poor food, and the continuous daily walks into the jungle. To offset her gauntness, her skin was turning a golden brown and her legs were firm to begin with. In her matching shorts and long sleeve shirt, she looked like a glamour model except for the myriad number of scratch marks, insect bites and bruises that lined her arms and legs.

All right, she didn’t quite look like a model on a photo shoot, but on the other hand, what model would endure the primitive conditions Sarah was being subjected to? That was the one trait about Sarah that always amazed Richard. Well, actually there were two if you counted her significant cleavage that managed to defy her recent weight loss. No, what was amazing was that despite the adverse conditions and despite the grueling daily routine, Sarah managed to groom herself to perfection each and every day. Richard had been on long expeditions in the

wild with other female biologists and they quickly used the trip as an excuse to let everything go au natural. Their leg hair sometimes became so thick you would think they were planning to braid it. But, oh no, not Sarah! Every morning she greeted the world with that fresh scrubbed look about her. It was almost sickening to him the way she wore her look of perfection, like some goddamn untouchable high school princess but, in fact, it just made him hotter for her. After all, he could never pass up an opportunity to sully perfection!

The entire team was finding camping in the tropics to be an ordeal. Their food and water was less than great due to the omnipresent tropical heat and a decided lack of variety. Fortunately, everybody's appetite was off as well so the demand for food just wasn't there. Even the simple act of going to bed at night could be an unwelcome adventure. The night before, Sarah let out a small yelp and as Richard watched, Sarah herded out of her tent a flying beetle the size of a small bird. Dressed only in her t-shirt and panties, Sarah shooed the bug from her tent and the green beetle buzzed loudly as it took flight into the cool night air. Richard shook his head at the spectacle and yelled to her, "I know some people who would pay good money to watch your show."

"I'm glad that I amuse you, Richard," and Sarah turned and retreated to her tent with what remained of her dignity. "Damn, she did look good in that t-shirt and panties!" he thought.

Richard had always assumed Sarah to be a four-star hotel type of gal, the kind he usually couldn't afford but despite these occasional setbacks, Sarah was handling the primitive conditions like a trooper, and even Richard had to admire the hardiness of the petite princess.

No, Richard had to smile at her and said "Nah, you look great, kiddo!"

In return, Sarah gives Richard a perplexed look. Sarah had found it an incredible challenge just to keep up with Richard during a walk, never mind a full run. She was no slouch

herself but his long legs were always carrying him way out in front of her, and her diminutive stride just couldn't keep pace with him. He was always moving too fast for her.

Then there was the troubling matter of the bright yellow shorts. Richard was wearing his favorite old yellow shorts again, and in fact, he is always wearing his favorite yellow shorts. As far as Sarah can figure, the only variety in Richard's daily running getup is deciding what dirty t-shirt will complete his ensemble. The cotton t-shirts would hang from a makeshift line by his tent, stiffly waving in the breeze as they dried in the tropical air. However, the yellow shorts always seemed fresh, a testament she attributed to the enduring qualities of polyester and not to any act of cleanliness on his part.

"You know, Richard, if you ever wore another pair of shorts, I might reconsider that run with you. What is it going to take to get you out of those shorts?" Sarah asked.

Richard gave Sarah a leering look.

"Look boy choose something that will actually happen during your lifetime, okay?"

"Are you kidding, give up my lucky running shorts? Never, I sooner walk," Richard said as he sprinted from the camp. Richard has been running along the beach on an almost daily basis but today, for a change of view, he decided to run along the beach in a westerly direction. As was his norm, he ran near the water where the sand was wet and firmer to tread on.

Richard was running for fifteen minutes when he suddenly he heard a rustling sound behind him and he felt something sharp striking his head. As he looked behind, a large gull was hovering above him and she was actively taking pokes at his head with her beak. He covered his head with his hands and felt a trickle of blood oozing from a small cut. Maybe it was the aggressive pace of his run or his ugly yellow shorts but he definitely incurred the wrath of the nesting gull.

He accelerated his pace and began haphazardly changing direction in an effort to lose the irate gull while waving his arms in the air. With each turn that he made, the gull was right there with him, crying as she continued her unrelenting attack on his scalp.

“Why is every female on this island so damn temperamental!” he yelled. Richard began a furious sprint that left him high up on the beach and the gull was satisfied that he was no longer a threat.

As he slowed down, he noticed something curious in the approaching sands. There were more gulls but they were preoccupied with taking swipes at an assortment of empty shells and other marine remains. As he ran closer, the gulls quickly departed and he saw that the sand was upturned along the length of the beach. Years of fieldwork has taught Richard to be curious anytime he spotted a disruption in the natural order of things.

As he approached, Richard saw a sight he had seen numerous times before during his childhood vacations. He could see hundreds of diminutive footprints scattered throughout the sands of the beach. A troop of the Ebu had been present in the area, and they had resided there for quite some time. There were even some stone flakes lying on the white sand. Amazingly, they had spent enough time on the beach for some of the Ebu to reshape their stone hand axes. He then spotted the ultimate cultural prize, the remains of an Ebu fire, and as Richard stirred the cooling embers, he spotted charred fish bones among the ashes.

Richard sprinted back to camp in record time while excitedly yelling, “I got it, I got it! Sarah, the Ebu are into the Hampton’s scene!”

Sarah is not a New Yorker, and she doesn’t quite get Richard’s stupid little Long Island in-joke. Instead, Sarah looks at him as though his idiocy had finally become permanent.

“What is it now, Richard? Slow down and please, speak slower. Uh, why are you bleeding from your head?” Sarah asked in a tone befitting of a mother talking to her hyperactive

son. Richard is breathing hard from his sprint back and stops to catch his breath. As he gathers his wind, Richard pulls his t-shirt up to his face to wipe the sweat from his brow. He then pours water over his head, removing the sweat and the blood in a flood from his hair.

“Really Richard, you could write ‘the’ book on personal grooming. Now, what is all the yelling about?” an exasperated Sarah asked.

“I found the Ebu! When they get tired of dining on rat, they move down to the beach for a change in menu. That’s why we couldn’t find them. We were looking in the heart of the island, and they were at the shore living off the sea. That’s why you came across them during your original visit. It makes sense and it wouldn’t be the first time that ancient hominids have been found to be living at the shoreline. I mean how else could they have managed to survive on this small island?”

Sarah looks at him while shaking her head the entire time. “Wow, we are so stupid. At the burial site among the dead, there were some seashells, remember? This is great, but where are they now?” Sarah asked.

“Not sure partner, but at least now I know where to begin looking,” Richard said.

“Let’s get going. You grab the camera equipment,” Sarah ordered.

“Shouldn’t I change?” Richard asked, while bathed in sweat from his run.

“What, with you on a roll wearing your lucky shorts? Really, I’ve survived the odor so far, I’ll manage for a few more hours, Richard,” Sarah said with a smile.

It was a good half hour walk to the newly discovered beach site and Richard kept looking over his shoulder for the irate gull. He was walking ahead and Sarah interpreted Richard’s looks back as impatience on his part with her current pace. Richard’s long strides put him out front from her but Sarah doubled her pace to keep up with him. Once there, Sarah and Richard began looking for a trail along the tree line. They did not have far to look and they found a trail littered

with the remains of crushed shells, a strong indication that it had been used by generations of Ebu.

The two walk for about a quarter mile, when they hear a loud murmuring noise coming from the woods. Richard couldn't see them, but he realized the Ebu must be close by. The two crouch down and slowly waddle their way to the source of noise. Richard was not comfortable with crouching this long, and he occasionally would fall over as he grappled with the camera equipment. Sarah took the lead and the two pushed on. The murmuring grew louder and as they approach a small clearing, they can see several Ebu sitting by a small fire. Other Ebu are sitting among the trees, and they appear to be peacefully resting. Richard is not sure what to do; if they get too close, they will startle the Ebu. However, their present position for the purposes of observation is untenable and they can't even get the camera rolling. They watch for a few minutes, and Sarah signaled to Richard to go back a bit. They reluctantly leave and return to the beach site to consider a different approach.

"Well, we found them, but now what?" Richard asked. "We can't get close enough to get the cameras going or even observe them without them being on to us."

Sarah smiled at Richard while affectionately grabbing his hand and looked him directly in the eyes. "Leave that to me. Listen to me, and let's go over the basics. First, I'll be the one interacting with them. I've done this all my life with chimps and gorillas. You are the support person with the cameras, and I don't want you to be seen during the initial contact. Nothing personal, but you are a fairly tall specimen, Richard Staller. If they see you, don't stare at them but instead glance back at them, and give them a chance to look back at you. Remember, it's not polite to stare. Secondly, keep yourself small. A large animal is very intimidating to a smaller animal. Keep yourself in a crouch, no sudden movements, and no loud noises," Sarah said.

Richard just smiled in agreement with her.

“Richard, I have no idea how they are going to react to us. Sarah motions to Richard’s backpack for him to get something, and Richard roots through the bag for a few seconds and takes out his handgun. “What are you nuts? I want the dry fruit in your pack, not a gun,” Sarah said. Sarah is visibly upset at Richard, but Richard rolls over on his side laughing.

“You are so damn gullible, girl I love pulling your chain,” Richard said between laughs.

“Ha-ha, Richard. You know you are such a cretin. That’s why you’re the support person. Oh yeah, this time please refrain from throwing rocks at them, is that understood?” Sarah demanded.

“I’ll try! So how are you going to win them over, boss?” Richard asked.

“We’ll do what Jane did. We’ll win them over with food, patience, and I’ll try to blend into the environment,” Sarah said.

Richard is looking quizzical after her comments. “I was making a reference to Jane Goodall. I’m going to move over to them in a crouch, let them see me from a distance, and leave some of this fruit. This dried fruit is sweet as compared to their usual diet, and this will hold up in the heat of the day. You got any better ideas?” Sarah asked.

“They might like lobster!” Richard said.

“I’ll talk to the chef and see if I can get the item added to the menu. In the meantime, you stay behind me and keep out of sight. If this gets ugly, you just stand up and be your usual self; that’s enough to scare anybody including a truculent Ebu,” Sarah said.

Richard looks at her while shaking his own head. “You know, despite popular belief, I am not a complete imbecile. Jane Goodall’s techniques worked with wild African chimps but these guys are a nearby relative of ours that just happen to split off the old family tree close to a million years ago. We have no way of predicting their behavior, nor do we know they are going

to react to the sight of you. We should have given this approach a little more serious thought,” Richard said.

Sarah turns and gives Richard a harsh look, and Richard realizes that he has incurred Sarah’s wrath once again.

“Richard, all I have done over the past two years is to think about this very moment. Damn it, I know all of the ramifications, and I even considered the possible cultural contamination that is going to occur when a primitive species meets a so-called advanced species such as our own. The right way to do this is to have a team of experts study and debate this issue for months on end. And you want to know something? It’s weeks of endless mental masturbation as they massage their massive egos and try to gain an advantage and promulgate their own specific agenda. Believe me; I’ve watched these pompous asses in action. In the end, it always comes down to the good intentions of the observer to make it right for the subjects, whether they are Apache, Maasai, chimps or Ebu. It has always been that way. You know the Heisenberg uncertainty principle about measuring and observing a subatomic particle without changing its future position. All you can do is minimize the impact of that observation. I have to be a good observer and remain as dispassionate as possible when watching the Ebu. I am not there to interact with them, nor am I here to save them. That is the only way I can accurately record their existence on this planet and do them the justice they deserve,” Sarah said.

“Nice speech Sarah, but who are you are trying to convince? Me or you?” Richard asked.

“Richard, the right thing to do is to walk away from the Ebu and forget all about this island. That way the Ebu can continue their present existence uninterrupted. But you know someday, they’ll go extinct on their own or worse yet some unscrupulous person will find them and exploit the Ebu for their own personal gain. Then what of their future? Are they going to share the same fate as the medical lab chimps? Considerable good can come from this

discovery; specifically, when we can document man's ascension from our animal relatives to a transitional species like the Ebu. This is an opportunity to prove that humanity is not that different, nor of a divine origin, separate and apart from our animal brethren. And if that is true, we owe much more to our chimp, gorilla and orangutans cousins, who we continue to imprison, torture in medical experiments and kill in the wild for food," Sarah said.

The edge in Sarah's voice was very evident, but Richard took the words not as a sermon, but as the words of a true believer in her own just cause.

"Okay, okay, Sarah, I'm on your side, I'm just worried about your safety," Richard said.

Sarah looked up at Richard and looked directly into his eyes again. "Really, thanks for the concern Richard but I'm a big girl now!"

"Sarah, one more thing, your point about the mental masturbation..." Richard said.

Sarah gave him one of those exasperated looks again. "You never give it up, do you? On second thought, let's not even go there. Besides I'm counting on one other factor that will help make this soiree a bit safer than what it initially seems," Sarah said.

"What's that?" Richard asked. "That the Ebu are noble savages and that they will act accordingly?"

"No, that is romanticized, western culture nonsense," said Sarah. "No, I'm using a little island biology. Since the Ebu are an island-borne species with few natural predators, it would be reasonable to expect they should have little fear of strange animals. But, you never know, after all they are human. So, I'm ready, how about you?"

"Good to go kiddo, good luck!" Richard said as he gives her a small pat on her back.

Sarah grabs his hand in turn and said, "Thanks Richard, so partner are you ready to make a little history?" Richard reluctantly nods his head in the affirmative, and the two head off to their individual destinies.

They approach the Ebu band once again along the same trail. Sarah motions to Richard to move toward some thick brush to setup the video camera equipment. She waits patiently for him to complete the setup, knowing her big moment on stage has arrived. Richard moves slowly and deliberately so as not to disrupt the brush. The Ebu appear to be very self-absorbed in their daily routine and they have yet to notice the newcomers. Richard signals that he is ready, although his angle is less than perfect for shooting the video. It doesn't matter; it's all up to Sarah to make this work anyway.

Sarah's initial step is to leave food as an offering to the Ebu before they introduce themselves to the tribe. Sarah is crouching, and she is slowly approaching along the trail bringing with her the dried fruit. She'll leave the food about thirty yards from the camp and in this manner avoid being seen by the troop. Sarah gets to thirty yards but she continues to crouch-walk closer to the Ebu camp.

"What is that nut doing? She is getting way too close!" Richard said aloud to himself.

Sarah gets within twenty yards of the Ebu camp and she can start to recognize the faces of different individuals. Her breathing becomes more rapid, and she can feel the adrenaline beginning to rise in her body. She spots two isolated adolescents playing on the trail leading to the camp. She stops and watches the two small naked children play, mesmerized by the tenderness being expressed by the two. The older child is cupping a large beetle in her hands and the wings are vibrating madly as it struggles to take flight from its captor. The younger girl is watching the bug with obvious delight and she gently tries to take the struggling beetle from the older girl's hands.

As Sarah watches, the sun mixes in with the shade of the leaves while dabbing her face with streaks of warm light. She is sitting on the back porch of her parent's house contently playing in the sun on a quiet spring day. Sarah's older sister is holding her new doll and is

engaged in a wordless monologue with her little sister on how to work the buttons on the dress she had fastidiously placed on the small plastic figurine. The willful young girl soon becomes impatient with the pace of her sister's handiwork and hastily wrestles the doll from her sister clutches in an effort to fasten the buttons by herself. In disgust, the older girl's face suddenly reddens and contorts in pain as she lets out a sharp, piercing distress call...

The older female adolescent had spotted Sarah along the trail and her shrill call of warning disrupts the relative calm of the morning air. "Shit, I'm such an idiot! I hope Richard is getting this," Sarah muttered to herself as she awakens from her daydream. She really wanted to just drop off the fruit and get out of there unnoticed but the tranquility she was formerly feeling has been replaced by a sudden fright.

The soft murmuring and clicking sounds are replaced by a harsh chattering noise among the group of adults. Two older males rapidly move closer to the adolescents with their short, deadly spears in hand. They spot Sarah, and they hurriedly place themselves between the young girls and Sarah. Sarah is scared and the adrenaline is pumping throughout her entire body. She is trembling from equal parts of excitement and fear, but Sarah doesn't move and remains in her tight crouch. They are clearly agitated, and they are close enough that Sarah can tell them apart. One appears to be an older male with a bit of grey in his balding short black hair and with a little facial hair. He is lean and wiry with a dark brown skin not unlike an aborigine. "Ok, I'm calling him Grey," Sarah thinks to herself, as the scientist struggles to regain self-control. She is thinking anything, in a vain attempt to control her raging emotions.

The second male stands by Grey's side. "Joe," as Sarah names him, is slightly shorter than Grey, more muscular and has a pronounced potbelly. He has some long, scraggily whiskers coming from his chin but he too is relatively hairless. The dark skin, full-grown adult males are less than three and a half feet tall and their size is disorienting to Sarah. Both have raised their

spears from the ground, but Sarah is unsure if they could hit her from that distance. Their long arms throw off any quick mental calculations on her part. Sarah begins to reconsider the sanity of her decision and questions the predictability of an unknown race of people.

She looks them both in the eyes and then averts her gaze. From the corner of her eye, she scrutinizes their spears, and it is clear to Sarah that the Ebu are confused by her presence. Sarah hesitates as she debates whether to back away or not. Hell, she is even considering making a run for it. “Where the hell is Richard?”

Richard is watching the drama unfold before him. He is also unsure what to do next as he stares at a vulnerable Sarah standing alone on the trail. The spears in the Ebu’s hands are a powerful reminder of how badly this encounter could go for Sarah and he, too, is uncertain as to how far they can throw their spears. The conventional academic thinking was that early spears were used for close quarter killing, just as they did with the unfortunate rat at the pond. They didn’t look particularly aerodynamic but did he really want to field test that theory with Sarah as their possible target?

“How fast can these little devils go? Can we out run them if we had to? But wait, Sarah can’t outrun anything! Stupid plan! Actually, this wasn’t even a plan, it was more like wistful thinking on our part,” Richard thinks to himself.

Richard is concerned and worried about his Sarah. How much time does he have to react to a hostile move from the Ebu? He decides that if they raise their spears above their shoulders, he will immediately reveal himself and create a distraction for her.

Sarah remains in her crouch and watches the males closely. The pale intruder puzzles the Ebu, and they are intently staring at her. Her size is not a threat, but she is behaving strangely to them, her movements from her crouching position are almost like that of a wounded animal. The other Ebu are keeping their distance from the stranger leaving the two males to deal with the

intruder. The adolescents have run back to the camp to the comfort of the older females.

Richard the scientist is still recording the first interaction between the two Ebu males and Sarah.

Separated for thousands of years by a hostile geography and dissimilar cultures, the two species observed each other with keen interest. As the stalemate continues, Sarah does something very instinctual; she smiles at the Ebu while looking straight at them. The Ebu look and turn their heads to their side trying to figure out the motives of the stranger. The older male walks forward a few feet at a time and strains his head to get a better look at Sarah. Sarah continues to smile at him, and she starts making her way backwards while leaving the dried fruit on the trail. As she moves backwards, the older male lowers his spear and looks at the other male while making several strange clucking noises. The other male lowers his spear as well. As she continues to crouch and walk backwards, she looks again at the older male and swears that she sees a weak smile in return from Grey. She wasn't sure; she really couldn't tell from that distance. Slowly, she moves purposely backward, and in turn, the Ebu males slowly move forward.

As Sarah retreats around a bend on the trail, she loses sight of the Ebu males. Sarah gets up out of her crouch and she begins running to Richard's hiding position. Richard is watching the entire episode while the camera records the event. He notices that the Ebu have stopped to examine the dry fruit offering Sarah had left behind and Richard breathes a welcome sigh of relief.

Sarah is now running as fast as she can. Sarah is moving so quickly she feels as if she is flying in a dream; she has never moved this fast before in her life. Running at a full sprint, Sarah quickly makes her way back to Richard's camera position.

Richard greets her by saying to her in a hushed voice, "Are you freaking nuts, girl?"

Sarah jumps into his arms and Richard in the same motion gives her a big hug and lifts her completely off the ground. "I'll tell you something lady; you got a big pair of cojones."

She is shaking and sobbing lightly from both the adrenaline rush and the overall excitement of the moment. "Did you see that? I made contact with them! That was the most amazing moment of my freaking life," Sarah said. Richard is hugging her tightly, while keeping her suspended in the air and Sarah doesn't even bother to push Richard away.

"Why the sudden change in plan?" Richard asked as he lowered her to the ground.

She sighs and is content to rest for a few seconds in his arms.

"No plan, I just saw the two children playing and I stopped to watch them," Sarah said.

Sarah puts her head down onto Richard's chest while she inhales his sweaty masculinity. He holds her tightly and can still feel her trembling in his arms. Once again, she surprisingly finds solace in the arms of a big ape. With Sarah trapped in his arms, Richard happily listens to the rhythm of her breathing but Sarah finally grows impatient with the prolonged hug. "Thanks, you can let go of me now!"

"Oh, sorry, you kind of scared the shit out of me," Richard said.

"Hey, I got news for you; I scared the shit out of both of us," Sarah said.

Richard returns to the camera and checks to see if the Ebu are pursuing them. To his relief, the Ebu are busily picking up the dried fruit and are slowly returning to their camp with their newfound bounty.

"Where are the Ebu?" Sarah asked almost plaintively.

"Hate to say it kiddo, but I think they were more interested in the dry fruit than they were with you. I guess you pale skin types are not exactly their kind!" Richard said.

It didn't matter. Sarah was too busy doing her little spastic dance of joy over the day's events, and Richard was content to just watch the spectacle. With one bold and incredibly stupid

deed, she had secured her place in scientific history and validated her very own existence. That had to be considered a good day in anybody's books and it was still early in the morning.

The Princess Meets Flo

During the night, Sarah and Richard begin an animated discussion among themselves as they sit by their campfire. The guides have seen the two Americans argue before and they know better than to interrupt the two during one of their so-called scholarly debates. Supar and Rudy quickly become weary of the two and they retire to their respective tents before they too, become part of the fray. They hate listening to a man and a woman endlessly arguing with no obvious resolution in sight.

“Sarah, all I’m asking is that we add some structure to your interactions with the Ebu. You know some basic guidelines and a phased-in approach to your dealings with them,” Richard said.

“No way Richard! For you to draw up a schedule at this point is all conjecture on your part. We know nothing of their culture and of how they think. We’re getting way ahead of ourselves with this conversation, and you are being far too structured at this point. The Ebu are a people, Richard, not lab animals for our experiments and we have to be flexible in our interactions with them!”

Sarah is raising her voice and she is clearly agitated. Her high from the Ebu encounter earlier in the day has dissipated thanks in large part to Richard’s continual meddling.

Meantime, Richard can only shake his head at her. He is struggling to find some way to rein Sarah in so she doesn't continue to take big risks like she did earlier in the day. Only, Sarah, the boss, has taken over once again and her heels are digging in for a good fight.

Sarah continues with her argument. "I think we should review what we have so far and evaluate our plans for tomorrow. I also want to review the tape to see what else was going on. With my first viewing of the tape, I saw the Ebu males picking up and scrutinizing the plastic bag. Damn it, I can't believe I left that behind."

"Sarah, believe me, if they've been combing the beaches you can only imagine the garbage they have managed to scavenge over the years," Richard said.

"Nevertheless, we have to be more careful about possible cultural contamination; we can't leave anything behind" said Sarah. "That said, we've got to get this process going as quickly as possible since we can't stay forever on this island."

Richard continues to shake his head at Sarah's stubbornness. "Boy, you are such a pain in the ass! I know you are very focused on what you have to do tomorrow, but the questions I am asking, are for the day after tomorrow and the day after that day. What's wrong with putting some thought experiments together for the Ebu to determine what is going on in those small brains of theirs? That diminished brain capacity has to have some impact on their thought process."

"Richard, I'm just not ready to plan for that next step. We can decide this later, all right?"

"No, it's not all right, Sarah. I've always said that no decision is a decision. I'm not giving you another opportunity to take chances whenever you see fit!"

"Gee, thanks Dad! Damn it Richard, of course, I'm taking chances. Is that what you wanted to hear? What the hell do you expect? I've got to do in two weeks what would normally

take a half year of field work. So big surprise, we're gonna take a few shortcuts and with it a few additional risks. I'm a big girl; I know what I am doing. There, are you happy now with my admission?"

Sarah's face turns crimson and she is visibly angry at the turn of direction the conversation is taking but Richard is unrelenting.

"Maybe we should just go and come back with a real research team," he said.

"No way, there is so much we can learn just by being here and watching them," Sarah shouted back.

Richard decides to stop skirting the issue and to get straight to the heart of the matter. "Sarah, I just don't want you take any more unnecessary chances, is that clear? What you did today was crazy, almost damn reckless. Do you have a death wish I should know about?"

Sarah is unmoved but Richard continues in a softer tone. "It's just that I'm really worried about your personal safety, that's all. I'm not trying to pick a fight with you; I'm just worried, okay?" Richard asked.

"Richard, I think we both agree that I took some extreme risks today. I know I scared myself to death. It's just that we're so damn close now, and I don't want to blow this one small window of opportunity. You have to trust me on this one. You know what is exciting me about these people? I am getting the sense that they can think something as fundamentally human as 'I am'."

"You forgot to add 'I am and I want to be somewhere else!' that's what makes somebody really human," Richard said jokingly in an effort to defuse her.

"What, Richard? You want to be somewhere else?" Sarah asked with an edge in her voice.

"Well, I don't want to be here having this argument with you."

“Not to worry Richard, this argument has ended for you. I can see you’ll never see beyond ‘I am’. Good night!” Sarah said. Sarah storms off to her tent leaving Richard alone.

“Well, there she goes, the future Princess of the Ebu,” Richard said just loud enough for her to hear.

Sarah, as she stepped into her tent, replied with a curt “Jerk!”

As the campfire slowly dimmed, Richard had little to do but to reflect on Sarah’s baffling commentary about ‘I am’. To him, ‘I am’ was the most human of all sentiments, an almost defiant expression of one’s existence to the world. She was always making these whacked comments that were incomprehensible to him. On the positive side, he did feel that being called a “*jerk*” was a decided improvement over being labeled a *cretin*. To his way of thinking, the word *jerk* at least carried the connotation of a temporary condition with some possibility of reform. *Cretin* really did imply a long-term physical condition of being mentally challenged. Yes, that resolves it, *jerk* was much better than being called a *cretin*!

From the darkness of her tent, he then heard Sarah shriek in anger and frustration, “You’re such an asshole cretin!”

Oh well, so much for personal redemption he thought to himself as he sat alone in the darkness of the camp.

The following morning Sarah greets Richard with a big hello as though their argument had never happened. Of course, the princess had won the argument and Richard would have to make do knowing she was the boss. They return together to the beach site to begin the process of habituating the Ebu to Sarah’s presence. Again, she leaves fruit with them and watches from a distance while making her presence known to the Ebu camp. Again, there is much excitement among the Ebu and three adult males approach with the newcomer boldly grabbing the dried

fruit. The newcomer is a young adult and he is shorter than the other two. He is making quick work of the fruit, and his gluttony earns him the name “Henry”. Only Grey is carrying a spear and the others appear to be unarmed. They spot Sarah in the distance and quizzically watch her as they continue to eat their newfound bounty. Sometime later, one of the older females joins the males, and she starts to take some of the remaining fruit pieces as well.

Sarah continues this routine for three consecutive days and each day she manages to get closer to the troop. Each day the routine is the same, and this methodical approach by Sarah appeases Richard’s concerns. Sarah brings the fruit and leaves it in her usual location near the trail. From thirty yards away, she has moved to twenty yards, then finally to ten yards. That is as close as she dares to go and she assumes a regular sitting position by a large banyan tree. Each day more and more of the Ebu visit the trail at the same set time to eat the fruit treat. Richard remains hidden but he too has been able to move the video camera closer to the camp. With each incremental step closer to the camp, Sarah is able to observe more and more of the rich tapestry that comprises the Ebu life. Every observation is significant to Sarah in terms of her ability to record who the Ebu are as a people.

One day Sarah decides to make Richard visible on the trail and positions him thirty yards from the Ebu camp. Upon the initial sight of Richard, the Ebu males become enraged at his presence. Sarah stays back, carefully observing their reaction to Richard. Even though Richard is crouching the Ebu are not very fond of Richard and won’t allow him to approach the troop. Despite his best efforts to make himself small, the Ebu are very wary of Richard.

Sarah was relatively shorter at five feet three inches tall and her overall physique was fairly petite. With her recent forced diet, she is only thirty pounds heavier than the Ebu. Her relatively high-pitched voice also tells the Ebu that she is female, albeit a rather strange one to them. Richard’s relatively tall stature at over six feet two is a strong signal to the Ebu that he is

an aggressor. His overall size is too strong a visual cue since he weighs almost a hundred pounds more than the largest Ebu male. Keen observers of nature, the Ebu can gauge his size even as he crouches and scurries along the ground. In the Ebu world, there is no other animal on the island quite as large as Richard Staller. Richard's body signals may suggest submissiveness, but Richard's large size is a direct signal to these small people that he might be a predator. The Ebu decide to err on the side of caution, and they don't allow Richard to approach them.

This ordeal goes on for two days and Sarah decides that Richard has to remain back. Sarah even tries to have Richard bring the food. It does not matter. Everyday the Ebu are getting increasingly agitated with Richard's approach. Even Grey is annoyed at Richard's presence and he gives Richard several stern looks. "Richard, they just want you out of here, I'm sorry, we really did give it the old college try," Sarah said.

"That's okay; I've been rejected by better. I know where I'm not wanted. Let me get a few close up shots of our rude neighbors and I'll go." Richard takes a quick movie shot of the Ebu with the digital camera using a small 16-megabyte memory module and stuffs the module into his pocket. "Might as well use it up," he explains to Sarah, "too small to get many digital shots on." Richard proceeds to take additional shots, but the males are getting even more upset with the sight of the camera. "Okay, okay guys, I get the message, I'm out of here," as Richard slinks back into the forest.

"Stay in your crouch Richard!" Sarah reminds him.

To Richard's relief, none of the Ebu have challenged Sarah's presence. Unlike Richard, the smaller and apparently very female Sarah has been readily accepted by the entire Ebu troop.

Sarah remains at her post by the banyan tree, and she easily blends into the scenery for the Ebu. One thing she notices is that the dried fruit is not much of a treat for the Ebu anymore. One of the local fruits has started to ripen, and the adult females have taken to gathering large

amounts of the fruit and bringing it to camp. There are four adult females with one older, frailer female. The dominant female is larger than the other females, and she has a small infant male that she nurses. Besides gathering food the adult females care for five adolescents, and from what Sarah can gather, maybe four young adults. She has to guess since Sarah finds age difficult to discern among the Ebu because of their small stature. Altogether, Sarah has identified twenty members of the Ebu tribe of varying ages and sex.

The Ebu females are even smaller than the males, and like their counterpart 18,000 years ago, they stand barely three feet tall. Interestingly, even the mature females have relatively small breasts as compared to their human counterparts, and nothing like the pendulous breasts of the Ebu Gogo legend. For females and males alike, the Ebu are a hairless lot, and are certainly no hairier than most of their human counterparts. All of the Ebu have a pronounced potbelly with wide hips, though there is one scrawny, light-skinned female with an even larger stomach than the rest. It takes a day or two for her to recognize the signs, but Sarah realizes that the young female is very much pregnant. While observing this small female, Sarah soon learns about the harsh hierarchy that belies the seeming tranquility of the Ebu clan.

The older female rules the other females in the troop with a classic iron fist and makes the younger female's life extremely rough for her. The younger female is constantly being separated from food by the older dominate female that Sarah names "Agrippina". Agrippina, in addition to her male infant, had several other older children. She was constantly manipulating the males of the troop and was good at getting her way with them. The oldest child was a male in his teens that Sarah just had to name "Nero". He was somewhat cowardly and constantly sought the attention of his mother, especially if the other males challenged him or if playtime got too rough.

As the other Ebu have taken to the fresh fruit, the small pregnant female continued to enjoy the relative quiet of eating the dried fruit. After a week of regular visits, Sarah finds herself greeted each morning by the young female. She decided to name the light skinned pregnant female: Flo, a nickname the researchers chose for the original Flores Homo Floresiensis skeleton. Every morning Flo would wait patiently for Sarah and the daily ritual of the dried fruit handout. Sarah, seeing the ribs on the skinny pregnant female, has taken to added a little protein to the mix while taking care not to tip off her new menu to the rest of the clan.

When seeing Sarah approach, Flo would automatically assume a submissive posture and greet her with a gentle clucking sound that is the standard hello greeting of the Ebu. Sarah learns to imitate the clucking sound and begins to respond in kind to Flo. Invariably, Flo would give Sarah a big smile in return and her yellow, oversized teeth reminded Sarah of a precocious eight year old with their front adult teeth in. Sarah couldn't help but smile in return at her diminutive companion's heartfelt daily greeting.

The closer Sarah gets to Flo, the more she notices the idiosyncrasies of the small female. Flo's hair is a bit longer and often dirtier than the other Ebu. Sarah finds out why when observing the grooming habits of the Ebu. The Ebu will use broken stone flakes for cutting their straight black hair, and they will often assist one another with their daily grooming. However, with Flo at the bottom of the pecking order, few of the other Ebu will go out of their way to groom her. Consequently, Flo has taken to cutting her hair by herself, usually in a haphazard manner and with a sometimes-comical result.

There was another, more insidious consequence of being a social outcast within the Ebu troop. Flo was constantly shooed away from the infants of the troop. The other females would often exchange infants with one another; perhaps there was a comfort level because biologically most of the females were also sisters. Flo, however, is never given a chance to hold the infants,

and she is relegated to hanging out or playing with the juveniles. Nero often teases and torments Flo when he gets the chance, knowing that Flo cannot reciprocate in kind because of the presence of Agrippina.

For Sarah, Flo becomes an instant favorite mainly because of her underdog status in the troop, but also because Flo is always so genuinely happy to see her. Sarah actually sees the loner in Flo and, in a sense; they share a common bond together.

Flo had a number of other interesting habits. Flo was a noisy eater who constantly smacked her lips as she ate the fruit, and she would make small guttural sounds that emanated deep from the back of her throat. In addition, Flo liked to arrange her food in a very careful order placing her favorites up front, such as the dried pears and apricots while moving the prunes to the back. "Does anybody like prunes?" Sarah had to wonder. With those noises, Flo was sharing with Sarah her contentment with the daily offering of fruit. It was a small ritual she performed everyday, and Sarah found her quirky little companion to be both amusing and enlightening.

Sarah enjoyed watching the Ebu from her favorite spot at the base of the banyan tree. The enormous tubular lattice trunk of the formidable fig tree belied its humble origins as a parasitic strangler vine deposited by a lone bird's strewn droppings. Sarah had chosen a location that was partially shady so she could sit in relative comfort for hours at a time while watching her subjects. Furthermore, she never lacked for companionship since at her side was her newfound friend, Flo. Occasionally, a cool breeze would blow through the banyan tree and as if in quiet tribute to the sacrifice of her fellow researcher, Sarah would lift her head from her notebook and give the secreted Richard a small smile or a gentle hand wave. It was a peaceful and deeply spiritual experience for Sarah and one that she had hoped she could begin to convey in her writings.

One day Flo is sitting quite close to Sarah, as is her routine, contently eating her dried fruit. They often only sit a few feet apart as though they were old friends meeting daily at a local park bench. Sarah reaches out to give Flo her favorite fruit: dried apricots. Flo gingerly takes the offering of food from Sarah. Up to this point, both have taken great care not to touch one another and their only physical contact had been the subliminal exchange of their personal odors consisting of Flo's unique palm oil tang and Sarah's pervasive freshly scrubbed scent. However, this time Flo touches Sarah's shirtsleeve, gently pulling it away from Sarah's skin, trying to see where the material ended and where the being began.

Sarah chuckles at the gesture but unexpectedly Flo actually extends her hand to Sarah, at first hesitantly, but then with a certainty that belies her normal timid disposition. With her long arm stretched out to reach Sarah, Flo extends all five fingers outwardly from her hand. Sarah seeing what Flo is doing extends her left hand likewise and Flo gracefully touches Sarah's fingertips with her own, looking quizzically at the differences and similarities between the hands of the two species. Sarah is doing the same, and the hands touch as if a child's hand touches an adult hand. One hand is small and dark, the other larger and pale in color.

The two lightly touch each other's hands for just a few seconds, each looking at the other hands and then into each other's eyes, and in a brief moment they span the eons that separate the two species. One is from the dominant species of the planet that numbers in the billions with a brain that is almost three times as large the other's, while the other is a castoff member of an evolutionary throwback that numbers less than two dozen on a small, remote tropical island. Despite the vast differences between the species, they are just two individual sentient creatures, sharing a common emotion called wonderment.

From the Ebu camp, Agrippina spots the two and in a jealous rage, she starts hollering. The two suddenly separate as though they were teenagers caught doing something they shouldn't

do. As Flo scurries away, Sarah can only wonder if Richard got their special moment on videotape.

Over the next few days, the relationship with Flo continues to grow. In return for Sarah's largess, Flo in turn brings some of the Ebu food to their sitting spot. Some of the food is readily identifiable; others cannot be discerned that easily. The flowers of an attractive white orchid show up one day, and Flo has every expectation that Sarah will eat them. Sarah has observed the other Ebu eating this flower as well but she and Richard have had little luck in finding the source of these lovely, white flowers. Sarah only has a small taste but she is surprised to find out how sweet they are, almost like a honeysuckle.

That night she shares a few flowers with Richard. "These are hallucinogenic, right Alice?" Richard asked.

"It is just one disappointment after another for you, Richard. I don't think they have any recreational value but they don't taste bad," Sarah said.

"Damn." Richard eats a few and then exclaims, "Hey, these aren't bad, kind of sweet. Do you ever figure out where they are getting these from?" Richard asked. Sarah shakes her head no.

The following day Flo brings to Sarah a dark, hardened mass of dried meat. Flo readily eats it and again gestures to Sarah to do the same. Sarah has no idea where the meat came from but she gives it a nibble. The texture is a bit disgusting, but to her surprise, the meat is not gamey at all but rather bland. She eats a little more and hopes that Flo will soon get distracted. Fortunately, two of the younger males start rough housing and Flo is intently watching the pair go about their antics. Sarah, seizing her opportunity, deftly places the mystery meat in her bag.

That night Sarah takes the meat to her camp. "Richard you want to try this?" Sarah asked.

Richard twirls the meat in the air with two fingers while observing its unique texture.

“What is this crap? Ebu take out? I know rations are getting low, but this is getting a bit too ‘Survivor Islandish’ for me.”

“It’s sort of a cured meat that Flo brought to me. I can’t figure out what it is,” Sarah said.

“Cured meat? Pastrami is a cured meat; I don’t know what the hell this is. Well, did you try it yet?”

“Yeah, it’s not that bad,” Sarah said lying.

Richard looks at her and then the meat. “Sorry, you go first kiddo!”

Sarah takes a bite, grimaces and looks at Richard, while telling him, “You try it now!”

“Just as long it’s not Spam!” Richard nibbles a little and makes a disgusted face. “This is not very good, Sarah. Kind of makes you wish you were a vegetarian. You know, I’m surprised that you’re not a ‘vegetan’ or something.”

“Hey, cretin what the heck is a ‘vegetan’? Did you mean vegan?” Sarah asked.

“Yeah, that’s it,” Richard said.

“I recognize that for me to live something has to die, be it a plant or an animal. Even something as benign as a having a cup of tea required the farmer to disturb the earth to plant his crop which in turn killed millions of living organisms. I accept that sacrifice and appreciate the source of my food,” Sarah said.

“Well, I can’t share your appreciation for the mystery meat,” Richard said. “I got another question for you. I was reviewing the video from the other day.” Sarah knew what was coming.

“Should you be physically touching Flo? I mean, after all, we could introduce a new disease to the Ebu population that they have little defense for and inadvertently wipe them out. Something as innocuous as a common cold could have severe repercussions with their immune

system. They have been isolated on this island for thousand of years, so who knows what they are susceptible to?" Richard asked.

