

UP

One Man's Journey to Feminism

Peter W. Pruyn

he / him / his*

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Cover photo: 7,500 feet over Galveston Bay early on a Saturday morning. ©2020 Peter W. Pruyne.

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Content warning:
Contains descriptions of physical and emotional violence

* Pronounced "prine". He/him/his: This is the set of pronouns I ask others to use when referring to me. People who identify as transgender or gender nonconforming may use pronouns that do not conform to binary male/female gender categorizations, such as "they, them, theirs."

3: Seychelles

Age 25-27
(1992-1994)

“Once you have adapted to your community, assessing its needs will probably not be difficult. However, finding a way to satisfy those needs almost always will require a great deal of imagination, understanding, patience and frequently a high tolerance for frustration.”

— Introduction to the United States Peace Corps Handbook

“Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness”

— Mark Twain

One reason I applied to the Peace Corps was that up until that point I had only worked professionally in computers and wanted to do something different. I felt drawn to service doing classroom teaching, ideally in something like Math.

Meanwhile, the Peace Corps makes very clear that job assignments are made based on the needs of the developing countries. So when I applied and was offered the job of computer teacher, I could only chuckle. When I was offered the country of the Seychelles, I said “Where’s that?”

In-Country

The Seychelles are a group of islands in the Indian Ocean, a thousand miles east of Kenya, four degrees south of the equator. The Seychelles are unique in that they are the only granitic island nation in the world, the rest being either volcanic or coralline. Geologically, the Seychelles were created when the Indian subcontinent, which was originally nuzzled up against the east coast of Africa, decided to cruise on over and ram into Asia, thereby creating the Himalayas. The Seychelles were some of the “crumbs” that were left behind.

Upon arriving in-country with four other Volunteers, officially I am first a Peace Corps Trainee. Only after completing an intensive pre-service training program, do you then officially become a Peace Corps Volunteer. Our graduation from training was being sworn-in as Volunteers.

Our swearing-in ceremony was held at the American Cultural Center in Victoria, the capital of the Seychelles. Present were the U.S. Ambassador, who gave us the oath, Mdm. Danielle de St. Jorre, the Seychelles Minister of Foreign Affairs and our guest speaker, and about fifty Seychellois guests. Seychelles national television was there, and we all appeared on the evening news speaking mediocre Creole in our “interview.”

The oath is the same oath that all U.S. Federal employees must take. Once again, it was not lost on me that this would have been the same oath I would have taken had I become an officer in the Air Force:

I, Peter Pruyn, do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic, that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same, that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion, and that I will well and faithfully discharge my duties in the U.S. Peace Corps. So help me God.

The two-and-a-half months of training went fast.

PST Calendar

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY
WEEK 1 9-15 Nov	PUBLIC HOLIDAY				Arrival, briefing Rest visit Elaine	PC office 1000 PC Director Dr M. Louise	Brunch with other PC volunteers DIRECTION
WEEK 2 16-22 Nov	Intro. Training Language Seychelles Politics	Language Visit Victoria clinic, hospital	Language ID Card US Embassy	Work Orientation visit Sey History	Language Talk: Environment Bot. Garden	Language	Island Tour Lunch L'Islette
WEEK 3 23-29 Nov	Language Talk: Education Min. of Ed.	Language Visit : Anse Royale School	Language Visit: NYS PC Director	Language Thanksgiving Lunch	Language Work Orientation Sey Society	Trip to Praslin Visit Vallee deMai La Digue	Sunday mass Veuve Reserve Grand Anse
Week 4 30-6 Dec	Language Health Cooking	Language Visit to l'Union, meet workers	Return to Mahe Health	Health Talk: Economy	Language Work orientation Talk: homestay	Start of homestay	PC hello/goodbye party
Week 5 7-13 Dec	Language PC & Sey Government Min. of Admin.	PUBLIC HOLIDAY	Crafts Village visit Language	Work orientation Health	Language Visit SFA	Language	Walk to La Reserve & Picnic JEN'S HOUSE
Week 6 14 -20 Dec	Language Visit District Coun cil	Language Language	Talk: Religion Language	Work Orientation Project	Language Language	Language test	BOAT RIDE(?)
Week 7 21 -27 Dec	Language Language	Language Living in US/Living in Seychelles	Workshop: Conflict Resolution	End of homestay Language	CHRISTMAS		Marine Park
Week 8 Dec28-2Jan	Language Language	Visit: Tracking Station Sega with Kevin	Language Visit RTS	Language Free	NEW YEAR	PUBLIC HOLIDAY Language	
Week 9 4 -10 Jan	Work Orientation Language SHOTS	Presentation of projects Language	Language Personal interviews with PC Director	Language Presentation of projects	SWEARING IN		

Figure 16: Our nine-week Pre-Service Training calendar. Approximately half was Creole language training. I notice in Week 7 I stopped crossing off the days. I must have been busy!



