

PARADISE AT THE EDGE

Voyage on Board the RV Heraclitus

French Polynesia, the Cook Islands, and Tuvalu, July 2004 – March 2005

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CONTENTS

Chapter One

Bora Bora to Rarotonga — July - September 2004

Chapter Two

Tuvalu — December 2004 - March 2005

Chapter One

Bora Bora to Rarotonga

July 31, 2004

The full moon rises over the peak of Tahaa. We'd arrived on the last full moon to this perfect bay, sheltered from the maramu, the wind out of the northeast, and from the trades running east-southeast. Three hundred spinner dolphins came to feed here for three days straight. Every morning their blow would resonate out over the water, spins and flips, tail slaps, coming close enough to the ship to ride our bow wave on the way out to dive.

Today, they're here for our departure instead.

The sky's gone dark gray, rain starting to pour — thick, heavy, gusts of wind driving it sideways. The anchor chain gets stuck, twisted by the tide working in and out of the bay all week. We finally clear the channel on an incoming tide, drenched through, the dolphins escorting us out to the safety of open ocean.

Raise the sails.

Eddie's voice carries over everything: "Satu, dua, tiga" — three words that stuck with us from our time in Indonesia. Every body still able to stand the swells is up on deck. Within thirty minutes all sail's up, and we're making six knots, wind on the beam. Once past the shelter of Raiatea — the sacred island, home to Taputapuatea, the largest marae, the largest temple, in all Polynesia — the swells rise, and half the crew's hanging over the rail, emptying their stomachs. The transition's never subtle. We'd become land creatures again, and now the sea's taking us back. The ship got away.

Our strategy's to sail as far south as we can manage; going west is never really a problem, with the easterlies dominating this part of the Pacific. Half our crew's never sailed before — everything's new to them, the helm, reading the wind, the particular way the hull moves slicing through water. We rig safety lines. Squalls hit us with heavy rain, though rainbows keep appearing between them. Hina, the moon, keeps hiding behind cloud.

Bora Bora appears one last time, like a diva taking a final encore. She's earned her fame — she blew us away, hypnotized us, under the spell of the dancing vahine, adrenaline from the shark dives, nights spent dancing, va'a races with six paddlers to a canoe filling the lagoon, cheers and drums, copra

competitions, the sheer poetry of the spoken language, conversations overlapping in easy harmony, sensual overload, extremes and contradictions both, a coral cemetery, the best smiles anywhere, the fastest hips, glorious bodies, that particular scenery, shading blues across the lagoon, roasted pig in coconut milk, Hinano beer and the mornings after, the paka paka, painting the sky into its own spectacle, parades of officials, every institution and business turning out for the show, conversations about nuclear madness, stories from the Second World War, fresh baguette every single morning, shark legends, fruit races, and songs that will stay in our bodies forever.

Now Bora Bora disappears over the horizon, folding itself into memory.

The wind stays strong, racing at six knots on the beam. The ocean blurs time itself, moments surging past, transcending time and space both. Falling in love, a chemical high, emotion raising the body's own heat, stupid love songs running through my head, a feast of remembered and freshly made sensations.

The king of all marlin comes to visit the stern — five meters of grace and power, cruising alongside us for twenty minutes.

Then we catch our first fish, a fifteen-kilo bonito, then a mahi-mahi, seven kilos. The tuna becomes Polynesian raw fish salad, with lemon given to us as a gift back in Tahaa; the mahi-mahi becomes dinner, fried in butter and capers. Life is good for our stomachs, even if a few of us still feel the urge to run for the rail once in a while.

The night runs long. The wind shifts into a gale, then dies entirely, the ship rolling through the swells. A parrel on the mainsail snaps, and it turns into a tacking game, working the ship into the most comfortable angle we can find. A low pressure system moving east, coming up from the south, keeps changing our whole relationship to the wind. By four in the morning it picks back up, settling the sails, and we drift northwest for most of the day. Some real acrobatics to fix the parrel gives my body its own kind of rush.

Whales, whales — just a few meters off the ship, two of them staying close to the surface, circling us.

My body wants to be in the water. We rig a line; the ship cruises at three knots. An ambassador, sent from the ocean's own mind. I put my body and mind out there and simply let it happen. The two whales start calling others in. Eight whales end up circling the ship, each taking their turn to present themselves. Civilized, somehow. For two hours a real ballet unfolds, a dance between man and whale and ship. I'm in the water to let them see one of us, up close.