Richard had another agenda. Besides concern for the health of the Ebu, Richard was actually getting creeped out by the touchy-feely branch of anthropology that Sarah was practicing on a daily basis with Flo. Richard had always pegged Sarah as a hardheaded scientist, but now he was beginning to have his doubts about his initial impressions of Sarah. Furthermore, Richard was now in the habit of leaving Rudy with the video camera as he searched the rest of the island with Supar. Richard really didn't want Sarah getting out of control with the Ebu in his absence.

In turn, Sarah gives him a dirty look that she holds for a few seconds before speaking. "Richard, I got the doctor to give me every conceivable shot known to man before I left, and I carefully monitor my health. In the ten years, I have been doing primate research I have never gotten another primate sick including the human kind. That said, it's a good point you're making Richard and I'll be extra careful going forward," Sarah said in a somewhat sarcastic tone.

Sarah then hastily changes the topic before Richard can interject. "Richard, I've got a simple experiment we can we do with Flo that requires minimal contact. Let's give Flo a mirror and see how she reacts to her image in the mirror. We can then see if she is at all conscious of herself," Sarah said as she threw Richard a bone.

Richard looks at Sarah and smiles at her guile. "That does sound fairly innocuous as experiments go, and it definitely fits the budget. Let's do it!"

The following morning, Sarah finds her usual spot by the banyan tree and settles down. Every morning the troop makes their way from their sleeping lair into the temporary day camp. At this point, the Ebu don't bother to give Sarah a second look, except for Flo, of course. Flo greets Sarah like a long lost friend each day, and Sarah is happy to see Flo didn't bring any

mystery food today. Today is different though because among the dried fruit Sarah has placed her small personal pocket mirror.

Flo sits down and peacefully begins to eat the fruit Sarah has laid out for her. As she sorts the remaining fruit, Flo notices the mirror. Flo picks the mirror up apparently attracted by the reflection of the sunlight from it. She looks in the mirror and gives it a puzzled look. She turns it over several times checking out both the back and the front. Unlike other lower animals, Flo is not startled by her own reflection. Other animals when initially introduced to their reflection in a mirror, automatically assume it's another animal and act accordingly. Male birds will peck and attack their reflection thinking it's another bird, but chimps on the other hand can recognize themselves almost immediately. Flo looks in the mirror and makes a face. After a careful review she smiles and starts touching her face. Flo plays with the mirror for a while and she begins to notice her haphazardly cut hair. She fingers the uneven ends of her hair as if to wonder how did that happen? Flo's hair is reminiscent of a doll's bad hairstyle as cut by a young girl in a manic-depressive state. For several minutes, Flo plays with the mirror before returning to eat her fruit.

That night, Sarah eagerly greets Richard back at the camp while exclaiming, "Richard, Flo passed the test of self-awareness as defined by Gallup. She easily recognized herself in the mirror! That girl aced the test!" Sarah said.

"Sarah, you know those mind tests are all fairly subjective and have always been a bit suspect to the scientific community," Richard said.

"Richard, the key point is she didn't fail the test. She is self-aware and I wouldn't be surprised to find that she would pass a Theory of Mind. Richard, with Flo there is a there, there."

“Whoa! You are getting way ahead of yourself Sarah. You went from a simple self-awareness test to saying these little 500cc critters have a Theory of Mind. That’s a big step for such a simple test,” Richard said.

“They are not critters as you so eloquently put it and I’m not arguing with you tonight, Richard,” and Sarah calmly walks away to her tent.

The following day, Sarah goes back to her usual location with food and she brings the mirror again. This morning is different, and Sarah can clearly see that Flo has a different agenda in mind. Flo gives the usual morning greeting but she has something in her hand. Sarah is afraid that it’s some strange meat that she will have to share with Flo, but on closer inspection, she can make out a piece of volcanic stone. In fact, it is a special cutting stone that the other female Ebu use to cut their hair. Flo sits next to Sarah and hands the stone to her while pointing to her own irregularly cut hair. The gesture to cut Flo’s hair delights Sarah. “If Rudy doesn’t get this on tape, I will personally kill that boy tonight,” Sarah said to herself.

Sarah examines the stone and notices the carefully sharpened edge cut into the rock. She feels the edge with her finger and instantly cuts the skin causing it to bleed. “Stupid of me, boy that is sharp,” she says to herself. “Well, Flo, I was never too good at this, but I’ll give it a go,” Sarah said.

Then she hesitates as she thinks about what Richard would have to say. “Oh, to hell with him,” and she carefully positions herself and Flo at a good angle for the camera. Sarah laughs wondering what her mother would think after spending years as a young girl haphazardly cutting her own hair and that of her unfortunate dolls. All Sarah knows is that Flo wants her hair to be even across her forehead like the rest of the troop. Sarah finds cutting Flo’s hair is akin to cutting the hair of a small, hyperactive, five year-old child. Her scalp at least was clean but then Sarah notices a few scattered fleas hopping about the tangled hair. Sarah sighs and picks the

fleas away from Flo's scalp. "Well, on the plus side there are no lice but this is going to take a while, girlfriend," Sarah says to Flo. Flo sits quietly, rocking back and forth, smiling to herself while Sarah cuts and grooms her hair.

Twenty minutes later, Sarah is done with the haircut and she gives Flo the mirror once again. Flo looks in the mirror at her new bangs for several minutes, then turns to Sarah, and gives her a big, yellow smile. Sarah smiles back at Flo while basking in their shared moment together. Flo then motions to Sarah's hair, clearly indicating that she wants to return the favor. Sarah tries to decline the offer but Flo is insistent on cutting Sarah's hair. Sarah reluctantly sighs and goes, "Oh boy, this isn't going to be pretty...."

As dusk approaches, Richard arrives at the camp from the cave dig, and he sees Sarah strangely sitting quietly by herself. The two guides are sitting at the far end of the camp and are keeping their distance away from her. As Richard gets closer to Sarah, he is startled by the sudden and dramatic change in her physical appearance.

"Aren't you a little too old to be rebelling against your parents? What the hell happened to your hair, Sarah?" Sarah's hair is a mess with her bangs uneven and the back cut at a number of different lengths.

"Just look at the videotape Richard, just look will you?" Sarah asked.

That night, Richard remains quiet. After ten minutes of awkward silence, Sarah asked Richard if he had reviewed the tape.

"Yeah I did, what the hell was that about? Are you planning on opening an Ebu Super Cuts saloon?"

Sarah looks at Richard. "How can you say that? That moment was a real break through. Flo demonstrated self-awareness and, to some degree, a level of empathy with me."

“Come on, you don’t call that science do you Sarah? That was an amusing anecdote. Sarah, you’re getting way too close to your subject, and that’s not good for any scientist.”

“Richard you’re wrong. If the subject doesn’t trust you, you can’t learn anything from them. It could be a dog, cat, monkey, chimp or a child. They all have to trust you. That’s how you get close to them. I’ve done this all my life, please respect that. Richard, they won’t even let you near them whereas I’m actually interacting with them.”

“Sarah, look I know how important and noble trust, empathy and all of that other crap is, but didn’t we just have a conversation about minimizing physical contact. For God’s sake, now you’re grooming each other? What’s next? Double dates with Flo?”

“I’m not sure about Flo, but I don’t think I can come up with an appropriate date.”

“Sarah, just listen to you? Sarah, somewhere, some how there has to be a middle ground. Where do you draw the line between observing them and interacting with them? When does your interacting start corrupting or interfering with their culture? What happened to the girl who made the comment about the Heisenberg Principle?”

“She evolved!” Sarah said curtly.

Richard is silent for a few minutes and an awkward silence hangs about the camp. Richard doesn’t want to hurt her feelings, and he has to admit to himself that he is suffering a small pang of professional jealousy. After all, he spent the entire day in a dark and dank cave with Supar moving yards of dirt in a futile effort to look for fossils. At the same time, Sarah is making real breakthroughs with the living Ebu. That was Richard’s calling in life, to look in the dark places while hoping to see the light of a different yesterday. Now that Richard had these living fossils available to him, he was disturbed by the fact that they wouldn’t allow him to approach, and study them. Instead, Richard went to the sanctuary of the cave to get the answers to questions that the living Ebu couldn’t answer. How did they get here, and how long have they

been here? How did they manage to survive for thousands of years on an island that was barely large enough for a good condo project, never mind an entire species? Richard was relegated to the dark recesses of the past while Sarah was basking in the light of the living fossils.

Sarah is sitting by herself looking fairly sad and dejected, but her sadness is more than offset by her comical, almost punk-like hairstyle. Supar and Rudy make it a point not to look at her for fear of laughing, and incurring her sizable wrath once again. Richard looks at Sarah's hair, and notices that no two pieces of hair are the same length running from the front to the back of her head. Richard counted almost twenty different cuts of hair on Sarah's head or should he say hacked? Richard tries to turn away but he feels compelled to look at her once again and he is struggling desperately to contain his laughter. He looks over at Supar and Supar and they both turn away, refusing to look him in the eyes. Rudy is hiding his head in his hands; nobody wants to be the first to begin laughing at Sarah's expense. That's it, Richard has to give in.

"Sarah, putting questions of orthodoxy aside, I have to admit that was pretty cool," Richard said. With that one comment, Sarah's face instantly brightens and Richard starts chuckling.

"Good, I'm glad you admitted that to me. It makes it so much easier to give you this," Sarah said. Sarah has an envelope in her hand that she hands to Richard. Richard peers inside and sees a collection of clippings consisting of straight dark hair; the hair Sarah had just cut from Flo. Richard looks inside the envelope, and then he gives a big hearty laugh.

"You just made my day, girl! Damn, instant DNA samples from the living Ebu. You are a genius among beauticians! No wait, a second, that really is damning you with faint praise. Oh, to hell with it, you are a beautiful, genius beautician!" Richard said as he gives Sarah a big hug and then proceeds to mess her hair.

Undeterred by Richard's hug Sarah goes on. "I figured it was either that or collect Ebu droppings but it's even better than that. We can use the hair to test for nutrition, diseases, heavy metals; you name it, and as we watch them groom one another, we can gather samples from the entire troop. It's so simple in concept; I don't know why we didn't think of it originally. And don't worry; I took extra care while handling those locks."

Sarah stops a moment to catch her breath. "Look, I promise to cool it with Flo but only if you would do me a really big favor?" Sarah asked.

"Sarah, if you want to open the Ebu hair cutting saloon, just go ahead, and I'll even help you sweep the hair from the floor. What's the favor?" Richard asked.

"Can you please help me straighten my hair out, please, pretty please?" she pleaded as she looked up at him with a small smile.

"You got it, and not just because you earned my help, but because you're killing Rudy and Supar with that sorry ass cut," Richard said. At that point, the other two men who were silently sitting by the fire erupt into laughter.

"Gentlemen, where are the scissors? I'm going in!" Richard said.

The following morning Sarah returns to her spot under the Banyan tree sporting her new short haircut. Flo gives Sarah her usual greeting, and Sarah starts to watch the other Ebu go about their daily routines. Each day Sarah continues the process of naming and identifying and cataloging each individual member that comprises the troop. The vast majority of the troop appears to be in surprisingly good health. Unfortunately, Sarah finds one individual whose physical appearance is disturbing to her. He is a small male, about ten-years of age who appears almost normal, that is from a distance. As Sarah got closer, she couldn't see how his arms were folded and she finally realized he was actually missing both of his arms. Stranger still, there are

no scars to indicate that he lost the arms in some tragic accident. The small nubs that extend from his shoulder look like a classic birth defect. He is entirely helpless, and he obviously can't contribute much to the troop, yet the other Ebu care for him and see to it that he has enough food to eat. Moreover, he is usually groomed better than Flo. The Ebu sense of self seems to extend to powers of empathy for others members of the tribe as well.

Later that day, Sarah begins to feel under the weather. She is coming down with chills and a fever, and she spends the late afternoon alone in her tent. She decides that she will ride out the illness, and not disturb Richard's work in the cave. Rudy checks in on her every so often so she at least feels somebody is aware of her condition. When Sarah greets Richard at dusk, she can see the concern in his eyes. Sarah's normally tan complexion is many shades whiter than usual, and her eyes are very glassy looking.

"Man, we got to take your temperature. You look like your burning up! Richard said.

"Richard, I took it already. It's way up there."

Richard takes her temperature again and shakes his head at the 102 degree reading.

"Supar, get the medical kit and pull out whatever medicine we have in the camp. Wow, she has some fever. Sarah sit up for a moment and put your arms up," Richard commanded.

Richard begins by examining her arms and legs looking for any telltale bite marks on her skin. Richard is all business as he feels her neck and then around her armpits. "Stop it, that's ticklish!" Sarah half-expected Richard to take advantage of her but his entirely serious demeanor scares Sarah even more.

"Raise your arms again for me," and Richard continues his examination.

"Hey girl, your lymph nodes are swollen, that's not good at all. I don't like this one bit. Damn, you need a doctor, and it's too late to get off this damn island tonight. Supar, you should have told me earlier."

“She wasn’t that bad earlier. What is it boss?” Supar asked.

“Don’t know, could be reaction to an insect bite, food poisoning, bacterial infection, you name it! She’s got a temperature of 102 degrees. Supar, get me the medical kit and tell me what you have in there,” Richard said.

“I got some penicillin, some other antibiotic, a few malaria drugs,” Supar said

“Sarah, how do you feel?” Richard asked.

“How do you think, I feel like crap! I’m very feverish, a little achy and I’m really tired. What is it? You’re scaring the hell out of me!” Sarah said.

Richard checks her pulse and is relieved to find that her pulse is strong. “Any chance we can navigate out of here tonight, Supar?”

“It’s dangerous boss, I wouldn’t recommend it. Some of the coral outcrops, you can’t see them in the dark. We could take the bottom of the boat out,” Supar said.

“Damn it, I really don’t like this! All right, get the penicillin and let’s give her the remaining bottled water. Supar try to radio for some help as well. Maybe we can get lucky for once and contact someone.”

Richard stayed up with Sarah that night constantly monitoring her, and checking her vital signs. In the distance, Richard can see a line of thunderstorms forming along the horizon, and he debates which course of action is riskier to follow: take a chance with the approaching storms in the middle of the ocean or continue to care for Sarah on the island with the limited resources on hand?

Slowly, her condition worsens, and she tosses throughout the night while a delirium sets in from the fever. The following day is hellish for Sarah as she is sweating profusely and beginning to shake violently. After a spiking a fever her skin begins to turn clammy and cold

while her temperature nears 104 degrees. Soon, she begins to lose consciousness and she enters a trance-like state while muttering incoherent words repeatedly.

Sarah is alone in the jungle but she knows they are present and busily watching over her. She knows them too well; the demons have visited her before. The demons press closer but she suddenly feels herself leaving her body and her spirit races up the slope of the volcanic mountain. At the top of the mountain, she can see a large plateau filled with the dense, lush vegetation of a tropical jungle. She moves closer to the jungle and as she sees past the vegetation, she finds the ruins of an old temple. She enters the old temple and in the dim light, she can see a light colored stone altar stained with a dark iron oxide facing upward to the heavens.

On the altar, a naked man and woman is coupled at their hips, their flesh and muscles glistening in the moonlight from their ongoing exertions. They are furiously engaged in lovemaking but curiously, there is no outward look of joy or ecstasy on either of their faces. The woman devotee is on top of her master with her legs astride, rhythmically working him to an orgasm, sensing his nearing orgasm and then skillfully backing away. His hands grab her breasts; touch her long dark hair and then slowly fall to the top of her thighs. They repeat the cycle of coupling, rising and falling together, a pleasure less exercise in lovemaking with no climax or any sense of affection. She is the vessel and he is the master, harnessing from the exercise his vital fluids and their imagined psychic energies. She gives; he takes.

She gazes again upon the couple trying to determine who they are but in an instant the lovers are gone. In their place, the distant echoes of bound prisoners shuffling slowly in a somber trek to the altar as they fill the humid air with a palpable sense of foreboding and dread. She smells the air and a light breeze carries the pungent odor of fresh blood to her. The

dreadfulness of the altar overwhelms her and with the onset of her revulsion, the demons at once banish her from the temple and the island.

As she continues her passage, strange apparitions and a continuous parade of the people in her life begin to visit her. They beckon and call to her in a cacophonous chorus of eccentric humanity. She goes in and out of consciousness and when she opens her eyes again, she finds herself in the sterile whiteness of a hospital setting. “Is this a hospital ward? Where is this?” she calls out.

Two doctors are standing at her bedside seemingly oblivious to her presence and to her cries. They are conversing to each other in a quiet monotone dialog.

“This is Sarah Levine, young, white women, 28 years old, and an associate professor. She’s an accident victim with a fractured skull; a linear fracture, with an epidural hematoma. We did surgery on her to remove some small blood clots, and her vital signs remain good. However, she has a nasty fever with a temperature near 103 degrees so we have an IV and catheter going, standard antibiotics, and a morphine drip going. Her white blood count is elevated but blood tests so far have yet to identify the source of the infection. We don’t believe it is from the surgery but we can’t be sure,” the resident said.

“Has she regained consciousness yet?” asked the doctor.

“No, she’s very feverish and she goes in and out. She keeps babbling about a Richard, but she gives no last name. Also, she keeps muttering about an “Abu”, sounds like a type of people.”

Sarah starts to yell out to the doctors, “What accident? Where is Richard? Where am I...” but they do not respond to her. A sense of panic grips her as she senses an evil diffusely making its way into the room borne by a pernicious breeze. The malevolent spirit settles alongside the two doctors at her bedside and peers at her prostrate body. She tries to rally her

body but her eyes slowly close and she falls out of consciousness once again, her spirit leaving behind the two doctors in the hospital.

“Sarah?”

She awakens again to find Richard at her side gently holding and stroking her hand. As she turns to smile at Richard, a low metallic sound, reminiscent of a large bell, resonates and reverberates in the distance hills of the island. Richard smiles in turn and then he speaks to her, at first haltingly then with a deep, rich vital voice, she had never heard before.

“Sarah, even a mighty river has its beginnings as a small trickle of melt water atop a distant mountain. Yet that humble source provides the flow, the very energy that keeps the water moving with continued purpose. So must your spirit remember its source, its humble origins so that you too can find and have purpose during your lifetime.” The sound of the bell continued to intensify until the impact of the ringing was almost visceral upon her body.

“It is so easy to become distracted, to lose your focus and to eventually lose your way. Sarah, you should always be listening for the bell, for it is the only link to your past and to your true self,” Richard said as his visage and the sound of the bell slowly faded away.

Sarah finds herself in a small room in a meditative pose. A young Buddhist nun makes her way into the room calling her name, pleading her to awaken.

“What’s wrong? Are you having those dreams again?” the younger asked the older nun pleadingly.

She awakens to the presence of another and she tiredly answers the pleas of the younger woman.

“Yes, I did but they are more concrete, they are firmly set in my mind’s eye. They will not go away,” the older nun responded.

“You were crying out, who are they? Spirits?”

“I am not sure, other lives, my lives; I cannot answer since I do not fully understand. I’m so tired.”

Her head is so weary and so tired and she closes her eyes once again. Her name is called again but what name?

When her temperature hits 104 degrees, Richard and Supar decide to move Sarah to the relative comfort of the pond where she can at least be shaded from the blazing tropical sun. Without hesitation, Richard strips Sarah down to her underwear and uses the water of the pond to bathe and cool Sarah’s feverish body. As he looks upon her, he is too concerned and anxious to admire the tan lines that he had once kidded her about in another distant time and place.

As night turns into day Richard maintains his vigil at Sarah’s side, and he is beginning to fear the worse for his colleague. His lone hope is her strong pulse, and the muttered prayers he utters throughout the course of the long day to a personal God that he rationally knows does not care or even for that matter exist. Richard sits by her side constantly watching over Sarah while stroking her hand or soaking her body in water, doing whatever he can to comfort her. Every so often, she regains a semblance of consciousness and Richard is there to greet her and reassure her that she is doing well. As he tends to her feverish body, dark and distant storm clouds gather about the island continuously rumbling their ominous approach while filling the air with the smell of heavy rains that never quite arrive.

“Come on girl, come back to me, God don’t let this happen!” Richard whispered to her in a repetitive mantra.

As night approaches on the second day, her sleep becomes more peaceful and her temperature begins to drop as well. By daybreak of the third day, Sarah looks decidedly less feverish, and a relieved Richard grabs a few minutes of well-deserved sleep.

Later in the morning, a groggy Richard catches Sarah trying to rouse herself from the ground. “Where the hell are you going? You just stay right where you are missy. How do you feel by the way?”

“Much better thank you. Boy, that fever with the hallucinations was rough, I don’t ever want to go through that journey again,” Sarah said.

“Journey? Is spiking a fever of a 105 what you call ‘a journey’ nowadays? A better description would be more like a personal hell. You made a nice recovery, but you are going nowhere today, and I’m going to see to that. Write up your field notes, I know you are behind in your writings. And damn it girl, stop scaring the shit out of me will ya?” Richard asked.

“Fine boss, but what about Flo? I missed her feeding the last couple of days.”

“That’s right, for now I am the boss. Flo will have to survive without your companionship for a little while longer. Besides, whatever you got we don’t need you spreading to the Ebu. I’ll take some food to the spot for you if you like.”

“Thanks Richard,” Sarah said. She grows reflective for a few minutes and then asked, “Hey, Richard, have you been talking to me, perhaps about a river... some philosophy about life and a river flowing? You know some real, fortune cookie stuff.

“Huh? Oh, yeah that’s right, I almost forgot. While you were out me and the boys ordered some Chinese take out and we each took a turn reading our fortune cookies aloud. What

do you think? I certainly didn't say anything about a river but you were babbling on and on for the past few days. Maybe you overheard me saying a few small prayers or talking to Supar.”

“Gee, Richard the atheist saying a prayer pour moi?”

“I never said I was an atheist, I am ambiguous agnostic for your information,” Richard said in an apparent huff. And for Pete's sake, get some clothes on, will you girl?” Richard commanded.

Sarah stares at down her underwear-clad body and notices her soiled bra and panties from her recent ordeal. She is too frail to feel embarrassed by her present condition and instead, she nods her head in quiet agreement.

“You need help?”

She shakes her head no but as she tries to get up but in her weakened state, she almost falls over.

Richard catches her and commented, “No, you need help, either I do this or I can ask Supar and Rudy to do this for you.”

Sarah nodded okay and as he devotedly helps her with the changing of her underwear, she sighs in resignation that she has precious few secrets left to withhold from him.

Despite her sense of urgency to return to normalcy, Sarah continued to feel a malingering weakness and it would take several more days for her to complete her recovery. To keep Sarah occupied during her recovery, Richard makes it a point to sit and talk with her during the course of the day. Richard was running out of stories to tell her and, as a last resort, he began to reminisce about his childhood days. Sarah was learning that there was a lot more to the alcoholic babe chaser and, in fact, at his core, Richard truly was a boy nerd that lived in perpetual wonderment of the natural world. Unfortunately, all of his boyhood nerd stories were becoming incredibly mind-numbing to her.

“Sarah, I had a dream last night, it’s one that revisits me every so often. I am boy about twelve years old, and with my friends, we are exploring some deep, virgin woods located far from our homes. We were on our bikes, but the terrain got so rough we had to walk them for a while. We decided to climb a hill that was very high, and the slope was almost at 45 degrees. We got to the top of the hill and we found a rocky outcrop. Being budding scientists, we started to look at the rocks, which were sedimentary, probably shale. As we split the rocks open, we found strange and wonderful creatures. Each rock held a different fossil from an ancient ocean and there were some fossils we couldn’t even begin to identify. It was amazing. Entire worlds were making themselves available to us, and we spent hours pouring over those rocks.”

Sarah did her best to stifle a yawn but the undaunted Richard continued with his story. “You know what was best about that moment for me? Amongst the group of us, there were no egos jostling for position, no prides to be hurt, no sins to contemplate; just a mutual moment of self discovery. That perfect solitude; the perfection of that one moment hooked me for a lifetime. It took us the better part of the day to get back home with some of our treasures. That dream has revisited me throughout my life. It’s what motivates me when I’m in the caves, the same way the chimp’s eyes motivated you,” Richard said.

Sarah smiled at him and comments, “You dream about rocks, and I always have that dream about this stupid island. You never dream of me?” Sarah said trying to tease him, and in the process, hoping to divert him from telling yet another tedious childhood story.

“Why, should I?” Richard asked.

“No, I just wanted to make sure you weren’t lying awake in that tent, all sweaty and thinking about me,” Sarah said in a kidding manner.

“Well, actually, if you will recall, over the past couple of nights you were the sweaty one. And no, I sleep perfectly fine dreaming about the fossils and worlds I have yet to uncover,”

Richard said.

“Yeah, I bet. Well, back to the caves with you then,” Sarah said in her best imperious manner.

“I see somebody is feeling better.”

“I do feel pretty good. Think I can go see the Ebu today?” Sarah asked.

“Yeah, why not. Maybe you had the 48 hour bug from hell or something but no touching missy, alright?” Richard asked.

“You got it majikan,” Sarah said as she gives Richard a crisp salute. “And Richard, really, I want to thank you for caring for me. You truly are a professional and you’ve been a great friend. I’m glad I met you.”

“No problem, Sarah and besides, I really should be thanking you, you know for allowing me to give you a sponge bath every night. So many nooks and crannies to bathe and those tan lines, what can I say, they are just magnificent, well worth the wait!” Richard said with a large leering smirk on his face.

“What sponge bath? Oh, never mind, you royal pain in the ass...” an outwardly horrified Sarah said, as she hurriedly walked away from him while trying to contain the grin on her face. For Sarah, there was absolutely no sense in encouraging the boy!

The Cost of Weakness

With Sarah's full recovery, the team quickly gets back to its routine of research and living on a desolate tropical island. Sarah gets up early with Rudy to set up the video equipment before the Ebu can get back to their usual encampment. Sarah spends the day watching every detail of the Ebu day. What they eat, who are enemies, who are allies, and how they sleep together.

Besides observing the normal social intercourse of the Ebu, Sarah spends her time documenting their tool use and is careful to document the tools they use that wouldn't normally be part of the fossil record. Tools constructed of wood and animal hide do not survive the ravages of time yet Sarah finds that these tools are a big part of their daily kit. For Sarah, it's a classic example of the old axiom about 'the absence of evidence not being evidence for absence'. Their fire making gear is always nearby and jealously guarded by the males.

She also found that her concerns regarding cultural contamination were not unfounded, but completely beyond her control. As Richard had said, she began noticing that the Ebu regularly collected debris from the beach for either practical use or for personal ornamentation. Plastic bags were very popular with the Ebu for containing food and other key materials. Shiny metal objects and even plastic tampon dispensers would find a second life as personal ornaments for the Ebu. The cultural contamination was difficult to watch but it proved to Sarah, once again, the resourcefulness of these tiny, isolated people.

One form of normal primate social behavior is eluding Sarah however. That is, observing the Ebu mating rituals proves to be a strangely elusive task for Sarah. As far as she can tell, they have sexual intercourse from behind, but overall, there isn't much sexual activity at the Ebu camp. In fact, Sarah doesn't see any permanent pair bonds among the male and female Ebus. What Sarah does observe is a strict male-female division of labor: the mature males hunt, and the females gather food while rearing the infants alone. They have babies, but she is not sure of the rituals or of the mechanics on how they are getting pregnant.

Back at the camp Sarah hesitates, but she decides to share her embarrassing plight with Richard. Sarah is embarrassed, not because of the sexual nature of her work, but because as an experienced field naturalist, this should be a routine matter of observation. Besides, she was hanging around Richard too much to be embarrassed about anything around him. Anything was fair game for his juvenile humor, and Sarah finally accepted, with a certain resigned grace, her lot in life as Richard's straight man.

Alright then, here it goes. "Richard, I'm not having much luck with observing the Ebu mating rituals," Sarah said.

"What? You haven't seen them bumpin' uglies at all?"

Sarah gave him a dirty look and Richard realized his mistake.

"You know, not even a come hither look?" Richard asked.

"Come hither?" Sarah asked.

"Yeah, you know that special love-sick look you are always giving me," Richard said.

"Sorry Richard, you are confusing my come hither look with my drop dead look," Sarah said.

"Oh, okay, my mistake then. You know now that you mention it, I haven't seen them doing the big nasty either but then again I'm quite the voyeur you are."

“Yeah, right,” Sarah replied as she wondered to herself as to how many euphuisms Richard had for doing it.

“So what’s the big deal? You know they are doing it, I mean there are lots of little Ebus running around, right? Maybe they’re shy like you, you know they like the night life,” Richard said.

“Look, I’m just trying to figure out if the Ebu females have a period of heat like chimps and other animals or are they more like human females, you know, receptive to sex at anytime,” Sarah said.

“Hey, what human female is receptive to sex all the time? I want to meet that gal, right now preferably,” a grinning Richard said.

Sarah is thinking, “Here we go again; a dog with a bone. This is way too good for him to let go of.”

“Richard, let me correct myself; I meant to say potentially receptive to sex all the time with the right advances from the right male. Key word is the right advances, Richard,” said Sarah. “You do remember our conversation about such important emotions as affection and love, don’t you?”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry, can’t help you there, ‘I am what I am’,” Richard said.

“Not quite the intended meaning of the phrase, Richard. Besides shouldn’t you be quoting from the New Testament?” Sarah asked.

“I get my material wherever I can, babe. Hey, I wonder if we do catch them doing it on videotape, can we put it on a web site and make some real money? I’m going to call it ‘EbuLove.com’. Monthly subscription of \$19.95 a month, and all the downloads you can watch in streaming video.”

Sarah looks at him in amazement. “You are such a juvenile. Is that all you ever think about?” Sarah asked.

“Since I’ve been on this island that is all I have had to think about at night. You want to demonstrate some of that Ebu love for me? Oh, a little shy, huh? That’s okay; I’ll wait for you until night time if you want?” Richard asked.

“You really know how to turn on the charm mister, but right now on this island I think you’re a distant second to the Ebu males!” Sarah said.

Sarah has had enough of the stupid banter and she walks away from Richard, shaking her head while muttering. “Why do I bother talk to you at all? It’s amazing to me how you go from a caring person to a cretin in the blink of an eye,” Sarah said.

“What can I tell you, babe? I’m a complex guy,” Richard said with a smirk.

Sarah spends much of her time observing the behavior of the other Ebu to the dominant male of troop: Grey. Grey clearly rules the troop and all of the other adults are quick to defer to him. Their submissive body language and behavior leave no doubt that Grey is in charge. Even the dominate female, Agrippina, makes it a point to groom or give him food whenever she can. Sarah never sees Grey strike another Ebu but instead he uses his piercing glance to make his point and to keep the others in line. Sarah, as well, makes a point of diverting her eyes when Grey catches her watching him. She doesn’t want to incur his wrath either, and to this point, he has been surprisingly tolerant of her presence at the edge of their camp. Even though she is almost two feet taller than he is and outweighs him by thirty pounds, Sarah can sense the killer instinct in the older male.

With the island so close in proximity to the equator, the days and nights are almost twelve hours long year round. Consequently, the small team has a considerable amount of time

to kill at night, and they do their best to put it to good use. Without a portable generator, they only have flashlights for lighting and accordingly much of their work is performed by the uneven light of a flickering campfire.

Over time, Richard recognizes that Supar's true calling was as a teacher, that is, when he is not in the employ of his seedy pirate friends. Every day before dinner, Supar the teacher, eagerly demonstrates for Richard some of his "bul mu do" martial art moves. Sarah is usually annoyed at these displays of male brutishness, but even she can see the elegance in Supar's Buddhist influenced martial art moves. Moreover, Sarah is actually enjoying the spectacle of watching the much smaller Supar beating the hell out of Richard. Richard towers over Supar but Supar willingly engages him out for a quick joust. After a few obligatory throws of Richard to the ground, the smiling Supar goes off quietly and helps Rudy make the dinner for the entire camp. Richard is a good sport about the daily beatings, and through the weeks of training, Richard's own technique slowly begins to improve. While picking himself off the ground, Richard invariably tells the camp that he is becoming an expert on falling. After all, not every Joe knows the importance of exhaling on the way down to the ground.

After dinner, the team reviews the following day's activities, and shortly thereafter begins the collegial sharing of ideas between Sarah and Richard. Inevitably, the collegial sharing quickly degenerates to a series of shrill arguments among the Americans and the two natives have grown accustomed to ignoring the heated exchanges. Typically, Supar and Rudy talk among themselves and Supar, ever the teacher, spends his time teaching his brother some rudimentary English.

"Richard, let me bounce these ideas off of you," Sarah said. Sarah knew Richard wasn't a social anthropologist but he was, at least, reasonably intelligent on these issues when he wasn't being a total ass.

Richard sighed a little because he knew this wasn't going to be a quiet night. There was just sometimes when Richard didn't feel like talking, not to Sarah, not to Supar, not to anybody in the small camp. However, the one thing he did know about women, was that when a woman wanted to talk there was little a man could do to stop her and if he did stop her it was not without penalty. Men, on the other hand, were a little more attuned to when a woman wasn't talkative. Well, not really attuned, no man is ever attuned to a woman, but more like it was fine with the man if the woman didn't want to talk; just let her sulk, she'll eventually come out of it. As far as Richard was concerned, for most women, talking was like breathing, and you could only hold your breathe for so long.

"Okay, just don't bounce too hard; it has been a long, grueling day in the caves," Richard said as he opted for the path of least resistance.

Sarah excitably begins with a quick verbal flurry. "First, the Ebu are obviously sentient, self-aware creatures. Their self-awareness allows them to reflect on the thoughts of others, and with that comes empathy for the other Ebu. Case in point: the other Ebu always watch Grey and spend a considerable amount of time trying to gauge the Alpha male's mood. I've seen them do it, and they do care for others in the troop. They don't care for Flo because of her low status in the troop, but they do care for Ben.

"Who the hell is Ben?" Richard asked.

"The physically challenged male adolescent who has no arms," she replied.

"Oh, you mean Flipper," Richard said.

Sarah blinked several times in disbelief at Richard's incredibly crude, insensitive comment. "Okay, it's official, you are a total ass, and you said that just on purpose to bother me," Sarah said. Richard is smirking at his childish remark, but the undeterred Sarah gives him a dirty look and continues.

“Are you done now little boy, got it all out of your system? Let’s try this again; do they have a ‘Theory of Mind’? Can they put themselves in another’s shoes? With the level of complex social interaction that Flo has shown, I would have to say yes. I’ve seen it all: empathy, resentment, pride, envy, you name it. Just watching how the troop interacts and how they treat Flo, you would think you were at a local high school.”

Richard is listening with his head down trying not to object to Sarah’s speech, and he realized Sarah must have had a rough go of it in high school. Moreover, the ‘Theory of Mind’ stuff continued to creep him out; way too touch-feely for his masculine scientific sensibilities. If you couldn’t objectively measure something he didn’t want any part of it. At the same time, Richard is struggling with himself in an effort to refrain from making his usual jokes to her, and in the process, possibly avoiding pissing her off altogether.

“From empathy you get a wide range of so-called human emotions and original sins such as pride, envy, resentment, embarrassment, lie, deceit, and guilt. Key emotions for what though? Is it for the successful interaction of an intelligent individual within a close-knit social order such as man or the Ebu? In fact, for most theorists our large brains, the range of emotions, and our language skills are all a necessary part of the ‘Theory of Mind’. You follow me so far, Richard?”

“Yeah, I’m not arguing with you so could you get to your point?” a weary Richard asked.

“Well, Richard here’s my point. If these midgets can manage a Theory of Mind with 500 ccs of brain matter, why the heck do we need 1600 ccs of brain power? Having a big brain requires a big investment on the part of the parents. Brain tissue also consumes gobs of calories and protein. What gives, I mean, where is the evolutionary advantage?” Sarah asked.

Richard thinks for a moment. “Good question, Sarah. First, I am not a hundred percent with you on the ‘Theory of Mind’ conclusion, but they are close so I’ll give you that one for

argument sake. But in all the time you spent watching them, haven't you noticed several things missing from the Ebu?" Richard asked.

Sarah thinks for a minute and replies. "Well, yeah they are missing a culture of some type. Their language is not much either."

"Sarah, I thought we had an agreement about leaving the language studies out of the mix for now since that is definitely not your strong suit. You're right, they are missing a culture and they obviously have no religion. I envy the little buggers for that. I mean, this is truly a Garden of Eden when you have paradise without the baggage of a personal God. Look, combine the range of emotions you just described with the concept of an Alpha male, our friend Grey, and you can evolve the concept of an omnipotent God. I'm not trying to be blasphemous, but let's face it, in many religions, man created God in his own image. Interestingly, the Ebu haven't done that yet. No culture, no God, no gods, and not even a single sign of animism. Interesting juxtaposition, don't you think?" Richard asked.

Sarah is impressed that Richard knew about animism, this coming from a man who didn't even know what a vegan was. Wait a minute, he knew what a vegan was, he was just making another one of his stupid little jokes and she didn't catch on. Duh! Sarah picks up the conversation again with renewed vigor feeling that she now had a true colleague to speak to rather than a class clown.

"Okay, so this is what I am thinking. It goes back to that famous phrase from Descartes, 'Je pense, donc je suis'," Sarah said.

"Sarah, please not another foreign language, stop the madness will you?" Richard pleaded.

"It's Decartes quote, 'I think therefore I am'" she said. "I remembered your wisecrack from the other day, you know the one about after early man muttering that famous sentient

thought 'I am', and then his second thought was 'and I want to be somewhere else'. So what happens? We begin to dream of somewhere else, where the food is sweeter and the water fresher, where we're free of disease and predators."

"How about where there are cuter mates?" Richard asked.

Sarah continues undeterred by Richard's remarks. "Ha, ha and don't interrupt Richard. All of the other animals have a past and a present. The past is called memory. The question is did we evolve our large brains, not for tool use, not for language – I mean other animals do that with considerably less cortex, but for the creation of a future? Did a sense of personal time foster the creation of self and with it a past, a present and finally a future? And how much of stretch is it to consider a future after death and the creation of God and the heavens?" Sarah looks at Richard for support, but there is no response to her ongoing monologue.

"Other animals can plan but can they put themselves into the future like we can? Now the Ebu aren't human but they are a pit stop along the road to us or at least they were. Do they think of a tomorrow? Their burials indicate some awareness of self after death but I'm not sure, maybe their burials are a form of rudimentary public sanitation. But then why the burial ornaments?"

Now it's Richard's turn. "Sarah, let me rephrase what you are saying. All right, they have the rudiments of 'Theory of Mind' but do they have a 'Theory of the Future'. Can they do what every human being does; place themselves somewhere else at a different time and leave the present. You know we started using it as planning tool for the future but now we use it as a toy, as a diversion for ourselves, to avoid focusing on our own personal dissatisfaction. We sit in our cars, stuck in traffic but we think about the chick we want to..."

Richard stops upon seeing the dirty look he is about to receive from Sarah. "...help with their school work. By the time the drive is completed, we can't remember a single moment we

spent during that drive. I'm teaching biology to the unwashed, and the whole time I'm thinking about how am I going to escape this drudgery? We are seldom here in the present. We are always somewhere else even if only for the briefest moment, you know like when you daydream about making love to me. Can the Ebu do that?" Richard asked.

Sarah gave a small snort at Richard's comment. "Richard, once again you are confusing one of my ongoing nightmares with dreaming and I doubt that the Ebu dream about you. You're not talking about dreaming during sleep are you, because I noticed that Flo does REM quite frequently?" Sarah asked.

"No Sarah, when I was kid we had an old family dog named 'Old Farter' who would also REM during his sleep. You had to keep a watch out for him, especially during one of his more active dreams. He was one of those silent but deadly types. The noisy ones you at least had some warning about and you could run from the room," Richard said.

Sarah's nose is turning up in disgust upon hearing Richard's story. "Richard, that's it, I have way too much information about your childhood. I'm really beginning to think that the gas from the dog may have addled your young developing mind. Moreover, just change the poor dog's diet, and finally what does this touching family story have to do with the 'Theory of Future'?" Sarah asked.

