

EXCERPT from novel in progress

Working title: “Barnacle Boy” by Jamey Clayberg

The village looked exactly the same, it had been seven years since I’d seen it, and when I did I felt a wave of memory rush over me; almost nothing had changed. A couple huts had water-tanks now, big, round flat-topped things made of corrugated tin welded together to catch rainwater. The worn paths were wider and deeper, and there was a hint of something in the air, I recognized it and realized we got there right around lunch, which was the one and only meal for the nationals. Somebody was cooking something and my stomach growled, I usually ate two meals a day and hadn’t had one yet.

“Was that you?” Sarah laughed.

“Sorry.”

“No I’m hungry too, who can we hit up for some grub?”

“You’re terrible...” But she was right and I knew it, it was only a matter of seconds before someone in the village would drag us into their hut and feed us. Hospitable folks.

“No I’m not, you know all these people, right? They haven’t seen you in, how long?”

“Seven years.”

“Yeah, and they loved you guys right?”

“Right. Especially Dad.”

“So this a family reunion, they’re going to treat you like a king and stuff you with all the food they can find, and let you sit in the one chair they have in the hut, right?”

“Pretty much.”

“So who do we hit up for some food?” I was about to give her a lecture about not taking advantage of people who care about you when Kahane came out his hut yelled.

“Ai! Masta Rich! Poro-man!” I was so used to my “Barnie” nickname it was strange to hear my given first name again. He ran over and grabbed me; I was surprised how good it felt to see him again. He half crushed me and ran back to the hut and dragged his wife out, she threw her hand over her mouth and rushed over and hugged me too, crying a little. A couple kids ran out of the hut and Kahane started introducing them and explaining that they had been “busy” wink wink since I’d been gone and how are you and who’s this beautiful girl with you and where’s your Mother, is she here too and I could barely get in a word that it was just me and that this was my friend Sarah and how glad I was to see them too. Kahane sent his boys off to tell other people and they ushered us in deeper asking questions and telling us every little thing and how much they had appreciated my Dad and how old so-and-so had died last year and how young so-and-so had gone off and got shot with a spear in a payback fight and how the fishing had been good this year but the coffee plantation had laid off people and how good it was to see me again. I felt bad for Sarah, they were treating her like a queen but she didn’t know any of them and this had to be a bit hard. She mostly spoke Pidgin too so the “tok ples” or native language of the village was lost on her. She could respond to them in Pidgin if they asked something she understood and pretty quickly they figured out they needed to use Pidgin with her. I was rusty on my tok ples but it started coming back.

When we got to the center of the village the crowd got big, word had spread and lots of familiar faces showed up; lots of kids and dogs and pigs running around too. I watched Sarah’s

face, I knew it would be like this but she was enjoying herself. It was fun being the star of the show, in town with the expats and businessmen we were low-lives, leeches and barnacles so to be the king even for a second felt pretty good.

“Masta Rich! Come see the church!” I hated the “Masta” thing, but nothing my Dad had tried to tell them could change it, since the early missionaries and again during the military action here they called whiteskins, any expat, really that wasn’t a national “Masta.” When we got to the church I had to stop for a second. There it was, the sum of my father’s time here, still exactly the same with its tin roof and open sides, plank pews and the enclosed area behind the low stage. Nothing had changed, but the nameplate had a symbol next to it I didn’t remember. It was a black silhouette of a Bird of Paradise with a dollar sign reversed out of it. I’d seen that somewhere before.

“Is this your Dad’s church?” Sarah said.

“Yeah, was.”

“Right. It’s still going strong it looks like.”

“Yeah, sure does.” We were standing at the back, looking over the rows of plank benches and I was overcome with nostalgia, I’d sat on those benches so many times, squirming and bothering people around me, or picking at a beetle on the ground and then later in junior high I’d sulked in the seats and dreamt of running off into the jungle for something to do. My Dad stood at the pulpit and I could hear his voice echoing through time and it felt really, really horrible right then to hear it in my heart. I couldn’t stand to think of him seeing who I had become now. Just before we got dragged away to eat I saw a large copper bowl on a stand at the front by the stage and it gave me an idea about where I had seen that black Bird of Paradise symbol. Before I had a chance to tell Sarah we were whisked away to the common house for lunch. When we got there I saw that the common house used to be my home.

“This used to be our house,” I said.

“Really? Did it look like this?”

“No, they must have turned it into a meeting place rather than fight over who would get to live in it. We didn’t have that double door and all that bare dirt used to be full of flowers my Mom took care of. I peeked around the house.

“And that used to be a garden.”

“That patch where the truck is.”

“Yep.”

“This must be strange.”

“Yep.”