Figure 17: The house I lived in as a Peace Corps Volunteer on the island of Mahé in the Republic of the Seychelles, Indian Ocean.

The Seychelles Polytechnic

It is the first week of classes. I have to look at my schedule three times to remember whether I'm teaching a class called 3D1 in room 201, or 3D2 in room 301, or 3D1 in 301, or 3D2 in 201. By the time I've gotten to room 201, I've forgotten. I peek in the room, and no one is standing at the blackboard. *So this must be it! No teacher.*

I stride up to the board like I know where I am and start to erase half the board to write, "ALWAYS MEET IN THE COMPUTER ROOM UNLESS TOLD OTHERWISE." The class is looking at me. But as I erase the board, they gasp. The class prefect, Roland, blurts out, "There's a class already in session!" I look to the rear of the room, and, to my horror, Mr. Ransinghee is leaning over a student's desk helping with an assignment. I have walked into the middle of his economics class and erased half his board. Everybody bursts out laughing as I make a hasty retreat spewing apologies to Mr. Ransinghee.

It's now my second day of teaching. I'm in the computer room. My first class has just left. I'm trying to remember what class is coming in next and just what the heck I'm going to teach them on the computers. I plan to teach by stepping them through the task as they do it on the machines. Isaac, the other Peace Corps volunteer who is teaching computers at the school, sticks his head in the door and says, "Public Utilities called. There's going to be a power cut at 8:30." I look at the clock. It's 8:25. Welcome to teaching at the Polytechnic.

The Seychelles Polytechnic is the highest level of education in Seychelles. It's sort of like a cross between a big high school and a junior college. The Poly is broken up into a dozen or so schools, such as Humanities and Science, Business Studies, Construction, Engineering, Hotel and Restaurant, Education, and Fine Arts. It is free to citizens, but selection is competitive. There are about 2,500 students in-total ranging in age from about 17 to 21. Most degrees take three years.

I am in the School of Business Studies. I teach two sections of first-year students, one section of second-year students, and two sections of third-year students. I teach 17, 50-minute periods a week, 104 students in total. In the four days before classes began, I poured over last year's exams and assignments. Elaine and Chris, the two previous computer Peace Corps volunteers, are there for a few more weeks. They can help, but they can't teach for me.

The first week was hell. We have no textbooks, no software manuals. Meanwhile, the climate is hell on the computers. We have one air-conditioner for a large room with fourteen computers. They are mostly EPSON PC clones. Of the 14 computers, 6 have hard drives. My largest class has 27 students, so we have to put two students to a machine. When one machine is down, three students to a machine.

Our classes are vocational in nature. They are designed to help students get a job, which actually isn't that hard, because these skills are in such high demand. The students will take external, British exams in using various software packages such as, Lotus-123, dBASE, and a word-processing program called MultiMate. I teach them how to use these software packages and a little DOS. By previous government decree, the computers used in the country are to be IBM PC compatibles, and those software packages are the ones to be used. Since then, organizations have expanded what software they use, but these are still the main ones. IBM PCs are still the rule. The largest concentration of Macs on the Island is in the Peace Corps Office: three.

No doubt my former colleagues at Cornell's Program of Computer Graphics will wince when they read this.

I don't know why I thought that somehow computers in developing countries would be separated from "Third World-ness".¹⁴ I thought of civil engineers in the Peace Corps building roads

¹⁴ As I mentioned in the introduction, this is an example of a term from my 26 year-old self, not my present-day self. Today I would use the terms "developing nation" and "more developed nation".

with dirt instead of concrete. I thought of nurses in the Peace Corps using education instead of antibiotics. But computers? A computer's a computer, right? Well, yes, but if the infrastructure around the computer is older, then the computer acts older, too.

