

THE BLINKING LIGHTS

*Fiji to Vanuatu to Papua New Guinea,
September - October 2007*

Michel Lippitsch

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This is a work of memoir. It reflects the author's recollections of events, locales, and conversations from his own experience over time. Some names and identifying details may have been changed.

First edition.

A Note on the Text

This book is drawn from five pieces in Michel's archive, written between September and October 2007: a short entry from Fiji marking the move onto a new ship, the Infinity; an undated piece from Levuka, Fiji, titled "Strange Days"; a longer account of a serious accident in the Banks Islands of Vanuatu on the fifth of October; two entries from the days after, in Port Vila; and a log of the passage north to Alotau, Papua New Guinea, that follows.

The book's center of gravity is a single afternoon in the Banks Islands, when an accident became a rescue, and the rescue became, in Michel's own words, a lesson in what he calls real wealth.

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3 September 2007

Fiji

The open sea opens her arms again. A big mahi mahi becomes our dinner, and the wind pushes us west, toward Vanuatu. Fiji has already turned legendary in our own odyssey.

After the end of what I can only call the corporate war — months of lawyers batting the question back and forth until we lost the use of our own ship — the black hull of the Heraclitus slipped out of reach. But the sea gods didn't leave us empty-handed: we found another ship, the Infinity. She demanded all our attention from the start. We spent our first weeks with her in Thailand, grinders and sanders and welding torches between the massage parlors and the gold-plated temples, days thick with the fumes of varnish.

Our belongings arrived by container, straight from the country of the mystic minke whales, and lifted our spirits for days after. A few days diving the Similans, a quick stop in Langkawi, some rough wind, and we made Singapore. Raffles Marina welcomed us the way an old friend does — years of collaboration behind it. Yves was there within the hour, an angel with tools, expertise, good humor, and whatever else the moment called for. Infinity needs serious work still, before she can carry us on a two-year expedition around the Pacific and Southeast Asia.

Strange Days

Levuka, Fiji

The hills are burning. Ash rides the wind down onto our deck. The first visitor to the ship is a police officer — a woman. Others follow, selling vegetables, though it's clear soon enough that some of them are scouting as much as trading. We welcome everyone with open arms. Maybe too open.

One night the dinghy is left on the stern without a second line, unlocked. By midnight it's gone — line, bolt, and all. The weather is calm; I can't understand what happened. We search and find nothing. Thai and Ceru, two friends from the village, come to help, and we report the loss to the authorities in Levuka. Once we've moved the ship back into the lagoon, Thai tells me straight: the boat was almost certainly stolen, the missing bolt just there to throw off suspicion. He's had his own things taken before and now guards his fuel closely wherever he goes. A couple of small items go missing from the ship too — two watches, a pocketknife.

It feels like we'd all been asleep. My own attention stayed fixed on weather and the ship's safety, but I hadn't thought to watch the dinghy properly, or to keep an eye on visitors coming aboard. Everyone was in their own kind of research mode, and nobody, not even the three mates, was really watching the ship. I'd been below decks myself for hours at a

stretch, lost in editing footage, in a different world entirely.

Carol keeps saying she can't do it all — and she's right, she isn't doing it all, though she keeps wandering into territory that isn't hers while her own goes unattended. As captain the ship is mine to answer for, so I take it on. Losing the dinghy hits me harder than I expect, my heart pounding with it, and I lose my temper with her in a meeting I can't quite manage my way through. Being near her some days feels like standing next to a live wire — every rise in energy gets pulled back down, every sentence comes back with her voice already inside it. I understand now why Eibes has taken to hiding in his bunk; he'd been through the same thing. She can't be alone for long, and when the mood in her turns dark, it looks for somewhere to land.

I'd hoped to find time to be creative, but the moment I get anywhere, something pulls me away. As a leader I haven't been firm enough, haven't tracked the details closely enough, and now it's time to pay for that. I trusted the mates to run the small day-to-day operations, naively thinking it would free me up to film and edit. Instead I feel caught again in a whirlpool of things that maybe can't be resolved, only lived through. Wrong time, wrong place, and knowing it. Time to pick up the pieces and start again, attention where it needs to be.

I miss Orla more than I expected to; I thought I'd welcome the break, and instead I can't wait to see her again. I feel slightly alone right now. And I live in a community.