"I'm talking specifically about daydreaming, not dreaming, as part of the equation for future planning. You don't need much of a brain to dream, 'Old Farter' proves that, but planning for the future is an entirely different issue. Combine that with our developing language skills, and you have unprecedented demand for an increase in brain size. I'm asking do the Ebu practice a 'Theory of the Future'? On the other hand, maybe our big brains are just there for better chitchatting skills. I don't know. Do you think we are on to something?" Richard asked.

“What we?” Sarah thought to herself, but before Sarah could answer Richard, Supar begins to talk. Normally Rudy and Supar sit silently by themselves in an effort to avoid the American’s continual bickering, but this time Supar is intently listening to the campfire conversation of Richard and Sarah.

“Can I share with you a story that I was told by one of my teachers?” Supar asked.

Sarah looks disgusted and is about to say no, but Richard gives Supar a nod to go ahead.

“One day, Buddha was talking to his students and he asked, ‘What is the span of a human lifetime’? One student answered and said it was a couple of days. Buddha shook his head in disapproval and told the student you do not know your practice. The second student said it was the time between meals. Buddha again shook his head and told the second student that he did not know his practice. The third student answered, “It is the time between...”

Before Supar could finish, Sarah responds in a harsh tone, “It is the time between exhaling and inhaling, Lord Buddha, and Buddha said you know the practice to the third student.”

Richard is flabbergasted at Sarah for completing the story for Supar. “Whoa, I didn’t know you were a Jew, Catholic and Buddhist all rolled into one.” Supar is smiling as well.

“I told you how I was raised: screwed up! I studied comparative religions as a social anthropologist before I changed majors. Buddhism just kind of resonated a bit for me, so I remember some of the stories,” Sarah said.

Richard said, “That’s great. One thing, what the hell does that story mean?”

Before Supar could answer, Sarah once again stops Supar from talking. “It means you only have the existing moment, all other thoughts and feelings are false and are the result of desire.”

Supar adds, “You must be mindful, always surrendering to the moment. To spend your time elsewhere, such as the past or the future is harmful and leads to false desires. As soon as we say the present, it is part of our past.”

“Oh, yeah that clears it up for me,” Richard said with a smirk.

Sarah steps in again. “I’ll make it real easy for you Richard; you summed it up with your joke about man saying ‘I am and I want to be somewhere else’. The somewhere else could be the past or the present; it doesn’t matter to us. The modeling and structure of our brains allows all of us to escape the present. That psychic escape is a basic element of human desire and the reason for our success as a species. On the other hand, it also plants much of the seeds of our unhappiness as individuals,” Sarah said.

At that point, Supar claps and comments, “Very well put, Sarah!”

The comment causes Sarah’s anger to ignite. “Don’t talk to me mister; don’t you have some Karma to make up?”

“You know what they say about letting go of negative thoughts, Sarah? You should learn to forgive. Maybe that’s how I can be your Buddha!” Supar replied.

“Supar, remember what the master said to the monk about killing Buddha if he should meet him,” Sarah curtly responded.

“Ah, the attachment of pride,” Supar said.

“Oh, shut the hell up Supar!” and Sarah storms away to her tent.

Richard looks at Supar and shrugs. “Well, that wasn’t quite the Zen-like moment I was expecting. If you want to spout philosophy, you know what they say about the wrath of a woman?”

“I can assure you that Sarah is far above such pettiness.” Supar said. “She’ll come around.”

Richard looking to break the awkwardness of the moment asked Supar, “How are you a Buddhist? I thought most of Flores was Catholic?”

“My father was Japanese and please don’t ask me how he got to Flores. Something to do with the war. After the war, he married a local woman and they had me and my brother. That’s all, no great mystery,” Supar said.

Richard decided it was perhaps best not to continue his inquiry about Supar’s father, knowing full well how the Japanese had coerced local Indonesian girls to serve as comfort women for use by their military personnel.

“Hey, Supar, one more thing I have to ask, about Sukarno’s name. No relation to the original Sukarno, right?” Richard asked.

“No, just a bad sense of humor. He used to be with the rebels but he quickly lost interest. Not enough power or money in it for him. He took the name to upset some of his old comrades,” Supar said.

Silence falls over the camp again and Richard begins shaking his head. “Boy, she is never going to forgive you,” Richard said.

“She will one day, I promise you that, and Richard please don’t give up on her. Like I said, Sarah is somebody special. Never give up on her, and you two will have a special future together,” Supar said.

“Alrighty then, I’m out of here. Goodnight, Supar, Rudy,” Richard said. Richard didn’t feel like sharing his true feelings for Sarah with anybody and that included his teacher Supar.

The following night the camp is quiet and after the brief fireworks of the previous day, everybody seemed content in their own isolation. Richard hates to be the one to break the calm,

but he decides to interrupt the silence with a question that has been nagging him all day. “Sarah, have you given much thought as to how we are going to announce this little find of ours?”

The question catches her off guard. “I was thinking Flo and I might do a little Vegas revue show or maybe appear on Oprah. We could be opening act up for some of the major headliners, maybe for Prince. Failing that we could go to Branson...,” but she noticed that Richard wasn’t smiling and that wasn’t like Richard.

“Lighten up, I’m just kidding Richard. Well, there are several key journals I am going to want to introduce these findings to. Why do you ask?” Sarah said coyly.

“Oh, come on, you know why. The minute we announce the existence of these little buggers, we are inviting a true three-ring media circus into our lives. We have to have everything in order; our work has to be impeccable, unimpeachable, and unquestionable.”

Sarah pauses. “Look, I understand the gravity of our find and the academic challenges we are going to face,” Sarah said.

“No, you don’t understand, to hell with the academic issues,” Richard said. “Our peer group is the least of our problems. When you announce to the world that we found a troop of living fossils, human-like creatures, you will be rattling a lot of people’s cages.”

“Not the creationist business again?” Sarah asked in an exasperated manner.

Richard gives Sarah an annoyed look. “Look what they did to Galileo, they threatened him physically and then with excommunication from the church. Look at what is going on in the states with the Creationist agenda at the schools. Look, I’m not talking about the everyday Joe Blow with their religious beliefs. I’m talking about the real confrontations we could see from the singular nut jobs that are out there. We have to be careful, and we have to protect ourselves from a variety of different threats.”

“We can take care of ourselves,” Sarah said.

“Well Sarah, who’s going to protect the Ebu? Once they get wind of our find every scientist, adventurer, and profiteer is going to go looking for them. There are also going to be a number of rather pissed-off government officials that are going to want to know what we did and where we did it.”

“I know, you want to bring back some physical remains,” she said.

“No, it’s not what I want but it is what we have to do. I know those remains are going to be lightning rod for controversy. Face it, without a skeleton or some other Ebu remains; we will get challenged on everything we say. Pictures and video, no matter how compelling, just doesn’t cut it anymore. Everybody just assumes that pictures can be modified digitally. A true DNA test is critical for proving the veracity of our claim. Without the DNA tests, we’re just two charlatans selling Ebu snake oil to an incredulous audience.”

“We got the Ebu hair available for DNA testing,” Sarah said.

“That’s great Sarah, but we got to have it all. Don’t forget there are people out there that can’t even spell DNA, you can ask OJ about that one,” Richard said.

“You really think people are going to get pissed off about this?” Sarah asked.

“Jeez, look at all of the crap the Australian team went through with their announcement and that was just some bones. Now think about what we are saying. Hello, world! Meet your long, lost cousins, the Ebu! Yes, they are alive and please, pardon their gruff appearance; they’re from your father’s side of the family. These little guys are going to creep half the world out. The idea that we have cousins like this strikes down two of our most cherished thoughts. First, God didn’t create us in six days, evolution did over millions of years, and, by the way, here are the evolutionary leftovers to prove it and, number two, if God didn’t create us, then humanity ain’t all that divine after all. We’re subject to the same rules of nature that the other living creatures of this planet must adhere to. We have met the other members of the family tree, and

they are not too pretty! In fact, they look a little too similar to some of our animal brethren. I tell you, it's just a shame that these Ebu are so..."

"What Richard?"

"So damn fugly."

"Fugly?" Sarah asked.

Oh, no is she for real? "You know, beyond ugly..." Richard hesitated. "All right, I'll say it. Fucking ugly, the Ebu are just fucking ugly," Richard said. Sarah just shook her head at Richard's crude comment, and she cared too deeply for the Ebu as a people to dignify his remark.

"Sarah, for many people, the Ebu are going to be perceived as a missing link between humans and apes. Many simplistic people are not comfortable with having chimps as a distant relative, never mind breaking bread with the Ebu. I'm not just talking about the Catholics out there that are going to have a problem with this, you are going have to deal with fundamentalist Moslems, Born Again Christians, and Orthodox Jews as well, and you know how passionate they can get as a group. We are so screwed," Richard said.

"Richard, I know the ramifications of our announcement. Let's face it; our only other alternative is not to announce what we found. That's not going to happen, not with everything we have invested in this expedition. Do you really want to hold back on making this announcement?"

Richard shook his head no; he knew the personal costs would be too high to consider that option.

"We'll just have to make the best of it and do it by the numbers. On the plus side Richard, maybe we'll now accept our place in the natural order of living creatures on this planet and be a little gentler on some of our animal relatives," Sarah said.

“Don’t hold your breath on that one, lady. Exploitation is man’s greatest gift to himself. Whether we exploit the animals, the air, the earth, or another man, we just love taking advantage of something else. Besides how do we classify the Ebu? Human or animal? Semi-human? Do they have rights, unalienable rights? What level of consciousness do they have? What type of IQ do these guys have with those tiny brains? And who has the right to study them, or for that matter exploit them?”

Sarah hesitates to respond. “How about calling them proto-human? Of course, they have rights as do all living creatures,” Sarah said.

“Yeah, tell that to a cow as they are being led to the slaughter house. Call them what you want: new primate species, indigenous people, whatever, where you place them depends on your agenda. Just based on our own conversations one point is self-evident. There is no guarantee as to what rights the Ebu will have under international law. So when we announce this find do we keep the Irmã Flores location a secret? Don’t kid yourself; even if we do keep the location a secret others will eventually seek and find the Ebu. We are better off cutting a deal with the Indonesian government to keep this under control. I promise you one thing though: this is going to be a bumpy ride for both us and the Ebu,” Richard said.

“Richard, the only right thing to do is to keep the Ebu and the island a secret. I can do it but can you make that ultimate career sacrifice?” she asked. She knew this was a lie on her part.

Richard could only sigh in response to her remark and his silence spoke volumes to her. Sarah has asked herself the very same questions, and she knew there was no right answer.

Irmã Flores and the Ebu were not readily giving up their past secrets to Richard. Richard was eager to get his hands on the fossil record to answer the questions the living Ebu couldn’t. When and how did they get to the island? Was there a land bridge to the mainland at some point? How

had they survived living on this island for so long with such limited resources? What had been their interactions with modern man? It was Richard's job to get those answers from the fossil record while Sarah learned as much as she could from the living Ebu.

With Supar in tow, Richard began a systematic search of the island's numerous caves, while Sarah remained in the light with the living Ebu. Richard knows that the Ebu have, in the past, used caves as shelters to ride out bad weather and rough times. The fossil record found in the Flores caves proved the importance of the caves to the Ebu as a home base. Richard is almost certain that the present troop on the island has a base cave as well. What was frustrating for Richard was that up to this point he couldn't find any Ebu caves, past or present, on the island. Weeks of exploration with Supar had yielded little evidence of any previous Ebu occupation.

At this point, Richard is getting worried. They can't stay on the island indefinitely since they are running low on provisions. Furthermore, Supar and Rudy had originally agreed to work for two weeks. They were already well into their fourth week on the island, and at some point, the guides would have to return home to their respective families.

Richard decides to take a gamble and looks for the Ebu caves on higher ground along the ridge of the volcano. Of particular interest to Richard were the numerous caves that burrow into the volcanic mountain. Most of the caves are the remains of old lava tubes where magma flows had once poured out across the island from ancient volcanic eruptions. These caves appear more promising to Richard because their floors were covered with the remains of fossil animals. Finally, they achieve a partial success. One cave doesn't yield any Ebu remains, but Richard finds some characteristic stone tool flakes littering the floor. They continue to search hoping to find a cave that has a long history of habitation by the Ebu.

On the third day of their exploration of the ridge, Richard and Supar hit pay dirt. They find a cave floor that is littered with Ebu skeletal remains. There were no signs of present day occupation, but as far Richard could tell, the Ebu occupied the site up until a few decades ago. Richard doesn't have the equipment or manpower to do a proper dig, but he digs a small exploratory hole through the cave floor to get a sense of their history. Richard was desperate to answer the one question above all others that anthropologists were asking about Homo Floresiensis, "How did a band of full-sized Homo erectus survivors manage to get stranded on a tropical island hundreds of thousands of years ago without the use of a boat? And why would they stay on such a challenging environment as this island and evolve into the miniature Ebu?"

Over the next few days, the historical record Richard uncovers tells a disturbing story and the island certainly was no Garden of Eden for the Ebu. Richard finds that the Ebu population on the island had been significantly larger in the past, in fact, the very recent past. A few hundred years ago, there may have been as many as a hundred individuals up to living on this tiny island. Many of the skulls were crushed, indicative of a violent end for many individuals and opening up the specter of past warfare among the Ebu tribes. Moreover, the cracked arm and leg bones he finds suggest the horrific possibility of cannibalism among these quiet and seemingly passive people.

The more recent bones tell another, more insidious story. Many of the bones show signs of malnutrition. Moreover, many of the skeletons belong to young children, who are among the first to feel the full impact of famine. Richard is sure that if he can X-ray the bones he will see Hansen lines, signs where bone growth stopped due to severe malnutrition. The Ebu species is coming to a slow tortuous end, and malnutrition appears to be the primary culprit. It would appear that over the past two hundred years, this island paradise had become a living hell for the Ebu survivors.

Richard shares with Sarah his concerns regarding the Ebu nutritional plight. “Sarah, I think we should follow a hunt one day. I need to get a better grasp of what they are eating and where they are catching their food. These guys are having a tough time on this island, and we need to get a better grasp of their nutritional needs. Let me know when they break from camp and we’ll follow the males one morning.”

Sarah agrees, but for several days they keep missing the males leaving the camp. Richard suggests that they get up much earlier in anticipation of the hunting party. The following morning Sarah and Richard are ready for them, as the Ebu males head off into the jungle in search of their next quarry. Sarah and Richard slowly follow the party into the jungle. The hunting party consists of five males and is led by the elder male Grey. The party methodically moves up the slope in the direction of the jungle that covers the base of the volcanic mountain.

Sarah and Richard have to be careful not to get too close to the party, and they trail them by a couple of hundred yards. Richard can see better because of his height but he has to crouch to avoid detection by the Ebu. As the hunt progresses they begin to lose the Ebu males in the thickening underbrush. Both Sarah and Richard have a tough go because of the dense vegetation under foot. Their travel is often punctuated by a series of low grumbling curses that come from Richard as he continues to get caught on the numerous branches that line their path. While they struggle to make their way, the smaller Ebu almost seem to glide over the vegetation, and they quickly cover ground in search of their prey. They get further ahead of Sarah and Richard until the two lose sight of the Ebu party entirely.

As Sarah and Richard make their way through a particularly nasty brush area, they can hear the Ebu party. “Ochuwaa” a number of the males call, and there is considerable noise coming from the distance on their left. Richard silently motions to Sarah to get down as they hear the hunt unfold. For a few minutes, they hear nothing, and Sarah knows its time to play the

waiting game. As they sit idly, the minutes go by, and Sarah stares intently into the forest. Her ears focus on the sounds of the jungle, while her eyes watch the dancing light and shadows that cascade through the leaves. A light breeze transforms the display of light and shadows into an ever-changing panorama of phantasmagorical shapes. Among the shadows, she suddenly notices a massive shape lumbering along the brush. The powerful, muscular shadowy shape is the size of an adult water buffalo but it is very different. Then in the gleam of the light, she sees a single tusk. It is a miniature Stegodont, a small, island relative of our modern day elephants that has been extinct for thousands of years. Because of the limitations of their island environment, they had evolved to a much smaller size than present day elephants. The adult Stegodont is leisurely eating the vegetation seemingly oblivious to the nearby presence of the Ebu hunters.

The Stegodont picks up its massive head and the second tusk is clearly broken at the base. The Stegodont is suddenly startled and concealed within the brush, an Ebu hunter thrusts his spear deep into the elephant's hindquarter. The elephant trumpets an alarm and runs deep into the woods dragging the diminutive Ebu along with the spear. The Ebu hunter hits a tree along the way and relinquishes his grip on the spear as he falls onto the ground. The elephant trots away but then it is besieged on either side by the remaining Ebu band and they thrust their stone tipped spears deep into the animal's ribcage. Dark red blood pours from the wound and the elephant thrashes in agony...

Sarah's reflective musings were disturbed as the hunt was taking an abrupt and sudden loud turn. The rustling and yelling from their left becomes almost deafening in the early morning quiet, and they hear the sounds of another creature rapidly moving through the woods. The early dawn light is making it difficult for the pair to follow the ongoing action. The thrashing noise gets louder and louder, and the source of the commotion is coming straight at them. "What the hell is it?" Sarah wonders. Through the brush, a set of massive leathery jaws

lined with jagged discolored teeth menacingly lunges at the pair. Richard pushes Sarah backwards to get her out of the way. The hellish creature is coming right at them at a very fast pace. Sarah begins to frantically crawl, and, to her surprise, Richard goes right by her in a full run. Just as he is about to disappear into the safety of the brush, Richard stops and helps the shaken Sarah up to her feet, and they both begin to sprint away from the creature.

For Sarah, it's too late to make her escape as the beast moves within striking distance from her. It's a large Komodo dragon heading straight for her at a furious pace. The creature is over eight feet long and moving quickly through the brush in a wild effort to flee the pursuing Ebu hunters. As Sarah turns to face the dragon, the monster hesitates, halting its two hundred and fifty pound body and, for a brief moment, she can smell the fetid breath of the dragon. A heartbeat later, Richard grabs her by the waist and pulls her once again to safety.

The Komodo is sluggish from the cool morning air, and its reptilian body chemistry is sealing the dragon's fate. They can sometimes scurry up to ten mph, but this one can't get its blood warmed up in response to the threat from the hunters. As the dragon slows, the Ebu quickly close in and corner their prey. The dragon makes a hideous hissing sound as it starts to thrash about on the jungle floor. A spear is protruding from its side, and Grey is on the other end of the spear driving the stone point deep into the dragon's ribs. Grey is using all of his body weight to apply leverage on the spear, ripping the flesh of the dragon as he digs in. Just as the lumbering dragon swings its massive head in Grey's direction, a second, younger male spears the dragon from the other side.

The animal writhes in pain as it scrambles to get away, whipping its large tail from side to side. Abruptly, the stone tip spear of the young male breaks in the side of the dragon, and the dragon's jaws are now free to take a bite at its tormentors. The dreadful jaws lunge at the younger male and they seize him by his calf muscle. The young hunter screams in pain while

being dragged to the ground and the other Ebu descend upon the reptile in unison, thrusting their spears deep into the dragon's sides. Before the dragon can tear the calf muscle from the bone, one spear pierces its heart and a small river of blood pours from the six-inch wound. The large reptile stops moving and its labored breathing slows to a standstill. In the darkness of the woods, the Ebu silhouettes play against the light scattered among the leaves, and Sarah watches the small Ebu struggle with a creature the size of a mythical dragon. Only this dragon is real and so is the ensuing life and death struggle. The dragon finally collapses to the ground while the blood pours slowly from its wounds until the river becomes a mere trickle. In doing so, the dragon releases the death grip on the young Ebu's leg. Richard and Sarah are no more than twenty feet away from the kill site, and they remain motionless in the brush to avoid detection by the agitated Ebu.

The skin on the calf of the young Ebu hunter is torn away from the muscle and blood is profusely pouring from the wound. Grey goes off into the jungle for a few minutes, leaving the younger male writhing on the ground, moaning and crying to himself. Several minutes later, Grey returns with some leaves and mud and begins to dress the wound of the injured male.

The other Ebu males stand around while looking at their fallen companion for a while, but then they begin the process of harvesting the komodo carcass. They remove the Komodo's limbs one at a time with their spears and several stone cutting tools. After the limbs are separated from the body, they begin to flay the Komodo's leathery hide, and remove the skin intact from its trunk. Several of the males sever the head from the body while the others are busily gutting the beast. Finally, they hack at the head and remove some of the larger teeth from the dragon seemingly as a trophy of the hunt. Two of the males carry back parts of the dragon, while Grey and another help the wounded male back to the camp.

Sarah and Richard sit in their hidden location for a few minutes without speaking, without moving. “That was intense,” Richard said. A quiet Sarah is visibly shaken by the drama that just unfolded before them and Richard puts his arm around Sarah to steady her.

“I give you credit, kiddo, you didn’t yell even when that dragon was headed right for us. Me, I got to check for stains in my pants. Well, I guess we can add Komodo to their expanding menu. Not a big surprise, huh?” Still, no sound from emerges from Sarah other than her rapid breathing and a few small gulps that are coupled with her furiously blinking eyes.

“What’s wrong, Sarah? The Ebu male getting wounded? Yeah, I hate to say it, but that little guy is a goner,” Richard said. Sarah nods her head in agreement still unable to speak. “Yep, that small male is going to have some nasty infection taking over his body in the next few days. If their bite doesn’t do you in, you know the bacterial infection will. I’ll bet they will be burying him before the week is out. Watch out for him, Sarah. This drama is going to be amazing to watch.”

Sarah is silent, too upset to talk because of their narrow escape, too upset to talk because of her concern for the plight of the small male. Instead, she sits quietly holding her head, deep within herself.

Later that day, Sarah returns to her usual spot under the tree, and Flo greets her like an old friend who has been away on holiday for too long. The two soon return to their old habit of sitting side by side while Flo occupies herself with the offering of food from Sarah. Today, Sarah is spending most of her time watching the plight of the small wounded male. He is lying in the middle of the camp writhing in pain while several males and females attend to him. They change the dressing on his leg throughout the day, and as they remove the dressing his swollen leg looks like a putrid mess. She also notices that they bring him food and among the food offerings are the mysterious white orchid and a share of the vile mystery meat. What is

interesting is their insistence on making him eat their small offerings as if they know what is good for him. “What is this? Is everybody a Jewish mother in this troop?” Sarah thinks to herself. She wished her mother was that attentive when she was growing up. Even Flo makes an effort to give him some food, but with the presence of the other females nearby, Flo is careful not to overstay her welcome.

The following day goes badly for the small male. He is not writhing in pain any more, a bad sign since he is barely moving, and his color is considerably paler. The poison from the dragon is taking its toll on his small frail body, and he appears to be falling into a coma.

Sarah returns to the camp that night distraught and feeling very conflicted. She is having a tough time watching the young male die and debates what they can do to assist him. “Richard, I doubt that he is going to make it through the night. Is there anything we can do for him?”

Sarah asked.

Richard firmly shakes his head no and then he adds “No, we can do nothing, nor should we help them, Sarah.”

“Easy for you to say, you don’t have to watch him die,” she blurted out.

“Come on girl, I know you have observed life and death struggles before. Be strong, okay?”

“I’ll try but I’m finding it tougher to watch the Ebu and remain entirely objective. I mean, it’s not like watching animals in the wild; these are a real people with their own personalities. I don’t know, I just feel very different about watching them, and I’m not the detached scientist I used to be. Something has changed for me on this island, Richard, and I just can’t put my finger on it,” she said.

Richard nods his head while not quite comprehending what she is feeling. With little comfort forthcoming from Richard, Sarah goes quiet and turns inward again.

The next morning Sarah is shocked to find that the small male is still alive, and is actually tossing about. From all appearances, this might be his final death moments, except his color is actually starting to return. Sarah is baffled by the turn of events. Two days later the small male is up, and appearing to be making a full recovery. That night, Richard is shaking his head when Sarah tells him that the injured male is recovering.

“Impossible, we watched that Komodo bite him and that saliva is toxic beyond belief. Komodos have twenty-five different types of poisonous bacteria in their mouth. What the hell did they give him?” Richard asked.

“They dressed his wound with a standard mud dressing covered with palm leaves and some other plant material. You know, they fed him the usual assortment of disgusting lunch meats throughout the day, and...” Sarah said.

“That’s it? What else?” Richard asked.

“Well, I saw those white orchids make an appearance again and I’ve been wondering. Sarah pauses for a moment. “Can’t be though, can it Richard? Are you thinking what I’m thinking? Can those white orchids have some type of medicinal value?”

“Yeah, maybe big time. That’s why Flo was sharing that special treat with you. I have no idea where they come from, but somebody in the tribe is busily gathering them,” Richard said.

“Maybe that’s why I recovered so quickly?” Sarah asked.

“You think? That would be something. Could explain why these little buggers held on for so long on this island. Man, this is big. We got to find the source of that flower,” Richard said.

Sarah arrives at her station in the morning but Flo is nowhere in sight. The night before, Flo had been behaving oddly, seemingly distracted and her disappearance for Sarah is a signal that Flo went off to give birth. Sarah debates the wisdom of going to look for Flo. A quick head count of the Ebu indicates that none of the other females are assisting Flo with the birth of her child. They are all in the camp, and the males have gone off in another hunting party. Sarah can only conclude that Flo is off alone in the brush giving birth to her infant. She is concerned for Flo, but she can only anxiously watch and wait.

That afternoon there is a loud commotion in the Ebu camp. As Sarah looks up, Flo is slowly returning to the camp, her legs smeared with blood and she carries at her side a tiny infant. Flo is a mother, and from her strange behavior, this is clearly her first child. Flo dangles the infant from her side as if she is carrying home the groceries. The infant is tiny female, a little more than nine inches long, maybe a pound or two in total weight. The infant is in distress and is constantly crying but receives little comfort from the awkward Flo.

Minutes pass but Flo has no idea how to care for the infant, and she makes no effort to nurse the newborn. The cries of the infant are upsetting the troop, and Sarah finds the cries disturbingly close to those of a human infant. The other older females slowly approach lead by Agrippina, drawn to Flo by the constant wailing of the infant.

“Come on girl, be strong. Flo, you be strong. Don’t let those bitches touch her,” Sarah mutters to herself. Flo is uncertain how to react; she has never been the center of so much attention before, and her innate shyness causes her to become even more submissive in her body language.

The infant continues to cry, looking for comfort and nourishment that is not coming from Flo. Agrippina makes a bold move for the infant, and grabs the dangling infant from Flo’s arms. The dominant female looks at the newborn trying to figure how and why the infant came to be.

Flo tries to take her child back, but the larger Agrippina quickly rebuffs her. Agrippina raises her arm as if to strike Flo and, in reaction, Flo cowers while quickly moving away from striking distance.

With Flo off to the side, Agrippina carefully, almost lovingly, places the crying infant on the ground. She picks up a large rock that the Ebu use for cracking open large conch shells while glancing menacingly at Flo. She holds the rock with both of her hands, lifting it far above her head and with all of her might, she thrusts the rock downward. Initially, Sarah fears Agrippina is about to strike Flo with the rock, but instead she continues the downward thrust into the crying infant's skull. The rock smashes the infant's skull with an audible thud, instantly stopping the crying, and causing the infant to lie limply on the ground. Blood pours from the crushed skull and the small limbs twitch in a final death spasm. Agrippina drops the rock and as she turns away, her dark skin is splattered with tiny blood droplets. Flo freezes with fear for a moment and, then overcoming her fear, she manages to grab her bloodied, limp infant from the ground.

Sarah hesitates and doesn't react, trying to grasp the horror of the act that she just witnessed. As though she had watched a friend being betrayed, Sarah does the unthinkable and stands upright while yelling at Agrippina in a complete rage, "No, you stupid, ugly bitch! Why, the baby? Why?"

In the process of yelling, Sarah's true height becomes evident to the entire Ebu troop. The rage display of this large five-foot tall creature terrorizes the miniature people. Worse, they are not used to such loud vocalizations from somebody in such close proximity to their troop and they lack the protection of their males. The females and the adolescents of the troop flee at once, and scatter towards the woods with Agrippina among them. Flo is alone in the camp holding her dead infant. The yelling from Sarah has frightened Flo as well, but she turns back to look at Sarah, and they look directly at each other for a brief moment. A weeping Sarah is standing with

tears flowing down her cheeks. A stunned Flo returns her look and then Flo, too, is gone, taking with her the dead infant to join her kind in the safety of the jungle.

With the flight of the Ebu into the jungle, Sarah collapses to her knees. Rudy comes out of his filming location to get Sarah, and he gently leads her back to their camp. Sarah is crying at the sudden turn of events in her life. She is crying for the loss of Flo's infant, and the missed opportunity to watch the infant grow. Sarah is also crying at her unprofessional outburst, but most of all, she knows she is crying for her friend Flo.

A panicked Rudy radios Richard to tell him what happened, and Richard hurriedly returns with Supar to the camp. At the camp, Richard tries valiantly to console the hysterically sobbing Sarah.

"I really blew it, Richard. I blew any pretense I had of professionalism with that stupid outburst, and to think I once called you unprofessional. You were right about me getting too close to Flo. I mean this is ridiculous. It's not like I never saw infanticide before, but this, uh, oh God, this was totally devastating to me. Flo's infant sounded just like a human baby when it cried, and to watch a baby get crush..." Sarah said. Tears are streaming down her cheeks, and Sarah's heavy sobbing convulses her entire body.

Richard comforts Sarah for a while but she remains inconsolable. A little later, Richard quietly watches the videotape of the incident, shaking his head the entire time while viewing the unfolding tragedy. Richard lets out an audible gasp at the viewing of the deathblow. Richard may have been right with his warnings but he wasn't feeling particularly victorious. Instead, he felt incredibly sad for both Sarah and Flo. At that point, Richard decides to give Sarah some time alone, and he makes his way back to the Ebu camp. Upon his return at dusk, Sarah has gathered herself together, but she is still gently crying. Sarah notices Richard's return to camp.

"Have you seen the Ebu?" Sarah asked.

“Nothing so far, my guess is they went into one of the caves along the north side of the island for protection. They haven’t been back to the camp that I can tell you. Don’t worry kiddo, they’ll return. You’re not that scary.”

Sarah is holding her head in her hands, and Richard places his arm around her shoulder in a belated effort to console her once again. Sarah started to cry again and as Richard holds her tightly, he can feel her chest shudder with each mournful sob.

Sarah said, “Please Richard, I don’t want to be alone tonight!”

Richard gently takes Sarah’s head into his hands and gazes directly into her eyes. “I won’t let you go for a moment, dear, I promise,” he said, as the two clung tightly to one another.

As night firmly gripped the small camp, Supar and Rudy find themselves wide-awake in their shared tent. Strangely, the noises of the jungle have abated somewhat and in the distance they can hear the soft sounds of lovers emanating from one of the American’s tents.

“What are they doing?” Rudy asked jokingly.

Supar answer “Stupid, what do you think he is doing? He is consoling her.”

Rudy chuckles and says, “Oh, is that what Americans call it. I thought they didn’t like each other?”

Supar said nothing.

Another moment passes while the moaning continues and Rudy adds, “I wish my wife were here so I could console her, too.”

“Enough of your talk, go to sleep!” and Supar struggles to fall sleep.

They grow quite and listen to the sounds for another ten minutes. Supar has had enough and gets up, leaving the tent. “Come on brother, it’s a beautiful night to sleep on the beach.”

Christian Soldier

Reggie didn't know where the Ebu were located but he did know a thing or two about industrial espionage, and he was putting those skills to good use. Reggie's men were instructed to gather as much intelligence as possible about the other research teams working in Flores. When they arrived in the town of Ende, one of Reggie's operatives received new intelligence regarding the arrival of another research team that was planning an exploratory expedition. During a subsequent update, Reggie learned that the team consisted of two American scientists, but much to everybody's surprise, their planned expedition was to an entirely different Indonesian island, far away from Flores. It was just as well since the Indonesian government was busily shutting down the research on Flores in deference to one of their own native researchers.

Reggie's goons did some further snooping and got the names of the two Americans heading the expedition. Bill "Googled" the names and found numerous hits on the woman known as Associate Professor Sarah Levine. She had a reputation as a solid research primatologist, and a number of well-respected scientific journals had published her research. A Professor Brightman had also given Sarah some credit regarding his Flores Island bird population research. The other scientist, Richard Staller, was an unknown associate professor of physical anthropology at a small university, with little creditable research to his record.

Was Sarah Levine going back to do more bird studies for Brightman but why would a primatologist study birds in the first place? It did not make sense since Brightman was dead and why would she go back to Flores to do bird studies with a physical anthropologist in tow? Two scientists doing research outside their chosen field of study was more than just a mere coincidence. The facts did not add up to Reggie and he quickly concluded that the ongoing bird studies were little more than a cover story for an entirely different research goal. It seem very plausible to Reggie that the American researchers were ultimately after the same prize as his team.

Reggie was delighted to hear the news and he instructs his people to search for the American team. Reggie was looking for any opportunity to change the existing search area from Flores Island. No matter how Reggie looked at it, the search in Flores had been a total failure up to this point. Access to the caves on Flores where the original Australian research team had been digging was now strictly off limits to all teams. Efforts to bribe the local officials were getting nowhere fast and to make matters worse, there was a speculative rumor spreading among the researchers about the poor viability of the existing fossil DNA. Normally, Reggie's tactics would become more heavy handed at this juncture, but he decided for once that discretion would be his best course of action in a strange land.

Overall, Flores Island had been a bust for his team, and Reggie was running out of time and patience. No clues, no fossils, and absolutely no ROI to show for their efforts. Oh, there was the usual gossip about the Ebu, but nothing concrete would ever materialize and to make matters worse they were rapidly running out of money. The ever present heat and the continuous inefficiency of the local natives were grating on Reggie. Adding to Reggie's woes, he soon received orders from corporate headquarters to pull the plug on this 'lovely little Asian boat cruise' as they derisively called it, and Reggie was apparently going to take the hit for this folly.

The only problem was that Reggie was not the kind to take a hit, at least not willingly and not without a fight. No, others would pay for their misfortune but not Reggie, that was not the way of his world. So, Reggie ignored the orders from corporate headquarters and he would try his luck by chasing this maverick American team across the expanse of the Flores Sea.

Unfortunately, they had no idea what island the maverick team had targeted for their research. Loose talk about Endes gave them a general direction regarding the island chain, but they would have to search for the team as they navigated their way through the Flores Sea. The good news was that they had managed to secure a photo of the native boat hired by the two Americans.

For several weeks, they desperately searched the islands looking for the American team, single-mindedly making their way from one uninhabited island to another. Reggie chartered small planes to help in the search of the area but there was still no sign of the team. After several weeks of searching and when they thought all was lost, to their surprise, they found an aerial surveillance photo of a small boat anchored in a southern bay on a small, uncharted island. The team had been on the island for more than a few weeks and Reggie was positive they were there for a good reason.

Upon their arrival at the island, Reggie carefully orchestrated their landing as if he was planning D-Day. They decided to approach the island from the north side so as not to announce their presence to the American team located in the south. Reggie had the large ship anchor a distance off the island, and had his smaller supply boats ferry both his equipment and men to the beach. Bill is feeling the pressure from Reggie, and he personally takes charge of the large camp's deployment. Bill is not sure what they are to going find on the island so he prepared for both a dig and a capture scenario. The equipment and men pours onto the island over the course of the next two days, and their northern base camp rapidly takes shape.

As Reggie arrives on the island, he deploys his Ebu search parties. Reggie instructs two teams to look in the caves for specimens, and sends a third team to look for the living “Oboes” as he calls them. Bill senses desperation in Reggie’s actions, and that is a new erratic component to Reggie’s already volatile chemistry. Hour after hour, Reggie barks instructions incessantly to his men knowing this could be his last stand. From time to time, Reggie stares at Bill while wondering how did he allow Bill to get him into this predicament in the first place? Bill knows the look and he decides it is best if he remains out of Reggie’s sight.

As the third team scours the island, reports filter into Reggie about the occasional glimpse of a strange, tiny people. Overhearing the reports, the news leaves Bill feeling somewhat conflicted. On a personal level, Bill feels a sense of relief that the Ebu do in fact exist but his excitement is tempered by the future Reggie has planned for them. Bill knows he has unleashed an unpredictable malfeasance upon a small and unsuspecting people somewhat akin to bringing small pox to the Indians.

After the camp is established, the support staff is transported to the island and Karl is among the first wave. It is nighttime at the base camp, and a fully clothed Karl is lying awake on his cot while coping with the sweltering heat. Sweat pours off his skin as he impatiently waits for midnight to strike. Karl glances at his watch repeatedly hoping the seconds and minutes would fly by in a single instant. They wouldn’t, but biding his time had always been Karl’s strength.

Karl was fortunate so far to have even made it to the island. He wasn’t part of Bill’s original landing team, but when he got word of the island expedition, he made a convincing case to Bill to get himself included. At first, he wasn’t quite sure of the purpose of the expedition, but Reggie’s involvement persuaded him to go along. Personally, Karl hated Reggie, and he decided

a long time ago that Reggie was nothing but pure evil doing the devil's work. Therefore, wherever the devil decided to played, Karl, the soldier of God, would be present to do battle.

Earlier that day after their deployment to the island, Karl ran into Bill and Reggie at the camp. Reggie was deep in conversation with Bill when the pair saw him approaching. Reggie glanced at Karl and asked Bill "Who is this?" Bill commented that Karl was his laboratory assistant and Reggie derisively said, "Oh, I see another lab rat. How many lab rats have you brought to the island?" Neither man acknowledged Karl's presence and the pair entered a large tent together. Karl lingered near the tent and overheard the two talking about the potential of their new island find. "Not being noticed" was an important new skill Karl had acquired since he began hanging around the likes of Reggie and his men. He didn't move a muscle as he listened to every word that was exchanged between Reggie and Bill. He didn't know what a hominid was, but he figured it had to be a different type of people apart from normal folks. Reggie's plans called for using these people, these Ebu as they called them, for a new line of stem cell research, and this distressed Karl to no end. As if the use of the fetuses wasn't enough of an abomination, Reggie was planning to use an entire people for his ungodly research.

Karl had waited for this opportunity, and now he knew where and when he was going to make his stand against Reggie. No, Karl was not going to allow Reggie to continue his crimes against God's children. Karl was to be counted as one of God's soldiers, and he would protect the Ebu from Reggie and his kind!

At midnight, Karl rose from his cot while grabbing a backpack he had carefully prepared and concealed during the course of the day. Karl nervously reviewed the pack over and over again. Food rations, water, medical supplies, canvas, rat traps, burlap bags, potable water pills and even quinine. He ended the list with a rifle and some ammo including a box of #1 buckshot shotgun shells. Karl grabbed a gun he had secreted earlier in the day, and left the tent to begin

his journey into the wilderness. The camp guard, a slothful local native youth, was sound asleep, and Karl was able to leave the camp unnoticed.

Karl has the necessary supplies and a true mission, but he has no real knowledge of where to look for the Ebu or even what he was actually looking for. Karl just assumed that if he found these unique people he would recognize them immediately. In the middle of the night, a young man goes into the wilderness to meet his uncertain destiny. He would go all night knowing that they would begin to look for him at daybreak. Karl had to get several miles away hopefully on higher ground, where he would have some advantage if they decided to pursue him.

At the outset, Karl stumbled into the forest moving very hesitantly. It would take some time for his eyes to adjust to the dark, but they do eventually adjust. The uneven terrain was beating the hell out of his feet and ankles, making the journey an ordeal for Karl, but he plodded along.

“Dear Jesus, what am I doing here?” Karl thought to himself. “This is crazy. I’m never going to make it far enough away from these bastards. How am I getting back home? Yet, I have to do something. It’s time to stand up and be accounted for.”

“Onward Christian soldiers,” he chuckled to himself but he resisted the urge to sing. “So this was war, what type of man was he going to be when the war began? Coward or hero?”

Throughout the night, Karl resisted the temptation to rest and to drink water while the sweat continued to pour off him. “I’ve got five hours to daybreak, five hours to make it up the slope of the mountain,” he said to himself. He had to keep going and he wouldn’t allow himself to fail his mission from God.