I have no syllabus. I design the curriculum as I go. Luckily, the external exams are easy, so I only have to worry about teaching specifically for the test for a fraction of the term. Elaine and Chris have also recently come up with some assignments from past years that I can use that make things a lot easier. So things are getting better.

One obstacle is the fact that I haven't used any of these software packages before. I can figure them out, but it's harder to actually teach them. On the other hand, I've found it's amazing how little you really have to know to teach something mediocely. You need to know a lot to teach something well, but not mediocely. For the time being, I need to be satisfied with mediocre.

A significant difficulty in teaching here is language. The kids grow up speaking Creole, start school with Creole, but somewhere in middle school everything switches to English. So when they get to us, they are nowhere near fluent. For the first-year students especially, you have to speak slowly. And when someone doesn't grow up among any kind of technological infrastructure, when they get to a computer for the first time, they are sort of like my parents (sorry!). You start with, "The ON switch is here. Insert the floppy disk this way. Do not put your thumb over that hole in the cover of the diskette¹⁵."

¹⁵ 5.25", floppy.



Figure 18: The Seychelles Polytechnic where I was a computer teacher. Top: The computer room. Bottom: A typical classroom.

Memory: Sears

Our French class with Madame Ravelli in room 25 has just ended. It's the early 1980s. For middle school and upper school we have a dress code of wearing blazers with either a turtleneck or a collared shirt with a tie. Today I am wearing a tie with a pale, yellow shirt. I happened to have gotten this shirt where I get many of my clothes: a thrift store near our home.

After class is over and Madame Ravelli has left the room, a few of the boys start to make fun of my shirt. They say the collar is too big, that it looks like it's from the 1970s. They want to know what the brand name of my shirt is. I don't know. I shrug and start to leave the room. They grab me and wrestle me to the floor. Two of them, one on each arm, pin me to the floor, while Sam Veltman tries to turn up the rear of my collar to read the manufacturer's label. He does this while my tie is still tied and the collar button is still buttoned, so it chokes me as he does it. It hurts.

Despite my struggling, Sam is eventually able to turn down the collar far enough to read the manufacturer's label. Triumphant, he reads the evidence that justifies their mocking of me: the brand of my shirt is not Brooks Brothers, Lacoste, or Polo by Ralph Lauren—it's Sears, a brand they associate with washing machines and refrigerators. Collectively, they laugh uproariously. All this time, Curtis Banfield, who I had considered a friend, has been standing against the wall off to the side. He joins-in in the laughter.

As I struggle to my feet, I say through their laughs, "I don't care."

But part of me does.

I never told anyone.

Killing the Pig¹⁶

5:05 AM, the Saturday before Christmas. I haven't heard anyone get up yet. Like many things in the Seychelles, it will start a little later than they said it would. By 5:25, I hear my Seychellois host family's father, Henri, in the kitchen, and his son, Andre, in the shower. Time to get up.

I am close enough to their family that they insisted I stay with them through the holiday, including today's annual ritual. I feel both honored and apprehensive. The night before, Andre had shown me his old Army uniforms. Now out of the Army, he doesn't have much use for them anymore. He has lent me a set of his grey camouflage fatigues to wear this morning so that my clothes won't get blood on them.

Time to get in uniform.

Outside, the sun has not yet gotten up. Silver clouds pass slowly in front of a crescent moon. Their house is next to a very large fruit bat roost in the National Botanical Gardens. As dawn approaches, hundreds of the bats fly overhead across the moonlit clouds after foraging all night. They don't fly in formation; each fly their own path with a distinctive, slow wing beat. They strut through the air to reach home before daylight comes.

Behind their house, their neighbor, John, has started a large fire next to the pig pens. Over the fire is a metal can about three feet across with water in it. There are three pigs in two pens. Two of the pigs are named after government officials the family doesn't care for. We will kill the larger one. It is only about 6 months old, but it's pretty big, about 5 feet long and stands about two and a half feet high. The other two pigs are only a couple of feet long. They are kept separate from the larger pig because they fight. Andre gives the two younger ones some food. The larger one just stands there in its pen, looking up expectantly, wondering why she's not getting any breakfast, too. The stench of their pens mixes with the smoke from the fire.

Andre takes a hose and washes down the pens and the pigs. They squeal when the stream of cold water hits them and try to hide in the corners of the small pens. A waist high table, about six feet long, three feet wide, and covered with black plastic, is put in front of the pens. It looks like an operating table. Triage opens for business at sunrise.

