

Backpackers – free material (the crab ladies story)

This material was excised from the opening of Backpackers as it didn't fit the tone or approach of the rest of the book. I also thought it slowed down the tension and conflict at the start, by distracting the reader into an unrelated short story.

I am a little upset about “killing my darling” (as the phrase goes) because this is the original short story that eventually grew into the Backpackers novel.

I present it here as an exercise in editing and making difficult decisions about writing.

[start]

Maybe you just had to be there.

You know when you've had one of those experiences? The ones you try hard to explain to people, but always end with a dejected “Maybe you just had to be there,” when you see you're not getting through or your listener is sceptical about what you're saying? That's my story of the Lady Crabs. Rubbish title, I know. Everyone always thinks it's about STDs. Don't get me wrong, you can catch some pretty nasty stuff on the old Lonely Planet trail. But this isn't a story about STDs (although there is some sex involved).

[cut]

As we walked I noticed that the island's undergrowth, like the beach I'd landed on, was spotless.

“Have you noticed how there's so little litter here?” I said to Cath.

“Yeah, that's one of the reasons I decided to stay, hey?”

“It's nice to see the locals caring for their environment for once.”

We walked in silence for a minute or so, kicking through some coconut husks. A small piece of blue plastic wrapping, the only litter I'd seen, reminded me of my arrival at the beach.

“Have you seen those old ladies at the beach, clearing the litter?”

“Yeah, they’re lej,” said Cath.

“I wonder if they get paid?”

“Paid? Don’t you know the story?”

I looked at her face, which was patterned with shadow and light from the palm leaves overhead. “What story?”

“The locals call it the Curse of the Lady Crabs.”

We were nearing the end of our circuit of the island. The bar where I’d first met Cath was just ahead, the jetty and the beach from my arrival down to our right.

“Let’s grab that drink, and I’ll tell you.”

We sat in the shade of the bar’s dried palm leaf roof, which extended over part of its outdoor seating area. Inside, behind the bar, a local man, small in that Asian way and thin, yet naturally muscled from the practicalities of island life, wore a black singlet and played with his mobile phone. I wondered if South East Asia had a texting culture like we did in the West. He turned up the bar’s music, a medley of Bob Marley and island reggae, either to give us some privacy or to drown out his exposure to what must be a waterfall of inane backpacker chat. Around us a couple of other tables were occupied by backpackers, leafing through guide books or sipping at sun-lazy cocktails.

Both Cath and I had mixed fruit juices which glowed like radium paint when they caught the sun. She was about to tell me the tale which I then told around the world. Told so much it tied Cath into my memory, a tie that's never broken to this day.

“So,” I prompted Cath, “the Curse of The Crab Ladies? Local B-movie or something?”

“Yeah, so here’s how I heard it,” she began. “You know how all of these stories are

always, like, one hundred years ago, or just before the first missionaries arrived and tamed the savages?" She rolled her eyes and dimpled one cheek to show her ironic use of "savages".

"Sure."

"Not this one," she said, shaking her head. "This one's like, twenty five years ago. None of this was here, then?" She swept her arm around to indicate the bars and other buildings, "And the island was only just getting known on the old hippy trail. The locals consider this island one of their gods. They say this is where man was given the gift of farming taro and other foods."

"I thought taro was a Polynesian food?"

I thought she looked panicked for a second, but she rallied quickly, "Rice, then. Or spices. Anyway. It's a creation myth, and it's sacred. So, twenty five years ago a few hippy chicks come here one year and fall in love with it. They sunbathe for two weeks completely starkers, upsetting the few locals who lived here, who kinda worshipped a mixture of Christianity and Buddhism. So, you know, superstitious and prudes with it. Anyway, after two weeks, browner than me from head to toe, they leave the island and all their rubbish on it, and disappear. The locals are really upset, like, really pissed? So fast forward a year. These hippy chicks come back, but now they've brought other chicks with them. There's like, ten or fifteen? All women, and they want to turn the island into a women's retreat. This time they stay for a month, some of them making trips back to the main island for supplies now and again."

I stirred my fruit juice with the straw, "How come there were no guys?"