As Karl neared the mountain, he had made no effort to conceal his path through the woods. The experienced trackers, actually paid assassins, on Reggie’s team, could follow him quickly, especially during the light of the day. As he stumbled about in the dark, broken

vegetation and footprints clearly marked his path through the virgin underbrush. As Karl came across a small stream, he immediately knew that it was time to make his move. The stream was mountain fed and during the dry season, it moved sluggishly through the woods. Karl walked into the middle of the stream, and began the process of making his trail disappear. He would walk along the stream first in one direction and then another, hoping to confuse his would be trackers. Karl knew Reggie's team didn't have dogs so that made his efforts to disappear just a little bit easier.

At this point, Karl placed a couple of burlap bags over his boots to dull the impression of his boots on the soft soil. This would slow down his pursuers since they wouldn't have the crisp outline of his boots to follow. Karl was thinking of anything he could do to obliterate the spoor, or tracks, he was leaving behind at this point.

Karl decided to move in the direction of the stream's source toward the mountain. He walked along the stream for a good quarter mile before stopping once to take a drink. Finally, he saw his opportunity when he spotted a strong tree branch straddling the banks of the eight-foot wide stream. He jumped up, grabbed the branch with his arms, and tried to pull himself up. Initially, he faltered, and he dangled from the limb for a moment exhausted from the night's trek. Karl waited a moment to catch his breath and with a second wind, he was able to pull himself onto the branch. He climbed from one branch to another, hoping to make his trail literally disappear into the primordial forest. He did this for as long as he could, and he finally came down into the middle of virgin forest. This would buy Karl some much-needed time as his pursuers would struggle to pick up the spoor again.

The alarm at Reggie's camp began slowly as numerous people called out Karl's name. Where the hell did he go? One of the guards noticed that a gun was missing and with it some ammo. This discovery created a panic in the camp, and the worst of thoughts filled the morning

air. The debate began as to whether or not they should hunt him down. There were no signs of a struggle so they were confident that Karl left of his own accord but what was his motive? True, he could get to the prize before them but what resources did he have? Who got to him? The worst thoughts ran quickly and angrily through one man's mind; Reggie's mind.

Reggie interrogated the small native that stood guard the night before. "You didn't hear anything, huh?" The head guard quickly translated. The small native's face began contorting in obvious fear, as Reggie's temper was already legendary amongst the native workers. "No, boss!" he said. Reggie felt the blood rushing to his face at the words from the native. He was being made a fool of and his ego wouldn't allow it. Reggie was in a vile mood after word had gotten back to him about the nature of rumors the office prairie dogs were spreading about him back at headquarters. In essence, Reggie's million-dollar Tahiti cruise was a career ender, so this treachery just put him over the top. Reggie snapped as he struck a blow across the smaller man's head, whipping it back so hard that the man went unconscious and slumped to the ground. "Somebody pick up this piece of shit and lock him up!" Reggie barked.

Reggie then stared at Bill and asked, "Karl reported directly to you, correct?"

"Yes, he did Reggie," Bill said.

"So what the hell is your boy to? I need to know right away. Do a complete background check and not with our corporate hacks. Use my people for this assignment. I want to know all there is to know about this asshole! I want a team after Karl right now is that understood? Track and bring him back here dead or alive. I don't care, I just want him stopped. What the hell is he up to?" Bill started to protest the escalation in violence, but Reggie quickly quiets him.

Reggie doesn't hesitate and decides to send two of his best professionals to go after Karl. One is a six foot-four former bodybuilder called Arnold, because everybody assumes he is an Austrian. In fact, his real name is Robert, and he is an ex-Marine that doesn't talk much. He has

been on Reggie's payroll for a while, and is a trusted soldier of Reggie's. The other guy is an averaged size gent named Tito with a less than stellar background in the military, and with some tenuous connections with organized crime. The pair has a decidedly sadistic look about them, and they seemingly enjoy the work that they do for Reggie. Bill has always made it point to keep his distance from the pair knowing firsthand their less than sunny dispositions.

The pair of goons track Karl for several hours that morning and do so with considerable gusto. All things considered, they were just glad to be off the boat after having spent weeks at sea with little to do but fight their tedium. They are able to follow Karl's spoor up to a point with relative ease, but lose his tracks entirely by the stream. As trained trackers, they begin a 360-degree search of the area, but they were still failing to pickup the spoor. After an hour of futile searching, they were unsure what to do next, and they finally had to acknowledge that Karl had somehow eluded them.

They radio Reggie, and the pair debates whether to look for Karl on the upper slopes of the volcano. "Gentlemen, Karl is going to be looking for shelter, and that volcano is the only higher ground on this island. He has to be heading there; there is nowhere else to go on this island. This is not a big deal; this guy is just a lab rat. Robert, stop wasting my fucking time and go fuck him up!" Reggie shouted.

From his position up on the volcano, Karl spots the two trackers methodically make their way up the slope. Karl stares in disbelief at the two, and is shocked at how quickly they were able to track him. Even from a distance, Karl can spot their M16 rifles and scopes, a sure sign that he is dealing with Reggie's hired professionals. Fortunately, for Karl, the tropical heat has forced the trackers to make their journey without body armor; a reasonable risk for them considering their seemingly soft target: an escaped lab rat. They are quietly moving as a team each man using a

stick to point to the direction of the spoor. Neither is talking, and they use hand motions to communicate to one another. Karl watches his pursuers for a while trying to think of his next course of action. He knew Reggie wasn't going to sit tight, and now he had to decide if he had the faith and courage to deal with this new challenge.

Adding to Karl's misery is his rapidly declining health. After the night's forced march, Karl is starting to feel feverish, and he is beginning to lose himself in the jungle. Before he slides completely into oblivion, Karl knows he will only get one opportunity to deal with these hired animals. He decides to go on the offensive and take his chance on setting a trap for his pursuers.

Karl guesses that they are only an hour behind him in their pursuit, and he doesn't have much time set anything too elaborate. He removes the bags from his feet, throwing one along the mountain path and allows his boots to leave marks for about twenty yards. At an appropriately concealed location, he removes his boots and sets up a trip wire along the path for his guests. Karl had resisted the need to relieve himself throughout the night knowing he wanted to save his urine for this moment. He liberally urinates along the path marking the area as an alert to any unsuspecting animal. No need in having some passing animal setting off his lone trap, Karl thinks to himself. For years, Karl has been planning for this day, and in the next hour, all of his dreams will either come to fruition or to a decidedly bitter-end.

The two trackers make their way along the trail as it begins to wind its way up the steeper slope of the volcano. The higher they go the thinner the vegetation becomes and the trails in the dirt become easier to follow. As they trudge on, thunderstorms begin to darken the sky and their constant growl in the distance ominously announcing their imminent arrival to the island.

Robert is the first to spot the burlap bag and the boot prints. He points to the articles with his stick, and he hand signals to his companion to stop moving forward. They both stop in their

tracks and carefully inspect their surroundings. They move much slower, observing the ground with even greater scrutiny and care. They go another twenty yards before Robert stops his approach yet again, and he points to the trip wire stretched across the path. The shine of the wire is clearly visible in the blazing noonday sun. He motions for the two to move away from the wire, and they begin to make their way along either side of the trail. They are both crouching, and are taking great care to avoid the trail entirely. Robert approaches the trip wire from the side in an effort to see where the wire was leading. He is now on his hand and knees, struggling to control his breathing, while he carefully approaches the trip wire. Robert hears the breaking of a branch and to his horror sees that his hand has tripped a second concealed wire hidden along the brush. A metal trap snaps, and there is a loud shotgun blast within a few feet of his position. Robert falls over onto his side bleeding from a dozen shotgun pellets that have buried their way deep into his side. He is bleeding profusely from a large gaping, red wound, and he can see smoke rising slowly from the brush. As the smoke clears, he can see a rat trap lying on its side with a spent shotgun shell trapped between the sprung hinges.

With the sound of the blast, Tito instinctively ducks for cover on the other side of the road. As he scurries along the ground, a second blast fires and he feels a sharp massive pain in his lower leg. Tito's foot had struck a buried shotgun shell rigged with a homemade nail contact. The blast rips through the back part of his foot and a few pieces of shot bury their way into his lower back. Tito lets out a large yell and falls to the ground. He takes a quick look at his foot, and he can see that the heel is a bloody mess. As he removes the dangling heel of his boot, the bottom of his foot is visible as a raw mass of meat with the heel bone clearly visible. Blood is pouring from the wound, and he applies a tourniquet to his lower leg to stem the flow of blood.

On the other side of the road Robert is groaning and lying on his side, yelling for help, knowing he is quickly bleeding to death. Tito looks upward at the slope trying to find his

attacker, but he can't see Karl. Tito tries to scurry away from the side of the path, away from the upper slopes, but he observes a dozen similarly rigged shotgun shells surrounding him. He stops moving and he is pinned in his present location. A sense of panic starts to grip him and he grabs his radio to call Reggie for backup.

“Reggie, Reggie... we need help, we're being attacked. Who the hell is this son-of-a-bitch?” As Tito speaks, he continues to scour the high ground looking for his would-be attacker. “Anybody in the camp...” The radio goes silent as a shot hits Tito square in the back. Tito's face contorts, and he slowly slumps face forward into the dirt.

Karl slowly rises from his hiding perch. He had been waiting for his pursuers along the low ground of the path knowing that his pursuers would instinctively look upward on the slope for their potential attacker. Karl carefully walks over to Robert watching for any sudden movements from the wounded man. Robert is moaning and writhing along the ground holding his side, and struggling in an effort to stop his bleeding. Karl kicks the M16 away, and he notices the blood mixed into the dirt of the path. It was strange the way the blood had formed small, uneven clumps as it mixed the dirt, concealing its bright red color from his view. Despite his wound, Robert is not done and he grabs his large hunting knife from his belt. Karl was expecting the move and he methodically kicks the knife away from Robert while shaking his head at Robert's futile effort.

The shotgun blast at such close proximity did serious damage to Robert's side. As he surveys the scene, Karl knows Robert's wounds are too severe for him to survive, and Karl debates what to do with the dying man. Robert angrily looks up at Karl, and yells, “Fuck you asshole!” at him. While lying on his back he tries to spit at Karl. The spit barely leaves his lips, and instead dribbles down his chin. Karl shakes his head, realizing what he must do, and he utters a small prayer. With shaky hands, Karl takes up his rifle and without hesitation, aims, and

shoots Robert in the head. In an instant, the wounded man's agony ends and his body stops moving.

Karl slowly walks over to the body of Tito and gathers the remaining shotgun shells he had scattered on the ground. Karl only had time to rig one shell on that side of the road, but he figured just burying the rest would confuse and delay his pursuers. Most of all, he had counted on the trackers seriously underestimating him and his faith. They did and Karl thanked God for his good fortune as he ground the clumps of dirt near Tito's body into the ground. He had managed to kill two of Reggie's best men in less than ten minutes, but the carnage left him extremely shaken as he tried to reconcile his actions with God. As the sweat poured off his forehead, Karl prayed and begged God for his forgiveness. After all, wasn't he just a soldier in God's army doing God's work?

New Friends

Sarah slowly awakens to the morning sun and as she peered out her tent, she awoke to the curious spectacle of watching Richard making breakfast for the team. Normally Supar would make breakfast for the entire camp, but Supar was nowhere in sight that morning. Instead, Sarah was watching Richard go about his unusual antics. Richard was hurriedly making coffee and pancakes for the troop, and the smell of burnt food hung heavy on the early morning air. At least he wasn't wearing the yellow shorts she thought to herself, as she caught herself chuckling at the bizarre spectacle.

Sarah finally decided to leave the tent, but as she pulled up her covers, she felt a sudden rush of cool air touching her breasts. She looked down, and she saw that she was completely naked. 'Oh, yes, last night,' she thought to herself and a small smile came to her face. Richard certainly saw his opportunity, and he had taken full advantage of her vulnerability last night. Strangely, she was glad that he did.

Sarah was pleasantly surprised by how tender a lover Richard had been during the night, that is after she survived his initial onslaught. After a deep, passionate kiss, they hurriedly retired to her tent. Inside, he was practically ripping her shirt off and she was positive that she saw at least one unfortunate button fly into the air. She should have been concerned but she was too busily removing his clothes to stop him. He made quick work of her bra and shorts and as he furiously kissed her, his hands freely fondled her naked breasts. He then pinned her arms back

while simultaneously parting her legs with his own. To her surprise, once the preliminary rush of passion was over for Richard, he became very affectionate and attentive to her needs. Her shoes and socks were the last to go as he lovingly caressed her bare feet. There were no forced “I love you” exchanges between the lovers but she didn’t care because the damn runner could go the distance.

After their lovemaking was over, Sarah found herself lying next to the opening in the tent with the cool ocean breeze dancing over her naked skin. Richard was next to her, sleeping and snoring lightly with his large, warm arm protectively draped over her shoulder. She smirked; realizing he wasn’t such a bad choice after all as she gently stroked his arm and hand. She was wide-awake; enjoying a strange sense of contentment she had not felt in a long time, while realizing that the horrors of the previous day were now a distant memory.

She had to face it, they had both willingly used each other last night, and if you don’t call that love, then what do you call it? Passion? Horniness? A big mistake? Still, if it was a mistake, she found solace in his passion and attentiveness last night. The edge was suddenly lifted from her but for how long? Whatever, Sarah knows she has started something that she was not ready to deal with. As he continued to prepare breakfast, Sarah notices Richard slightly grinning to himself, no doubt congratulating himself on his performance last night. That’s it, she had seen enough from the man-boy.

Sarah hurriedly put her clothes on and left the tent. Upon her exit from the tent, Richard smiled at her as he tried to suppress a small smirk. “Would you please wipe that idiotic smile off your face, mister?” Sarah said while grinning at him.

Richard laughs at the comment, knowing he was busted. “You got it boss, back to business or should I say Ebu business. Boy, you were right about persistence being a virtue.”

“So, where are the boys?” she asked in an effort to change the topic.

“I think we scared them off to the beach,” Richard answered with a smile.

“Hmmm... oh no, we’re we that noisy?” Sarah questioned as her face relinquished any sense of self-proprity and turned beet red.

“Nah, not too bad, but I think you did let out a rebel yell or two during the course of the night. Hey, am I allowed to hug the boss?”

Sarah nods a weak affirmative in his direction. Richard walks over to her, and wraps his arms around her while giving her a big kiss on the mouth. Sarah sighs and hugs him back while standing on her tip toes, unsure what to do next with her newfound lover. It had been Sarah’s observation that the normal behavior of the male after a night of lovemaking, was to treat their former lover like a pile of radioactive waste. Namely, the object of their undying affections from the previous night was to be avoided at all possible costs come sunrise. This was part of a deliberate effort by the male to distance himself, and to avoid any potential emotional commitment to the female. “Just do it and leave!” was sort of a male mantra after a brief hookup. Instead, she found herself feeling that way about Richard, and she found the sudden role reversal somewhat bewildering if not downright amusing.

Her momentary sense of contentment from the night before had quickly dissipated in the harsh glare of the morning sun, replaced instead by an emotional rollercoaster that only strengthened as she reflected on the strange turn of events. “Wow, two mistakes in one day!” How could she compound the biggest professional mistake of her life with such a stupid personal mistake and all in one day? Just what she wanted on this trip: a boyfriend?

All she wanted to do was to get down to the pond, strip herself of her clothing and throw her naked body into the water. She urgently wanted to wash away all traces of the events of yesterday, hoping that in her tropical baptism she could absolve herself of her stupid personal

sins. But no, here she was fidgeting and squirming while being hugged by an affectionate Richard.

“Can I consider sleeping with the boss a fringe benefit?” Richard asked.

Sarah smiled at him and after a quick pat on his butt she walked away from him while saying, “You’re still a cretin.”

Why did she always behave in this stupid fashion, allowing her brain to get in the way of her heart, just as some guy was clearly committing himself to her? On the other hand, perhaps it was time for a pre-emptive dumping on her part before Richard could do the same to her. The only thing she did know was that Richard, the man-boy-cretin, was always good for a surprise or two and, for the time being, that was so much better than being alone. Plus, she had to admit on an entirely superficial level the previous day’s events made for another great ‘Dear Journal’ entry!

For several days following the incident, the Ebu have made themselves sparse to the researchers. When they do find the Ebu troop, the Ebu won’t allow Sarah to approach them, as if to punish her for her transgression. Since their night together, Sarah hasn’t allowed Richard to approach her either. Richard has been attentive and affectionate, but Sarah is still hesitant to commit to him. Sarah feels their night together was a moment of weakness for her, much like the rest of that awful day. No, if Sarah was to take a lover it was to be on her own terms. Worse, Sarah was beginning to feel uncomfortable about the island as if she was reliving her dreams, and she didn’t quite know why. She felt as if recent events were closing in on her, pressing her to make decisions she had no desire to make. Richard sensed her hesitation, and he decided to give Sarah some time to reflect on the week’s events.

With little happening at the camp, Supar decided to return to Flores for some much needed supplies. With the discovery of water on the island, they have managed to stretch two weeks of supplies into four, but now they were running out of almost every commodity. Richard, in fact, has been pressing Supar to disclose the origins of some of their recent dinners, and after seeing the look on Supar's face, he quickly decided that he would rather not know about the origins of the mystery meat. Besides needing some necessities, they were almost out of dry fruit and that was starting to put a serious crimp in Sarah's work with the Ebu. Sarah is not crazy about Supar's departure, but Supar leaves his brother Rudy behind during the three-day journey, to assure Sarah of his eventual return.

Without Supar's assistance, Richard's work in the caves grinds to a virtual halt. Instead of working in the cave, everyday begins with a new ritual of Richard having to look and track down the Ebu's new camp location. The Ebu are doing a good job of keeping their distance from the researchers, but the small team remains dogged in their pursuit of the Ebu troop.

One morning, Richard and Sarah leave the camp together in search of the Ebu. After an hour of walking, Sarah finds herself separated from Richard. Once again, Richard's long legs have allowed him to stray too far in front of Sarah, and she loses sight of him in the dense jungle. She was about to call out Richard's name but hesitates because she didn't want to alert the Ebu. Sarah doesn't panic because of her familiarity with the island, and she decides to continue the search alone. She methodically made her way along an old path and as she scanned the tree line, she caught a glimpse of somebody watching her. As she turned to look, they disappeared into the jungle. Was it Richard but didn't Richard have his stupid yellow shorts on today? As she moves near a break in the woods, Sarah finds herself walking in a small clearing. To her surprise, she can clearly see several of the Ebu females sitting with the young in the shade of the clearing and Sarah quickly realizes that she has found the new Ebu encampment. There are no

males in sight, just the usual collection of females with their infants intermingled with some adolescents.

Sarah is delighted to see the Ebu, but they, in turn, are shocked and alarmed by the sudden intrusion of Sarah. Sarah is standing at her full height and, in her confusion, she finds herself staring at the Ebu females while looking for Flo. Sarah didn't assume a more submissive posture, and the Ebu females are startled by her sudden gain in stature.

The sight of Sarah outrages Agrippina, and she starts to get very agitated. Agrippina has not forgotten Sarah's outburst that day, the outburst that drove the entire troop deeper into the woods of the island. Without provocation, Agrippina picks up a large rock, and in single motion, hurls it at Sarah. The poorly thrown rock misses Sarah, but soon another missile is hurled in Sarah's direction. The second rock strikes Sarah in her thigh causing her to yell out in pain. A trickle of blood begins to flow from an inch long break in the skin, and the blood slowly makes its way down Sarah's leg.

The other Ebu see Agrippina's reaction, and they start to get frantic as well. Several Ebu give out their warning call, a loud "Kurchuck" sound that Sarah has heard before. The combination of Agrippina's excitement, with the presence of the bleeding stranger, starts a round of bloodlust among the Ebu in the camp. The other Ebu females grab the rocks and cutting stones that litter the ground and they begin to rain a shower of rocks in Sarah's general direction. While they are throwing the rocks, the entire troop begins shrieking at the top of their lungs as an alarm call to the males. Their throws are a poor imitation of the males hunting techniques, and many fall short of their target or miss Sarah altogether by a considerable distance. Yet, a few find do their target particularly those thrown by the adolescent males.

Flo is at the far end of the camp, and the sight of her tribe attacking Sarah freezes her. Sarah starts backing away, while at the same time trying to fend off the rocks in mid-air with her

hands. Several hit Sarah in the hands and body, but she manages to remain alert and conscious throughout the ordeal. Sarah is debating whether to move forward in a bluff to scare the Ebu off, or to attempt a run for it. For the moment, Sarah is paralyzed with indecision rather than fear. It is then that Sarah catches a look at Flo, and gives Flo a quizzical look as if to ask, "Why me?"

Sarah decides to make a break for it, when she sees Flo suddenly run forward. Flo runs to the front of the small Ebu band, and positions herself between the attackers and Sarah. As Agrippina goes to hurl another rock, Flo knocks the rock out of her hand, while yelling at the older, dominant female. Flo's actions infuriate Agrippina but before she could strike, the screaming Flo shoves the larger female to the ground. After staring Agrippina into submission, Flo moves down the line knocking the stones out of the other Ebu's hands. Flo continues to yell and shriek at the other females, even after she has disarmed them. The fierceness of the little female takes the other Ebu off guard, and they don't know how to react to Flo. Their yelling ceases and Flo holds her ground between the Ebu troop and Sarah. A shaken Agrippina is confused by the sudden bravery of the smaller Flo and Sarah sees the temporary lull as her opportunity to retreat from the Ebu camp. Sarah quietly backs away while limping on her injured leg. She looks down at the cut, and Sarah considers herself lucky that the Ebu didn't get the opportunity to do more damage to her. Many of the rocks they were throwing had some nasty cutting edges, and they could have done considerable more damage to her if given the time.

Sarah slowly walks back to camp, confused by the sudden bravery of Flo. As she limps back to her camp, she catches up with Richard who was coming from the other direction after he heard the commotion originating from the Ebu.

"What the hell happened to you?" asked Richard as he surveys the bloodied and slightly shaken Sarah. After a quick look, Richard decides that Sarah is more stunned than hurt.

“I think the Ebu females decided that I wasn’t good enough company for them. They actually started to throw rocks at me. I guess they are capable of holding a grudge, huh?” Sarah asked.

“Sarah, sit down for a minute. What were you doing out there? Is this some Jewish thing, you know reenacting an Old Testament stoning?” Richard said as he grabbed the first aid kit.

Sarah is staring off in the distance, and not answering him. Richard tends to her wounds beginning with the cleaning of her cuts.

“That cut on your leg needs a few stitches; otherwise it’s gonna open up and get infected. A butterfly is not going to make it out here, not under these primitive conditions,” Richard said.

Sarah looks at Richard, “How are you with a needle?”

“Not great, yourself?”

“I’ve stitched up an ape or two in my time. Don’t worry, I’ll give you instructions. Nice, tight stitches please,” Sarah said.

“Come on, scars on babes are kind of cool, huh?” Richard sniggered.

“You are such a cretin!” Sarah said in kidding to him. “I really don’t know what type of chicks you’ve been hanging around.”

“Oh, I think you know,” Richard said as he was busily massaging her tan legs. It wasn’t a subtle, gentile massage but a deep vigorous muscle rub down that reached deep down to her bones.

“Hey mister, a lot more cleaning, and a little less stroking, please!” Sarah said.

“Just trying to relax you, baby!” Richard said.

“Baby?” Sarah thinks to herself.

Despite her recent ordeal, the impromptu massage did feel good and she felt strangely safe in Richard's company. As he stroked, she felt a familiar urge starting to well up in her loins and the waves of warm, liquid ardor threaten to overwhelm her. Sarah chastely closes her legs together and she decides to change the subject.

"You know, I don't understand Flo. She didn't stand up to Agrippina when Agrippina killed her infant, but she stops an entire angry Ebu mob when I'm getting attacked. All of sudden, she gets a backbone, I don't get it. What gives?"

Richard continues to massage her legs while talking, "Sarah, in all likelihood this was her first full term baby, right? And based on what you have seen, Flo has had little practice with the other infants of the tribe since she was constantly being ostracized by the other adult females, right?" Richard asked.

Sarah nods her head in the affirmative, and realizes Richard had been reading her field notes.

"It's real simple, Sarah. Flo may not have understood what her baby was to her, but she does understand what a friend is. You're her friend, it's that simple knucklehead. You're probably the only living being in this world that has ever befriended that poor creature. So guess what, Sarah? You finally have a friend in the world! Ok, it's not quite human, but in your case, you should take whatever you can get," Richard said.

"Just one, huh?" Sarah asked.

Richard smiles at her. "Okay, make that two, counting me!"

Sarah smiles back at Richard. "Yeah, great, now I've got two non-human friends! When did you get so smart?" Sarah asked.

"Hey, a minute ago I was a cretin," Richard said.

“Yeah, I keep changing my mind about you,” she said as she ran her hand through Richard’s hair.

Richard continues, “I haven’t had too many friends myself so I know one when I see one. Moreover, I wasn’t just attacked by a mob of angry Hobbits, so I’m thinking a little more clearly than you are right now. Will you please stop fidgeting so I can clean this wound for you?”

Richard grabs the antiseptic and announces, “Oh boy, this is going to be fun; okay, this will definitely hurt you more than me. Hold still, this is going to sting a little bit...” For the next ten minutes, Sarah’s shouts of pain, curses and laughter intermingle with the chorus of calls from the other denizens of the jungle.

The Guardian

Karl stumbled upon the Ebu from a distance and carefully watched them for a time. Karl thought that the Ebu would be some primitive human tribe, a group of noble savages that he would have to protect from Reggie. Instead, the strange tiny, human-like creatures do not immediately register with Karl as a people or as an animal. Their small stature combined with their long arms and sloping foreheads were quite unlike any other creatures he had ever seen. Karl clearly did not believe in evolution, and not having studied early humans, there was no context for him to place these creatures in. Human beings spend their entire life classifying the creatures and animals in their world. Where in the menagerie, do you put a three-foot tall, bipedal creature with long arms, sloping foreheads, no chin, and a good-sized potbelly?

What to make of these strange creatures? Are these the new children of God or perhaps a forgotten tribe? Maybe they were the true descendants of Adam and Eve. Karl's only recourse was to go to the Bible. There is just one mention of dwarfs in the Bible, a less than helpful instruction in Leviticus 21:20 about excluding dwarfs from the priesthood. "All right, they can't be priests but what are they?" Karl thought. Could the Ebu be descendants or agents of Lucifer, and therefore be inherently evil? Didn't make sense, and again there was no context in the Bible for Karl to reference. They are obviously not practicing Jews so they must be Gentiles but as Karl watched the Ebu, he noticed that they didn't practice anything. Perhaps they were a lost tribe, sort of related to the Australian aborigines, but their sloping heads kept Karl from making

that assumption. Additionally, their arms were so incredibly long for such a short people. The only thing Karl was sure of was that they were a relatively peaceful people, very much unlike Reggie and his human gang of corporate thieves.

The Ebu didn't worship any false gods; in fact they had no outward manifestations of worship, period. They had little in terms of material possessions. The males had their spears, and a few other simple tools. On occasion one of them may keep a seashell as a prized possession, but that was the extent of their belongings. They obviously weren't very materialistic.

The other observation Karl noted was that the Ebu were oblivious to being very naked. They wore no clothing anywhere as well as on their feet. Children, adults, they were all equally naked, and they made no effort to cover their nakedness even when in mixed company. Their genitals, breasts and buttocks were exposed for all to see in the tribe.

Their language was another challenge. Karl couldn't make sense of their weird mix of calls, sounds and ticks. The mix didn't have the usual rhythm of any human language as Karl knew it. Some greetings were easy to make out. There was "Hummphhh" sound that was typically a hello greeting but making heads or tails out of names was near impossible.

Karl was looking for a purpose in his life and he was hoping these strange people would provide one for him. He struggled to understand his calling and then the answer came to Karl. The Ebu were also God's children, and he would be a missionary to the Ebu teaching them God's way. He would first have to gain their trust, learn their language, and only after overcoming these considerable challenges would he finally be able to teach them about God's glory. Karl never considered the difficulty of dealing with their small minds so taken was he with his new mission. It may take a lifetime but this would be his calling; it was actually God's calling.

Karl would also protect the Ebu from the likes of Reggie and his kind. To Karl, saving twenty souls was well worth a lifetime of crushing isolation and besides, Karl saw little opportunity for a peaceful return to his own kind.

There were several obstacles in the way of Karl's grandiose visions. At some point, Karl was going to have to deal with Reggie, who continued to send his men after Karl on a daily basis. Then he inadvertently found out about the presence of Sarah and Richard's team on the island. Karl watched them for some time, and realized that they too were pursuing the Ebu. After spying on them for a while, Karl figured they were natural scientists interested only in observing the Ebu, but he couldn't know for sure what their future plans were for them. Besides, Karl had his doubts about their spiritual motivations, especially when he spied the woman they called "Sarah" bathing, naked and alone at the pond. Her nude body was all there for him to see and he watched with fascination as she rubbed and cleaned her glistening skin with the warm tropical water. As he became aroused, he cursed Sarah as a whore for inspiring such impure thoughts in him and he debated what to do with her next. Karl was afraid that any outsider, no matter how benign, could be introducing sin to his people.

Karl finally realized that he had too many major challenges before him; the strange Ebu people, Reggie, and finally Sarah and Richard's team. Oh, he almost forgot the raging fever that was consuming his body since his arrival on this island. The fever was so bad that Karl considered raiding one of the camps for some medicine, but he knew he couldn't take the risk. The challenges appeared almost insurmountable but Karl put his trust in God, and prayed that he would find a way through his ordeal in the wilderness.

For several days, Karl watched the Ebu while taking great care to avoid Sarah. When Sarah left, he would sometimes come down from his perch to interact with the Ebu. Unfortunately, Karl did not have Sarah's good graces when dealing with these timid people.

Karl never figured out how to make himself “small” until he observed Sarah interacting with Ebu. Unfortunately, at the point, the Ebu were well aware of his immense size and had quickly determined him to be a sizable threat. He tried to bring them food imitating Sarah’s techniques, but he was always gathering the wrong food, or it would be of some inferior quality. The aboriginal gourmands would sample Karl’s offering but they would usually spit the food out in disgust. The Ebu were not interested in his spoiled food or Karl for that matter, and Karl was getting frustrated with their continued rejection of him.

One day, Karl got a new idea. Out of boredom, he started imitating some of their calls and would practice them for hours at a time. He would call them after Sarah left, and he would do this for about ten to twenty minutes into the early evening. Originally, the Ebu didn’t know what to make of the weird sounds, and they ignored the stranger’s plaintive calls. However, after a few days of this new routine, they began a chorus in response to Karl’s calls, and some incredible chatter among the Ebu would follow soon thereafter. This would go on through dusk, until the tribe settled into their nightly sleep. In the dark, Karl would then drag himself back to his encampment on the volcano slope, and attempt to grab a few moments of sleep in his cave.

His peaceful work with the Ebu was tempered with the looming threat of Reggie’s men. Karl had seen Reggie at work, and he knew that Reggie had few personal boundaries. Thus, Karl knew Reggie’s men would continue to hunt him. To deal with that inevitable scenario, Karl found a secure location in one of the caves over the volcanic bluff on the north side of the island. The cave’s location gave him an incredible view over the approaching trails, so it would be relatively easy for him to spot the advancing assassins. On chillier nights, Karl could also light a fire if necessary, and the smoke would be hidden in the mist that blew in with the cool morning ocean breezes. Nevertheless, he had to be wary, and every day he waited for Reggie to make his next move.

Karl knew the price of his possible failure, and it gave him the motivation he needed to continue his fight. Karl was privy to the intimate details of Reggie's grand designs for the Ebu and the horrific future for the Ebu that Reggie was envisioning. The most traumatic moment would be the actual hunt and capture of the Ebu specimens that Reggie planned to take back to the laboratories. To be chased by such large creatures, and then shot by a Taser, as Reggie planned, would be an incredible shock to the Ebus. From there, they would begin a lifetime of captivity, typically placed in small sterile lab cages that would be just sufficiently large enough to house them. An endless parade of lab procedures would thus begin on the Ebu, in an effort to steal as much knowledge as possible from their small, frail bodies.

Karl's personal knowledge of the procedures caused him to shudder. Getting DNA from the Ebu was as simple as placing a cotton swab in the mouth of the donor. However, at some point, there would be a demand to create the new stem cell line. The eggs would be harvested from one of the female's ovaries in a relatively minor surgical procedure. Of course, the researchers would have to get viable sperm from the males, and that could be a rough go for the individual male. One technique in use at primate centers was electro-ejaculation. The male primate, typically a monkey, is strapped into a chair, with two metal bands tied around his penis. An electrical current is then supplied that is strong enough to cause the monkey to ejaculate. In the vernacular, the procedure is known as "shock the monkey", and the shock is enough to cause pain to any appendage of the body let alone a penis. Monkeys subjected to this practice were observed to howl in outrage before the next procedure would begin. Afterwards, the males that have been through this procedure have been known to engage in some fairly aberrant behavior even for caged lab animals. This technique is actually considered humane when compared with another electro-ejaculation procedure that uses a priapic rectal probe to force ejaculation.

Whatever the technique, the Ebu sperm can readily be harvested for whatever use the researchers had in mind. The sperm can be combined with the harvested Ebu eggs, thereby fertilizing the egg, and beginning the growth of an embryo. These embryos could then be killed and utilized to create the start of a new Ebu stem cell line. This would create a stem cell line containing some very primitive and radically different human DNA. There was one other, even more insidious, use for the harvested Ebu sperm. Unethical researchers, as if they were any other type, could fertilize a human egg with the Ebu sperm, and create an entirely new species. Nobody knew if this was possible but rumors had it that similar experiments in the past combined chimpanzees and humans and the resultant embryo was viable but sterile. Existing “humanzee” hybrids were the subject of endless speculation by many scientists and it was certainly plausible given the similarity between the two species genomes. The genome of humans and the Ebu were even more similar, and Karl trembled at the thought of allowing this reckless experimentation to occur.

The captive Ebu’s final destination? Who knows what Reggie had in mind? It was clear from Reggie’s conversations with Bill, that Reggie had definitive plans for exhibiting what he called the ‘little freaks’ after the researchers had their way with them. Of course, all of this would be to Reggie’s personal gain. In short, the Ebu would be living their lives in a personal hell away from their own kind, and perhaps begin a generation of zoo-bound Ebus. Karl knew this was the fate of the Ebu, unless he was able to prevail with the help of God.

Karl didn’t know what to do next and he was quickly losing his mind in the jungle. His madness was fueled by his fever, filling his mind with wild thoughts, and abetted by the accompanying loneliness of his new tropical world. He kept having visions of the naked Sarah bathing, and he struggled to expunge those indecent thoughts from his mind. Karl knew he could never fill his spiritual void with other people so he began to seek other answers to his spiritual

crisis. Alone in the wilderness, Karl began a personal dialog with God. An internal monologue began deep within him that he repeated throughout the course of the day filling his emptiness with visions, and a purpose to his life:

This is the story of my children, and how I am here to protect and serve them. I failed to protect my human babies, but God, in his wisdom, has chosen another mission for me. These children of God have come before me and my vision is now clear. I see the truth, and I will do what I have to do to protect these Forgotten Children of God. I will protect this lost tribe, as the father of his children does when threatened by sinful strangers. Pity the man who seeks to harm my children for they we will have to have to deal with my wrath. I know what man does to his kind, the taste of sin and death that ravages our planet. We have little pity for our own, never mind what we would have for these strangers.

Alone, apart from my earlier life, I have grown transformed beyond an ordinary man, beyond the petty conditions of our human society, beyond caring for those of my kind. I hated the small, bickering masses of human kind that have wasted their opportunity to serve their God. I have no use for them anymore, and my children will have no use for them. My language is that of God, and I will shed my old ways so that I can learn to talk to my children. That way, they too will learn the Word of the Almighty and I can be one with the Forgotten Children of God. God is their father, and I am their Guardian.

The Guardian Meets the Lab Rat

Several days after Karl's escape, there is a buzz in Reggie's camp. Outside of the camp, the guards find the head of Robert, one of Reggie's prized goons, impaled on a sharpened wooden stake just outside the camp's entrance. The head is removed from the stake and brought to Reggie for his review. Reggie steps outside his tent to look over Karl's handiwork.

"That is not going to be good for business, not good at all," Reggie said. "Bill, why is your boy biting the hand that feeds him? Any ideas? Because Bill, if you have any ideas now would be the time to share them with me," Reggie yells at Bill.

"None Reggie, I have no idea why he is doing this. He has been an exemplary associate, that is up until this point," Bill responded.

"Exemplary associate? Is that what we call this asshole? Karl is causing me much personal pain, and I want it to stop now. Those were two of my best men. Bill, I want you to go out there with one of the guards and talk to him," Reggie demanded.

"What?" Bill asked.

"Bill, you heard me. There is nothing wrong with your hearing. Find out what he wants, and make whatever promises you have to. Do whatever you can but get him to stop this nonsense! Is that clear?" Reggie asked. Bill tries to protest, but Reggie is not listening to Bill's pleas.

That afternoon, Bill wearily makes his way up the slope towards the presumed direction of Karl. With one of the guards, he follows the trail Robert and Tito had taken a few days before. As they climb the trail, a loud imperial voice rings out across the slope of the mountain.

“Stop moving Bill or you and the guard will both die!”

Before Bill can take another step, Karl emerges from the slope some thirty yards above the trail.

“Bill, take a step back, now! Do it!”

Bill takes a step backwards on the trail with the guard at his side. From above the slope, Karl tosses a large stick a few feet in front of Bill. At first, nothing happens but a few seconds later a loud snapping sound echoes across the mountain as a series of sharpened wood stakes fly across the trail, burying their ragged points deep into the parched tropical soil. The noise and violent movement causes the two men to duck in reaction.

“Sorry, it’s a pig trap, Bill! Tell your guard to remain there, and you can come up alone,” Karl shouts.

Karl hasn’t spoken to anybody in days, and even the company of an enemy is worth taking a risk for. Bill makes his way up the path, and Karl meets him on the trail.

“I see you have kept yourself busy out here!” Bill said.

“I am called the Guardian. God has sent me here to protect my children, protect them from sin, and to protect them from the likes of Reggie and you,” Karl said.

“God has spoken to you?” Bill asked. He couldn’t help but notice that Karl had a demeanor and gravity about him that was befitting a young Charlton Heston on acid.

“In a fashion he does, God talks to me with this,” as Karl holds out the Bible.

“Bill, why do you do the evil things in that lab of yours?”

“Karl, I’m doing research, research that is critical for curing disease; I thought that would be fairly evident to you.” Bill said.

“You are using dead babies to help the living. That’s wrong, Bill!” Karl said.

Bill decides to get away from a heated discussion on stem cell research, and tries a different tact with Karl.

“Of course, they are God’s children. I am here to protect them and save them. I am their Guardian,” Karl said.

“Karl, that’s all well and good, but how did they get here?”

“They are here as a sign of God’s love.”

“Karl, take a good look! Do these look like any people you have ever seen before, anywhere? These are the legendary Ebu Gogo, or to be more precise Homo Floresiensis, a leftover archaic branch of ancestors from our family tree. In other words, they are a group of our ancestors that have managed for tens of thousand of years to avoid extinction unlike the rest of their kind but you know what know what they really are Karl? They are freaks of nature, Karl! They are an experiment in evolution that has been abandoned by an uncaring mother called Nature.”

Karl doesn’t respond to Bill’s words.

“For Gods...” Bill caught himself about to commit a blasphemy and stops for a moment. Composing himself, Bill continues.

“What are these so-called children of yours? The Children God Forgot? Karl, anybody can see that these are not people. Just look at the little freaks!” Bill said.

Karl is hearing none of this. “You are speaking of evolution, more lies from amoral men of science, right Bill?”

“Not lies Karl, evolution is the only logical explanation for the Ebu’s continued existence. We need tissues samples from the Ebu for our medical research, to save lives, Karl. Not to take them, not like you just did,” Bill said.