Before last year, they needed four men to kill a pig. Each would hold a leg, and they would tie the legs over a horizontal pole to suspend the pig upside down hanging from its legs. They would then cut its throat and let it bleed into a bucket, which could take a while. During this entire process, the pig would squeal and squeal and squeal. Understandably.

These days they kill the pig with 220 volts. Andre has brought an extension cord with an on/off switch on it. He has a second extension cord that has had one end cut off and the two wires stripped bare for the last six inches in a 'Y'. We wait about an hour for the water to boil.

The water is now ready. John takes a pan and puts some oats in it. Andre opens the pig pen door and puts the pan of oats near the side of the pen with the extension cord. As the pig gobbles the oats, Andre stands behind her with the wire 'Y'. Andre wraps one of the bare wires around each of the pig's ears. The pig doesn't stop slobbering.

Andre leaves the pen and slides closed the little pen door. He sits down with the on/off switch. He throws the switch, and it glows red.

The pig becomes rigid. It does not make a sound as the electrical current flows through its brain. Andre leaves the switch on for only half a second. The instant the current switches off, the pig collapses and goes into spasms on the pen's concrete floor. I think to myself that Andre should have left the switch on a little longer, but Henri announces that the pig is dead.

¹⁶ If this subject isn't for you, feel free to skip to the break in the text on the next page that begins with "It was something new." A version of this story appeared in *Peace Corps Today*, Fall, 1993. And, yes, today I cringe at how the pig was killed.

John opens the pen door, and they drag the twitching pig out to the table. But the pig is not dead. Andre should have left the switch on longer. The pig starts to thrash wildly, and they motion for me to grab the remaining fourth leg. We hoist the pig up onto the table, its head hanging off one side. It kicks my hand hard, and its hoof cuts my knuckles. Andre gets a big pot and holds it under the pig's neck. Henri is holding a large knife and sticks it in the pig's jugular. They tell me to lean on the abdomen. Blood pours into the pot. The pig is still breathing but fighting less. It does not squeal. It bleeds more. It stops breathing.

It turns out that the boiled water is for shaving. The pig's hair is like steel wool. They swing the pig along the table and drape burlap sacks over the front half of the pig. John takes a pot of boiling water and pours it gently over the sacks and the pig. The sacks act like large hot, washcloths. John places the sacks over the rear of the pig and does the same thing. Andre and Henri now have knives and are scraping the hair off the pig. They shave everything: the ears, tail, and feet. There are lots of nicks, but no blood. After using the knives as best they can, Henri takes a safety razor and goes over the whole pig again. The pig's shaved stomach feels like a warm, squishy football. It takes an hour to shave the pig.

We go have breakfast.

After tea and toast, we come back. John starts by cutting off the head with a machete. They put the head in a bucket of water. Its pale stare gazes up into space out of the bucket. As we hold the body on its back, Henri uses a sharp knife to cut open the chest all the way down to the tail. Under the skin there's an inch-thick layer of fat. Steam comes off the intestines in the cool morning air. The intestines are big. The small intestines look like yellow sausages. The grayish large intestines look like the forehead of a Klingon. The bladder and intestines are full, and Henri skillfully maneuvers around them. They are warm and sticky. The heart is as big as our own, about the size of a fist. They lift up the rear of the pig to pour out the blood into the pot.

Henri carefully cuts out the appendix and liver. The liver is big enough to be a meal for a family of four. They will use the small intestines to make sausages. The white stomach is big, about the size of a large roast chicken but mushier. I can't see the lungs. With a machete, Henri carefully but forcefully chops down the middle of the spine. Each flank is then cut into quarters. The feet are cut off as treats for the dogs. Each chunk of meat is rinsed in water and then placed on a plastic sheet on the ground. The chunks are then covered so that the flies don't get to them. Lastly, John splits the head with a hatchet. The brain is small, about the size of half a fist. I am impressed with their skill in filleting the pig with knife and hatchet. I kept looking for a single moment when the pig changed from looking like "pig" to looking like "food" but never found it. In the beginning there was just a pig, and in the end of the process, food.

By 11:00, after about four hours of work, they are finished. The chunks of pork are brought to the kitchen and put into a lot of freezer bags. I take a shower and wash off the spatters of blood.