Cath looked thoughtful for a moment before replying, "We can do without men, you know. There are ways and means."

I gave a sarcastic smile, "I didn't mean like that. It's just, that many women travelling so far out, over twenty years ago? You barely see it happening now."

She gave a shrug as if to say the finer details of the story weren't hers to explain.

Outside the bar, on the sandy path which passed it and on which I had followed Cath to Roda's Shack, a middle aged woman, a Western woman, walked by. She walked with the easy gait of a younger woman and her blonde hair was still a natural yellow. She wore a large bum bag at her waist, which horribly accentuated the paunch she was developing. Despite her appearance in most aspects of being the right side of fifty, her skin had the baked look of old leather. A sun worshipper who had spent too many years on beaches and under sun beds, her dermis had shrivelled prematurely, thickened to chestnut and withered, as if the sun's heat had fried away the underlying fat, leaving only stringy meat in its place.

Cath punched my arm, "Hey, stop staring. Jeez, if that's what you're into, I can introduce you."

I looked back at Cath and her perfect twenty-something year old skin, "Ha. Ha."

A cat jumped on the table next to us, licked one of its front paws, then stared at us with big green eyes. "Pss pss," I beckoned, rubbing my fingers together.

The cat gave a haughty look before bounding away.

I pointed after the retreating woman, now safely out of ear shot, "She just made me think of how all those women would look now, if they came and sunbathed for a month, year after year."

"Maybe she's one of them? Searching for her sisters?"

The shadows from our glasses melted into the table. I looked up to see dark clouds in the sky. A rumble of thunder shook sudden torrential rain onto the island, which quickly tap-danced off the roof above and trembled in streams to the sand floor, water dancing and pirouetting where it hit tables and chairs. We watched the sunny world turn to a grey, striated mist, and listened to the tribal drumming of the rain on the roofs and sand.

“So then what?” I asked. “The women come in greater number and..?”

“Well, this goes on for a few years. Each time they come, they stay a month, leave the place a mess, ignore the local customs. Finally, the islanders get pissed off and have a council. They call in a local witch doctor to help them. The women come back the next year, the same core of ten plus a few new ones. When they arrive, the witch doctor goes to visit them. He has Council Elders with him, and some younger people pushing wheelbarrows. The barrows are full of baskets and litter pickers.”

I looked up from my fruit juice, from which I was sucking the last few drops, watching the foamy pale yellow bubbles burst around the straw’s end.

Cath looked back at me over her shades.

“Baskets with litter pickers? I thought this was a witch doctor?”

“Yeah, it’s also late twentieth century, you drongo. They’re not savages.”

Outside the bar the rain was starting to ease. Thunder grumbled in, sounding tired and lazy, its source further out to sea now.

“Anyway,” Cath continued, “the witch doctor asks them to clean up after themselves. He says they’re welcome to visit the island, the Council has even constructed a shop packed with supplies to save them long trips to the main land. But could they just clean up when they leave? Some of the younger women just shrug and say OK. The older ones though, they’ve come to view this place as theirs. They don’t want to be pushed around, especially by a man.

“The Elders take the younger women’s ‘OK’ as agreement. They leave the equipment and go back to their side of the island. A month passes. It’s just before the women usually leave. They time it so they can have a full moon party on the beach, sleep off their hangovers and leave the day after that. So they’ve got their portable stereos, you know the ones they used to call ‘ghettoblasters’?”

I nodded. "Dad had one when I was a kid."

Something changed in her face again. It was only much later that I discovered why. I remember it well. As soon as I said, "Dad had one," it was like she'd been shot. She started nodding, and shoved her face into her drink, finishing it in a long gulp. When she put the glass down, she called over for a replacement, scrunched up her face, took a breath and gave me the coldest smile on the hottest day I could imagine. I was about to say something, ask what was wrong, when she carried on, as if nothing had happened.

"So, anyway, we're not talking professional sound systems, but there's a few of these around the beach, cranking out music til the early hours." Her voice cracked, just a little bit, a wobble around one of the words. I remember thinking it was similar to a teenage boy's voice breaking. She just jumped over it, carried on talking until it went, "The Elders and the witch doctor visit mid-party, when the moon's at its brightest and fullest. Its reflection fills the sea in the bay, like they're partying by a lake of mercury. Some say they saw the witch doctor raise his hands in the air and shake some sticks and feathers."