Karl is starting to get upset with the conversation. “No, not just tissue samples! You’re going to fertilize eggs with sperm and create embryos, and then you are going to kill the embryos so you can culture a new stem cell line. More murder for your science! We should not be destroying young human lives for the benefit of others.”

“Yes, you’re so right Karl. Maybe we should just wait until they are eighteen years of age before we do that. Ever hear of war, Karl? That is what we do as a society. It’s no big secret, old men send young men and women to their deaths everyday. Hell, they don’t even bother to send their own young anymore to their lovely little wars; they just send somebody else’s kid to do their dirty work. We have been doing this since the beginning of time, grow up will you? If you really want a personal war, or if you want to save innocents then go to Middle East, Karl. Over there, they can appreciate your enthusiasm,” Bill said.

“No Bill, you see there is a difference, because God tells me where I should do his work, not man. The Ebu are God’s children, and I am their guardian. Let me ask you this? What type of science gains from the taking of lives?” Karl doesn’t wait for a response from Bill. “Face it; you need the live bodies for your profits, don’t you?” he asked.

“Profits fund the research, that’s the way it works in our world,” Bill replied.

“Bill, that’s in your world perhaps, but not in God’s world. Profits line your pockets and Reggie’s pockets. Let’s at least be honest with one another for five minutes. Bill, you and I both know what Reggie wants to do with them. He is going to cage them, and keep them as lab rats for his experiments, or should I say your experiments? You are going to spend years studying

them, and harvesting their tissues. You may even breed them so you have an abundant supply of future generations! That's not right, Bill and you know that!" Karl shouted out.

"We are only going to take a few," Bill said.

Karl looks at Bill. "Six to be exact, I can count the cages, Bill. Six! Six of my children to be torn apart from their people, and to be thrown into Sodom and Gomorrah, am I right?" Karl asked.

"Yes, six is correct..." Bill said.

"I can't let you do this Bill. Bill, please help me stop Reggie? You know Reggie is evil, right?" Karl pleaded.

"I can't Karl. What you are doing is wrong. You have killed two people so far. Is that God's doing? His own son dies on the cross without taking a life, and you go ahead and kill without impunity. Is that right, Karl? Is that really God's way or your own way?" Bill asked.

"Don't speak to me about God, Bill. You haven't earned the right. The blood of so many babies is on your hands, and yet you have never stopped for a moment to consider the lives that never were or were never allowed to be. I hate the way you rationalize what you do, Bill! These lives that I took were in the name of God," Karl said.

Karl is getting visibly angry and Bill, for the first time, is now concerned for his own safety.

"Bill, do you believe in God?" Karl asked.

"In a way, I do believe there is a higher authority than man, if you want to call that authority God, so be it," Bill said.

Karl looks squarely at Bill and said, "Bill, when you meet that higher authority, and he asked for an accounting of your life, what are you going to say to him? What scars do you have to show him for your fights?"

“I’m not sure, Karl but I do know that I’m not going to be able to help you. Reggie will stop you, and you will get yourself killed for nothing, nothing Karl!” Bill said.

“Not true Bill, you know why I am doing this. And I promise you this, Reggie is not leaving with the Ebu, and he is not going to leave this island alive. Neither are you, unless you change your ways.”

Bill shuddered slightly at Karl’s chilling prophecy, and he now knew Karl wouldn’t hesitate to escalate the violence.

“Karl before I go I have one more question to ask of you. Did you sabotage my work at the lab?”

Karl looks at Bill and nods his head in a slow affirmative.

“I had to Bill, I was saving the babies,” Karl said.

Bill shakes his head, “All those years, and it was you cursing my work. I don’t know what to say Karl. I trusted you and I helped you.”

“Bill, we both let each other down but this time I trust you to do the right thing! Help me stop Reggie! I prayed to God that you would help me.”

Bill looks forlornly at Karl. “Karl, you know what they say about God answering all prayers, and you know sometimes the answer is an emphatic no!”

“Help me Bill!”

“Karl, you don’t get it. It doesn’t stop with Reggie. You think he is the only one who wants to find the Ebu. Teams of scientists are scouring Flores now as we speak, looking for these damn Hobbits. How long do you think it’s going to take them to start looking at some of the other larger islands in Indonesia? What about the American research team that is here right now? They know the Ebu are here. Are you going to kill them also? No Karl, it’s not if, it’s when. You’re living a fool’s dream, if you think you can protect them forever,” Bill said.

The two men stop talking for a moment and Bill feels awkward in the silence. “Look, you need some help. You look very feverish. Can I at least get you some medicine?” Bill asked.

“God will protect me! I doubt that he will protect you!” Karl said.

Before Bill can answer, several bullets in rapid succession hit the rocks just above their heads.

“Damn it, Reggie must have followed you. Bill, just get out of here!” Karl said.

Bill heads down the trail hoping Reggie’s men will have the good sense to hold their fire. “Don’t shoot, don’t shoot!” He turns around to look for Karl, but Karl has already disappeared into the wilderness.

Reggie is pacing the tent furiously; afraid his expedition to this island is spiraling out of control.

“I don’t have time for this shit, keep looking for the Ebu. Any sign of Bill and my men?” Reggie asked.

“No boss, we got nothing.”

“Stupid bastards,” Reggie said.

A few minutes later, Bill comes running into Reggie’s tent in an obvious panic. He turned to Reggie and asked, “You followed me to Karl? I thought you were going to allow me an opportunity to talk to him first before your goons would open fire?”

“Did we get him?” Reggie asked.

“No, your idiots missed Karl, and almost hit me instead,” Bill said.

“Damn! We had a change of plans, Bill. Well, of course I had you followed. It was for your own protection. I had to have a safety net for you, and I think it was best that you didn’t know. More convincing that way for you, too,” Reggie said.

“What? In case I failed to get him to stop?” Bill asked.

“Well, is Karl stopping his little rampage?” Reggie asked.

“No, he is doing God’s work.”

“What?”

“You heard me Reggie. He is the self-appointed guardian of the Ebu. He is a total religious freak. You could say he has the spirit,” Bill said.

“Well, can he be bought? Maybe a donation to his church will do the trick?” Reggie asked.

“No, not as the Guardian of the Ebu. Reggie don’t you ever listen? He has always been doing God’s work, you could say he is a true believer,” Bill said.

“Well, fuck him then,” Reggie yells as he flushes an angry red, signaling to Bill his frustration with the ongoing events. At this point, Bill decides it is best to burden Reggie will all of his troubles.

“Reggie, we got another problem. Some of the men are sick; they are coming down with a high fever.”

“Well, it could be anything in the middle of this God forsaken jungle. What’s the big deal? Just treat them, you don’t need my approval. Give them every antibiotic we got in the arsenal; it’s no big problem. Can they still work?” Reggie asked.

“No Reggie, their fever is around 103 to 104, and they are getting delirious fast. Even their lymph nodes are swollen, which really has me worried. If I could get some blood work to the ship, it might help me pinpoint what we are up against,” Bill said.

“Just do it and stop wasting my time. Think Karl did something to the camp? Maybe he took some infectious agent from our labs?”

“I doubt it, but if he did we are all goners,” Bill said.

As they finish their conversation there is commotion in the camp, and some of Reggie's men are talking very excitedly.

"Boss, look what we found in the brush!" the guard said.

One of the men holds up a plastic container, and in the middle of the container is the small mangled body of an infant.

Reggie peers into the container as the odor of decay fills his nostrils and he turns his face away in complete disgust.

"Ugh, get that disgusting, smelly thing away from me. Bill, what the hell is that mess?" Reggie asked.

Bill yells for a pair of gloves and dons them as he starts poking at the small body. "I think it's an Ebu infant. Bill is talking aloud to himself, "That is not a normal child, I mean look at the tiny size of it. This is amazing," as he examines the remains. "The skull is crushed, but I can still make out the differences from a regular baby. It's very different, look at the long arms of this infant; it's got to be an Ebu child. This is unbelievable, Reggie," Bill said.

"Reggie, do you realize what this means? We've got our DNA sample! I bet these tissues are still fresh. We can go home now and it is mission accomplished!

There is silence from Reggie for a moment as his face flushes several shades redder than before.

"Get the fuck out of here, Bill!" Reggie shouted. Reggie looks up at Bill very enraged, and he pushes Bill away from the tub.

"You didn't hear me did you? I told you before I want a full dog and pony show, I want it all. I want specimens for my collection, I'm going to get them now, and I will display them. That carcass, no matter how bizarre looking, is not going to cut it for the shareholders. What about the stem cells, Bill? That infant is not an embryo now is it? Even I know that. With the

“Oboes” this close, you want me to leave the island? No way! Bill, we stay until we complete the whole job is that clear? Remember what I told you about fucking with me! Don’t make me find another lab rat, Bill,” Reggie said.

“Yes, Reggie, I understand all too well what I have to do now,” Bill said.

“Good Bill, I just want to make sure we are on the same page. I mean, what the hell is wrong with you? Come on man, where is your sense of adventure? Now, go get me some live Oboes specimens for my collection. Do we finally know where they are residing?” Reggie asked.

“Rumor has it that they are by the pond,” Bill said.

“When were you going to tell me this little bit of information, Bill? Never mind, let’s move then. Remember, six individuals. Two young adults of each sex, and I want one adolescent of each sex as well. I want this done right!”

The Capture

While waiting for Supar at the camp Sarah looks at Richard and asked, “Did you see me before the Ebu females attacked me?”

“Huh?” Richard grunted.

“Before I was attacked did you go looking for me?”

“No, I was so busy following the trail I didn’t notice you were gone until I heard the commotion from the Ebu camp. Why?” Richard asked.

“Because I saw somebody watching me. I thought it was you at first but they weren’t wearing those ridiculous yellow shorts of yours.”

“Well, thank God, my lucky shorts are safe,” Richard responded.

“Richard, please be serious. I didn’t imagine this and I have been sensing somebody watching me over for some time now. There is something else, almost a pres...” Sarah said.

“Okay, okay Sarah; believe me, I do trust your intuition or is saying that sexist?” Richard asked. “Whatever, I’ll go looking for them but you stay here at the camp. By the way, did Flo have her dead infant in her arms when she ran away from you?”

Sarah tries to remember. “I’m not sure if she took the dead infant with her. I think she left it behind, but I can’t be sure in the pandemonium of the moment,” she replied.

“Well, while I’m out searching I might as well go looking for the infant’s remains at the original encampment. That could be a very important specimen for us to preserve and present

with our findings. I should have done it earlier but I dunno, somebody has been distracting me lately,” Richard said.

Sarah decided not to argue with him, and left Richard to his grisly task. To Sarah’s way of thinking, it was a better choice than disturbing the Ebu burial site for specimens.

As Richard searches near the old Ebu camp, he fails to find the body of the infant. “Did Flo take the infant after all or maybe scavengers got the body,” Richard thinks to himself.

Richard continues to look through the camp, when he notices a series of footprints in the dirt. “Ah, shit!” They are not the small bare feet of the Ebu but are instead boot prints from three human males. Worse, they are not the sneakers imprints either of Rudy or Supar. Somebody else is here on the island, and Richard sprints back to the camp at to warn Sarah and Rudy.

Sarah sits under a tree near the expedition’s camp while working on her notes when she senses his presence. Somebody is watching her again.

“Rudy?” Sarah asked.

No answer comes from the trees and after a few minutes, she slowly returns to her note writing. However, her work is interrupted again as the animals suddenly grow quiet in the surrounding jungle and Sarah senses the approach of a stranger.

“Who’s there?”

Nothing and Sarah gets up to look about the camp. She is reliving her nightmare and she struggles to regain control of her emotions. As she turns around, he is behind her and looming large above her. His young face has a yellow pallor of death about it and his reddened eyes are intently staring at her. His tall, angular body is naked except for his camouflage pants and a deep sweat soaks his torso. The young man’s chest is covered in a series of reddened cross-shaped

welts as if he was a junior member of a bizarre scarification cult. Sarah tried to run from him but he grabbed both of her wrists and forced her to the ground onto her knees.

Sarah screams and yells, “Leave me alone you freak, who the hell are you?”

As he looked down at her, the bandage on her leg is torn away after her struggle with him and he spots the one-inch long series of black stitches on her thigh. He places his hand on her leg and runs it along her thigh. Sarah struggles to get free but he won’t relinquish his lock on her wrists. He takes his index finger and lightly traces the raised skin of the stitches, and Sarah shudders in revulsion at the strange touch. He looks into her eyes and stares for a few seconds and the anger lines on his face begin to soften. Then as he remembered his mission, his face-hardens again as Sarah continues to struggle beneath him.

“Sarah, I am the guardian and protector of the Ebu. You and your team must leave this island, immediately!” he said.

“What the hell? How do you know my name?”

“Go now, you are warned, the others are here to trap the Ebu, and I must stop them. You will not get a second chance from me,” he said.

“What others? What do they want with the Ebu? Why?” Sarah asked. Sarah looked back at him trying to reach him, scanning his eyes while recognizing his conflicted emotions. He closes his eyes and he stops moving. He is breathing softly, hovering just above her and seemingly content just to be near her.

Seeing his closed eyes, Sarah steadies herself, and yells “Protect this asshole!” while delivering a swift knee into his groin. The young man falls to the ground and pushes Sarah into the dirt with him. He is on his hands and knees, trying to catch his breath while making small retching noises. A pained, contorted look covers his face and he flinches as if to strike her. Then seeing the fear in her face, he stops and lowers his arm.

In between gasps he mutters: "I... I wasn't going to hurt you," he said.

Sarah said something very strange for her considering the ferocity of the stranger. "I'm sorry, I didn't know," and strangely she suddenly felt guilty. She sensed that he was telling the truth despite his rude behavior. Before either can react, a loud noise approaches the camp and Richard is shouting in the nearby jungle.

"That was stupid, now leave the island with your team," he said and he stumbled into the depths of the jungle.

As Richard ran into the camp he yelled, "Sarah, we got company, you were right. Somebody else is on the island!"

Richard spots Sarah lying on the ground while remarking, "What the hell are you doing rolling around on the ground?"

"Jeez, what the hell do you think I'm doing, taking a dirt bath? You cretin, he was just here attacking me! A very sick young man

Hey, a little help please?" Sarah asked and Richard extends a hand to help her.

"What? Who the hell was he? Did the bastard hurt you? Are you all right?" Richard said as he searched the tree line.

"No, I'm fine; I'm just a bit shaken. At first, I thought he was going to... really, I don't know who he is. He was a young white American with a really crazed look on his face. He just warned me to get off the island, and he mentioned that there were others on the island trying to trap the Ebu. He looked freaked-out and he was kinda of sickly, either with drugs or a high fever," Sarah said.

"How do you get rid of the creep?" Richard asked.

"How does a woman get rid of any unwanted male admirer?" Sarah asked while looking at him crossly.

Richard was patting Sarah's back to remove the dust and he abruptly stops.

"Really? Ouch, I'll keep that in mind the next time I'm sparking with you. This is just great, more company on the island and he is a crazy bastard to boot," Richard said.

"He was right about the others since I found three sets of boot tracks at the old Ebu camp. This is working out well, the Ebu are completely pissed at you, we got trappers after the Ebu, a crazy lunatic is running loose in the woods, and there is still no sign of Supar with our supplies. I don't know how they do it, but every day in Club Hell just keeps getting better and better. Did you see where the Ebu are hanging out today?" an animated Richard asked.

"Yes, I caught a glimpse of them by the pond today. I figured I give them a break after all of that excitement with their attempted stoning yesterday," Sarah said.

"Okay, let's go. If they're after the Ebu I want to be there."

"To do what, Richard?" Sarah said with a look of concern on her face.

"At the very least, to be a witness to a crime," Richard said.

"Richard, absolutely no guns! I don't want this to escalate into a small war," Sarah said.

"Okay, no guns, I guess if they get out of line we'll just give them really mean looks, or am I being too impolite?" Richard asked.

The pair takes the long trail around the pond so as not to scare the Ebu. They must slowly climb up the hill to get to their observation position along the bluff. Not a word is spoken between the two. As they settle into their spot, they can see that the entire Ebu tribe has made their way to the pond to drink and bathe. From the bluff, Sarah can even see Flo sitting quietly by herself along the far side of the pool. They watch the scene for several idyllic hours as the Ebu peacefully relax, and quietly enjoy the cool water of the pond.

"They're here," Sarah said in a firm but hushed tone.

Richard can hear nothing as a stillness settles over the jungle. “How does she know they are here?” he wondered. Richard continues to survey the jungle with his binoculars for another five minutes when he spots a line of uniformed men in the woods quietly making their way in the direction of the pond. He points to Sarah the line of men slowly winding their way toward the Ebu. The size of the advancing party and the guns they carry signal their intent.

As Richard debates what to do Sarah doesn't hesitate as she stands up and give an alert by imitating the Ebu warning call. As Sarah makes herself clearly visible to the Ebu, she calls out a hearty “Kurchack” as loudly as she can. Some of the Ebu stop and turn to look at her at top of the bluff. They seemingly recognize her but they don't initially react to her presence or to her call. A minute passes by with no discernable reaction from the Ebu other than some chatter and mild curiosity regarding Sarah's presence. As far as they were concerned, the annoying Sarah was too distant to be either nuisance or a threat.

“Oh, to hell with this,” Sarah said. She yells a ferocious “You bitch, Agrippina!” and alerts the entire Ebu troop. In harmony, they stand by the ponds edge looking up at the bluff where Sarah is standing, clearly agitated by Sarah's yell.

“Sarah, damn it, will you get down,” Richard is shouting but Sarah is ignoring him while she points to the woods.

As the army silently advances through the brush, a single shrill whistle pierces the quiet of the woods. Simultaneously, the skirmish line of men doubles their pace, and they surround the perimeter of the pond. Then they begin yelling and shouting creating a wall of noise as they advance. Ten men are walking the skirmish line, and they are moving rapidly through the woods in the direction of pond as they yell.

Flo sees the advancing giants and gives out a call to the rest of her troop. They turn their heads away from Sarah to look in the direction of Flo and the nearby woods. They all see the

advancing men and in unison, they rise and flee in the direction of the waterfalls. Agrippina and the older females panic, and in the commotion, she leaves her crying infant at the pond's edge mired in the mud.

Grey and one of the other males grab their spears and they move together in the direction of the advancing men. Flo runs with the other Ebu to the side of the pond near the small waterfalls. As she runs, Flo stops to pick up the abandoned infant. The troop splits into two groups; a few Ebu decide to swim for it, while the others head to the seeming safety of the forest.

The noises and cries of the Ebu troop fill the tropical air as they run for their lives. Grey hides in the brush and waits for the men to clear the jungle, and as they do, he throws his spear in their direction. The spear strikes one of Reggie's men in the leg and the guard cries out as he falls to the ground. Grey begins to retreat, but another of Reggie's guards approaches him from behind. The old male stops and defiantly holds his ground as the guard shoots the Taser at him. The bullet from the Taser hits Grey squarely in the chest and he falls to the ground, writhing from effects of the Taser, while his companion flees into the woods.

As the Ebu run for the jungle, a second skirmish line of men armed with Tasers is waiting to greet them. Like small children eluding annoyed adults, the Ebu haphazardly run about the woods desperately seeking escape. Adding to the noise of their cries is the roar of gas engines as several men on ATVs emerge from the forest toward the Ebu troop. The sight and sound of the all terrain vehicles heightens the terror level for the Ebu. The guards indiscriminately start shooting any Ebu in sight, young and old alike. Agrippina is near the safety of the woods when she gets hit once, and then a second time, and finally a third time with the Taser bullets. She instantly begins convulsing and falls to the ground. Soon, a half dozen more, prostrate, and convulsing Ebu lie strewn along the ground with her.

Flo is the last Ebu to leave the pond as the infant she is carrying slows her escape. She spots the advancing skirmish line and moves in a different direction. As Flo is running toward seeming freedom, she runs directly into one of the ATV's that was idling quietly in the woods. Reggie is aboard the ATV directly in front of Flo, and he guns the engine in an attempt to frighten her.

"Oh, this is too good to be true," Reggie said when he sees the young Ebu female with the infant. Flo stops and glares at Reggie but she has nowhere to go as the guards surround her. She tries to dive into the brush, but the infant she is carrying causes her to lose her balance and she stumbles to the ground. Reggie shoots her in the back with the Taser, and she falls to the ground convulsing. The wailing infant falls with her, tumbling to the ground as he scrapes his face on the dirt. Slowly the infant crawls his way back to Flo's side. He sits by the convulsing Flo, clutching her arm and urging Flo to hold him as tears stream down his face.

After a few moments of sheer terror and noise, the hunt is over. Reggie, like any proud hunter, begins to review the assortment of Ebu that are lying face up on the ground before him. "Remember we just need six of them, men." He sees the small deformed Ben convulsing on the ground. "Ugh, disgusting, leave that one behind. I definitely want the young female with the infant and leave behind the young male with the damaged calf."

"Leave those others behind," as Reggie points to some older females. He steps over Grey and comments, "Amazing, how old is this one? Way too old."

"Boss this one is dead," as one of the guards examines the pulse of Agrippina. Reggie walks over to the lifeless female with her faced pushed into the dirt and he gentle nudges her arm with his boot while shaking his head.

“Damn shame, that was a good specimen. Bill, good news! I have a specimen for vivisection available to you. Please keep this one fresh for us. Bring it aboard the ship and throw it in the meat locker, right way!” Reggie demanded.

“Okay, people clean this mess up!” Reggie said. Reggie surveys the bluff by the waterfalls and points to it. “Oh, before I forget there is somebody on that bluff! Send some men to check it out. And it better not be that bastard Karl.”

“Run away!” Richard said. Sarah is standing on top of the bluff looking in disbelief at the ongoing display of avarice while fighting back her tears. Sarah is busily staring, trying to see what became of her friend Flo.

“Now Sarah!” as Richard grabs her and pulls her away from the carnage.

As they run away, Richard leads the retreat. Richard’s long legs once again get him far ahead of the slower, shorter Sarah. As Sarah struggles to keep up with Richard, she begins to tire, and with one misstep, she falls face first into the ground. Richard continues to go for another thirty yards, when he suddenly notices that Sarah is no longer beside him. He backtracks along the path in an effort to find Sarah, only to overhear her screaming in the distance.

“Richard, hurry, they’re coming!”

Two uniformed native guards are running towards the pair and they are within ten yards of Sarah.

Sarah is struggling to get up and as the men approach, she can see Richard from the distance. With a frightened look in her eyes she yells, “Go away Richard, they’re almost here.”

The two men approach yelling and pointing their rifles at the pair. Sarah has fallen on a path situated on a very steep slope. Richard quickly scans the terrain looking for an advantage, but the slope is far too steep for him to climb. Richard has two choices: run away or go back for

Sarah. Sarah sees that Richard is continuing to approach, but he stops for a moment and flashes to her a quick smile. Then Richard's face darkens as the two guards continue to close in. As Sarah starts to get up for her rescuer, Richard walks over to her and forcibly pushes her back down.

“Stay down bitch, I had enough of your shit!” Richard said.

Reggie's men approach yelling “Cegat, Cegat!” with their rifles pointed at the two Americans. Sarah tries to get up, but Richard puts his foot on her back and pushes her back down into the dirt. The first guard points his rifle at Sarah's head as the second taller guard takes aim at Richard. Richard blithely ignores the taller guide, brushing him aside and as Sarah starts to get up for the guard, Richard again forcibly pushes her back into the dirt for a third time.

“Richard, what the hell are you doing? You're hurting me!” an exasperated Sarah yelled.

“Shut up damn you!” Richard yells. “Help me tie this bitch up will you! Rope! Tali! Tambat!”

“Richard, are you nuts?” Sarah asked as she continues to struggle to get up. Sarah looks confused by Richard's sudden betrayal.

The two guards stare at the unfolding spectacle while they struggle to understand the English commands and they suddenly begin quarreling with each other. At the same time, Richard is forcing Sarah's hands behind her back, while her legs are flailing about. She continues to struggle and then she begins to cry because of Richard's betrayal.

“Rope! Tali! Tambat wanita!” Richard barks. One of the guards finally understands and grabs a rope from his backpack. The other man stands by helplessly confused by the domestic quarrel and the peculiar behavior of the strange Americans.

“Help me tie her! Tolong! Tie her up for me! Now!” Richard shouts. Sarah continues to struggle but Richard pushes her down again rubbing her face in the dirt.

“Richard, you bastard!” Sarah cries as she is filled with rage at Richard.

“Look bitch; stop struggling, what do you think I’m here for? For you?”

As she struggles to get up, Richard grabs Sarah roughly by the shirt and the shirt rips exposing Sarah’s shoulder and white bra.

“Bitch, you’re not even that good a lay!”

Tears are now pouring over Sarah’s cheeks as she sobs in humiliation while lying in the dirt. The two guards completely stop, and are mesmerized at the sight of the struggling girl with the ripped shirt writhing on the ground before them. The two guards have become voyeurs and are enjoying a good view of Sarah’s cleavage.

“Tolong!” Richard barks again as he desperately tries to get their attention.

The guards are used to taking orders and the smaller man puts his rifle on the ground while bending over Sarah in an effort to tie her hands.

“Get them behind her back,” said Richard, as he roughly grabs and puts Sarah’s hands in the small of her back. The taller guard is confused and he is intently watching the hysterical girl. A small smile emerges on his face and he dangles his rifle from his side as Richard takes a step back. The smaller man is now kneeling and having a hard time securing the struggling Sarah. Richard yells at the guards “Like this!”, and as he moves toward the kneeling man to demonstrate, Richard springs forward. “What the hell are you smiling about?” Richard asked the taller guard and he pushes the man over the side of the bluff.

The taller guard shouts in fear while falling with his gun, and he goes tumbling down the side of the hill for almost twenty yards followed by a small cloud of dust that marks his trajectory down the bluff. The sudden departure of his companion startles the other guard but as he attempts to standup Sarah trips him. Richard sees the guard rising and cracks him along the

side of the head with a swift kick and the guard collapses onto his side. Richard grabs the rifle on the ground and he points it at the guard while smiling.

“Give me your hand gun. Bedil! Stand up, hands up,” Richard said as he is gesturing with the gun. With one hand, he turns the smaller man to face outward from the slope.

“You both enjoyed this a little drama way too much,” and with a swift kick to the guard’s butt, Richard sends him over the bluff to join his companion.

Sarah is lying on the ground stunned at Richard’s actions. “Dear, let me untie you,” Richard said.

“Don’t you call me dear you thug,” she hissed at him as she sits up. Streaks of tears and dirt line her face and as Richard extends a hand to untie her, she angrily shoves his hand away. She struggles to cover her bra and her shoulder with her torn shirt and failing that, she begins to stare at Richard. As she stands up, she looks directly into Richard’s eyes and with her free hand, slaps him soundly across the face.

“You bastard, if you ever do that again...,” Sarah said.

“What the..., damn that hurts. I’m sorry dear, I couldn’t think of anything else to do but you do have to admit it was a pretty good act. Look, I’m sorry, but the combination of your tears, and my yelling orders at them had them totally confused. The ripped shirt didn’t hurt either. You know showing a little skin really had them distracted. That tall bastard really enjoyed the show.”

Richard stops his rambling and looks downward; he knows he is dead meat. “Look, it confused the shit out of them, and I know how the islanders look at white people as always being in charge,” Richard said.

As if a passing wind went by, Sarah’s disposition totally brightens, and she beams a big smile at Richard.

“Mister, you call that acting?” Sarah asked with enthusiasm. “What I did was acting, the tears, the sobbing, I was great. I’m not that stupid Richard, and I think I know who you are by now. It took a few seconds to catch on but why the hell did you have to rip my good shirt, you cretin? And that comment about being a bad lay was totally uncalled for Richard Staller! It’s not like the natives know what good or bad lay is.”

“I know you’re not...” and Richard decided not to go there. “What else can I say; I was getting into the moment.”

“And that’s the only moment you are going to have for a long time, buddy,” Sarah said.

“Hey, if you knew it was an act what the hell was the slap for?” Richard asked.

Sarah gave him a peevish look and responded, “I was also in the moment, particularly with that comment about being a bad lay. Besides, you were enjoying pushing me into the dirt a little too much.”

“Hey, you’re the one that said no guns, not me,” Richard said.

“Yeah, and that’s a damn good thing too,” Sarah said, “because knowing you, if you had a gun with you, your plan probably would have called for shooting me as a diversion.”

“Not fair! Come on, please forgive me, dear?” Richard pleaded.

“No, go to hell and stop calling me dear,” she shouted.

“Well, you could at least thank me for rescuing you,” Richard said.

“Yeah, thanks for the rescue and please drop dead,” she snarled.

“You’re welcome, I feel a lot better about myself now,” Richard said.

Richard points to the upper slope. “We better get going! Let’s get to a higher elevation before they find the two fallen stooges on the bluff. We’ll head to the caves and hang out there for a while.”

Inside the cave, Richard is busily talking, but Sarah is quiet and only answers him with an occasional yes or no. Richard apologizes profusely for his brutal charade, but Sarah is not interested in letting him off the hook that easily. Richard is also concerned that he has not been able to reach Rudy via the two-way radio.

While sitting on a large rock, Sarah is futilely trying to patch her torn shirt and she decides to break her silence. “That was the best plan you could come up with, huh Richard?”

“I had a mental block, what can I tell you? I’m sorry, I get that way when people point guns at my head. You could run faster you know,” Richard said.

“Oh, excuse me for not running away from the bad guys as fast as you do,” Sarah retorted.

“Come on, gimme a little credit, will you? I did come back for you,” Richard pleaded.

“And that’s the only reason why I am still talking to you,” Sarah said.

Richard started to look for anyway to get back in her good graces. “Maybe we could duct tape your shirt for the time being?” Richard suggested.

Sarah looks up at him in disbelief. “You cretin, you are not duct taping my shirt. Do you even have duct tape?”

“Ah, no, not really but I could get some.”

“You cretin, why not just me a new shirt? We are so screwed!” Sarah said shaking her head in disgust.

“Sorry, never mind,” Richard said and he looked to change the topic to anything but the torn shirt. “Look, we got much bigger problems right now other than your torn shirt.”

“Cretin, you think I don’t know that. Why do you think I keep focusing on my damn shirt?”

“Well, you don’t always have to be on the...”

Sarah's head snapped back and she blurted out, "Mister, don't you dare complete that sentence."

For a brief second Richard actually fears for his life as he read the intensity of her reaction.

"I meant to say you don't always have to be on the defensive," he replied thinking he had deftly recovered from his near faux pas.

Sarah looked backed at him as if to say, "Do you really think I'm that stupid?"

"Shit, our worst fears are coming true right before us. I just don't understand but how the hell did they find out about this island?" Richard asked.

Sarah looks up at Richard and said, "I bet it was Supar. We haven't seen him for a couple of days."

"Doesn't make sense to me Sarah. Those guys below didn't look like they were part of that scruffy pirate lot. The uniforms, the equipment; no way, they were part of somebody's staff. Somebody is here with a ton of money and resources. Doesn't really matter, somebody talked. Damn, how do we clean up this mess?"

Sarah looked up at him and said, "You mean how do you cleanup the proverbial Pandora's Box once it's opened?"

"I guess we don't. We just have to deal with it. We knew this could happen, shit happens in life," Richard said.

Sarah wasn't comforted by his trite words and she started to yell. "Face it Richard, we screwed up big time! Somebody followed us, and the Ebu are going to suffer for our careless mistakes! We should have been much smarter about this expedition. I blame us as much as I do those greedy schmucks out there," Sarah said.

Now it was Richard's turn to get angry, "Enough of this blame fest and keep your voice down. It's not our fault, Sarah. This shit happens and I refuse to take the blame for those assholes out there. What do you want to do? Stay home and do nothing with your life? Sarah, there is evil in the world because we do have a free will and because we get to make all of the choices: good, bad, or indifferent. It's called a life and it is what we do in case you forgot. We do the best we can with the limited information we have at the time. We can share what we found on this island, or we could have kept the secret to ourselves and let whatever fate awaits the Ebu befall them. Regardless of what we did here, there was always going to be the day of reckoning when the rest of world would discover the Ebu. After all, it is a small world getting smaller by the day. You may have felt better because you weren't directly responsible for their fate, but it's all the same for the Ebu: exploitation or extinction. Instead of blaming ourselves for the actions of those assholes out there, let's see what we can do to salvage this mess. Who knows? Maybe there is purpose to this madness."

Sarah said nothing but sat quietly by herself. A few moments later, she did speak again but this time she began a remorseful dialog with herself.

"Dear Journal, this has been one hell of a week for me, professionally and personally. Through a singular act of brazen stupidity on my own part, I lost the collective confidence of a strange new people, to be followed by a stoning from the very same people and I get accosted by two crazies on the same day and then this..."

"It's not that bad," Richard remarked.

She ignored him and then said, "Oh yeah, I almost forgot, I also went to bed with this jerk."

"Funny, I didn't hear you complaining at the time..." Richard retorted but their boisterous argument is interrupted by a loud noise from outside the cave.

“Sarah! Richard!” Their names are boomed over the air from a megaphone.

“Somehow Sarah, I don’t think your day is going to get any better. How the hell does he know our names?” Richard asked.

“Please come out. I apologize for the treatment of your team by my men. Misunderstanding actually, my guards got carried away. They have some particular challenges regarding English. Again, you have my reassurances that no harm will come to you or your team,” Reggie said.

“That voice is definitely American, but what’s with that affected tone? Who is this bozo?” Richard asked.

The voice continued to plead and reassure for ten minutes, but Sarah and Richard remain in hiding.

“I’m not buying what he is selling, I can tell you that Sarah, are you?” Richard asked.

Sarah was sitting and squirming as she listened to the voice. She responded, “No, there was no misunderstanding when he rounded up the Ebu for his own use, and he knows we saw him in action.”

A few minutes pass and the voice returns but with an angrier edge to it. “We have something of yours! I have your guide, what’s your name?” and a loud smacking noise booms over the megaphone. “Rudy? Oh, yes Rudy! I’ll make this real easy for you,” Reggie announces. “Either you come out in five minutes, or I blow Rudy’s fucking brains out! Your choice, I certainly don’t need another mouth to feed. Did you hear me? Come out and throw the gun away where we can see it!”

“Richard, what are we going to do?” Sarah asked.

“Sarah, if we go out there they’ll just kill the three of us. He could be bluffing,” Richard said.

“Or not!” Sarah yells. Sarah looks at Richard angrily. “Richard, I’m going. We have to surrender; we have no other choice. I can’t let Rudy die,” and she got up to leave the safety of the cave.

“Damn it, Sarah! Are you listening to me? Think for a moment, will you?” as Richard grabs her hand.

Sarah pushes his hand away. “You’re not going to get violent with me again, are you? You want his blood on yours hands?”

Richard’s shoulders slump and he knew he was defeated. “We don’t even know what that asshole wants.”

“Richard, he wants the Ebu, not us, that’s fairly evident. He may not have a reason to do us any harm. He just wants to do his dirty work in secrecy.”

Richard gives Sarah a look when she said secrecy.

Resigned to his fate Richard sighs, “Okay, okay, I’ll go out with you. We’ll hide one of the guns in here in case we get away again. I certainly can’t let you go by yourself. I really don’t have a good feeling about this at all, Sarah.”

Sarah gave Richard a small nervous smile. “It will all work out, trust me,” and she tenderly touches Richard’s hand as she led him from the cave.

As Richard walked out into the light with Sarah, he wondered where did he hear that line before?

An Unlikely Ally

“Are you coming out or do you want me to blow your man’s brains all of over this island. You got two minutes left,” the voice threatened.

Richard yells from the cave, “Don’t shoot. We’re coming out and I have a lady with me! Tell your men to hold their fire!”

The pair comes out of the cave with their hands held high in the air. Below the caves, three guards are holding Rudy hostage with a rifle pointed at his head. A shaky, blindfolded Rudy remains very silent. As they make their way down from the cave, Sarah and Richard are quickly surrounded by five armed native guards quickly surround Sarah and Richard. Sarah starts to say something but the men yell “Quiet!” and Richard shakes his head as if to say no to her. Richard’s slumped shoulders said it all as their hands were bound and the three captives are marched back to Reggie’s camp.

The three silently trudge along but they have yet to meet the voice that threatened Rudy’s life. As they approach the main encampment, Richard and Sarah are shocked at the size of the camp and the scale of Reggie’s operation. There are ten large tents erected, each manned with a guard, and they can hear several large generators droning away in the distance. About the perimeter of the camp is a makeshift fence consisting of wood stakes and multiple strands of barbwire standing six feet tall. Off to the side of the main tent Sarah can see six large, antiseptic

metal cages seemingly designed for animals, and Sarah can only wonder if her Flo is caged within?

“When the hell did this small city go up? Amazing, being on the other side of the volcano, we never heard them,” Richard whispers to Sarah. The three are unceremoniously tossed into an empty tent, with their arms and legs bound by the guards.

“Rudy, are you okay?” Richard asked in a hushed voice.

“I’m okay boss, but they scared me big. Hit me good.”

That was the extent of Rudy’s English, and before he could say more Reggie and Bill enter the tent. Richard carefully looks over Reggie and spots a sharp dandy in a ridiculously new safari outfit straight from some ostentatious online catalog that was coordinated with a large gold bracelet. All in all Reggie’s attire was a fitting homage to the safari gangster life. From the manicured look of his nails, it was obvious the man never did a day of hard work in his life and the trip to the island was apparently no different for him.

Reggie speaks to the three. “People, I must apologize for your rough treatment, but I have some important questions for you. But first, let me ask the lady the most important question. Did my men rip your shirt?” Reggie asked with a false sincerity.

“No, I can honestly say they did not,” Sarah said, while giving Richard a dirty look.

“Good, I’m glad that sordidness is out of the way. I can give you a shirt from one of my guards if you like?” Reggie offered.

“No thank you, I want to make it very clear to all involved what side I am on,” Sarah huffed.

“Hmmm, well back to business then. What are you doing on this island? And please don’t bother to lie to me,” Reggie said.

“I could ask the same of you? We are a university team doing research on this island,” Richard said. Richard figured saying less would be more in these circumstances.

“Please, don’t bullshit me people. I took the trouble to check to see who was out here and your little expedition is not officially sanctioned by any government or any university that I know of. In fact, shouldn’t the two of you be enjoying a Margarita on the beach at Bali right now? You know, I would have a serious discussion with that travel agent of yours about your present accommodations. Let’s cut the crap. I’m here like you for the Oboes. What is your interest in them, old buddy?” Reggie asked.

Richard looks at Sarah and asked “What the hell is an ‘Oboe’?” He then turned his attention to Reggie and asked “Our work is purely academic but what your’s, old asshole buddy of mine?”

Reggie tries to keep his temper under control before responding, “Under the present circumstances, I will ask the questions and let’s try to keep it civil. Who knows you are here?” Reggie asked.

Richard hesitates as he struggles to come up with the right answer. “A few people know.”

“Who might they be?” Reggie asked.

Again, Richard pauses. Reggie is growing impatient. “People, I am busy man and don’t have time for this shit. That’s it, shoot the three of them!” he barks to the guards. Bill looks at Reggie, horrified at the very suggestion of escalating the level of violence as Sarah yells, “Richard?”

Richard cracks. “All right, nobody knows we are here. It’s just us, nobody knows we are here, and we don’t have official sanctions. We didn’t have time to get the necessary clearances

from the university and the state department.” Richard was keeping one secret, his last ace in the hole: Supar.

Reggie is pleased at Richard’s admission and asked, “One final question; which one of you is a primatologist?” Sarah looks up, stares Reggie directly in the eye, and said, “I am.”

Reggie eyes Sarah and said, “Good, I might have need for you later to assist with the care and keeping of the Oboes.”

Sarah looks angrily at Reggie and said, “Care and keeping for what? A zoo? I’m sorry; I can’t assist you with this abomination. What you are doing is wrong and you have no right to keep these people imprisoned in cages. They are free people with a free will and a right to their own life.”