It was something new. It was fascinating to be able to identify most of the things that were in there. It sure gave a lot of meat. It's amazing when you think that all they really had to do was give their leftovers for six months to this natural garbage disposal, and six months later they have food for weeks.

What makes something "disgusting?" If I had just read this, I might very well not have finished reading it, but when I was there, I enjoyed it. If I saw half a pig carcass on the sidewalk in New York City, in the context of my everyday life I'd probably find it disgusting. But in this context, I didn't. If you gave a child a cockroach in a cage every year for Christmas, and everyone who ever saw the cockroach said, "Ohhh, how cute!"; would the child say, "Yuck!" when they saw a cockroach on the floor of their kitchen? The Chinese traditionally like crickets, and crickets don't seem too "pretty" to me. When the pig was killed, I was around people who valued the process, who didn't say, "yuck." They had a purpose for pretty much the whole animal. Perhaps we don't like this kind of thing in the

“First” World because it reminds us of our own mortality. Perhaps we’d rather avoid being forced to think, “Gee, I look just like that on the inside, too.”

A week later, I am eating dinner with my homestay family. One of the dishes is a curry made with some kind of meat. The pieces of meat are whitish and hard, kind of like squid. It’s pretty good. After I have eaten half of what I have on my plate, the mother asks me, “Do you know what that is?”

I don’t.

“It’s pig insides.”

A split second after she says this, I realize that she probably shouldn’t have told me that. After about a minute, it is honestly difficult for me to finish the curry. I have to force each mouthful. And just because I wasn’t used to eating “pig insides.”

The mind is a powerful thing.

Memory: Softball

I’m in middle school, perhaps 7th or 8th grade. We’re playing softball in Van Cortlandt Park for gym. Our gym teacher, Mr. Caldera, is pitching. I’m at-bat.

I hate softball. No one has ever taught me how to hit, throw or catch well, so I feel generally useless. Any at-bat for me is, well, hit or miss.

I cinch up my grip on the silver aluminum bat. My classmates stand by the chain-link fence watching. Mr. Caldera lobs a slow pitch at me. As the ball approaches the bat, I swing.

A split-second later, the ball strikes low on the bat, hitting both the bottom of my right thumb as well as the handle of the bat. As I’m gripping the bat tightly, the impact has the effect of pulling the skin on the top of my thumb away from the skin pressing into the bat. The skin splits cleanly, creating a half-inch wound on the side of my thumb. Bright red blood begins to gush out of it.

I wince in pain, drop the bat, bend forward slightly and cradle my right hand in my left. The bat makes a metallic clanking sound as it bounces on the black asphalt.

As I’m doubled-over in pain, ironically it turns out that this was actually a hit, and my classmates are screaming at me to run—with an implied you idiot! in their collective tone when I don’t.

Seeing me clutching my hand and not running, at this point Mr. Caldera comes forward from the mound up to me to find splotches of blood on the ground. He calls a time-out and escorts me over to his blue plastic first-aid kit. I sit down, and he wraps my thumb in gauze and white adhesive tape.

I sit-out the rest of the game, holding my hand.

It was a hit, damn-it!

When class is over, we head back to school. I stay close to Mr. Caldera. As we climb a hill, he asks me how I’m doing. My thumb still hurts, but otherwise I feel fine.

We return to the school’s locker room. While my classmates are changing out of their gym clothes, he wants to take me downstairs to the school nurse. As he walks out of the athletic offices with me following him, suddenly I start to feel light-headed. My vision begins to get splotchy in the periphery. I suddenly realize that if I don’t sit down, I’m going to faint. Just at that moment, I’m passing a white plastic chair in the Director of Athletics’ office. Not having the ability to verbalize what’s happening to me, I collapse in the chair and lean forward. A moment later, Mr. Caldera realizes that I’m no longer following him and comes back into the office to see what’s happened. He sees me sitting there and suggests I take a breather. I do.

I assume it’s because of the blood I lost.

After a minute, I feel ready to get back up, and we take the elevator down one floor to the nurse’s office.

Nairobi

I have the good fortune to be able to take a school holiday in Kenya, booking a three-day safari to Maasai Mara game park. With a few days in Nairobi before I go, I decide to spend a day exploring the city on foot. Before leaving the Seychelles, I recall a colleague warning me, “Nairobi can be pretty rough.” Upon hearing this, I silently said to myself, “I’m from New York City. I should be able to handle it.”