More whales, more whales — majestic, ambassadorial, we meet them properly. Hours pass where time seems to live forever. A mother brings her calf to show us. Four whales, Bryde's, or maybe some still-unidentified species, hold thirty meters ahead of our bow. From the side, they come to inspect this strange creature, the newest kid on the evolutionary block. Somehow it seems they've stopped hunting us, and a few of these particular humans are showing real interest in making contact. They come closer, and closer, curious what exactly we're made of. One seems excited — I can tell, somehow, through the echolocation itself. He wants to see our eyes. Contact made. He looks harmless enough. Let's keep them happy, stay with them a while.

Fish, fish — a big one. I wrap the line around my body; it pulls hard. After fifteen minutes we get him close to the stern. Eddie and Marlow stand ready on the gaff. His yellow fin slices the water as he's hooked, hauled up, thrashing. I jump on him, killing him with a knife straight to the head. Blood covers me like I've been in a battle; it takes my whole body weight to hold him still.

We hang him on the rowbar — the scale reads eighty pounds, our biggest fish in years. I spend an hour cleaning him, portioning him out, enough to last us a week.

Raw yellowfin tuna salad, Polynesian style: cut the tuna into cubes, add salt and lemon juice, pour over fresh coconut milk, eat. Closer to land, we'll add shredded carrot, cabbage, cucumber, tomato, though my body seems perfectly satisfied without any of it. I could eat raw fish forever and never once tire of the taste or the texture. The old Polynesians never had any trouble feeding themselves off this sea, and they navigated it faster and better than any European ship of their day. Captain Cook himself noted canoes circling his ships, then leaving them behind entirely, only to be waiting at port by the time he finally arrived. There's a real misconception about how long sea travel actually took back then. The Polynesians weren't savages — they were a civilization, a civilization of sea people, intimate with the element, the ocean in their blood.

Our fishing pole gets shredded by a giant mahi-mahi, pulling the line straight down. He fakes us out first, then, just as the gaff nearly reaches him, shoots straight under the hull and around the prop, taking the top of the pole and the whole line with him.

A solitary minke whale brushes against the ship, almost affectionately, her blow reaching clear up to the deck.

We're within sight of land now — Rarotonga.

Aitutaki, Cook Islands

September 2004

The wind chills the face here — the coldest month of the year, twenty degrees Celsius at its lowest. The lagoon's almost entirely enclosed, except for a tight passage leading to the dock. Sailboats drawing two meters come in seeking shelter, though not all of them make it — the tide runs in and out at four, sometimes seven knots, and you can only really enter at high tide. One sailboat got stuck right in the passage, blocking every other boat from entering or leaving for days. The outer reef anchorage is poor, all coral formations; boats there couldn't leave either, their chains wrapped tight around huge coral heads. We went out to help free two of them, diving down to cut them loose. We're lucky ourselves, tied to a proper mooring, a big, fat one. We enjoy that particular luxury.

Back in Rarotonga, we got caught by a freak storm out of the north — twenty-foot swells pounding us, the anchor chain pulled tight as it could go. Our zodiac flipped and drifted straight over the crashing reef; by what miracle it survived, we'll never really know, but it did, must have danced clean through the raging sea somehow. The winch refused to bring the chain up, two ropes fouled on the prop. We hung there on the strength of the chain alone, carved through dead coral heads. Rain knocked the edge off the swells just enough. I went in under the ship to cut the ropes free of the propeller — a ride of a lifetime, every breath its own small game of life and death, the wildest dragon ride imaginable. It plays out mythologically in my head even now, looking back, but we survived it.

We'd broken the first law of the sea: watch the weather with your whole being, regardless of what anyone else tells you. When it comes to the elements, you make your own judgment, always. The elements rule over everything else; our biggest dreams only ever get realized if we stay in tune with them. Inside the shelter of a wall and a strong roof, the body simply stops receiving that information. I didn't expect anything like this, nobody did, but it came anyway. That no one's ever seen a storm like it in this particular season is no real excuse. We rode it out, the ship survived — but it was a genuine wake-up call. Man carries the whole hard drive inside him to see, feel, know intuitively. You just have to build the software, and keep it running.