Reggie listens quietly for a minute and then he explodes, “Shut the hell up! Who do you think you are, my fucking wife?” as he slaps Sarah across the face. Sarah covers her reddened face with her hand while Richard struggles vainly against his ropes. The force of the slap cuts Sarah’s upper lip, and as the blood trickles from her lip, Richard has to turn away from looking at her.

Bill tries to stop Reggie but Reggie continues to vent his venom at the hostages. “This island isn’t a fucking democracy! I didn’t want your opinion, nor do I need your consent to do anything. Those things in the cages are just one-step shy of being fucking apes. No, I need these specimens for my freak show, and I’ll get them back with or without your help, Miss. I just want to make one thing very clear to you people! Simply put, you should be more worried about how you are going to get off this island, and never mind where the Oboes are going.”

An hour passes after the altercation in the hostage tent and Bill decides to say something to Reggie, but as he summons the courage to approach him an alarm sounded in the camp. “Boss, we got company!” one of the guards announces.

Reggie and Bill exit their tent to witness a single man slowly making his way into their camp. Peering out from the tent, Richard can see Supar, and Supar is somewhat disoriented as he stiffly walks toward Reggie. Supar’s face is beaten and his eyes are puffy. Reggie watches the man approach and comments to Bill, “You know for a small, uncharted island in the middle of the ocean, this place is sure getting popular. Find out what the hell he wants.”

The guards talk to Supar for a few minutes in their native tongue. “He wants to talk to you, boss. He’s got friends here.”

Reggie sighs and approaches Supar. “What is your business here?”

“I’m part of the American research team that was on the island,” Supar said.

“You mean you’re with Sarah and Richard?” Reggie asked.

“Yes,” Supar said.

“Well, good news for you old buddy. They are my guests for now. What do your friends want?” Reggie asked.

“They are not my friends; they want to talk to you. They sent me to arrange a meeting with you,” Supar said.

“Talk about what? I’m sure they are not businessmen. Who are they and where are they?” Reggie asked.

“Actually, they’re pirates and they are just outside your camp,” Supar said.

“Oh, really, how quaint. Okay, so how many Jolly Rogers are there outside my camp?” Reggie asked.

“Actually, they are more like terrorists and mercenaries and there maybe fifty of them!” Supar said.

A disgusted Reggie said “Fuck it; you, go join your friends in the tent. Men, tie him up and keep him with the others.”

“Give me a megaphone; I really don’t need this shit. Let’s find out what these so-called pirates want.” Reggie yells out, “Three of you may come into the camp. Just three and the rest keep your distance from the camp. No guns!”

Reggie is perplexed by sudden turn of events as he spots Bill walking away. “Bill, where are you going? I want you out here with me, and these pirate bozos.”

Three disheveled but mean looking natives slowly walk into Reggie’s camp. As they walk, they take great care to observe the camp’s layout. The hostages can overhear the voices, and Sarah immediately recognizes the voices as that of the pirates. Sukarno and his band of pirates have made their way back to the island, with the help of Supar.

As the three pirates make their way into camp Reggie’s men raise their rifles covering them from a number of different vantage points. They purposely walk past the metal cages and at the sight of the three men one of the Ebu males cries out “Eeeyouuuu!” The outburst startles the pirates, but the contents of the cages is even more alarming to them. As Sukarno gets a good look at the cowering Ebu he asked, “What’s with the ugly naked midgets?” The other pirates laugh at his small joke.

Reggie is not laughing. “Please, the correct term would be little people,” Reggie said to him. “Just consider them a long lost relative that’s finally coming home. Enough with the questions; who are you and what do you want?”

Sukarno replied, “We are privateers.”

“You mean pirates, don’t you?” Reggie rebutted.

“I don’t know, pirates is kind of ugly, way too negative,” Sukarno said. Sukarno spots Sarah and Richard inside the tent and he points to the hostages. “You got something that belongs to us.”

“I do?” Reggie asked. “No, you are mistaken. They are guests of mine and they stay in the camp. The other man you sent in here, he stays too. I believe he is part of their expedition.” The hostages feel a brief moment of hope that Reggie is finally going to do the right thing.

Reggie eyes the pirates and his immediate reaction is to shoot the lot of them. Reggie is cautious however, and he needs to know how they got here and why. “Besides, what do you want with them?”

Sukarno took great care to look Reggie in the eye and said, “Unfinished business, that’s all. We had dealings with them before.”

“Ah, a business man! I like that!” Reggie spots an opportunity to have somebody else do his dirty work for him. There is no need to add several murders to his long list of dirty deeds in Indonesia.

“I’ve got a proposition for you old buddy that you might be interested in and we are talking about some serious money. Are you up to doing some wet work for me?”

“What Reggie?” Bill asked.

“Shut the hell up, Bill!” Reggie yelled while staring him down.

Sukarno looks at Reggie not quite comprehending and shaking his head.

“Okay, let’s be a little more direct. Have you ever killed anybody for money before?” Reggie asked.

“Oh yes, murder, all the time,” Sukarno replied.

“Excellent. I’ll give you twenty-five thousand American dollars to finish off an ex-cohort of mine that is running through the woods and creating considerable pain for me and my men.”

Sukarno isn’t stupid and sees an opportunity to make some real money. “Make it fifty grand and I want half up front. You know the exchange rate isn’t what it used to be for the dollar.”

Reggie retorted, “Forty grand it is, but you’ll get five grand up front and as a bonus, I’ll throw the American team in for free. Do what you want with them. Better yet, I want them all dead; is that understood?”

“And the girl?” Sukarno asked.

“Think of her as a fringe benefit for your men, she is easy on the eyes, but then if you spend enough time out here even the freaking midgets start to look good. Do what you want but remember, she’s dead too after they have their fun with her? Understood? Do we have a deal?” Reggie asked.

It sounded more like a command and Sukarno does not like Reggie’s tone of voice, but he sees a real opportunity to make money. His men have seen him bide his time before making his move so they go with the flow of the negotiations.

“I agree. Now, where is my money?”

As Reggie negotiates with Sukarno, two of the pirates move over to the hostage tent and begin to leer and paw at the squirming Sarah. Hearing the commotion from the girl, Reggie shakes his head and shoots his handgun in the air to get their attention. The startled pirates turn around and face an angry Reggie.

“Fun is after you catch that maniac in the woods is that clear?” Reggie asked. Reggie turns to Sukarno and said, “It is always good to have an incentive program in place for your associates, don’t you agree? Now out I said,” as he escorts the pirates out of the tent.

Seeing that Reggie is within reach, Richard kicks at him, and catches Reggie in the knee. Reggie rubs his knee and shakes his head at the futility of Richard’s effort. In turn, Reggie reciprocates with a couple of quick shots to Richard’s ribs.

“I can’t wait to get rid of this mess!” Reggie yells. “You know according to my men this bastard runs like the wind. Matter of fact, he busted up two of them during their capture. Not two of my better guards, but two of them, nevertheless. So, I’m going to be proactive and do something before there are more maniacs running loose through the woods. Do you know what they would do with runaway slaves old buddy?” Reggie asked.

Reggie begins to bark orders to his guards. “Turn him over. You two sit on him and you hold his legs. Put his face down into the ground!” Reggie said. The bound Richard struggles against the guards but they quickly overpower him, driving him face first into the dirt.

“Make sure you take his gag off too, I want to hear this bastard scream when I do this,” Reggie said.

Reggie extracts a large hunting knife with a nine-inch blade from his side. “Bill, how do you do this?” Reggie asked as he traces his knife on the Achilles tendon of Richard’s lower right leg. “Here?” Reggie asked.

“Reggie, for Christ’s sake!” Bill replied.

“Bill, is this the tendon?” Reggie asked again. Bill does not answer.

“Do you want me to hack his fucking leg off instead; I can do that, too? Is this it?” Reggie yells.

Bill mumbles a “Yes”. Reggie takes the knife and digs into Richard’s heel as Richard yells in agony at the searing pain. As Richard struggles, he throws one of the guards from him, but the weight of the other guards on his body keeps him from escaping. With a slight cutting motion, Reggie cuts beyond the skin of the heel, and he digs deep into the fibrous meat. In one slow, deliberate motion, he severs Richard’s Achilles tendon from its attachment to the heel. Blood pours from the cut and the severed tendon snaps free from its attachment to the heel, forming a knot on the back of Richard’s calf.

“Mother fucker!” Richard yells.

Reggie turned to Sukarno and said “Hunters use this type of knife to help skin and gut animals. I normally hate manual labor, but there is a certain satisfaction you get when you dig a sharp knife deep into warm flesh. Untie the girl so she can stop the bleeding for him,” Reggie said as he wiped the blood from his hand and his knife.

Richard is writhing on the ground and moaning in pain. Sarah is yelling incoherently at Reggie, but her cries are barely audible above Richard’s own yells. She attempts to hit Reggie but the guards stand in her way and they toss her easily to Richard’s side.

After a minute of agonizing pain, Richard’s incoherent yelling finally quiets and coalesces into recognizable words. “You stupid fuck, now you got two species of humans wanting you dead,” Richard shouts to Reggie.

Reggie is shaking his head at Richard’s comment and turns to face the pirates. The pirates are clearly impressed and Sukarno comments, “I must say I like your style! That American enjoys making empty threats but he used to be a damn good swimmer.”

“Yes, I’m a kinder, gentler sadist thanks to my anger management therapy; notice I’m just cutting one leg, so you can at least move him about albeit rather slowly,” Reggie said.

From the other corner of the tent a new voice joins the chorus as Supar yells out, “Patah tumbuh hilang berganti!”

Reggie turns around and looks at the pirates. “What is this, open mike night in the tent? Now, what the hell does that mean?”

“Whatever broken will grow back, whatever lost will be replaced, an old rebel quote,” Sukarno said.

Sukarno walks over to Supar with a small smile on his face. “Still pretending to be a rebel? Only the rebels wouldn’t have you, would they old friend? Not much need for a pacifist Buddhist amongst the Moslem extremists, huh!” and Sukarno kicks Supar in the face. “I warned you about betraying me!”

Reggie shrugs, “I still don’t get what he was blathering about. Enough already, gag these assholes for me,” and Reggie as he left the tent with Sukarno.

As the pirates leave the camp, they see that Reggie’s men have gathered the equipment from the American team. “Did you go through everything?” Reggie asked and the guard nods yes. “Good, destroy it all. Make this little expedition disappear from the face of this earth.”

The guards systematically destroy the library of videotapes, the copious notebooks, specimen samples, and recording equipment from Sarah and Richard’s expedition. As they move to the video equipment, Sukarno holds up his hand to stop them. “Hey stop! You can destroy all of it, but the cameras are mine.”

Reggie looks at him and the anger begins to rise, but Reggie decides to compose himself. Instead, he said, “Sure, like you said, you had a deal with them. Go ahead and give Mr. Pirate his cameras.”

Inside the tent, Sarah is tending to Richard’s heel and is applying pressure in an effort to stop the bleeding. Richard is quietly moaning from the pain, and he is deep within himself.

With her free hand, Sarah strokes Richard's face and hair in an effort to comfort him. "I'm so sorry Richard," Sarah said to him.

Richard feels her touch and he looks up at her while focusing on her face. "For what, Sarah? It's your fault this prick grew up to be such a major league asshole? None of this is your doing." He managed a small smile for her as he pointed to her mouth and she wiped the trickle of blood from her lip.

From inside their tent Sarah can see Reggie's men breaking up their equipment and placing the remains into a large bonfire. "Well, there goes all of our work and dreams in pile of smoke. Funny, how that's the least of our problems now. I guess we should be happy to just get out of this alive," she said.

Richard doesn't react to her words and lies on his side in a small ball of pain. With his hands and feet bound, Richard can't even touch his own wounded leg. Funny, how something as simple as grabbing your own injured limb could be so important to a being, Richard thought to himself. At least, he had the dutiful Sarah tending to his wound and trying in vain to will his pain away.

After a few minutes, Sarah turns to Supar and as she removes his gag, angrily asked, "Why are your friends here?" Supar is lying on the ground and he picks his head up to see Sarah. In the light, Sarah can clearly see the numerous bruises that line Supar's face and she immediately feels embarrassed for her anger. Supar's voice breaks a little, but he manages to talk.

"When I got into town to pickup supplies they got word I was there. They paid me a visit and accused me of grabbing a little business without including them. They roughed me up a bit, then a lot. I told them I wouldn't take them back to you, but they just threatened to kill me and to leave the team stranded on the island. All of my choices were bad; so I had no choice but to

take some of their pirate crew back with me on the boat and let the others follow. I'm sorry, I tried to fight them."

At that point, the guard outside the tent yells at them to be quiet. "Diam, diam," he yells.

The voices pick up again outside the tent, and Sarah intently listens to Reggie's plans. Reggie is yelling at his guards and then he turns to Sukarno. "Here is your five grand. Now go get this crazed bastard for me," Reggie said. Reggie gives Sukarno Karl's GendMeds associate ID badge. "Karl's probably in the caves, which are located on the north side of the volcano. Give my friends one of the hand radios. Call and update us when you get Karl. You're not invited back until you bring me his body, or I'll settle for his head. And I'll have none of this dead or alive bullshit. I just want him dead!"

The pirate team heads for the caves on the volcano with eleven armed men. They start to grumble about their assignment, but Sukarno keeps his men in line not tolerating any of their dissent. Once outside the caves they begin a sweeping search for Karl. On their way to the mouths of the caves, they see a number of wooden crosses mounted along the path. The men are shocked at the sizes of the crosses for they are over ten feet tall and the crossbeam is six feet in length. On one cross a paper is attached, and in red ink it reads, "Deliver me from evildoers and save me from bloodthirsty men, Psalm 59:2."

"Majikan, what does it say?" one of the pirates asked Sukarno. "Nothing for you to worry about, just keep moving," Sukarno replied.

A little further up the air is heavy with smell of death. Along the path, there is another cross, but this time there is a headless cadaver, not on the cross but seemingly kneeling before it. Rope was tied about the limbs to keep the body in the kneeling position and the bloated body is filling the air with the smell of decay. The dark color of the skin indicates that the body has been

in the sun for a few days. The body belongs to Robert, one of Reggie's killers who Karl had dispatched just a few days ago. Attached to the man's back is another sign that reads:

“My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes (Job 42:5-7).”

“What does that say boss?” one of Sukarno's men asked.

“What do you think? It says watch your ass fool! Just keep moving idiots!” Sukarno said angrily.

As they climb a little higher, the lead man in the party seemingly loses his balance and slumps to the ground. A gunshot echoes across the slope and the other pirates hurriedly take cover while Sukarno looks to see where the shot came from.

“Where did that shot come from? Anybody see where it came from?” Sukarno yells. A second shot hits the rocks behind him forcing Sukarno to take cover. “Bastard's got a damn good view of us,” Sukarno said.

Karl yells out from his perch. “Your nakedness will be exposed and your shame uncovered. I will take vengeance; I will spare no one.”

Several moments pass and Karl shouts, “Drop your guns and I will spare you!”

“Is he sparing us or not?” Sukarno asked one of his men. At that point a third shot hits behind Sukarno. “I guess not. You know this bastard is crazy; I don't like this one bit. He has no fear, and I don't like.”

Sukarno points to two of his men and tells them, “You two go around that way, use that outcrop to protect you and try to get above him; we'll cover you from here.” As the two pirates make their way up the incline, the scree that litters the slope hinders their progress. They gradually inch their way along the ground, but with each step, they slide back a bit on the rocky steep slope. Above a loud rumble begins from above and as they look up a large thirty-foot long

log with wooden spikes begins a leisurely descent down the slope. The log initially rolls at a slow pace, but as it moves further down the slope, it starts to gain momentum. Once the log is up to speed, the men find it difficult to elude as they slip and slide along the slope. The log begins to randomly careen down the slope and the first pirate manages to evade the log, but the second man trips and the log rolls directly over him. He screams as the log breaks his leg and skewers the flesh of his torso. A hail of shots aimed at the pirates follows the advancing log, and the entire mountainside erupts with gunfire. The pirates are firing wildly up the slope, and Sukarno shakes his head at the sight.

“How the hell did he get that log up there? That bastard is crazy. We’re out of here! I’ve got no quarrel with this religious nut. This is the asshole’s problem, not ours. Let’s go after the real money, and take that smug American asshole down at his camp.”

“What about Budi?” one of Sukarno’s men asked. Budi was the unfortunate pirate skewered by the log and he remains behind, crying and whimpering on the slope. Sukarno looks at the dying man as if to weigh his options and casually shoots him with his hand gun.

“What about him? We’re out of here,” Sukarno yelled and over the next half hour Sukarno’s men slowly retreat from the slope and leave Karl to his mountain sanctuary.

“Where are the pirates?” Reggie asked later in day. After a series of shrugs and with no answer in the offing, Reggie decides to send several of his men to investigate. It takes a few hours, but Reggie’s men radio him the bad news. “Boss, they are back at their boat,” said one of the guards.

“And Karl?” Reggie asked.

“The bastard is still shooting at us!”

“This is ridiculous; I mean what is the world coming to when you can’t trust a pirate’s word. I need to take that bastard down before we begin moving the Ebu off this island.” Reggie tried to call his hired pirates on the radio, but he couldn’t get a reply. Sukarno wanted to tell Reggie to go to hell, but instead chose not to say anything, and he would use the radio to monitor Reggie’s movements. Reggie immediately began to question the wisdom of giving the pirate one of his radios. “Find my new friends, and let me know what they are up to,” Reggie said.

That night, Bill visits the captives in their tent and he looks at Richard’s heel. Bill decides to suture the open wound, and as he is working on the heel, Richard decides to engage him in conversation.

“You know, your boss is quite the little sociopath, and please don’t tell me the jungle is bringing out the madness in him.”

“No, you are quite right. As far as I can figure, Reggie was pretty much born that way,” Bill said.

Bill continues to work on Richard’s wound for a few more minutes as Richard bites down on his own hand with the pain. “I’ve cleaned and stitched the wound and I’m giving the girl some pain killers to give to you. I can’t do anything about the tendon so you’re not going to be able to move too quickly until a surgeon can reattach it. I can’t believe that bastard cut you like that,” Bill said.

“Damn that hurts. What the hell rock did he crawl out from under and please don’t tell me he is connected to organized crime?” Richard asked.

“No, just corporate America!” Bill said without batting an eye as he hands Sarah the pain killers.

“Oh, that explains it. Couldn’t this sociopath just be content with buying six thousand dollar shower curtains like rest of his kind?” Richard complained.

“No, not Reggie. He is less interested in the stuff, and he is much more into the actual hunt as you can see,” Bill said.

Sarah looks at Bill. “Damn, I wish I never brought the Ebu to Reggie’s attention,” Sarah said.

“Well, frankly, Sarah, it is Sarah, right? It’s not your fault, it’s my fault that I brought this upon us; I’m the one who had that major brain fart of introducing Reggie to the Ebu. I just never imagined that they really existed, and I never imagined how desperate Reggie could become. Most of all, I never considered the results of arrogance without boundaries. Allowing Reggie the opportunity to operate outside the norms of our society was a disaster in the making. I should have known better, I knew he was a sociopath,” Bill said.

“What the hell is your friend’s interest in the Ebu?” Richard asked.

“Originally it was to harvest their DNA for medical research; however, I think he has grown attached to the idea of exhibiting them, of course, for a commiserate profit,” Bill responded.

Sarah joined in and said “Ah, this is just great; this creature is going to destroy the find of the century and an entire race of people for a couple of bucks. Are you going to keep backing this monster up? I mean, you do know what you’re doing is wrong, right?” Sarah asked, in her effort to find an unlikely ally in Bill.

“It’s not a question of right and wrong; it’s more a matter of personal survival at this point. One word of advice: don’t get in Reggie’s way! You’ll live longer and be a lot happier,” Bill wearily said.

“I think it’s a little too late for that advice,” Sarah replied as she looked at Richard.

That night, Karl makes his way to the camp and begins to make announcements with the megaphone he took from one of Reggie's men. "Release the Ebu and leave the island. We want no part of you here. Release my children. You are warned Reginald Frey."

Reggie hears the announcement and the personal nature of Karl's proclamations begin to fire him up again. He runs and finds Bill in his tent.

"This guy is ridiculous! I've got human hostages in the camp, and he could care less what I do with them, but the six oboes concerns him. Bill, you were right about Karl being very protective of the oboes and this gives me an idea for tomorrow," Reggie said.

"Reggie, we got other problems, bigger problems than Karl," Bill said.

"What now Bill? This better be important," Reggie replied with an air of dejection about him. He was busily watching a large rat foraging for food in the corner of his tent and in frustration; he throws a bottle of water at it. The bottle just misses the rodent as it scurries and hides behind several boxes.

"Fucking rats are the size of a small dog," Reggie yelled.

"And that's the problem," Bill said in response. "We got more men down with a high fever, and those that are already sick are not responding to the antibiotics."

"What the hell is going on Bill, will you tell me?" Reggie asked.

"Reggie, you're not going to like this. We ran some blood work on the men who originally got sick. They got *Yersinia pestis*," Bill said.

Reggie shrugs and said, "So?"

"Reggie, it's bubonic plague, you know the nasty stuff that killed millions of people during the Middle Ages," Bill replied.

"The plague? What type of hell hole is this place?" Reggie asked.

“Look Reggie, rats have fleas that carry the disease and the fleas transmit the illness with their bites. You’ve seen the size of the rats on this island, and who knows, maybe even the Ebu are carrying some fleas,” Bill said.

“Not what I wanted to hear, Bill. You tell me this now? Is this spreading? Can I get it?” Reggie said with more than a hint of panic in his voice.

“We can all get it. Besides the damn fleas, we can get it from the sick men. As the disease progresses, it will get into their lungs, and they’ll get pneumonic plague. It can spread into the air as they wheeze and spit up. And here’s the kicker, this version is so virulent, the antibiotics we have just aren’t working on it. We don’t have a cure for it Reggie! The way this disease is progressing, means that the men who are ill from it are also going to die from it and soon,” Bill said.

Reggie sits down and thinks to himself for a minute. Bill watches Reggie’s face looking for signs of Reggie’s trademark sardonic smile or some display of anger. This time there was nothing, nothing other than a small trace of fear in Reggie’s eyes. Normally Bill liked to watch Reggie squirm but now he was getting the distinct feeling that Reggie was behaving more like a wounded animal that was being backed into the proverbial corner. Rationally speaking, Bill had to wonder what novel sick and aberrant behavior would be forthcoming next from Reggie? He didn’t have to wait too long.

“Bill, will shooting the sick men help?” Reggie asked meekly.

“What? Help who, Reggie, help who?” Bill said as he shakes his head. Bill had to admit that was a novel approach to disease control. Damn it, he knew it, Reggie was getting desperate.

“You know; to stop the spreading of the disease?” Reggie pleaded.

“No Reggie, there are multiple sources for the disease; the best we can do is to fumigate the camp to kill the fleas. Reggie, please do us all a favor, and don’t go into the medical... I

mean the quarantine tent.” Bill figured he would do whatever he could to keep Reggie apart from the sick men and his unique brand of health care.

“Bill, there is something else you can do! Fumigate those stinking oboes while you’re at it! You said they could be carrying fleas, the filthy beasts,” Reggie said.

“Okay, I’ll fumigate the Ebu, too,” Bill said in resignation. “When are we out of here?”

“As soon as I take Karl out of the equation,” Reggie said.

“Can I give the prisoners some food and water?”

“I don’t care, just stop this plaque,” Reggie replied.

Upon sunrise Reggie is instructing his men on which two Ebu to take out of the cages. Bill sees the sudden activity and he asked Reggie, “What are you doing with the Ebu?”

“Why Bill, I am baiting the trap for our Born Again friend, that’s all.” Reggie sees Flo and her infant and said “Definitely leave this one behind with baby. These specimens are far too valuable for this mission. Let’s see, who can we spare?” As Reggie scans the cages, he leans his hand against Flo’s cage and turns away to watch the men work. Flo sees Reggie and she quietly moves forward in her cage to Reggie as if to kiss his hand. Reggie turns and sees the dismissive Flo moving in his direction and he actually smiles at her.

“Look at this will you, Bill? Maybe we can civilize these filthy beasts, what do you know?” Reggie said with a trace of amusement on his face. The subservient Flo smiles back at Reggie and she presses her lips against his hand as if he was the pope. “Amazing,” Reggie said in reply to her affectionate gesture just as Flo takes a deep bite into his soft knuckles. Reggie yells in pain and quickly withdraws his wounded hand away from the cage.

“Fuck, that stupid bitch just bit me. Give me a gun; I’m shooting that fucking animal.” Flo retreats to the far side of her cage with the infant whimpering and crying. Reggie continues to curse as blood trickles from the bite, and Bill runs to intercept Reggie. Reggie is upset and

tells the men, “Definitely take this bitch with us tomorrow, her, the infant and that young male. I had enough of this shit. Jesus Bill, do you think she has rabies?”

As Bill looked at Reggie’s hand he responded, “No, Reggie, absolutely no chance, she couldn’t catch it from you that quickly.” In anger, Reggie pulled his hand away and raised it as if to strike Bill but Bill dared him to go ahead. Reggie did not; he didn’t want to lose his sole remaining ally on the island but instead chose to walk away.

“Just put some peroxide on it,” Bill muttered to him as Reggie left the area.

Later that morning, the guards secure the arms of young male and Flo within their cages. After considerable struggle both Ebu have had their arms chained in front of their bodies. With her arms chained, Flo cannot hold the infant, but the infant manages to cling onto her. Reggie carefully monitors their work and barks more instructions to his guards.

“I want the chains secure when we move them, and please muzzle that bitch before she bites me again. Let’s move. We are going to pay our Bible spouting friend a visit. Bill, you are coming with us, you will not want to miss this show.”

The chained Ebu refuse to walk in line with the guards, and Reggie instructs his men to carry the screaming Ebu. “And pleased don’t loose the infant, okay?” Reggie yells to his men.

For a half hour Reggie’s team carries and drags the two struggling Ebu up the slope of the volcano. As they approach the mouth of the caves, Reggie and his team see their dead man kneeling before the cross. As he looks upward on the slope, Reggie spots the dead pirate lying face first in the dirt.

“Yes, this is Karl’s handiwork. Go no further men, that crazy bastard is here,” Reggie said.

“Boss, should we bury him?”

“Nah, leave him there, I never cared for him that much anyway, and nobody else is going to miss him either,” Reggie said.

“Put the two Ebu out front and I want two men with them. Jao, I want you to hold a gun to the Ebu’s heads.”

The two Ebu are huddled together terrified by the giants that surround them. Flo, while clutching the infant, is cowering into a ball, at the sight of the men while the small male is crying and whimpering in fright. One of the guards roughly grabs the male and in sheer terror, the small male relieves himself with some of the urine splattering onto Reggie’s boots. Reggie looks down in disgust at the young male and barks: “I just had those cleaned, shit he goes first!” Jao takes his gun and points it at the skull of the male Ebu.

Reggie steps away from the Ebu and takes cover. “Give me the damn megaphone. Karl, I have two of your children here! Karl, can you hear me? Yes! Look come out and throw your weapon down. If you don’t come out in ten seconds, I’ll shoot them one at a time. Ten, nine...”

Karl has seen the entourage make its way up the slope and he is angrily watching the sad exhibition. From his vantage point, he can’t see Reggie; otherwise he would try his luck at taking Reggie out. If he gives himself up, none of his children will be saved. What difference did it make? He is losing his people to Reggie as the fever continues to rage inside his body unchecked. When his people needed him most during Reggie’s hunt, he was lying unconscious in his cave because of the fever. Even now, he was ineffectual, as he struggled to think of a course of action through the feverish haze. Where was his God now?

Bill is visibly upset and is shouting, “Reggie, you can’t do this. This is wrong, damn it!”

Reggie pushes Bill aside and yells, “Do it!” A loud bang echoes across the mountain and the small male slumps over and falls to the ground. Flo jumps in the air from the noise while the tiny, lifeless body of the male lies on the ground in a puddle of blood.

“My children!” Karl mutters to himself.

Reggie presses ahead. “Karl, I’ll kill the female oboe next with the infant!” as he has the guard point the gun to Flo’s head. “Your choice, I’ve got more to shoot later. I recall there are about twenty of them. I’ll kill the others next too, you know I will do it. Ten, nine, eight...”

As the countdown continued a moment of spiritual enlightenment occurred for Karl, and it became obvious that at this very moment, God demanded his sacrifice. He felt he had no recourse but to oblige his Lord. There must be a reason why it had come to this? He knew deep in his heart this was the right thing to do, and he felt his spirits soar as left the safety of his cave.

“Okay Reggie, it’s over, I’m coming out,” Karl said.

“Throw the gun away, Karl, no tricks,” Reggie replied.

Karl throws the rifle to the ground and walks out of the cave with his hands high in the air. As he moves down the rocky slope of the hill, Karl is muttering the Lord’s Prayers as he struggles to keep his balance on the loose terrain. The wind abruptly gusts on the slope sending debris flying in to the air and Karl stops walking as if to listen to the wind. A few seconds later, he continues to walk down the slope while shouting, “My lord spoke to me in the wind today, I am truly saved.”

Reggie gets a good look to make sure it’s Karl, and he notices the strange smile on the young man’s face. “Save this, you asshole,” Reggie muttered to himself.

“Karl, stop there and turn around,” Reggie yells. Karl hesitates and then he slowly turns while he looks upward as the sky. With Karl’s back to him Reggie yells “Fire!” Shoots ring out throughout the hillside with the first bullet striking Karl in his side.

Bill is yelling “No!” as three other bullets find their target in Karl’s back. Karl falls forward to the ground and his body slowly tumbles down the slope.

For a few seconds, there is silence as the echoes of the rifle shots fade away through the hills.

Reggie is thrilled at the results and tells Bill, “You see I told you it wouldn’t be that bad. All that asshole cost me was one oboe. Should’ve of thought of it sooner, but I guess the heat got to me,” Reggie said with a triumphant smile on his face.

However, Bill is not listening to Reggie ravings. Instead, he is racing up the slope to be at the side of his old lab partner. As Bill approaches, he can see that Karl is lying in a pool of his own blood. Bill holds Karl’s head up, and Karl’s eyes look back at him with a glazed expression. It is only then, that Bill realizes the relative youth of Karl.

Reggie has not noticed that Bill has left his side. “Let’s go back men and get off this god forsaken island. Oh, Bill, I need one additional live specimen. Can we arrange that by tomorrow?” Reggie asked.

Bill is no longer listening to his old master as he watches Karl’s face and the life slipping away from it. He tries but he can’t stop the flow of blood from the multiple wounds, and his hands are covered in Karl’s blood. Seconds later, Bill hears a death rattle as Karl takes his last breath, and his eyes slowly close. He sits with Karl for a few minutes, fighting back the tears, and he takes from Karl’s pocket a well-worn copy of the New Testament. Bill grabs a small handful of dirt and allows the dark volcanic soil to slip between his fingers. He begins digging at the dirt with his bare hands seemingly oblivious to all that are watching him.

“Bill? What the hell are you doing? Bill, let’s go, will you? Leave him there,” Reggie said.

“Go to hell, Reggie. You had him, why didn’t you just capture him?”

“Why? Because that bastard killed two of my men and wounded three others, that’s why. I couldn’t take the chance he would get free again. You would do the same. Whose side are you on?” Reggie asked.

“Forget it, Reggie. I’m burying him, that is the least I can do for him,” Bill said.

Reggie looks at Bill rather crossly but decides to move along. “Bill, you are ruining a special moment for me. Have a little consideration, will you!” Reggie asked. Bill is unmoved by Reggie’s pleas, and he continues his feverish digging.

Bill looked back at Reggie and he couldn’t help but notice that some of the blood of the dead Ebu had splattered on Reggie’s shirt.

“One of you get Bill a shovel and help him bury that piece of shit,” Reggie barks to his men. “And you say I’m not considerate,” Reggie yells back to Bill.

Your Hands Are Stained With Blood

Inside the hostage tent, Sarah is by Richard's side and is busily changing the dressing on his bleeding heel. Richard is in pain, and is groaning quietly to himself. "Richard, you're not going to be able to walk on that leg are you?" Sarah asked.

Richard looks up at Sarah with the pain deeply etched in his face. "Oh, I can walk out of here, just not very fast, that bastard made sure of that. Without my Achilles tendon I can't pick my leg up, I'll just have to drag it behind me. It's a freaking runner's nightmare losing your Achilles like that. Yeah, I'm going nowhere fast but on the positive side you'll be able to keep up with me now."

"I got the pain killers for you, Percocets I believe," Sarah said.

"Give me a bunch of them, Sarah, just in case we have to get moving. Don't be stingy on me, girl!" Richard said, while managing a weak smile for her. Richard downs a small handful of them, swallowing them one at a time.

"I can't believe the mess I created."

"Enough Sarah, we didn't create this freaking mess. Like Bill said, Reggie was looking for the Ebu long before he met us. We just made the mistake of holding a lightning rod during a storm. Stupid, perhaps careless, but we didn't create the storm."

"Richard, I'm not sure your analogy helps how I feel," Sarah said in response.

It did not matter what Richard said. Sarah was deep into her thoughts, and she blamed herself for finding the Ebu and thereby unleashing humanity upon the small hapless troop. For hours, she watched the destructive consequences of her decisions: the caged Ebu, her work destroyed and the team held hostage. For her, the worst of it, was helplessly watching as Reggie cut Richard's leg. All of this violence was reigning down on her friends because of her stupidity and blind ambition.

She was kidding herself with romantic notions that this island was paradise. The killing of Flo's infant told her that violence was bred deep within our primate bones. There never was a Garden of Eden for humanity. It was clear that the human ascent from the other animals came with some extra baggage, including some very nasty and aggressive behavior. In the distance, more gunshots were echoing through the hills. The shots were another reminder of how humans and technology had ratcheted that aggression to an unimaginable level of violence, all within a blink of an eye. One aggressive thought, and a moment later, somebody is dead or dying, with an entire universe collapsing about him or her. There was little or no consideration for the victim, and even to consider the victim for a moment was a sign of weakness. That was how you filled an ocean with the blood of the innocent, one seemingly insignificant pint at a time.

How different our modern violence was as compared to our ancestors. Violence among the Ebu was up close, intimate, and very personal; you could smell the final breath of your victim. Whether it was a game animal or another Ebu, you felt their pain and their final spasms of life. That moment stayed with you. Violence amongst humans was more often that not done from a distance, which had the dubious distinction of sanitizing the act, and making it easier for even the uninitiated to do the killing. Amazing how the builders of weapons never considered the consequences of their actions, blindly going about their deadly business, much as Sarah did. It was no wonder that ancient Buddhists automatically excluded the makers of weapons from the

next stage of reincarnation. All people, including Sarah, had to be accountable for their actions during their life.

What of Sarah? Wouldn't she be held accountable for her actions? Was she truly innocent? No, not really. She began to blame her blind ambition for much of their woes. She remembered what she said to Brightman about wanting to be the academic head of this expedition and that was a matter of considerable pride for her. She knew that the discovery of the Ebu was going to have consequences on their existence. She just never took the time to determine what they could be, or took the time to figure out a plan to minimize them. Simply put, her pride and personal ambition had led her astray and now there was blood on her hands as well. It might take a lifetime to clean her hands, assuming she was going to get a lifetime.

Now she was doing the torturing to herself as she struggled to free her bonds. Outside, the guards seemed oblivious to the drama and pain going on inside the tent. "Where the hell is Flo?" Sarah thinks to herself.

At that point, Sarah looks over to Richard, and for a few seconds Richard is unaware that Sarah is watching him. Suddenly, as if he feels her presence gazing upon him, Richard looks up at Sarah. She has collapsed into a small ball of misery with her knees drawn tightly up to her chin, and from her eyes, he can see how sad and reflective she had become. Richard knows she is blaming herself for this disaster forgetting that it was he who had insisted on going ahead with the asinine ad-hoc expedition. Even with the pain in his leg, Richard manages another feeble smile for her. She faintly smiles back at him, and in her restraints, she inches toward Richard for a reassuring touch. The two sit side by side for a few minutes, and with his touch Sarah feels her battered spirits brighten.

While seated in his tent, Bill is trying to console himself after watching Karl die in his arms. Bill pulls out of his pocket Karl's old, worn Bible and as he looks at the book, it automatically opens to a passage:

Isaiah 59:3

“For your hands are stained with blood, your fingers with guilt. Your lips have spoken lies, and your tongue mutters wicked things. No one calls for justice; no one pleads his case with integrity. They rely on empty arguments and speak lies; they conceive trouble and give birth to evil.”

Bill trembles at the reading of the passage and realizes that Karl has spoken to him from the grave. Now all he had was empty arguments, rationalizations and lies, little else. However, there was something else in his life; he also had Reggie in his life!

One of the native guards interrupts Bill's quiet agony. “Boss, you better come quick, one of the men just died.” As Bill goes into the makeshift hospital tent, he sees a blanket drawn over the head of a man lying in a cot.

“Damn it and he's not going to be the last one.” Bill is losing control over the disease in the camp and he knows he has to act decisively if he is going to save anyone.

The camp is buzzing with activity and Bill orders the move of the five Ebu and their respective cages into the hostage tent. Sarah sees Flo, and Flo turns in her cage to get a better look at her old friend. Before the two can greet each other, five armed men come into the tent, their skin covered in a whitish powder that gives them a look of death. Each is carrying an industrial sprayer and they prepare to spray the tent.

“What are you doing? You got to do this now?” Sarah yells out.

The men don't respond, and they begin to fumigate the Ebu and their cages. The Ebu scream in fear and rage as the men liberally spray a heavy white dust cloud on them. The roar of the gas air compressors adds to the noise and the confusion. Not knowing to close their eyes as the spray is being applied, the Ebu find that the dust is burning their eyes.

Sarah yells, "What the hell are you doing to them?"

The yelling forces a weary Bill to walk into the tent and intercede on the part of his men. As he enters the tent, he stares directly at Sarah and tells her, "Enough, the camp has an outbreak of the bubonic plague and it's a particular nasty variant that doesn't respond to any of the antibiotics we brought with us. Even worse, its incubation period appears to be shorter than normal. It's killing the men faster than any other strains of plague I have seen to date. We have no choice but to kill all the fleas in this camp."

The guards untie the hostages and Bill tells the hostages, "Now take your clothes off and your underwear too!"

The prisoners hesitate until Bill pleads with them to "Please, just do it!" As Sarah begins to undress, she looks at Richard for an okay sign. Richard gives her a resigned look and the hostages undress.

The men spray a heavy dust cloud at the naked hostages as Sarah helps to hold Richard up.

"What the hell is that, an insecticide?" Richard yells above the noise and dust.

Bill sees his concern. "No, it's just a diluted borax powder in an emulsion mix. Not harmful at this concentration to most mammals, but its highly effective at killing fleas." Sarah is very naked, and she struggles to cover herself as much as possible while choking on the rising dust cloud. The smirking guards take their time with the spraying of Sarah and Bill yells at them to hurry.

“Make sure you get their clothes as well,” Bill said. “Okay, good, you can put your clothes back on. I’m sorry about the spraying but we are all at grave risk.”

As Sarah hurriedly puts her clothes on, she decides to act. “Make sure you don’t spray any Ebu children or babies with the borax, it’s very toxic to them,” she said.

“I know, I know, that is why we kept the infant separate from the adults for now,” Bill said.

“We also know something about this plaque,” she said.

“Just what do you know, and come to think of it, why aren’t any of you sick? You’ve been on this island for a while now, correct?” Bill asked.

Richard interjects, “Yeah, it’s close to five weeks we’ve spent in Club Hell, but one of us did get sick.”

“What? Who?” Bill asked.

“I got sick,” Sarah said.

“Symptoms?” Bill asked.

Richard recites the litany of symptoms: “Fever of 104 degrees, chills, swollen lymph nodes...”

“You got the plaque? How did you survive? Did you give her anything like an antibiotic?” Bill said.

“Yeah, a general spectrum penicillin dosage, but that wouldn’t work in this case; I didn’t know it was the plaque. It didn’t matter, she recovered within a couple of days,” Richard said.