After breakfast at the hotel, I put on my bright blue windbreaker and set out in the cool morning. The cloudless sky, high elevation, and dry air make for a perfect day, gradually warming over the course of the day.

Thinking it will be interesting to see, I head out towards the main train station. Almost immediately, I am confronted by groups of people living on the street begging. They are aggressive. I find I have no choice but to try and spot them at a distance and avoid them.

On the way to the station, completely by accident I happen to pass the U.S. embassy, an imposing, if ugly, medium-sized concrete building. Just across the street is a tree-lined approach to the train station.

Reaching the station, I begin to wander around. It is mostly an open plan, with long parallel roofs over the train tracks. Romantic images of steam locomotives from movies such as *Out of Africa* come to mind.

My reverie is interrupted by a casually dressed African man, perhaps in his late-30’s or early-40’s, who approaches me with a warm smile. He asks me where I am from. While at first I am concerned about his intentions, he strikes me as different from the average street person, showing interest in me as a person rather than asking for food or money. He fawns over my answer of being an American and invites me to “sit and talk.” Something tells me to be wary of this invitation, but I have no concrete evidence upon which to base my concern. When I hesitate, he pleads with a tilt of his head and a smile, “We don’t get much news from the U.S.!”

As a Peace Corp Volunteer with a mission for cultural exchange, it is difficult to say no to such a comment. After a pause, I shrug and say, “O.K.” He is clearly pleased that I have accepted his invitation.

With him still making small-talk, we walk east, away from the train station. We cross a wide avenue that appears to demarcate a neighborhood with smaller buildings. I see fewer and fewer Europeans. Little shops and street stalls replace office buildings and boutiques. I wonder where we are going and how far.

Just as I begin to craft excuses to turn back, he turns into a small white hotel, one clearly not frequented by White people. I am both relieved we’ve reached our destination as well apprehensive about what’s going to happen next.

He leads me up to an open second-floor waiting area. The hotel is neat and spare. Africans in white robes and headdresses sit on couches and chairs in the simply-decorated room lighted by daylight from large windows. There is a low-level hum of voices, but it is not crowded or noisy. He motions to a booth by one of the windows over-looking the street.

A waitress comes over to our table and asks us if we’d like to order anything. My host orders a cola. I order the same. He asks some perfunctory questions about my being a Peace Corps Volunteer and where I work.

After the warm bottles of soda come, he tells me his name is John. He says he is a first-year economics student from “a very old university”. He begins to tell me about how he is on a long journey. Starting in South Africa many months ago, he has gradually made his way north through multiple countries. Apparently, his ultimate goal is to get out of Africa and go to school in the United States. He does not make explicit why, but his story implies that he has survived great hardship and overcome many obstacles to make it this far. Without a complete explanation of why, however, I feel

wary. Is he running from the law? Should I be concerned for my safety?

As he continues, I become increasingly concerned. Clearly, he has dropped the agenda of learning “news from the outside.” He asks me my name and where I am staying. My mind goes back to having randomly walked by the U.S. embassy earlier, and it occurs to me to say that the embassy recommends that we not give out that information. I now feel I have been led here under false pretenses, but without a specific threat to my safety, I don’t know what to do except to see where this goes.

He finally gets to what he wants. After describing his journey across multiple borders and how many more he has to cross, he asks if I would give him money to help him continue his journey.

My instinct is to not give him money, but I’ve never been put in a position to tell a host “No.” I use my line from before, “I’m sorry, but the U.S. embassy recommends that we don’t give out money.” It feels good to have something to set a boundary with, if contrived.

He nods as if he didn’t hear me and proceeds to reiterate his appeal. I suppress an impulse to get up and leave. Instead, I sit quietly and listen. I don’t trust him and don’t want to make any more waves than necessary.

At the end of this second pitch, I repeat my line, politely but firmly: “I’m sorry, but the embassy recommends that we don’t give out money.”

He looks down at the table and finds another angle to make the request. Once again, I decline.

It has now been a full hour since we set out for the hotel. At this point it occurs to me that the only thing preventing me from leaving is the check. After an awkward silence, I realize that if I’m with someone who is asking me for money, he’s probably not going to volunteer to pay for the drinks. I motion for the waitress to come over, and I pay for our sodas: about 25 cents. As I leave the coins on the table, he thanks me for the drink. Part of me wants to tell him off. I tell him he’s welcome.