"Wait. Do they even have witch doctors here? Isn't that more like Africa?"

"John, the story's the important thing. Details change as they're handed down. But the power's in the story. Now be a good Pom and listen. The girls party and go to sleep. When they're awake, the younger ones shuffle down to the beach and make some attempt to clear up. Again, the witch doctor and the Elders are there, watching from above. The younger girls do their bit, tie up a few bags of garbage and go back to the camp. The older women take the piss out of them, telling them not to suck up to the locals, not to be bullied by men."

Cath's fresh juice arrived. She pushed the glass away. The rain had stopped, except for a few drops late to the party. The roofs dripped. It was humid. Somewhere a bird called. Behind us in the bar, the barman changed his CD from reggae to The Eagles. To the sound of 'Hotel

California', Cath finished her story.

"Well next day they all pack up and get ready to leave. The younger women get on the boats, and wait for the older ones to bring their gear down to shore. When they arrive, they climb in the boats, pick up the garbage bags the younger women were going to take back to the main land and throw them on the beach. The witch doctor and Council Elders turn up again. The hard core of women front up to them. There's two lines on the beach, island men on one side, tourist women on the other. The younger ones sat in the boats, shitting it.

"'We asked you to clean up, it was a simple request', says the witch doctor. One of the younger girls in the boat shouts, 'We did!'. 'Ah, shut up Gayle!' one of the hard core shouts back."

"Gayle? How do you know their names?"

"I don't. I needed a name. Gayle was my first pet's name."

"You called your pet 'Gayle'?" I asked.

"She was a dog. She farted a lot."

I stared at her.

"It's Aussie humour."

"Finish the story."

"Yeah, so one of them shouts, 'Ah, shut up, Gayle!', then lays into the witch doctor, on some militant feminist rant about patriarchal systems and how the islands wouldn't be here now if it wasn't for what their counties did in the Second World War. All that kind of bullshit. When she stops ranting, the witch doctor says, 'We asked you to play your part in keeping this island beautiful. You had a choice. Some of you took the responsibility.' Here he raises an arm holding some witch doctor stick thing at the girls in the boat. 'And you, you chose not to,' and points the stick at the hard core. 'Remember, you were given the choice.' And with that, him

and all the Elders walk away, leaving all the litter pickers and baskets on the beach.

“‘Fuck you!’ one of the hardcore shouts. The young girls in the boats at this point are dying of embarrassment. They watch the hardcore march as a line to shore, where the waters are lapping the sand. And as they reach the water, as one, their clothes collapse, as if the women have fallen out of them into trap doors in the beach. Gayle climbs to the front of the boat and looks at the bundles of clothes, which are moving. Now at this point, she’s thinking they’ve fallen into quicksand or something.”

I raised a quizzical eyebrow, “Let me guess, it’s something to do with crabs?”

Cath raised her right hand, formed a gun with it and shot me with a *click* noise and a wink, “Spot on. Out of the clothes piles scuttle these crabs, dark brown, clacking their claws in the air. When they’re all free they start darting over the sand, picking up bits of litter and running sideways to the baskets and dropping it in. Over and over and over, little sideways chains of crabs holding bits of plastic and cans and shit above their shells to the baskets. The young girls freak out. One of them manages to push their boat out into the water, where they start the engine and escape to tell the tale to other travellers.”

Outside the sun had come out again. The rain was already drying and above the sounds of The Eagles’ ‘Desperado’ I heard the final *plop-plop* sounds of rain water falling from roofs into shrinking puddles on tables and chairs.

“And what happened to the hardcore women? Were they boiled and eaten with claw crackers and lemon?”

“Legend has it they’re still here to this day. They can regain full human form only when they’ve collected all the litter on the island. The more litter there is, the more they revert to crab form.”

“Cool story,” I said.

Cath formed her hands into pincers and nipped at my chest making *clack clack* noises. I batted them away, laughing. “John, you’re legend. I can’t believe you listened to that bullshit!”

[end]