Nothing compares to what could have happened. We could have slipped the anchor, sure, but once the ropes were caught in the prop, we had no real control left. Drop another anchor — we learned our lesson. For five days after, Orla researched every weather station and frequency across the entire Pacific. Every day we watched the highs and lows playing their opposing

dance, their own whirl and turn. No — we don't want to play with the sea like that again. The goal is to keep the voyage going, and going, but never gone. Getting hacked to pieces in some heroic deed isn't the drama worth playing. We all love heroes; they feed something in other men. We keep manufacturing heroes for entertainment because that's what we secretly want to be. But a sea person isn't a hero. To survive, he'll sometimes play with his own life — we all do, we play with our lives regularly. A sea person needs to be wiser than that, though. He needs to know his own limits. Making the same mistake twice isn't necessary. Evolution's the highest game there is on this earth, imitating the best, then the second best. Anything less isn't really for the adventurer of this planet.

We ride the new, or at least strive to. The new is simply riding your own path with new senses.

We've lost some of our cultural diversity aboard lately, replaced largely by an American majority, teenagers really, most of them fresh out of school and their own family structure. Still, the few who had the drive and energy to jump, to try something entirely new, all carried the same dream — the dream of planet ocean, saving the coral reef. Action rules. I was raised in a passionate culture, the cult of passion itself, a real hunger to know, to experience. I don't see that same hunger in this newer generation.

I want to catch fish. That sentence alone is the whole foundation of the art of fishing. The know-how comes after. Always a student, ready and willing to learn.

Richard, from marine resources, came by one morning after hearing I hadn't caught a fish all week. "I'm coming to see your lures." Within an hour we'd rigged a full setup — bait-catching gear, every rod loaded with enough line, changeable lures for each species. This one, yellow and silver with a hint of blue, works well for tuna. The right hook size, a swivel small enough to avoid unnecessary drag, clear line instead of wire. Another rig entirely for wahoo, another still for mahi-mahi. We set a line to run overnight off the stern, hooked to a buoy and shock cord. Then he left.

That night I rig a light off the stern, determined to catch bait fish. There was no way I was catching bait fish that way — trevally jumping everywhere, faster than light, no bait ever going to tempt my tiny hook. I cast a shiny lure instead, as far as I can manage in one clean motion, and reel it straight back in. Suddenly the pull — I have to wrap my whole body around the line just to keep it tight. Close to the stern, I haul him up onto the deck: a fifteen-pound big-eye trevally. My curse, broken. Not every cast strikes, and not every strike lands, but eight trevally end up on deck that night. I decide to call it there —

enough for one evening. Adrenaline still pumping, fingers sore, I stand genuinely proud of it. The right motion, the right speed and tempo on the pull, the sensitivity it takes to bring them in clean.

More than just catching fish — providing for our own clan, the sea-people clan. Enough for five days, protein straight from the sea. Nothing extraordinary for people who actually live by the sea, but we rely far too much, most of the time, on the land to feed us. Out here, we're at the source directly.

Basic instinct, a lifeline. Mostly Westerners aboard, so you have to get clever to keep the taste buds satisfied — spice the fish, fry it, bake it. But it's raw I can't get enough of. Since arriving in Polynesia, I've craved their raw fish salad constantly, fresh lime wherever we happen to be, coconut cream — the essence of survival on these South Pacific islands.

Characters

Punua — Neptune of the South Seas, shark tamer, navigator, prince.

Thomas — the re/evolutionary of Tahiti Iti, tattoos as rite of passage, a school of magicians.

Caroline — the magic dancer, sensuality itself.

Paula — the diamond eyes.

The old navigator in the library, logs from New Zealand, eyes, eyes.

Junior — fisherman, musician.

The man on the dock, full of nuclear stories.

Fish Tales

Told aboard, on a bright night, thinking about our own consumer society —

A fisherman casts a line off the reef's edge. He pulls in a small fish. The fish starts to talk: "Please release me, I'm too small for you." The fisherman agrees, lets him go.

The next day the same fisherman casts in the same spot, pulls up the same small fish. This time he keeps him. The fish had thought he could talk his way out a second time.

"I'm too small for you. Why keep me now?"

"Today," the fisherman says, "I'm hungrier than I was yesterday."

Two fishermen stand side by side, fishing the same spot. One keeps pulling fish out, one by one. The other stands watching, not a single bite. Walking back to the village, the empty-handed one finally asks: "What's your secret? You must be holding some kind of magic."

"Not at all," the other replies. "I just hide my hook better than you do."