We get up to leave.

We have to go down a long flight of stairs to get to the street. Approaching the stairs, the idea of him walking behind me down the stairs gives me an uneasy feeling. I let him go first.

Memory: 86th Street

I’m about 12 or 13. It’s a weekday afternoon on a sunny spring day. I’m coming from school, so I’m wearing my navy-blue blazer with a tie and my olive drab book-bag on my back.

I enter the Number 1 subway entrance at 86th Street and Broadway. After going down the first flight of steps, there is a landing before the next flight of stairs. There is a point in the middle of this passageway where you are out of sight of both the entrance from the street as well as the token booth at the bottom of the stairs. Just as I’m passing through this middle section, I’m suddenly thrown violently to the right up against the yellow tiled wall. My body and olive drab book-bag on my back shake with the impact.

A teenage boy has grabbed me from behind with both of his arms. My book-bag is in his chest. He pins me to the wall so I can’t move, his left hand dug into my left side. Although I can’t see all the way around, I am able to make out that he is older and bigger than I am. His skin is perspiring. My heart races. I freeze.

He seethes menacingly into my ear, “Give me your money! I’ve got a knife!” He presses his left hand deeper into my side.

My mind is reeling. I’m still working through the shock, the denial, the cognitive dissonance of this happening in broad daylight. This is a passageway I’ve walked down all my life without incident.



Photo ©2020 Peter W. Pruyh

Figure 19: The subway stairs at 86th Street and Broadway.

Taking in his threat, my instinct ... is to do nothing. Without any response from me, he impatiently repeats his demand: "Give me your money!" He is panting. The way I am dressed may suggest that I have a lot of money. I don't. A few dollars, maybe.

A primitive part of my brain implicitly sorts through what's going on: first, his threat that he has a knife; second, that he is afraid; and third, that this is Manhattan in the middle of the day. It is likely that any second someone will come along, either from above or below. He must be terrified of getting caught.

He squeezes me tighter, shakes me, and repeats his demand. Completely subconsciously, I have the sense that something doesn't add up. That primal part of my brain takes in the fact that I can't feel any sharp object in my side at all, just his blunt fist.

I take a risk: I continue to do nothing. A little voice says that time is on my side. With no conscious thinking going on, completely by instinct, I'm betting on the high probability of someone else coming by and what I'm sensing is a bluff on his part. This is somehow bolstered by seeing that he is scared. Just stall. But there's no way to be sure. Is this the right choice?

He's trembling more. The pause feels like an eternity. Just when I start to have second thoughts about how I'm handling this, with no warning, he breaks his grasp, shoves me forward hard, and dashes up the stairs into the street.

In the blink of an eye, he's gone.

I catch my breath. I try to shrug the whole thing off, but I'm shaken and trembling. I re-adjust my knapsack, continue on down the stairs, and go on about my day.

I never told anyone.

As I reach the street, I say good-bye to my host and regain my bearings to make a bee-line for the Nairobi train station. Re-tracing our steps, I worry if he's following me, but I don't turn around to look. I nervously re-cross the major thoroughfare and eventually find myself back at the station. I'm scared, angry, and feeling taken-advantage of. I contemplate canceling my self-led tour of the city and going back to the hotel for the rest of the day.

Just then, a tall, well-dressed Kenyan man in a light-colored tweed blazer, pressed brown slacks and dress shoes approaches me. "Excuse me!", he says. My first thought is, *Oh, no; not again!* Somewhat snarkily, I say, "Are you going to ask me for money?"

At hearing this, his back stiffens, and he is visibly angered by my response. With a furrowed brow he retorts seethingly, "No, I am not going to ask you for money."

"Well, everyone else has," I say with exasperation. Taking in his reaction, I offer an apology.

In his elegant Kenyan accent he then explains that he works for President Moi's office. My heart skips a beat. President Moi? Of *Kenya*? *The* President Moi? The one who has brutally suppressed his opposition for years and is widely regarded as corrupt? I get the sense that that would make this man something like a member of the Secret Police. *You've got to be kidding me.* He further explains that the man I had just been talking to is "a velly, velly bahd mahn." I take in what this implies: I have been followed for the last hour. *This is not good.*

He wants to know what we talked about. He motions to a shiny black four-door sedan with a Robin's-egg-blue interior that is parked at the curb. He opens the rear door and wants me to get in the car to go to a police station to answer some questions. *This can't be happening.*

While I'm not entirely sure what's going on, my instinct is visceral: *Do not get in the car.* Images of squalid Kenyan prisons come to mind.