5 October 2007

Vanua Lava

Three in the afternoon, and an unfortunate thing happens. We're anchored off Vanua Lava, in Vanuatu's Torba Province, near a passage called William Bollen. Our outboard starts in forward with nobody braced for it, and two of us go overboard — Maxime, one of our students, and Eibes, our captain. The dinghy spins wildly, out of control, and the propeller catches Maxime's leg first, then Eibes's, before someone manages to yank the cord and kill the engine.

Maxime makes it to shore, screaming. Around Eibes the sea turns red — he's bleeding hard, but he reaches the beach too. The cuts are serious, close to the bone on Maxime's leg; Eibes's calf is shredded open, with a deep gash on his heel besides.

Within three minutes, while we're still applying pressure to slow the bleeding, an Australian doctor from a nearby boat, Dr. James, arrives with bandages. Henry Wetul, the island's medical officer, is right behind him. It's immediately clear that both of them need care the small hospital in Sola can't give — the only way out is by plane, and the airstrip isn't built for night landings, with the light already going.

What happens next is the island moving as one body. Alex, a businessman on his way through to the Torres Islands trying, of all

things, to retire, gets his secretary Feruga on the phone; within minutes she's found a plane refueling in Santo that can reach us and get back before dark. Dr. James keeps the wounds contained while a crowd gathers with pillows, mats, blankets. Maxime, already being cared for by the villagers, keeps saying how lucky he is — the propeller could as easily have caught his head. Eibes takes the pain in near silence, in shock, Heather our medical officer keeping constant contact with him; everyone who sees him is astonished by how tough he is.

Feruga finds a plane — fueling in Port Vila, paramedics aboard, Alex personally guaranteeing payment for the charter. Now the wait starts. Henry rigs intravenous drips from the hospital's last bottles, using willing hands as stands where there's no equipment for it. One woman simply holds Eibes's hand. Robert Sam and Sara Dini, who run the local guesthouse, stand by for whatever we need — we'd eaten Sara's cooking for lunch only hours before, and I think it's helping him now. There's no morphine on the island, nothing he can take by mouth if surgery is still ahead; he has to find whatever strength is left in him and hold the pain himself.

The wind is against the plane, so the village lights the airstrip by hand — three drivers bring their cars to line the runway, others gather palm fronds, and someone has the idea to collect the small blinking lights that wash up on the beach, used by fishing boats to mark their nets. It strikes me even in the moment:

lights built to help empty the ocean of fish,
now lighting the way to save a captain and a
student from a ship built to study coral reefs.

The villagers carry Eibes and Maxime to
the waiting cars; the woman who held his
hand sends him off with a kiss. Then the sound
of the plane, and it's down fast — the pilot
gives us two minutes or he stays the night.
Every hand moves together; the paramedics
are calm and efficient, and the plane is
airborne again inside three minutes.

Afterward I find everyone who helped at
the local kava bar, and they won't let me pay
for a thing. Sitting there, I can finally breathe.
What strikes me most is the synergy of it, the
efficiency, the warmth — a lesson to the world.
United we stand, divided we fall. With so much
less in material terms than the industrialized
world, Vanuatu's wealth is in its people.
Human, still human. No money will ever buy
that. Eibes will need months to recover, but
he'll walk again, and so will Maxime. To the
people of Sola, and to every hand that helped
that afternoon — we don't know all your
names, but your spirit travels with us now.

Port Vila

The sun comes up through the clouds as we enter the harbor at Port Vila — six knots, everyone on task, sails coming down, the anchor and the boat readied together. Our little tribe, working as one.

We head straight for the hospital with Carol to see Maxime and Eibes and take stock of the accident's aftermath. They're having breakfast in their hospital beds. Heather, who has carried so much of the strain since the fifth, finally lets herself come apart now that backup has arrived.

Eibes is due into surgery this morning, drips already feeding him, with a flight to Nouméa scheduled for the afternoon. We meet the doctors on their morning rounds — broken legs, a car accident or two; we're not the only ones this has happened to. We talk through the accident again, review what we're doing all this for, reaffirm the commitment underneath it.

Maxime will spend four weeks in Nouméa, where his father, a dentist, once worked and where the family's old friends will look after him. He's already decided to come back and rejoin us in Papua New Guinea — for his age, a maturity I never had myself. From the day he came aboard he felt like a younger brother to me. Eibes's case is trickier: no major artery or tendon cut, so he'll keep the leg and walk again, but the wound on his heel is deep and

needs close watching, and he's on heavy antibiotics against infection — three weeks before surgery is behind him, then two or three months of physiotherapy to rebuild the muscle in his calf.