“What? Impossible...”

“You heard me. We think what saved her is a medicinal food the Ebu regularly eat. To be specific, it’s a white orchid that the Ebu regular add to their diet,” Richard said.

“Can’t be?” Bill asked.

“But here we are,” Richard replied.

“Reggie, get in here!” Bill yells. Reggie is outside giving orders to some of his men and balks in replying.

“Damn it Reggie, now!” Bill yells again.

Reggie makes his way into the tent and makes a face at the dust cloud lingering in the air.

“Tell Reggie what you just told me,” Bill said.

“Sarah came down with the plague a little over a week ago,” Richard said. Reggie turns and looks at Sarah who is still struggling to get her bra on.

“Do you mind?” Sarah asked.

Looking at the half-naked Sarah, Reggie said “Really, she looks quite good for somebody who had the plague. And what saved her may I ask?”

“It was a white orchid that the Ebu regularly eat,” Sarah said.

“Oh, really, how convenient. Can’t be right, has to be something else. They’re lying, obviously stalling for more time,” Reggie said.

“We’re not,” Sarah said. “Hey, we saw an Ebu male get a bite from a Komodo dragon during a hunt one day. The Komodo gave him a good bite on his calf. You know about a bite from a Komodo? You know, being a reptilian creep yourself,” Sarah said.

“Stop it, you’re hurting my feelings. Please, enough with the stupid banter, and yes, I do know about their bite being fatal to the victim. Bill told me all about the lovely darlings,” Reggie said.

“They gave him the very same orchid when they were tending to his wounds. This little guy is still alive and kicking, that is unless you got a hold of him. He recovered in less than four days,” Sarah said.

“They’re lying! The Ebu don’t care for their sick. Stupid, clumsy lies, are you buying any of this nonsense Bill?” Reggie asked. Reggie is visibly upset, and he looks to Bill for some direction.

“Reggie, as to the Ebu caring for their sick, how do you explain the survival of the deformed male? Maybe they are lying but here is another question for you; why isn’t their entire research team sick? They’ve been on this island much longer than us,” Bill said.

“I don’t know. Why, did they eat this mythical orchid?” Reggie asked. Richard and Sarah both mumble a feeble yes.

“Alright, where is this orchid?” Reggie questioned.

“We’re not quite sure,” Sarah said, “it’s not in the lowland areas of the island to our knowledge. We’ve never seen it, and we’ve been all over that part of this island. I’m guessing it’s got be located on the higher elevations along the volcano slopes somewhere...”

Richard interrupts Sarah. “I’m sure they’re picking the orchids somewhere near the other cave complex we’ve been exploring, there is a pocket of woodlands nearby,” Richard said. Richard was lying but he had a gun hidden in the cave and there was no way for Reggie to know he was bluffing.

“Reggie, we got nothing else to go on. Most of the men are sick, and for all we know, you and I are next. We could already have the plaque!” Bill said.

“Bill, can you confirm this?” Reggie asked.

“Yes, I can. I can run blood work on the girl, and check to see if she has any traces of the infection left in her system. Her antibodies will tell the story. Give me six hours and I’ll have an answer for you. Sarah, I’m going to need a little of your blood,” Bill said.

“Do it, Bill! And if these idiots are lying, the entire lot of them is dead. Tie the rest, but leave the girl untied so she can care for the Ebu,” Reggie commanded.

After drawing the blood sample from Sarah, Reggie and Bill leave the tent together. Flo is sitting in the back of her cage while holding and nursing the orphan infant. Despite the horror of the past few days in captivity, Flo has become an attentive and loving mother. To Sarah, it was somewhat ironic that Flo was now caring for her former tormentor's infant.

Flo sees Sarah and her long arms reach out through the bars of her cage to touch Sarah once again. Sarah moves to Flo's cage and through the bars of the cage, the two touch each other hands. "Don't worry girl, I'll get you out of this mess, I promise," Sarah said to Flo.

Later in the day and without Reggie's company, Bill joins the hostages in their tent. "I got some bad news; your girl didn't get the plaque."

Richard and Sarah did not want to hear this and they collectively slump. A sense of doom hangs heavy over the team.

"Well, she had something; maybe your damn test is wrong, like a false negative?" Richard asked.

"Yes, she had something, but it was not the plaque." Bill pauses not knowing what to do. "Look Reggie doesn't have to know this; I owe that bastard nothing. That freaking maniac killed Karl in front of me! You have to believe me when I say I never wanted to be a party to killing. I can't do what he wants anymore. The killing ends here."

Bill is sitting on a folding chair in a corner holding his head in his hands. "We are all going to look for those damn orchids. Who knows? They may have some medicinal value anyway, and right now, that's all I got to go on. At the right moment, I'll give you an opportunity to escape from this maniac. You will know when. Let me talk to Reggie and convince him we have to go search for those white orchids," Bill said quietly.

"Bill, you have to let the Ebu go as well," Sarah said.

“What are you crazy? You can’t free the Ebu; they’ll alert the guards and Reggie. Five Ebu running loose is going to get Reggie crazed, and I can vouch for the fact he’ll start a killing spree. He’s really loosing it,” Bill said.

“Try stopping me, Bill!” Sarah yelled.

Bill is shaking his head. “Look, please listen to reason. When the time is right, you got my word I will release the Ebu. Please trust me,” Bill said.

“All right, but let me free Flo; she knows how to keep quiet,” Sarah said.

Bill looks up at Sarah as if she’s crazy, and Richard decides it’s time to intercede.

“Bill, trust me, there’s a special bond between the two, and it transcends the two different species. Simply put, they’re buds, that’s all I can say,” Richard said. Bill nods his head not knowing what to make of Richard’s odd comment.

Sarah smiles while she releases Flo and the infant from their cage.

“You are going to get us all killed,” Bill said. Flo gives a quick look about the tent checking to see where the other humans are, and she quickly moves back to Sarah. Sarah gets down on one knee while making a shushing sound to her tiny friend, and Flo moves toward Sarah as she holds the infant. The two look at each other and touch hands once again. Flo, while holding the infant, leans forward and gives Sarah a big hug with her free arm. Sarah hugs her too and pats the diminutive Flo gently on the back while she murmurs soft words of encouragement to her.

Richard looks at Sarah shaking his head in disbelief at the emotional spectacle of the two. “You’re hugging each other now? What is it; I can’t leave the two of you alone for a minute?” Richard asked.

“What are you jealous? Sarah said sternly. “Grow up will you and stop being so emotionally constipated!”

Flo, following Sarah's cue, turns and gives Richard a cross look as well.

"Great, now you got Flo giving me dirty looks, too. See what I mean, Bill? Doesn't matter what species they are, women always stick together," Richard said.

"Ignore the big ape girl," Sarah said. "Please Flo, be careful." Sarah lifts the back of the tent escorting Flo and the infant out. "Bill, will you go out now and divert the guards for me."

"There aren't that many guards left to divert to be honest with you, most are pretty sick," Bill said. "And by the way, your man doesn't look too well either."

Together, they all turn their heads to look at Supar and Rudy. Supar is quietly lying on the ground with a sallow complexion, and he is sweating profusely.

"Ah, not you too, Supar," Sarah said.

"I never ate the orchids, Sarah," Supar said.

"I'll tell Reggie not to come in because of Supar. Maybe he won't notice the female Ebu missing," Bill said.

Outside the tent Bill yells out "Reggie, I've got an update for you."

Outside the hostage tent, Reggie is getting exasperated with the unrelenting bad news and the strange turn of events. "We got four men that are functional, that's it? Let's go look for that damn orchid. It's only a matter of time before the rest of us get sick," Reggie said. "Get the idiots out of the tent."

The guards gather up Richard, Sarah, Rudy and Supar. "Take the gimp and the girl with us and leave the other two behind," Reggie ordered.

Supar comments, "You are going to need me if you run into my old friends."

"What, the pirates? Please, I think they are busily tanning themselves as we speak, and besides you don't look to be in such great shape either," Reggie said.

Going along, Richard quickly adds, "Supar has worked the caves with me. He knows the area better than I do. We could really use his help in searching for the orchids." Richard figured he could use Supar's help in making their escape, even a gravely ill Supar.

"Fine, but keep him away from me, he doesn't look well at all. Keep their hands tied except for the girl. Pointing to Supar, Reggie said, "You and the girl help the gimp walk."

The party slowly makes its way to the slope of the volcano, following a path to the caves. Two guides lead the way through the rough terrain taking directions from Richard. As the terrain becomes rougher, Richard falls several times as Sarah and Supar struggle to pick him up.

"Good god, this is going to take forever," Reggie cried.

"Asshole, if my hands were free I could at least balance myself. What I am going to do, run away?" Richard yelled.

Reggie has no choice but to untie the hands of the prisoners. Richard is moving slowly with the assistance of Bill, and Supar is barely capable of making it up the slope even with Sarah's assistance.

"The girl stays near me," Reggie said in an effort to keep some type of control over the wayward band.

They walk up the slope toward Karl's cave, making their way on a narrow path that winds about the volcano. As they approach the passage to the caves, the air fills with the acrid, pungent smell of decaying flesh. The two lead guards hesitate because combined with the odor they hear a loud rustling noise before them. They tentatively peer ahead but they can't see anything that would cause the noise. They realize that the noise is from above and as they look upward the body of a person falls directly in front of the advancing party. As they look closer, they see a blackened, headless body lying crumpled on the ground with its butt prominently sticking up in the air. The guards look at each other and together they take a collective step back

away from the grotesque corpse. As they retreat a large eight-foot Komodo dragon rapidly descends from the upward slopes hissing at the party to get away from its dinner. Grabbing a leg in its massive jaws the dragon tosses the body from side to side in an effort to rip pieces of flesh free from the carcass.

At first, Sarah and Reggie can't see the dragon but the retreating guards draw their attention to the feeding frenzy. They both stop in their tracks and as she catches sight of the dragon, a horrified Sarah screams "Oh, my God!" Sarah starts to sob, and the crying leads to hysterics, as if the totality of the horrors she had experienced on the island had reigned down upon her all at once. Sarah's crying becomes uncontrollable, tears are streaming down her cheeks, and she falls to the ground covering her face.

"What is this feeding time at the zoo? Men, pick that stupid girl up will you? Let's move it along and somebody shoot that stupid dragon! Oh, never mind, I'll do it," Reggie said. As Reggie aims his handgun at the dragon, the two front guards continue to struggle with the hysterical Sarah, but she refuses to get up from the ground.

"Ugh, enough with that stupid bitch, this is bullshit, just let me shoot her." Reggie takes his eye off the dragon and aims his handgun at Sarah. In a moment, Sarah stands up, stops her crying, and turns to face Reggie. Sarah defiantly looks Reggie in the eyes, and she sees a terrifying emptiness staring back at her.

Reggie is shaking his head. "Just what I thought, an aspiring actress, and a bad one at that I might add. I have to assume your illness, and the flowers were just a stupid charade on your part. I had enough of your antics. It's time to thin the herd," Reggie said.

Sarah refuses to cower but instead she continues to stare at Reggie, almost defying him to shoot her. Richard looks on in horror, but as he moves forward, he realizes he is too far away to intercede. As Reggie fires, Supar jumps in front of Sarah shielding her from Reggie and the

bullet hits Supar directly in the stomach. Supar hesitates, looks down at his bleeding abdomen, and slowly slumps to the ground.

The entire party stops, and looks on as a moaning Supar lies writhing and bleeding on the ground. Reggie is looking at his handiwork with a bemused expression on his face. The dragon hearing the gunshot looks up from his meal and hisses at the party for a second time.

“Ah, my work is never done,” and Reggie starts to take aim at Sarah again. However, this time the expression dramatically changes on Reggie’s face from its bemused look to one of total shock and surprise. Bill is behind Reggie with his rifle, and he has the muzzle firmly pointed at the back of Reggie’s head.

“Reggie, it ends here. You are not shooting that girl. Drop your gun, now!” Bill said in a stern, authoritative tone.

Reggie lifts his hands and the gun up into the air. “Oh, I see my lab rat is trying to be a man. No, make that a yellow lab rat. Stupid Bill, really stupid! You want to end up like Karl?” Reggie asked.

“Just drop the gun, Reggie, enough of your bullshit,” Bill said.

“Figures, you and Karl were in this together from the start. So stupid of me to trust you, Bill,” Reggie said.

“No, Reggie, it was you that brought Karl and me together. This madness ends here. Just drop the fucking gun will you!”

“Oh, you’re getting angry, huh. Go ahead lab rat you don’t have the balls to pull the trigger. You’re a yellow piece of shit,” Reggie said.

Bill hesitates, and Reggie doesn’t move.

“Look, Bill I’ll double your shares. Whatever you want, just name your ticket, old buddy. What is the price for your loyalty, huh, Bill? Just put the gun down,” Reggie said.

Bill hesitates.

“Then pull the trigger, you piece of shit, just do it!” Reggie screams.

“You’re right, I can’t shoot you,” Bill said in a defeated manner.

Reggie smiles at the comment and he begins to turn around.

“But this I can do,” Bill said as he hits Reggie across the back of his head with the butt of the rifle.

Reggie falls to the ground with a large gash to his head and his body rolls down the slope for a couple of yards.

Bill watches Reggie for a few seconds and said, “I have to say, I have never seen him look so peaceful. I thought the bastard never slept.”

The two guards at the front of the party have allowed their weapons to drop to their side, and they are standing motionless while they watch their boss lying face first in the dirt. The guard bringing up the rear does react to the drama. In an act of misguided loyalty, the guard points his gun at Bill, and begins yelling at him. This guard doesn’t speak English, and Bill is calmly trying to talk to him. Bill slowly approaches the guard, and tries to take control of the guard’s rifle. Confused by Bill’s intentions, the guard fires the rifle into Bill’s thigh, and Bill falls to the ground.

The noise of the altercation disrupts the dragon from its meal and the agitated komodo decides it doesn’t want to share its new found meal with the party. The guards in the front of the party are busily watching Bill when the large dragon makes a lunge for them. The first guard runs to escape the advancing Komodo but as the second guard turns to shoot the dragon, Richard sees his opportunity and throws his body against the guard. The smaller man falls hard to the ground and Richard wrestles the rifle away from him. Richard starts to shoot in the direction of the rear guard and the two men exchange wild, erratic shots at each other. The shooting scatters

the humans and the lone dragon across the hillside while Sarah and Richard take advantage of the mayhem to recover Supar's motionless body.

"There are some caves we can hide in up there," Richard said as he points to several cave openings in the mountainside. "We have to avoid the first two caves though; they don't go back very far. There is a third cave that we were going to explore that we should try."

After climbing for a few minutes, Sarah is exhausted from helping Richard drag Supar up the slope. "Richard, I can't go much farther and Supar is looking awful. We got to stop his bleeding."

"Hang in there girl, it's just ten more yards on this trail, just apply some pressure to his wound as I move him," Richard said.

They stumble into the third cave but they cannot see much past the entrance. The cave is actually a classic lava tube and Richard does not recognize any part of it.

"Is there a way out, Richard?"

"Beats me, I haven't been in here before. Let's go deeper behind those rocks over there, so Mr. Sociopath can't find us so easily," Richard said.

"Richard, I'm getting a bad sense of déjà vu about going into another cave," Sarah said.

"Yeah, so am I but what are we going to do?" Richard asked. "Like you said we got to stop his bleeding."

"Richard, where is the rifle?" Sarah yells.

"Shit, I put it down when I grabbed Supar! Fuck me; I can't believe I left it out there! Shit! Shit! Shit!" Richard cried out.

"Enough Richard, give me a hand with Supar," Sarah said as she looked for a place to rest the wounded man. "Put him down here. I'll work on him while you look for another way out. And please hurry before that maniac comes for us," Sarah said.

“Where’s Bill?” Richard asked.

“I lost track of him when all of that gun fire started,” Sarah said.

Sarah is bending over Supar trying to stop the bleeding by applying pressure on his abdominal wound. Supar is moaning lightly, and as his eyes open, he sees that Sarah is working on him. He gives her a weak smile.

“Sarah, thanks for helping me. You’ve earned much merit by befriending Flo, Flo is very important to you and to all of us,” Supar said.

“Shush, Supar, not now. I’ve got to stop this bleeding.” Supar’s face was very pale even in the dim light of the cave and as he spoke Sarah figured the fever and bullet wound was now causing Supar to become delirious.

“Sarah, it’s too late for me. If this bullet doesn’t kill me, the fever will but you, you must live and learn to forgive. Your father never wanted to leave you, Sarah, you must understand that. Please forgive your parents and most of all forgive yourself.”

He hesitates for a moment and then continued with “And take care of Richard, he’s got a good soul and he is the one for...,” he gasped as his face suddenly relaxes and he focuses into the distance.

“Damn you, stop talking, and save your strength, you fool,” Sarah said. Sarah can see that she is losing him as the sticky blood covers her hands as she struggles to apply more pressure to the wound. The blood continues to pour, and as she blindly gropes through the wound for the bleeder, she can feel the slick warmth of his flesh enveloping her hands. Supar groans with the pain from the increased pressure, and Sarah backs off from her futile search.

“It’s okay Sarah; I can see now, more than I have ever seen before. Flo’s next reincarnation is as a human, I can see that clearly now. You will see too. Damn, I’ve been such

a fool, I should have been a better Buddha to you, Sarah, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, I squandered my life, my opportunity," Supar said in a whisper.

"You've been a good Buddha Supar, you really have," Sarah said. "Now, please be quiet. Richard, I need your help now!" Sarah yells.

"I'll try to come back for..." and with those words Supar closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and quietly accepts his death. Sarah tries to resuscitate him and she vigorously applies CPR. "Richard, please help me!" After a few minutes of furious struggle, Sarah is holding Supar in her arms as she quietly sobs.

"If that's Flo's destiny I truly feel sorry for her. She deserves so much better than this existence," Sarah said quietly to herself.

As Richard returns, he sees a small weeping figure silhouetted by the light of the cave entrance sitting next a lifeless body. As he moves closer, her head is bowed down as if in reverent prayer while her hands are covered in blood.

"I needed your help, why didn't you come? Sarah cried.

"Ah no, is he dead?" Richard asked.

"I just lost him," Sarah said, fighting to hold the tears back.

"I called for you!" she yelled as she teetered near hysterics.

"This is not happening," Richard said. Richard sits down next to Supar and tries to resuscitate him.

"Richard, I've tried CPR already," Sarah said.

Richard is undaunted by her words and continues to work on the lifeless body of Supar. After several minutes, Richard is exhausted physically and emotionally but he continues to pump the chest one more time. As he pushes, his hand slips into the puddle of blood that had gathered around Supar's abdomen. Richard finally stops his efforts and holds his head for a few minutes

as he sits next to Sarah, and he finally gives up. Richard holds his head for a minute, and catches his breath.

Breaking the silence Richard asked, "What were you talking about?"

"What?" Sarah asked.

"I heard you talking to Supar," Richard said.

"Oh, forgiveness," Sarah said.

"You finally forgave him?" Richard asked.

"No, he asked me to forgive myself. He spoke about my father," Sarah said as she broke into tears.

Richard sighs. "God, Rudy is going to take this hard. You know, I liked Supar even after that pirate nonsense. He just made some mistakes as we all do. Strange but definitely an interesting man."

Outside the cave the gunfire continues.

"Can you believe that maniac is still out there? Hey, from what I can see, this cave goes back quite a bit. I'm going back for a second look. I just wish I had a damn flashlight," Richard said.

As Richard moves into the darkness he finds his container of matches in his pocket, and he decides to light his one remaining match. He strikes the match and the light fills the darkened cave. As Richard's eyes grow accustomed to the light of the match, the shadows start to melt away, and to his shock, he sees a dozen eyes looking back at him.

"Ah, shit!" as Richard's heart skips a beat.

"Richard, what's wrong," asked Sarah.

"Nothing, well, yeah, it's something, we got company dear," Richard said.

Sarah hurries back to Richard, and standing before Richard in the dim light, is the entire troop of female Ebus with their young. They are huddled near the back of the cave, and their fearful faces stare back in horror at sight of the two researchers.

“Oh my God, I can’t believe we never heard them,” Sarah said. As soon as Sarah completes her sentence one of the females throws a stone at Sarah causing Richard to drop the match. The rock barely misses Sarah, and they hear the rock clatter against the wall of the cave. The cave once again falls into darkness and an eerie silence returns to the cave.

“Here we go again, we are so out of here,” Richard yelled as the two quickly leave the Ebu troop and make their escape. Richard is swinging his leg as fast as he can as they retreat to the front of the cave.

“What the hell is it with you and those stupid bitches? Are they following us?” Richard asked.

“No, but somebody is coming from the front of the cave,” Sarah said.

“Quick, hide in the shadows over there to your right, there is a small cull de sac in the rocks we can hide in,” Richard said.

From the mouth of the cave, a male figure approaches silhouetted by the light of the day. Clearly visible in his hand is a rifle. Richard instinctively pushes Sarah down while at the same time, she is straining to get a good look at the figure.

“Lab rat come out, I know you’re in here!”

“Shit, it’s Reggie, why can’t this bastard do us all a favor and just die,” Richard whispers to Sarah.

A loud murmuring is heard come from the back of the cave and Reggie hears the noise. “Bill, I can hear you back there, make this easy for both of us, and please come out. I promise you, no more shooting.”

Reggie pauses and his voice grows softer. “Bill please, I’m not feeling so good Bill, my head really hurts and I’m actually feeling a bit feverish. Let’s face it; this has been a rough day for both of us. Come on buddy, we need each other, we’re almost done here. Let’s end this foolishness now.”

Reggie waits a few seconds and the murmuring continues. Reggie loses it and start screaming into the cave. “Damn you, are you back there with the others? Bastard, I can hear you talking. I’m counting to three: one, two, three. Here I come lab rat, ready or not.”

Lacking a flashlight, Reggie slowly walks to the back of the cave. In the darkness, the Ebu murmuring grows louder. Reggie continues to move to the back of the cave, but in the darkness he passes right by the hiding Sarah and Richard. “You stupid bastard, Bill, come out!” Reggie fires the gun into the back of the cave and the echoes of the blast reverberate throughout the cave.

The cave grows quiet for a few moments and, as if on cue, the entire Ebu troop starts screaming at Reggie. The deafening roar that emanates from the rear of the cave shocks Reggie. A few seconds later, a fusillade of rocks are hurled at him, and the misses noisily clatter along the cave wall and floors. Among the misses, a few thuds sound as some of the sharp rocks hit their mark and strike Reggie’s flesh. Reggie screams “What the fuck!” with their impact, and in the darkness, there is a clanging noise as Reggie drops his rifle. Reggie screams again as several more rocks hit their mark, and he runs for the mouth of the cave without his rifle. Reggie runs by Richard and Sarah, not realizing that they are in the cave with him and the Ebu.

Richard and Sarah sit up but they are in no hurry to leave their hiding spot nor do they want to incur the wrath of the agitated Ebu in the cave. A few minutes later, the light at the front of the cave silhouettes another figure. As the figure moves forward, his leg is clearly dragging behind him.

“You can come out now! Reggie’s gone!” the figure yelled.

“Thank God, it’s Bill and not that creature,” Sarah said as she exhaled.

“Bill, where did that bastard go?” Richard asked.

“I think he’s headed back to his boat with his remaining men.” Bill sits down and holds his wounded left leg. Wrapped around his upper thigh is a bloodied impromptu tourniquet. Bill looks up from his pain, and he sees the tears in Sarah’s eyes and her bloodied hands.

“How did you find us?” Richard asked.

“From the trail of blood. How is your man?” Bill asked in turn.

“Supar didn’t make it,” Richard said.

“I’m sorry about your man. What happened to Reggie? He looked pretty shaken when he fled this cave. I’ve never seen that bastard move so fast,” Bill said.

A loud murmuring noise ensues from the back of the cave prompting Bill to ask, “What, the hell is that racket?”

“The Ebu, that’s what happened to Reggie. On the positive side, we found the remaining Ebu, and they absolutely hate Reggie. The bad news is they are in the cave with us, and they have a particular aversion to old stony over here,” Richard said as he points to Sarah. “You got a flashlight on you?”

“Yeah, right here,” as Bill grabs his flashlight from his utility belt.

“Good, I want to go to the back of the cave. Sarah, you stay here, the Ebu have had enough excitement for the day,” Richard quipped.

“Okay, like you once said I know where I’m not wanted,” Sarah replied.

As they walked away Bill asked, “Why don’t the Ebu like Sarah?”

“I think it’s some sort of an interspecies catfight,” Richard responded.

From the front of the cave, they hear Sarah saying, “I can hear you Richard!”

As they continued to walk Bill asked, "You're joking during this mayhem?"

"Yeah, today I'm decided to leave the crying to the women," Richard said bluntly.

"Watch your step over here. Shine your light back that way; I want to scare the Ebu further back into the recesses of the cave," Richard said.

Bill shines the light at the back of the caves, and dozens of nervous eyes are peering back at him. The males are not with them, so the Ebu band is very nervous and jumpy after Reggie's visit.

"What are we looking for?" Bill asked.

"The orchids."

"So they do exist?"

"Yep, keep looking, I'll bet they have a stash with them. What's that over there?"

The two men look along a tall wall. Lying on the ground is the Ebu food cache, and among the food, spilling out from an animal hide pouch is a collection of the crumpled white orchids.

"Bingo!" Richard yelled.

"Richard, why don't you grab a few flowers while I cover you with the light," Bill said.

To his surprise, as Richard gathered the flowers, he noticed their color was still a bright white. "There a little wilted since being picked, but they'll do in a pinch. Bill, I'm keeping a few for myself," Richard said as he stuffed a few in a clear plastic bag.

"Why?"

"Let's just say they are bait for a rat, okay?" Richard said with a smile.

Reggie for the first time in many years finds himself very alone. Reggie was used to commanding an army of men, chess pieces to be sacrificed in his many games of war. They

were now dwindled down to a useless few. Karl had seen to it that Reggie lost his best lieutenants in the early going on this island. He looked at the two young natives that remain with him in the fight. Young and scared, the only thing they had going for them, was an active immune system. They were useless to Reggie, and he was having a hard time dealing with the humiliation of his betrayed by the lab rat.

Frustrated, Reggie starts yelling in the general vicinity of the caves. “Bill, you fucking yellow piece of shit, when I get back to the states, I’m going to hunt your family down, Bill, you fucking coward, do you hear me? I’m going to track them down, and I’m going to skin that pretty wife of yours alive, and then I’m cutting her tits off but before she dies, Bill, I’m going to disembowel each of your kids in front of her. You hear me you bastard, Bill!” Reggie yelled.

“Hmmm, sounds like Reggie recovered from his encounter with the Ebu, huh?” Richard asked.

Bill looks at Richard, his face etched deep with worry. “I’ve got to get to him and stop that bastard. I can’t take a chance on him getting back to the boat and back to the U.S.,” Bill said.

“I don’t know Bill, if Reggie has a fever you may not have much to worry about,” Richard replied.

“I can’t take a chance that the plaque is going to kill that son of a bitch. Vermin like him always manages to survive. No, this is something personal I got to do myself,” Bill said.

Richard shakes his head, and he points to Bill’s bleeding leg. The entire front of the pant’s leg is soaked in blood, and the blood is slowly dripping onto the cave floor. “You can’t do it Bill, it looks like your leg is bleeding worse than mine, and you’re looking damn pale as well. Hey, you did a good job of patching me up and I owe that bastard a big one for his impromptu surgery on me. Don’t worry Bill; I’ll get him for the two of us. You take Sarah back

to the camp, and get Rudy out of there. None of us are safe with that psychopath running loose on this island,” Richard said.

“Richard, please... he’s a nasty piece of work,” Sarah said.

“Don’t worry,” Richard said, as he kissed Sarah on the head, “Are you forgetting I can be a piece of work, too when I want to be?”

“Are you sure you are up to this Richard?” Sarah is looking at Richard’s leg. The pain on Richard’s face is obvious and bloodstains saturate the bandages on his foot.

“Look, I got a great little skipping motion going on now, I can’t miss! We need time to get the boat going and, yes, I do want to even the score with that son of a bitch and Bill you are right. What choice do we have? Letting him go, and taking the chance that he catches up with us later? He’s not expecting me, so I’ll have element of surprise. Besides, I’ve got to do this before the pain killers wear off, and I come to my freaking senses.”

Sarah looks at him, her eyes quietly questioning his sanity and Richard tries not to look back at her.

“Just go, will you! Please, no arguments this time, Sarah!” Richard said.

Richard makes the mistake of taking a quick glance at Sarah’s face, and he can see how miserable she looks as she stares at him. Her face is dirty and streaks line her cheeks where the tears had flowed. Worse, her short black hair is scattered and blown in all directions with streaks of borax powder still visible. Adding to her disheveled look is her torn shirt, and a mixture of dirt and blood cover her shorts and legs. Completing the look was her swollen lip but it was her eyes that said it all to Richard. The sad look in her eyes told him that she was trying to hold back an ocean of tears while struggling to avoid a complete breakdown. Frankly, he had never seen her look so despondent before.

“Damn it woman, don’t look at me like that; I’m not leaving you! You’re still was the prettiest girl on the island and I enjoy teasing you way too much!” Richard said as he gives Sarah a big hug.

“My beautiful, stupid warrior,” Sarah said softly as she kissed his face.

“What, stupid?” Richard asked.

“I love you,” Sarah said as she quietly sobbed in his arms.

“Yeah, same here, kiddo,” Richard whispered as he continued to hold her. Richard knew he had to move quickly as he felt himself weakening both physically and emotionally.

“Gimme your rifle, Bill!” Richard demanded in a desperate effort to change the topic, and to avoid a final emotional meltdown in front of Sarah.

Bill hands him the rifle. “While you chase Reggie, I have to go back with these orchids and try to save who I can at the camp,” Bill said. He then looks at Sarah and said “I’ll free your man and the remaining Ebu for you as well as promised.”

“Good, I guess now is not the time for me to turn the other cheek to this idiot, huh?” Richard asked.

“No, but you’re off this island, right?” Bill asked the two.

“Yeah, I think we are finding that every paradise has some serious baggage associated with it. Sarah, I’ll join you and Rudy over at the boat in about thirty minutes. Bill, can you point me in the direction where Reggie was headed?” Richard asked.

“He is headed north to the supply boats on the beach,” Bill said. At that point, Richard hobbled from the cave in search of his prey and his uncertain destiny.

Richard quickly makes his way down the volcanic slopes but he finds that his skipping motion is slowing him down when he hits the brush line. As he nears ground level, a light grey snow begins to descend from the darkening sky above him. As Richard rubs the flakes, they

leave a series of grey streaks against his skin, and it is then, that he notices the smell of burning wood hanging heavy in the air. A large plume of smoke is rising from the ground directly in front of him. The smoke is getting thicker as a significant brush fire rages on the small island. As Richard turns to go the other direction, he spots Reggie and his two guards. They have yet to see him, and Richard plans his trap by hiding his rifle on the ground a few feet away from him.

“Hey, asshole! I’m over here!” Richard yells.

Reggie and his men turn to face Richard. Reggie sees him, but chooses instead to ignore him and he continues on his journey back to the supply boat.

Richard tries again to get his attention. “Hey asshole, remember these! You’re going to need these orchids if you want to live another day,” and Richard waves a bag of orchids in the air.

At first, Reggie doesn’t react to Richard’s gesture and he stops to debate with his men what to do with the interloper. Richard decides to make his move as he grabs one of the orchids and starts to nibble at it.

“Only six left, Reggie. How are you feeling old buddy? If you ask me, you look a little feverish. What do you have a day or two to live? Your move, asshole!”

“Come on Reggie, when is that pride of possession gonna kick in?” Richard asked himself. Finally, Reggie gives in to his paranoia about his health, and he instructs his men to go after Richard. As the guards rapidly approach, Richard pulls the rifle out of his hiding location and takes aim but as he shoots, all he hears is an audible click. He tries again and another big click. After the gun battle, Bill neglected to reload the gun and Richard searches himself in vain for ammo.

Richard looks upward at approaching guards and said, “Oh, fuck me.”

After hesitating at the sight of Richard's rifle, the guards quicken their pace to apprehend Richard, and they start firing at him.

"Come on Lord, this is not funny."

Reggie's men are rapidly pursuing him, and Richard has little choice, but to run closer to the advancing fire. As he is running, Richard is annoyed with himself.

"Sarah was right; I'm not much one for plans. Talk about stupid!" Not only did he lose the element of surprise, but his stupid dangling leg was also stopping him from making a quick escape. Yes, Sarah had it right, stupid was the operative word. The fire is growing fiercer, and the smoke is causing him to choke. There is a strong fire line advancing across the woods as far as he can see. It had been dry for a couple of weeks on the island, not uncommon for the dry season, and the brush was burning fiercely.

"How the hell did this start?" Richard wondered.

A shot strikes the tree behind him, and Richard continues his retreat in the direction of the fire line. As he moves within a few yards of the fire, he sees a line of figures with torches busily setting additional brush on fire. He can only dimly see the figures through the heavy smoke but every so often, the wind would intensify, knocking the smoke down. With a clear look, Richard couldn't believe what he was seeing. The Ebu males were deliberately setting the fires, and they were driving the fire in southerly direction toward Reggie's men. Reggie's men were turning back as the flames, fueled by the rising wind, were galloping straight at them.

Richard found himself trapped in a pocket of dry brush, and a wall of flames that was rapidly closing in about him. He could feel the heat begin to singe his skin and he could barely breathe in the superheated air, and the bitter, black smoke was blinding his eyes. The wind strengthened and the fire roared directly at him. Richard raced to escape the flames, but his limping leg catches on a large root, and he tumbled to the ground with no escape. The flames

were almost on top of him, and there was nothing to do but to lie face down in a sandy spot along the trail. Richard pointed his legs in the direction of the fire and he covered himself as much as possible with a layer of sand. Within seconds, the flames were lapping about him, and Richard held his breath for as long as he could. The roar of the fire rang in his ears, and he could feel the heat encasing his body. Richard tried to bury his head deeper into the sand, but he could smell his hair and clothing smoldering in the intense flames. He felt his skin frying in the severe heat, and for a brief moment, the lapsed Catholic envisioned himself as the proverbial soul roasting in his personal hell.

Strangely, he did not feel scared; he was too exhausted for fear.

Darkness came quickly, and the heat gave way to the cold and shortly thereafter, he felt nothing. Richard felt his body collapse from the cumulative effects of pain, exhaustion and the Percocets.

“I’m so tired; I could just end it here.”

Darkness surrounds him, and the pain lifts from his body. An eerie sense of tranquility rose from deep within, and Richard began to feel this was as good a time as any to take a long dirt nap. He was still for a few seconds thinking about Supar and his thoughts drifted to his Sarah. He recalled there one night of love making together, and he felt his entire body sigh at the memory. She had looked so sad and forlorn in the cave, as if she knew this was to be his fate. Stupid man, couldn’t he at least tell her that he loved her! At the thought of Sarah, he felt a small surge in his near lifeless body and then he recalled how Reggie had slapped Sarah, and how the force of the blow had cut her soft lip. He remembered watching a trickle of blood making its way down her chin, and his turning away, in an effort to hide his shame. Richard focused on his shame as he remembered Supar and the terrorized Ebu. He allowed his Irish-

German temper to rage at the recent happenings on the island, while channeling his anger and hatred toward Reggie. As he did, he felt a renewed purpose surge through his drained body.

“What the hell slacker pacifist said hate was a wasted emotion?” as Richard’s spirit rose, rallying his exhausted body from its well deserved sleep.

No, this final dirt nap would have to wait; her beautiful and stupid warrior would continue the fight. As if to rouse him from his lethargy, Richard felt a crushing weight descend on his chest and, in response to the pain, he willed his corpse to rise from the dirt.

The advancing fire line was blocking Reggie and his men from their escape north to the supply boats. Reggie saw the approaching flames and decided to abandon his men. Reggie tried to find a break in the fire line, and failing to do so, he ran right through the wall of flame past the Ebu hunters. As he ran through the blaze, his clothes caught fire charring his flesh and a screaming Reggie rolls to the ground in a furious effort to extinguish the flames. After a minute of rolling about the dirt, the flames are out and a relieved Reggie continues his flight.

The smoke from the fire continued to fill the trail obscuring Reggie’s vision, and he half stumbled, half ran his way through the dark haze. As he runs, Reggie’s foot strikes a soft patch of dirt along the trail and he loses his balance. As Reggie tumbles to the ground, he looks backward trying to see what he had tripped on. From the ground behind him, a large apparition rises from the dirt, clouded in a veil of smoke and dust. The dark, smoldering figure looms above him and begins to descend upon him. Reggie instinctively grabs his handgun but as the figure closes in, it first strikes Reggie across his arms causing the gun to discharge near Reggie’s head. The bullet misses Reggie’s head but the explosive noise of the discharge so near to his ears causes Reggie to lose his hearing. Reggie loses his grip on the handgun, and the gun falls

away from him, clattering along the ground. Reggie struggles to get up but the apparition is standing in wait for him, almost daring him to rise.

“Didn’t expect to see me soon huh, asshole? I told you it wasn’t over!” A cloud of dirt fills the air as Richard kicks Reggie in the face with his good leg.

“Now for a few lessons in morality 101. Rule number one, you never, ever hit a lady, got it asshole?” Richard yelled.

A stunned Reggie is lying on the ground trying to recognize the voice. As a glimmer of recognition shows in his face, he yells, “You?” as he grabs a handful of sand to throw at Richard. Richard sees what Reggie is up to and he stomps his foot down hard on Reggie’s hand, and the hand relinquishes its grip on the sand.

“Argghhh,” Reggie screams as Richard repeatedly stomps his hand into the ground.

“What a surprise, you fight dirty too!” but Reggie is not done, and in the haze, he grabs a large stone with his other hand, smashing it into Richard’s injured heel. Richard yells out in pain and, he falls in turn to the ground. As he falls, Richard’s body instinctively assumes control, and he lands squarely on Reggie’s chest with his elbow. Reggie receives the full impact of Richard’s weight, and Richard can hear the cracking of several ribs as the force of the blow knocks the wind out of Reggie.

Richard has had enough of Reggie, and he feels a surge of adrenaline flowing through his body. Next to him, Reggie is coughing while struggling in vain to regain his breath. As Richard turns to look at his fallen opponent, Reggie throws a punch that catches Richard flush on the side of his face. Richard can taste his own blood and the infuriated Richard begins to hit Reggie repeatedly with a series of overhand rights directly into Reggie’s face.

“Number two; leave my fucking leg alone, will ya!” Richard yelled. One punch after another rain from Richard’s right hand into Reggie’s face quickly transforming Reggie’s face

into an unrecognizable mask of swollen, reddened skin. Richard pauses for a moment and as he surveys his handiwork, he is disappointed at the decided lack of blood. There are no signs of a single cut on Reggie's face and this infuriates Richard even more.

“And finally, prick, don't shoot at my friends,” he yells as a few more heavy punches from Richard begin to have the desired effect. Blood pours out of Reggie's nose and Reggie's eyes start to swell and close. The repeated punches start to tear and cut Reggie's eyelids and Reggie's fine facial features disappear into a mass of swollen cut skin and blood.

“Ah, now, you're looking pretty,” Richard said as Reggie stopped struggling. Richard sees his opportunity to catch his breath, and to examine his own bloodied hand. Just as he expected, his knuckles had taken a considerable beating from the pummeling he had given Reggie. As Richard sits, he mulls over his options regarding Reggie and debates whether his bloodlust was finally satiated or if he wanted to add murder to his ongoing list of personal transgressions. It was a tough choice but his musings were interrupted by Reggie reaching for the Taser on his belt.

“Nice try old buddy,” Richard said as he rouses from his personal reflections to smack the Taser away from Reggie's hand. The Taser lands a few feet away from the two, and Richard wearily gets up to retrieve it. Richard returns to Reggie, looking to see if there is any fight left in him.