Fish swim around a baited hook. One gets caught. Another sees the line, sees the hook. For ten minutes it just sits there, the most succulent bait imaginable. He bites anyway. The two fish end up lying side by side.

The first one asks the other: "Didn't you learn anything, watching me get caught?"

"Of course I did," he says. "I just couldn't resist."

Raise the Sails

*Raise the sails, the wind is calling,
Raise the dreams, the world is waiting,
We will never be back in the same places,
All we can do is hold some traces,
We feed on beauty and transcendence,
To run wild for our independence.
Dance, we might be back anew,
For another song of life and ocean, for a few.*

Chapter Two

Tuvalu

December 2004 to March 2005

The smallest island nation in the world, and yet Tuvalu is big news — not because of its size, but because it stands to become the first nation on earth to disappear entirely, should sea levels keep rising as global warming continues. Global warming's been slow to gain acceptance as plain reality, but the facts speak for themselves now, signs multiplying all around the planet.

More than the rising sea itself, the immediate threat to Tuvalu comes first through changing climate patterns — more frequent typhoons, stronger storms. It's a poor nation, living largely on foreign aid, its fishing rights sold off to Japan for what amounts to a handful of change.

Fast-moving change in lifestyle, overpopulation crowding the capital, Funafuti, a near-total dependence on foreign imports just to get by — the old image of a tropical paradise in the sun is long gone here. Trash litters the islands; villages sit built on what's effectively landfill. The government blames the Americans for destroying the most fertile land on the atoll, digging huge pits mid-island to build an airstrip, pits now seeping salt water.

We couldn't buy so much as a bunch of bananas, a papaya, a single coconut. What's actually going on here?

We enter the pass at the atoll of Nukufetau.

On the island, we're taught a traditional Tuvaluan song, "Te Ava Nukufetau" — a welcome, we're told, sung for visitors arriving through the pass. We learn it there, in the local language, and carry it with us afterward, dancing and performing it with the crew in theater nights throughout the rest of the voyage. It becomes one of ours, in its way, without ever really being ours at all.

Nikumaroro, Phoenix Islands

We're contemplating the giant rollers rolling in from far off, crashing against the reefs of Nikumaroro. The island's drifting away from the sun now, the light fading fast.

The black bullets — mother and calves, singing, curious. The pod introduces itself.

The marlin comes in, closer, closer, his great spear a genuine menace. A tingle of fear, and what if — electric.

The false killer whales send up their killing cry. I am saved.

The smell of blood. The feast. The sight of twenty whales tearing apart a four-meter fish. The call of the wild. A last goodbye, jumps and splashes.

We follow the rising moon back to the ship.

*Coral holocaust,
Where shall I pray when all the polyps' temples fade into algal mats
covering dead sculptures?
Can my eyes remain open?
Or will my heart follow the fate of my beloved reefs?
Tuned to the dolphins' breath,
Scanned — what shall they see?
Keep the song of the lagoon alive,
With fish and clams and dreams,
And at night, the melodies of birds,
The waves meeting the beach.
Keep the song of the coconut husks,
Sing with the fire,
Pandanus shade,
Cast your nets for mullet,
Harvest the laulau,
Hunt the coconut crabs,
And sing to the moon.
Don't let the planes steal the song of the birds,
The hotels steal the coconut crabs for overpriced meals,
Don't let anyone rape your land,
Paradise is fragile,
Don't let the stereo steal the fatele,
Don't let huge ships destroy your coral reef,
Oil companies pollute your lagoon,
And above all, don't let the spirit that keeps you alive die.
Listen to the voice of the lagoon,
And if the lagoon screams and hurts,
Listen to the voice of the lagoon.
The sun and the moon,
They are friends that you can keep forever,
Only if you take care, and show them respect.*

A Note on This Book

This is where the record of the voyage, as kept, comes to an end — not because the ship's journey did, but because this is where the written material runs out. The *Heraclitus* carried on, as she always did, and the author with her, though what happened next belongs to some other, still-unwritten account.

What's collected here spans a little over a year, three archipelagos, and two very different registers — the ecstatic, sensory abundance of French Polynesia, and the harder, more sobering note Tuvalu strikes at the very end, a nation quite literally watching the tide come in on itself. It felt right to let the book close there, on that note, rather than smooth it over with something more comfortable. The lagoon was asking to be listened to. This is simply the record of having tried.