By five we're all in the ambulance, an old truck with a red cross painted on the side, trying to keep the mood light by joking about the nurses who looked after Eibes and Max. Eibes is in a wheelchair, and somehow he and Carol find their way back to each other — a romance in the strangest possible setting. It's an emotional goodbye: three of us wounded, two in body and one in spirit, heading off on their own road to Nouméa while the rest of us turn back to the work of catching up with the expedition on schedule.

The next day is full — clearing back in with customs, chasing down bills, following the trail of everyone who played a part in the drama. Under a tree, waiting for a truck, I fall into conversation with one of the landowners of Iriki, the island facing Port Vila; his family has at least found a fair arrangement, a trust that pays out every year. Money moves differently here than I'm used to — whatever comes in gets spent and shared almost as fast, because family doesn't mean only a wife and children, it runs deep into the wider clan. I've watched it with Eddie and Julia both, aboard our ships: the moment cash appears, it's already gone, given away, spread around.

For an hour a woman from the airline office pours out her story — she's Bahá'í, curious about something she'd overheard me reading aloud, and we fall into a real conversation about spirituality, right up until I learn you have to be formally registered to belong. Then I lose interest. Later I track down the medics and the pilots who flew Eibes and Maxime out, putting faces, finally, to everyone in the drama; I find Feruga, whose few minutes on the phone probably saved a leg, and thank her properly.

How small it all looks, and how large we can make it feel, set against a world where far worse happens every day without anyone stopping it. We're the lucky draw of the dice, all of us on this ship — a different roll and any of us could have been born into something much harder. So take the luck while it's given. I'm too spoiled, still, to worry much about the version of it that isn't.

The Passage to Alotau

Saturday, the thirteenth of October. Kava still moving in our veins, we raise anchor at nine, the bay flat calm around us. Last night the Infinity turned into a nakamal of her own — a proper gathering, the kava strong, a voice somewhere in it whispering nothing but listen, listen. Before we leave, Orla leads a council, open to anyone who wants to talk through the accident one more time.

Twelve hundred nautical miles ahead of us, at roughly a hundred a day if the trades hold — though we're getting late in the season for them. By Monday the big jib is up and we're sailing with the wind behind us, four knots climbing to five as a front catches up and the swells start to build. We even sail butterfly-rigged for a few minutes, though it isn't the moment to get cocky about it. We land a big wahoo on a fat line, already worn out by the time we haul him up; something bigger takes the next line clean away.

The wind keeps building through a good force six, seven and a half knots dead astern, the kind of night that asks for real vigilance. The weatherfax has been silent two days running; Orla pulls what she can off the SSB instead, but there's nothing on the horizon worth worrying about — until the changed cleats on the jib start popping loose, one after another, and we're reminded how much sea we're actually in. Everyone pulls together to get the jib down and the storm jib up, back on

course inside fifteen minutes, the whole crew working like they've done it together for years.

Tuesday, the sixteenth. Daylight shows the ocean at her most splendid, deep turquoise crests that demand you stop and look at them. With the crew confident enough now on the helm to hold their own course, I finally find time in the studio to start cutting the footage from the Gaua festival — Tanna will have to wait its turn. Lunch is wahoo in a black sesame crust with a ginger and spring onion sauce, rice, a Thai carrot and cabbage salad. At the evening meeting: a hundred and fifty-five miles made, a hundred and twenty of them in the right direction, no weather to worry about, and a decision that if we clear the crossing cleanly, we'll stop for a dive on the way into Alotau.

After dinner we watch a documentary about uranium, courtesy of Laser — ironically, after having already sat through the long cut of *The Fountain* earlier in the week. I want to copy it and pass it around to friends across the Pacific, so they know what's being planned here: a forty-million-dollar embassy going up in Fiji, a fortress of one already finished in Vila, bristling with security, while a few hundred meters away you can simply walk into the French one. Paranoid, maybe, but probably for good reason — Vanuatu once turned away an American navy ship that wouldn't say whether it carried nuclear weapons. The country intends to stay nuclear-free.

I finally close out, more or less, the finances tangled up in the accident. A few freak swells rock the ship in the night, but she takes them well, shipshape as ever, carrying us on toward Alotau and, past it, Papua New Guinea.