“You are a pain in the ass. Damn, now where the hell is the handgun? As Richard looks at Reggie, he sees the sand kick up directly in front of him. A split second later, he hears the gun shot, and as Richard turns, he can see one of the remaining guards taking aim at him.

“Shit, these Fortune 1000 guys really are dedicated,” Richard said as he quickly makes his escape. Behind him, Reggie is yelling at the guard not to shoot in fear that the guard will shoot him in the confusion and smoke.

Richard grabs the Taser and staggers away. The guard continues after Richard, and is just a few dozen yards from him. Richard can't escape him, and looks to see where he can make a final stand in hopes of getting a good shot at him. As he turns to face the guard, the guard sees Richard taking aim with the Taser and the guard runs to take cover. The guard ducks behind a large palm tree, but his face immediately starts to contort as if in pain. The guard's momentum ceases, his body caught in a moment of indecision, and he slowly collapses to his knees while dropping his rifle. As the guard falls to the ground, Richard sees a series of diminutive figures pouncing on their fallen victim with their short spears as they repeatedly slice into the guard's rib cage. The guard falls flat to the ground and the Ebu continue their ferocious assault. Richard wanted to go for the guard's rifle, but the viciousness of the Ebu attack persuades him to put some distance between the Ebu and himself.

There is little time to be indecisive because Richard can hear Reggie approaching. Reggie is stumbling about in a frantic effort to escape, and he is having difficulty seeing through the smoke with his swollen eyes. Worse, Reggie has found his handgun, and Richard has to decide on his next course of action.

"Think Richard!" Richard yells as he drags his leg behind him and slowly moves ahead of Reggie looking for something that he could use to his advantage. "Come on God, some inspiration please?" Richard said as he curiously noted his prayer to a personal God. "Huh, I guess there are no atheists in a foxhole."

"Damn it man, focus will ya? The Ebu had to be driving the fire for a reason." Primitive hunters would use fire to scare herds of panicked animals over cliffs or into other natural obstacles. There were no cliffs in the immediate vicinity; it had to be something else. Richard continues to frantically look, and Reggie follows slowly from behind.

"Where were they driving us to?"

Richard continues to search along the trail and on the ground ahead, he finds the obstacle. A large smoldering pile of vegetation, fifteen feet across, lies in the middle of the trail between two stands of dense trees. Richard cautiously makes his way over to the pile, kneels, and carefully peers below the vegetation.

“Yes, nice work boys,” as he examines the matt of vegetation. As he looked below, he noticed the odor of death that lingered near the pile. Further, down the trail, he can hear the whimpering Reggie following closely behind him. It was a minor miracle that in all of the ongoing confusion, none of the human combatants had stumbled into this pile before. Richard carefully places the bag of orchids in middle of the vegetation, and finds a good hiding position on the side of the trail.

Reggie’s eyes are swollen shut and he is continually rubbing them as he struggles to see where to go next. He starts to panic as the ringing in his ears subsides and the murmuring and clicking noises of the approaching Ebu hunting party becomes omnipresent.

“Bill, I need you help!” Reggie yells.

There is no answer and a desperate Reggie screams as he tears at one of his swollen eyelids in an effort to see. He manages to puncture the swollen lid and a flow of blood washed over his face. He wipes the blood away and by holding the eyelid open, he is finally able to see. As he turns, he spots the orchids lying in the middle of the path. Reggie stops and he waits a few moments, all the time watching, continuing to hold his eye open. As Reggie pauses, he can hear the Ebu following behind him with a gentle rustling noise through the brush, their tiny legs moving at furious pace to keep up with the retreating giant.

Reggie grabs a large stick, and while sprawled along the ground starts to poke at the orchid bag on top of the vegetation. Richard realizes that Reggie is not that stupid, having

recognized the Ebu trap. Worse, with Reggie sprawled along the ground Richard can't get a good shot off with the Taser.

“Hey asshole, I'm over here!” Richard said.

A startled Reggie turns around and he sees Richard taking aim at him with the Taser. Richard fires, but Reggie is too quick, and he moves to his left to avoid the Taser bullet. Reggie starts to take aim at Richard, but the sudden onset of loud murmuring sounds coming from behind distracts him.

Richard can also hear the sounds and as he turns the Ebu charge him with their spears thrust forward. Richard knows the Taser can only take out one of the Ebu and he grabs a large branch broken branch from the ground to parry their blows. Richard steadies his aim at the Ebu readying himself for the attack but the hunters rush past him without a second look. They clearly wanted Reggie and a measure of revenge, they were all so human.

Reggie turns around, and he can see three diminutive figures cautiously making their way along the path. As he looks closer, Reggie can see the Ebu hunting party is almost upon him. For a moment Reggie stares into the eyes of Grey, and the eyes of the old male burn brightly back at him. Reggie fires at the Ebu but as quickly as they appeared, the Ebu disappear once again into the surrounding jungle. The only remaining trace of their continued presence is their constant murmuring that grows louder with each advancing step in Reggie's direction.

Richard decides to keep the pressure on Reggie. “Hey asshole, looks like the boys want to play! There is one thing I know about the Ebu, they do hold a grudge. They'll take good care of you like you did with Supar and Karl.”

“Karl? Karl is dead,” Reggie thought to himself. “Isn't he?”

Reggie looks back at Richard and he realizes that his enemies have him surrounded. As he steps back, Reggie sees enemies, smoke, or an inhospitable jungle threatening to overtake

him. In the darkness of his despair, he finds a light guiding his way and as he focuses on the light, a friendly face gazes down upon him. He looks upward and finds Karl looking down at him. As the smoke encircles Reggie's vision, a smiling Karl extends a hand to him as if to lift Reggie from his worldly woes. At first, the specter frightens Reggie but the smiling Karl seeks to calm and reassure him.

"Karl, this is impossible, you are dead. I saw you die," Reggie said.

"No Reggie, we all can live forever if we accept Jesus Christ as our savior. It is never too late, Reggie. Repent now and your soul, too, can be saved. Reggie, now get on your knees and accept Christ as your savior. You have no more time on this Earth; make your peace with God," the specter demanded.

Reggie hesitates.

"Now Reggie, before it is too late!"

"Yes Karl, I will do what you, I will accept Jesus Christ," Reggie said.

Richard watches as Reggie's face becomes more animated and then to Richard's surprise, Reggie begins talking to himself.

"Now who the hell is that asshole talking to?" Richard wondered.

As the smoke clears for a moment, he sees Flo standing near Reggie. Flo has a spear in her hands that she menacingly waves at Reggie but Reggie appears oblivious to her aggressive gestures. He is on his knees, smiling at her while talking incoherently. Flo sees he is no longer a threat and she puts the spear to her side content to watch Reggie go about his strange theatrics.

The wind abruptly shifts and burning embers begin to rain down upon the combatants, as the murmuring from the Ebu grows louder. Reggie's face turns from complete panic to a peaceful look of resignation, and in a strange gesture, Reggie begins to look upward into the sky

as if he was in an act of silent repentance. Reggie goes down on his knees and clasps his hands firmly as if in a solemn prayer. He blindly staggers forward and as he descends to the ground, his knees come to rest upon the branches of the trap. For a few seconds the branches continue to support him, and as Reggie held open his good eye, he found himself within easy reach of the orchids.

“Reggie don’t do it!” Karl exclaimed.

A look of victory flushes over Reggie’s face and in one swift movement, he unclasps his hands and he grabs the orchids with his right hand. As his weight shifts there is a loud snapping noise and Reggie falls forward, seemingly swallowed into the ground whole, his gun tumbling harmlessly away from him.

Richard sees Reggie’s plunge into the vegetation, and a series of hellish screams accompany the fall. The cries of a man in such horrible pain sicken Richard; they sound more like the wailing of an animal rather than the cries of a person. Reggie’s wailing convinces Richard to use caution in his approach to the trap. Richard grabs the handgun from the ground, and he peers down into a small pit previously concealed by the smoldering vegetation. Flo is intently looking into the pit and she doesn’t move as Richard approaches.

Reggie fell into a large Ebu rattrap, and he is screaming in agony from his fall. Peering into the pit Richard winces at the sight, and he can see Reggie is lying face down in the pit. Next to Reggie’s head is a large island rat that had fallen into the shallow pit several days before, and the decaying rat now had the misfortune of having to share his final resting place with Reggie.

In the dim light of the pit, Richard sees several large bones protruding from large gaping holes in Reggie’s body. Slowly, Richard’s eyes grow accustomed to the dim light and he can see a series of six large sharpened wooden stakes, each several feet tall, facing upward to the sky from the bottom of the pit. What he thought were bones were actually the ends of the sharpened

stakes and Reggie's body is twitching madly like a deranged marionette, his limbs flailing about in a series of bizarre jerky motions, as he lies impaled on three of the wooden stakes. The movements are quite unlike the normal fluid motions of a human being. The first stake lodges between his legs and has penetrated deep into his groin. The sharpened tip has penetrated through Reggie's body and the bloody point is visible by his buttock. The second stake pierced Reggie's hip and the third has entered Reggie's chest just to the left of his heart. Deep dark blood pours from the wounds creating small puddles at the bottom of the pit. Reggie's body stops its frenzied struggling, and his breathing becomes slow and labored. The high-pitched screams start to quiet down, but their echoes remain fresh in Richard's head. After a few moments, Richard hears muttering, almost like whispered prayers coming from the pit.

"Help, me, help..." and Richard shakes his head as a combination of soot and red embers continue their rain from the sky blackened sky and fall upon the combatants.

Both Richard and Flo look into the pit for a few minutes as they listened to the bawling coming from below. As if she had heard enough, Flo looks up at Richard. She had a befuddled look on her face that seemed to ask Richard to somehow make sense of this for her. For Richard, there was no logic to this carnage and all Richard could do was to shake his head at the wreckage in the pit. Flo imitated Richard's headshake and she promptly left his side for the safety of the jungle.

Richard doesn't know how to react as he looks at the impaled body of Reggie; feeling victorious seems oddly out of place. Instead as he sits down, Richard feels a sudden rage taking control of his body, and he finds himself angrily shouting at Reggie. "Reggie, you stupid bastard, this is what arrogance without boundaries gets you, and boy are you sadly mistaken if you are looking for spiritual guidance now."

There is no response except for some whimpering.

“Now Reggie, I ask you this: was it worth it, was it really worth it? I don’t feel sorry for you; I feel nothing for you, so lie in your death bed you arrogant fuck, I hope it’s an uncomfortable one!” Richard shouted.

The Ebu hunter band is slowly approaching the pit with Grey at the lead. Grey sees Richard, and there is a look of recognition in the old male’s face. Grey motions to Richard to leave and Richard quickly decides it is best to leave the pit and its catch to the Ebu warriors.

As he is leaving, Reggie’s weak voice can be heard coming from the pit, “Help me, shoot me. For the love of God kill me.”

Richard considers for a brief second the vicarious thrill of using his foot to stomp Reggie’s prostrate body further down onto the sharpened stakes. However, as he listens to the whimpering cries emanating from the pit, a wave of compassion overtakes him, and Richard debates whether to put Reggie out of his sorry misery. As the conflicting emotions wage battle over him, Richard debates and hesitates to act on either impulse.

“Fuck you Reggie, not for nothing, but I’ve acquired a new appreciation for life, even for your sorry-assed life. I’ve got to go, but I leave you in good hands. Don’t worry; I’m sure the Ebu will give you the same consideration you gave their people. See you in hell, old buddy,” Richard said. As Richard hobbles away, he turns back to look, and he can see the Ebu party hurriedly surrounding their prized catch in the pit.

At three feet tall, the Ebu are tiny compared to their Goliath-sized catch. Reggie turns his head sideways to look up at his tormentors, but he is barely able to discern the shapes of the Ebu hunters. In the light of the flames and the smoke, he can only see the outline of small, reddened, goblin-like figures jumping up and down about the pit as they perform a bizarre ritualistic dance. The murmuring grows louder as large spear points descend into the pit, thrusting deep into Reggie’s suspended body. Grey is the first to strike, plunging his lance deep into Reggie’s back

and deep red blood pours from the wound. The remaining Ebu spears make short work of Reggie as they repeatedly strike his torso and head. After he is dead, they begin the process of slaughtering and quartering the carcass among the small band.

As Richard walks away, he hears Reggie shrieking in the distance, but he chooses not to look back. The shrieking slowly subsides, replaced by the repeated thuds of wood spear points as they pierce the flesh of their victim. Richard walks faster as if he could distance himself from the violence. Richard doesn't like the dull pain he is feeling inside, and he begins to have serious doubts about the man he was witness to this day.

Exodus

Richard laboriously makes his way to the boat dragging his leg behind him for the better part of a mile. As he walked, he looked at the skin on the back of his arms and legs and saw that the hairs on his reddened skin had melted into innumerable small, twisted knots. Looking down, he saw that his cotton shirt and shorts appeared to be smoldering but at least, they were mostly intact. For once in his life, Richard was thankful for not having his yellow polyester shorts on. As he continued his personal inventory, he noticed that a few patches of his skin appeared to be suffering from severe sunburn, though a few first-degree burns were the least of his problems.

When he arrived at the mooring location for their boat, Richard finds neither the boat nor any sign of Rudy or Sarah. “Damn, did they take off without me or did something happen to them?” A sinking feeling overtakes a flustered Richard, and he debates his next course of action.

“Richard, over here, over here!” Sarah said in a whispered hallucinogenic voice, but he can’t see her. Finally, he spots a bush moving along the shoreline, and behind the bush, he sees two pairs of eyes peering at him. It is Sarah and Rudy and they slowly emerge from their vegetative cover.

“Boss, the damn pirates chased us again,” Rudy said in a strained shaky voice. Rudy’s eyes are red and Richard can only speculate that Sarah must have told Rudy about Supar’s demise.

“Damn it! Where the hell is our boat?” Richard asked.

“Pirates must have taken it. They steal everything. They must have it with their boat,” Rudy replied.

“Sarah, are you okay?” Richard asked.

Sarah nods her head in the affirmative. “Richard you look awful, how are you?” Sarah said as she runs to him. Richard looked battered and bruised from his ordeal, while his skin had turned a deep red from his recent immolation.

“I’m okay as long as the Percocets hold on. I’m really having a rough day in the office, dear,” Richard said as he held her tightly despite the pain from his burnt skin.

As he held Sarah, Richard looked about trying to catch his breath while getting his bearings. “Rudy, what the hell is it with these pirates? You would think we ran over their mother or something. It’s not like we have anything of value for these guys,” Richard said.

Rudy clears his throat and he is still slightly shaking. “Sukarno didn’t like Supar because he thought Supar cheat him all the time. Plus, Supar stopped a lot of killing so Sukarno never trusted him, thought him weak. With my brother dead, he only has us to go after. Supar said it was a thief’s distrust of a thief,” Rudy said as he fought back the tears.

Richard did not quite get everything Rudy said, but he got the basic idea. He looked at Rudy and he could see the pain in his face, but there was no time now to mourn the dead. Richard had to figure out where the pirates would dock their boat. Their speedboat was too large to move off the beach by hand, so they needed to tie it up in a cove with some deeper water. There had to be one area on the beach that was deep enough for both boats.

Richard knows the beachfront of the island like a realtor due to his daily runs. “Hey, I’ve got an idea guys, there is a small cove they could possibly dock both boats in,” as he leads Sarah and Rudy in an easterly direction along the beach.

“Hey, stop strolling along the beach and walk in the water so they can’t track us that easily,” Richard barks.

As they move to the ocean’s edge Sarah asked, “What happened to Reggie?”

Richard actually chuckles to himself. “Unfortunately, corporate America has lost one of its giants to a small group of enterprising Hobbits. Kind of a hostile takeover you might say. I can assure you he won’t be bothering us anymore,” Richard said.

Sarah finds Richard’s humor somewhat strained and figured it was the medication talking. She declines to press him for further details of his ordeal even though Richard’s smoldering clothes was piquing her interest.

As they walk along the ocean’s edge, Richard was tiring of being a human candle and without warning; he takes a full dive into the water. Within a few seconds, the cool saltwater began stinging his blistered skin and he quickly resurfaced. Taking her cue from Richard, Sarah took a moment to bend down to the water and she gently washed Supar’s dried blood from her hands. Rudy looked away but Richard watched as the blood from Sarah’s hands briefly turned the salty water a reddish hue. As Sarah stood up, the sun breaks through the leaden grayness of the clouds and the effervescent sea foam simultaneously erupts into a million miniature rainbows. As the waters swelled about her calves, the red hue vanishes into the vastness of the ocean, and they walk away without saying a word.

They go a quarter mile, walking and stumbling along the surf in an effort to obscure their footprints. In the distance, they hear more gunfire, but they press on without hesitation. Richard is dragging his leg behind him, doing his best to keep a good pace for the team. As they turn a bend on the beach, they spot the old wooden boat perched alongside the pirate’s speedboat. The two boats float in an impromptu mooring the pirates had created on the beach, and they are gently bobbing in the water side by side. Richard looks carefully, but there doesn’t appear to be

a guard near the boats. He motions to his two companions to remain silent, and they cautiously approach the boats.

To get to the boats, they have to wade in waist deep water. Richard sees that the speedboat is stuck in a sandbar and he scrambles aboard the boat, frantically searching for a way to start the engine. He moves to the small pilothouse, but without a key, he cannot get the motor started. Rudy makes his way to his brother's boat and climbs aboard. Sarah is bringing up the rear and is slowly climbing onto the speedboat behind Richard.

"Rudy, there's no key here, nor do I have time to hot wire this damn boat," Richard said.

Richard is so intent with the task at hand he is oblivious to the difficulties the diminutive Sarah is having in getting onboard the boat. After a minute of struggling, Sarah is still precariously hanging from the side of boat with one leg just barely making it over the top rail. Sarah has had enough of struggling and she yells to Richard, "Hey mister, a little help over here, please!" At that moment, a young pirate is making his way up the stairs from the galley of the boat, and he sees the small brunette dangling off the side. The pirate is a tall, slightly built youth who smiles with delight at the struggling woman and he goes over to give her a hand. The sudden appearance of the young man startles Sarah, but she calmly smiles back at him as he lifts her by the waist on to the deck of the boat. The young pirate is exchanging a goofy smile with Sarah as he admires her figure through her soaking wet clothes.

A smiling Sarah says, "Why, thank you sir, terima kasih! Oh, Richard dear, we have company."

A startled Richard hears the comment, turns around, and is surprised to find the young pirate on the deck staring intently at a soaking wet Sarah.

"I guess it does pay to be the only girl on a tropical island!" Richard shouts to Sarah. As the pirate youth turns around to face the source of the voice, he finds a handgun aimed squarely

at his forehead. The young man's smile disappears from his face, and without hesitation, he put his hands up. After the fight with Reggie, an exhausted Richard struggles to keep his emotions in check, and he has to stop himself from executing the young man on the spot.

Sarah sees the anguished look on Richard's face and yells, "Richard, what is the matter? Don't do it, he's just a kid!"

She was right; he could literally count the pimples on the kid's sweaty face. With Sarah's words, Richard regains his composure and points to the ignition, while asking for the boat's key repeatedly. Rudy yells "Kunci, kunci," to the young pirate. The young pirate shakes his head no.

Richard quickly frisks him and finds nothing but a cigarette lighter in the teen's pocket. "I'll take that young man, you shouldn't be smoking anyway. Sorry, but we don't require your presence here anymore, it's your turn for a swim," and Richard points to the water with the gun. The young pirate nods in agreement, and without further prodding he jumps in and swims frantically to the beach. When he reaches the beach, the teen scrambles into the jungle and out of view.

"Nice young man. Think that will work with the rest of their crew?" Richard asked.

"I doubt it Richard! Are you okay? You don't look quite right, you had a crazed look in your eyes with that boy," Sarah said.

"I'll be fine if can get this damn boat going and get off this god forsaken hellhole," Richard said.

Rudy fires up the ancient engine and frees the old boat from the sand. A cloud of thick black diesel exhaust encircles the boat making its way into the sky and Rudy is yelling for the two to get onboard.

Seeing the pungent smoke, several pirates positioned along the beach begin shouting to one another as they frantically run to the moored boats.

“Richard they’re coming! Let’s just go!” Sarah yelled.

“We can’t Sarah. They got enough men to free their boat from the sand, and they’ll catch up to us in ten minutes. To be honest with you, I don’t think they are going to give us the option of a refreshing ocean swim this time. I’ve got to disable this speedboat before we take off! Damn it, they have the fucking engine compartment locked!”

“Rudy, help me free this fucking boat,” Richard said. Richard and Rudy both jump into the water and struggle to move the boat, but they can’t set it free from the sand.

Rudy yells, “Boss, maybe we can free it with my boat?”

“Rudy, that engine is barely able to get out its own way,” Richard said.

A few gunshots originate from the beach and Sarah gives a small startled cry. Richards yells, “Rudy, take Sarah and get on your boat. If I could just cut the fuel lines on this damn boat we’d be out of here. Here take my gun!”

“Sarah, get aboard Rudy’s boat,” Richard said as he climbed aboard the speedboat.

“Not without you!” Sarah yelled.

“Sarah, damn it, don’t start with me now!” Richard said and as he brusquely picks Sarah up and drops her into Rudy’s boat.

A cacophony of AK47 and rifle fire fills the ocean air and Richard turns to face the beach while instinctively shielding Sarah from the onslaught. As Richard looks toward the beach, an angry cloud of red erupts on his shoulder. The bullet hits him squarely on his left side and the impact of the bullet causes him to stagger slightly backwards. A shocked Richard looks down at his shoulder and blood begins to flow from the wound.

“Richard!” Sarah screams.

Richard is staggering and fighting to remain conscious. He feels himself getting light-headed and he is starting to float away. Pain is screaming through his body, and he tightens his abominable muscles in effort to increase his blood pressure.

“Richard, get aboard damn you!” Sarah screams.

Richard hears Sarah cries, and he fights to regain control of his body. A few seconds later, the adrenaline kicks in, and Richard is back on the beach with Sarah. He gently feels his shoulder and sees that the flow of blood is a trickle and not a torrent. As he feels along his back, he is relieved not to find a large exit wound.

“That fucking hurts,” Richard yells while looking down at his wound. He then turned to Sarah while yelling, “They’ll be on top of us in few minutes, Sarah. You go with Rudy, while I work on their boat. Don’t worry, I’ll get it started, I’ll catch up with you in Maumere. Rudy get Sarah back and use the damn gun, will you! You know: bang, bang!”

Rudy fires a few errant shots in the general direction of the approaching pirates. Richard shakes his head at Rudy’s lame effort but the return of fire is enough to give the advancing pirates pause.

“Nice work Rudy, now next time try aiming at something like they do.”

“Boss, I can’t shoot and handle the girl too.”

Rudy had a good point. Sarah is an uncontrollable rage crying and sobbing, while she tries to get back onboard the speedboat. Rudy holds her back but he is loosing his grip on her. She breaks free and runs to Richard, holding him in her arms at the edge of the two boats.

“Richard, don’t leave me!” Sarah said somehow sensing she would not see him again.

“I won’t dear,” he said as he smiled at her and climbed aboard the old boat. Then in a moment of pure inspiration, he fashions a plan from sheer desperation.

“Rudy keep shooting will you, more bang, bang, okay?” Richard yells and Rudy continues to fire in the direction of the beach.

Richard is holding the hysterical Sarah in his arms, taking care to shield her from the beach as he whispers in her ear. “Sarah, you decide whether or not to tell our story, nobody else! I trust you alone to do the right thing. You live for the two of us!”

Sarah pulls slightly away from Richard yelling, “Are you freaking nuts? What are you talking about? Richard Staller, you leave with me on this boat right now, damn you!”

“Now is the only time we have left,” Richard said as he gave her a parting kiss.

He abruptly pushes her away while continuing to smile at her and Sarah gives him a confused look as her body starts to tremble. A strange hissing sound emanates from Richard’s hand as Sarah faces begins to shudder, and her body starts to slowly collapse. Richard steps away from Sarah with the Taser in his hand.

“I’m sorry dear; one of us has to make it out of here alive,” he said as he allows her to slide gently to the deck of the boat. Sarah is lying on the deck convulsing, and Richard places the memory chip and jaw fragment into her pants pocket.

“Take good care of these for me!” he said as he bends over, and kisses her on the head. “I’m not leaving you girl... I love you Sarah, I guess I always did,” he said with a strange look of contentment. Richard’s moment with Sarah is interrupted as a couple of bullets whiz by his head and he angrily looks Rudy’s way.

“For Christ’s sake Rudy, would it be too much trouble for you to shoot back at the bad guys?”

“That’s a good idea Boss, but I got no bullets.”

“Jeez, thanks for the update!” Richard exclaims as he jumps back to the speedboat.

“Rudy, take her out of her now and swear to me you won’t return, or I’ll leave you here instead!”

“You no worry, Majikan. We are out of here!” Rudy said,

“Rudy, you take good care of my Sarah, or I’ll kick your ass.” Richard yells.

Rudy gets the boat underway, and Richard starts to exchange fire with the advancing pirates. As Richard waves Rudy on, another bullet hits him in the arm, and Richard slowly slumps back into the speedboat. The old boat slowly pulls from the beach, and Rudy concentrates on making the boat move as fast as possible. Without looking, he can still hear the carnage echoing on the small beach behind him. In five minutes, Rudy gets out a few hundred yards, and he turns backwards to see a thick black smoke billowing from the speedboat. The speedboat is not moving, and a few seconds later, a large fireball erupts from its hull. In the distance, gunfire continues to reverberate across the beach as a series of explosions thunder through the tropical air. Rudy glances down at the deck and finds Sarah still convulsing as she lies curled on her side.

A half-hour out to sea, Sarah is recovering her muscle control and she begins screaming at Rudy, “Where is Richard?” Realizing that Richard is not onboard the boat, she screams at Rudy to return to the island to attempt a rescue.

Rudy refuses to turn back. “We both lose a lot. I don’t want to lose more by going back. Majikan made me promise not to go back and me not go back,” Rudy said. Rudy’s broken English said it all, and Sarah was too weak to fight him. She could barely move, and she sat on the deck holding her head in her hands. As she looked down she could see Richard’s fresh blood on her torn shirt, and she started to retch. Dry heaves wracked her body for several minutes and after her convulsing stopped, she lied on the deck quietly sobbing to herself. When she regained her strength, she confronted Rudy once again and reined a series of punches upon his chest while crying for him to return to the island. He quietly ignored her cries while steering the boat away from the island and into the waters of the open ocean.

A week after her return to Maumere, Sarah finds herself flying back to the states, alone and frustrated. She hated to leave Flores without Richard but without money and with a Category 4 typhoon bearing down on Flores Sarah had little recourse. Sarah had spoken to the authorities about the pirates, but they had no desire to go back to her island nightmare. Part of the problem was that they didn't know which island to go to plus the approaching storm was occupying much of their attention. The other problem was a general reluctance on their part to get involved with her and her bizarre story. In fact, the authorities were not buying Sarah's tourist story, and they had their own suspicions regarding the true nature of her serendipitous trip.

The head authority is a small native man in uniform with eyes that continually stare at Sarah. He kept asking how two Americans on a vacation trip to Bali end up on a mysterious island in the Flores Sea. "You're not telling me everything," the official said. "Unless you tell me the entire story, I can't help you, and I can't help your friend Richard either."

Sarah knows that she dare not share the truth with strangers. They have their suspicions too, and begin to interrogate Sarah on a regular basis. After a while, Sarah begins to suspect that many of the local authorities maybe on the payroll of the pirates.

The U.S. Embassy at Jakarta was not exactly convinced with her story either, and they have their own suspicions as well. Phone conversations with the cold bureaucrats at the embassy were going nowhere, except to elicit more questions from the civil servants. Sarah's story was always the same: they were two American tourists enjoying a holiday. Being biologists, they were avid nature lovers, and they wanted to explore some of the more exotic islands of Indonesia. She had been to Flores before, and wanted to take share that experience with Richard. The conversation would then continue to her mysterious island with the pirates, and a red flag would be raised to anybody paying attention. The authorities immediately thought they were the

victims of a bad drug deal, or perhaps the pirates caught the pair smuggling. To the authorities, the details and motivations in Sarah's story just did not add up.

Sarah soon has another, much bigger problem. After their arrival in Maumere, Rudy disappeared, and she cannot find a trace of him anywhere. Sarah figured that Supar's affiliation with the pirates was an uncomfortable situation that Rudy did not want to address with the authorities. Without Rudy, she has no connection to her island, and she goes about her rescue mission in Flores alone.

Sarah stays around as long as she can with no money or resources, and she can do little more than wait. She called home, but her mother only had a few hundred dollars to spare. She continued to look for Rudy with little success as she waited for Richard to return to Maumere. She wanted to charter a boat to go back to the island, but she has neither the money for a charter nor the exact coordinates of the island. Sarah spends her days in the hotel on the phone pleading for help, or she wanders the marketplace hoping that one day Richard will arrive with one of the local fishing boats. Sarah calls and tells her sister a sanitized version of her story but instead of sympathy, her sister coldly instructs her to come home.

What was Richard's fate? He was still very much alive when Sarah last saw him. She was out for a while as she was convulsing on the boat, and she was drawing a blank regarding the entire episode on the beach. She had been unconscious for a number of minutes, and the memory loss was a common side effect from a Taser. Yet after repeated questioning on the trip back, Rudy kept insisting that he saw Richard die.

Oh, there was one more thing! Rudy told her about Richard kissing her goodbye and saying that he loved her. Sarah lost all control at that point, bawling like a baby on the return trip. She was in mourning, yet she did not want to give up on the slim hope that somehow Richard had managed to stay alive.

As she undressed the first night in the hotel, she was stunned to find in her pocket the jaw fragment and the memory chip. She didn't recall Richard giving her the last two remaining artifacts of their expedition. She realized she had missed their last moments together, and the tears returned. She was mad at Richard for depriving her of those last moments together, and leaving her alone in the world once again.

Sarah began to hate Maumere. The bustling port and the routine of everyday life held few reassurances for her. As Sarah walked about in her grey nether world, the sunny weather of Flores seemed to mock her. During the day, she walked like a specter among the living, her essence devoid of all emotion and joy. Her emotional emptiness wasn't a surprise to her; after all, what did she have left in her life other than survivor's guilt? In the course of the past couple of months, what remained of her old life was unceremoniously discarded and vanquished to a distant memory. A maverick joker named Richard Staller had helped her breakaway from her tedium and loneliness, only to abandon her in her time of greatest need, a need that she was only now beginning to recognize. Something new was going to be created from the ruins of her former life, and Sarah wasn't sure if she was going to like this bright new future. Her only certainty was that she was going about her new life alone, once again.

Finally, Sarah reconciled herself to having lost everything she held dear in the world. She had lost her Richard, her one friend in the world and, perhaps, her last chance at true love and then she thought of Flo and the loss of her second friend. As the days rolled by, the pain of Richard's loss was less sharp but, in its place, she now had a dull ache that occupied every moment of her existence. She would often recall the stupid jokes he would make and then she remembered how ridiculous he looked making breakfast for them that morning, and the laughter would quickly turn to more tears. Sarah missed his jokes more than she ever could have imagined, and she would have paid dearly to hear his voice just once more.

Nighttime was much worse for Sarah. She had reoccurring dreams of Richard coming back to her; sometimes being in the room with her, sometimes making love to her. The dreams felt so real and Richard felt so alive, so immediate to her. When she awoke, she realized she was still alone, and that the dreams were just a bitter trick of her wistful mind. Worse, the nightmare about the return to the island came back to haunt her, but instead of Sarah, it was her Richard that was being torn apart. Sarah hated the night, and most of all, she hated the stupid, empty promises of her dreams. As for the nightmares, she had learned to live with them a long time ago and at least they were a fitting complement to her despair.

The only thing that kept Sarah going was the future, the future that she held closely in her pocket; the fresh jaw fragment with the clean DNA. Along side the fragment, was the flash memory chip with a ten-second video clip of the Ebu. She tried in vain to remember if there was glimpse of Flo on that video snippet. It would tell an amazing story that is if she ever decided to tell it.

Sarah was angry with herself for making the mistake all people do, assuming that her special time on Flores was going to last forever. She always too busy doing and never really living the moments of her life. She had assumed those moments spent with Flo and, most of all, her time with Richard, would somehow last forever. Instead, they were part of her past in the proverbial blink of an eye, and she never saw the blink coming. Damn, she thought she was smarter than that but wasn't that her original mistake? This had nothing to do with her inherent intelligence or wisdom, but had everything to do with love and trusting love.

Her only memory of the gun battle with the pirates was Richard's stupid last words that keep echoing through her head. "Sarah, you decide whether or not to tell our story, nobody else! I trust you alone to do the right thing. You live for the two of us!"

Sarah thought about Richard's last heroic, almost idiotic words about 'I trust you alone to do the right thing'. Who the hell gives a small speech while under gun fire? Then it came to her, that Richard at that very moment had accepted his fate, and that he trusted her completely with his legacy. She felt ashamed, because much to her dismay, she never shared his trust. She had wasted too much time and energy fearing that Richard would somehow, someday, hurt her. She never considered this before because he never said 'I love you', but strangely Richard had always been the romantic, not her.

After all was lost Sarah decided to return home. She caught one of the last planes out from the besieged island as the approaching typhoon pushed ever closer. Only, where was home? Somehow, she felt like she was leaving a piece of her home behind her. As she looked back at the island of Flores from inside the small prop plane, the skies were turning a dark grey-green and she felt a small vindication that at last the foul weather was finally matching her bitter mood. She felt small and spiteful as she secretly wished the storm would wash away all traces of Flores and her recent misadventures.

After a day of traveling and catching connections, the jet approached Los Angeles and Sarah gave a sigh that shuddered through her entire body. She was almost positive that the elderly woman seated next to her had heard and felt the sigh, too!

"That's all right dear, I feel the same way you do about flying," the old woman said. Sarah nodded a polite yes in her elderly companion's direction, and then her mind raced back to another time and place.

Physically and emotionally spent, Sarah came to a final decision that only truly weary could make. "Okay Richard, I will make this choice for the two of us!" she said silently to herself. "The world will know you and Flo like I did. Your story is well worth telling, and then I'm going back to find out what happened to you my love."

“I owe that much to the two of you,” she said in silent vow to herself. For one small moment, she touched her missing companions once again, and as Sarah fought back the tears, she finally found her madartha - her purpose in life.

Epilogue: Beginnings

Half a world away the surviving members of the Ebu tribe were making their way up the volcanic mountain, moving quietly to their most remote and secure caves. A small female is along side the males leading the rest of the troop along the steep path. It is Flo, and she is yards ahead of the other females as she assumes a dominant position with the males of the troop. As she walked, a young infant suckled at her breast as she held it closely in her arms. They continued to move forward not really knowing where they had come from, or where they were going. Like every other sentient creature that has come before them, they were moving toward an uncertain tomorrow, but it was always with the promise of a better day than today.

Sarah practically ran from the baggage claim area and headed for the taxicab stand at the airport. She decided to take a moment to rest and visit with her older sister, who lived in LA. As she made her way to the cab stand, a wave of frenzied people hurriedly moved by her. She tried to make her way through the crowd, but the flow of the crowd was moving in direct opposition to her. As the crowd swelled in size, she awkwardly sidestepped numerous people that were rushing to get by her.

As the multitude suddenly parted, she caught a glimpse of him, if just for a second. He went right by her, but Sarah was sure it was Richard. Sarah turned around, and was moving with the crowd, but he was moving too fast for her. Damn him, he was always moving too fast for her. Was it actually him? Sarah strained to get a better look, but she could not see him through the crowd of people. She yelled “Richard!”, but there was no response from the throng. Sarah spotted an opening, and she stepped down from the curb into the street to get a better look into the crowd ahead.

Witnesses said they saw a young woman step from the crowd into the street, and almost directly in front of the oncoming taxi. There was a screeching of the brakes, and then they heard the sickening thud. She apparently did not see the oncoming taxi. The taxi hit her on her side, and she collapsed on the street hitting her head against the roadway. When the ambulance arrived at the airport, paramedics were already on the scene administering to her. She was alive, but unconscious.

The doctors did not know what to make of their patient. She had no immediate kin that they could reach, and in her unconscious condition, they had to make all medical decisions for her. Two doctors are at her bedside reviewing her charts. The resident begins to update the specialist on the status of their latest trauma patient.

“This is Sarah Levine, young woman, 28 years old, and an associate professor. She’s an auto accident victim with a fractured skull; linear fracture, with an epidural hematoma. We did surgery on her yesterday to remove some small blood clots, and her vital signs remain good. However, she has a nasty fever with a temperature near 104 degrees so we have an IV with antibiotics going. Her white blood count is elevated but blood tests and cultures so far have yet

to identify the source of the infection. We don't believe the infection is from the surgery but we can't be sure. Frankly, she's lucky that the taxi wasn't moving too fast, otherwise the skull fracture could have been much more severe," the resident said.

"Has she regained consciousness yet?" the doctor asked.

"No, she's very feverish and she goes in and out. She keeps babbling about a Richard, but she gives no last name. I don't think it's her husband since she doesn't have a wedding ring nor do I see a tan line on her finger, so I'm surmising it's a boy friend. She also keeps muttering about an "Abu", sounds like a type of people. She must have been traveling a lot, maybe she's a hiker. She is in great physical shape and look at that tan," the resident said.

The doctor walks over to the bed and checks the patient's pulse. As he holds her arm, he examines her skin, and he notices the numerous markings.

"Good pulse. Curious, the skin on her hands and feet is a bit beat up like she was backpacking or something. There are tons of insect bites on her. I think you are right about the hiker business," the doctor said.

"Actually, her tickets and passport were stamped with Bali, Indonesia," said the resident. "I'm trying to check with the authorities there, but so far they have nothing on her other than her staying there for a few weeks. I checked with the US Embassy, and they said something about her being a bit of a crank, but I didn't get any details."

"Well, you're right about one thing, she wasn't at a vacation resort for a few weeks," the doctor said. "I mean look at that haircut, what's that all about? Anyway, you look at it, she certainly has had a rough go of it recently and she might have even picked up an exotic tropical disease or two. Hopefully, she will come out of it soon, and she is relatively healthy. When she comes out of it, we'll get a better handle on how much permanent damage there is, and what type

of future she is going to have. Hey, do you know who I have to talk to find out how I get paid for doing this lab test I did the other day, is it...”

The small blue-green waves gently lapped at the edge of Irmã Flores while kicking a narrow band of foamy sand up and down along the length of the beach. In the wake of the receding waters, an army of small crabs wandered along the moist sands feverishly picking at the remains of the Ebu’s last feast. Above the marauding hermit crab army, a flock of crying gulls lazily hovered in the air looking for any opportunity to swoop down and snatch a quick meal from the beach.

Several hundred yards away from the ocean, Sarah is sitting under the banyan tree with her back resting on the enormous trunk as the mid-day sun lazily filters through the leaves of the forest canopy. The light dances on Sarah’s smiling face as she stares out in the direction of the Ebu encampment. To her delight, she finds sitting in silence at her side is her old friend Flo. Flo is contently smacking her lips on the dry apricots she is eating, while she busily sorts the fruit she wants to eat next. The other Ebu are in the camp going about their daily chores in a quiet, almost dignified manner. Sarah looks over at Flo, and Flo exchanges a big smile with her oversized friend. From behind her, Sarah hears a loud rustling of the bushes. However, this time there is no rush of fear to overwhelm her, but as she turns, she can see the reassuring visage of Richard. Richard is watching over her, and she can feel the glow of his reassuring smile even from his distant hiding place. Sarah finally knows in her heart and soul that she is no longer alone in the world. A sense of welling being and love are washing over and resonating within her in rhythm to the gentle waves on the beach. Sarah’s eyes fill with tears and for a moment in her life she finally feels at one with her existence.

End to the First Flores Girl Novel: The Children God Forgot

The Flores Girl Sequel

Be sure to follow the continuing adventures of Flores Girl in the sequel, "To Hell with Heroes".

The sequel will be available as an e-Book in 2009. For more information about the sequel please

visit: http://www.floresgirl.com/the_flores_girl_sequel.htm.

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