I stall. As I hesitate, his tone gets more forceful: "Better come right now or there will be trouble!"

It then occurs to me to use the proximity to the U.S. embassy to my advantage. We can see it in the distance from where we are standing. I motion to it and say, "Why don't we do this at the U.S. embassy?"

He shakes his head and says with a dismissive wave of his hand that he doesn't want to involve my government, "lots of paperwork." This answer only serves to solidify my resistance to getting in the car.

He continues to pressure me. "Please come in my car right now!" His tone is very cross.

I repeat my suggestion of going to the embassy. He continues providing excuses as to why not to.

My brain races. I play the one card I have.

"I'm a Peace Corps Volunteer," I say.

He looks down, gives a slight bow of recognition, and with a slow sweeping hand gesture says, "That's good. Thank you for being in my country." His hospitality feels suspect, to say the least. But I sense he does now have a modicum of respect from knowing that he is dealing with a U.S. government employee. Nevertheless, he continues to pressure me.

I continue to stall.

At this point, another well-dressed Kenyan man, heavier and somewhat shorter, slowly walks up to the rear of the car. Apparently, he is a colleague. He seems more easy-going. In a calm tone of voice, he says to the taller one, "So this is the one. How is he?"

The taller one responds, "Scared." It takes me a moment to realize they are talking about me. The taller one turns back to me and repeats his demand sternly, "You must come right now!"

And then something interesting happens, something that I am only able to put into words as I write this. I look at the second man. I look at the first man. And something doesn't quite add up. Implicitly, my intuition takes in the fact that the second man is calm, while the first man is angry. From this disparity my subconscious concludes that the first man's anger is, in fact, an act. This

suggests the possibility that because I am a U.S. government employee, they actually can't lay hand on me.

I stare at the open door of the car in front of me. Without any of this reasoning occurring consciously, I suddenly become aware that I might just be able to ... simply walk away.

So I do.

I walk past the second man and turn to walk towards the U.S. embassy at a moderate pace. Just like walking down the stairs in the hotel only minutes earlier, I brace myself for something to happen. Footsteps. A yell. A heavy hand on my shoulder. Two heavy hands on both shoulders.

Just make it to the embassy.

My fears fail to materialize. Within two minutes, I arrive at the flight of concrete steps leading up to the embassy. I decide to go up them and stay for a few minutes on the landing at the top of the stairs. Under an eve, I am now out of sight of the train station. Just inside the metal and glass doors, a United States Marine silently stands guard in the well-lit lobby next to an American flag.

Catching my breath and bearings, after a few minutes I go back down the steps and uneventfully walk back to the hotel.

I never told anyone.

The Day I Learned I Was White

Seychelles had no indigenous peoples. It was first settled by the French as a colony for slaves and freed slaves. It was then ceded to the English when Napoleon lost. Because it is along the trade routes to Asia, there is also a population of Chinese and Indians. After 200 years of ethnic mixing, the skin pigment of the Seychellois people is a continuous spectrum. As a result, this can create certain challenges for Seychellois when they travel for the first time to countries that are more segregated. The following are a collection of anecdotes from Seychellois who lived overseas as well as a couple of my own. Listening to their stories helped educate me about my own racial privilege and the dynamics of power surrounding race.

The following story was told to me by a Seychellois named Peter who studied overseas for four years at a university in England:

When I arrived in the town, I knew no one else there. Every afternoon I would go jogging. Occasionally I would run into a Swedish woman who happened to go running around the same time. One day the woman struck up a conversation with me. She asked if I was doing anything for dinner. I said no, so we decided to go to a certain restaurant that evening. That night, while we were walking down the street together to the restaurant, a car full of young men drove by. As they passed, one of them leaned out the window and yelled, "You white-woman-stealing nigger!"

I stopped. I turned to her, and I said, "Uh, I don't think this is such a good idea. I'm not going." I started to go back to the bus stop. She said, "Oh, no. It's alright. Forget them. Come on; let's go." And I said, "No, I'm sorry. I have to go. I'm sorry." And I took the bus back to my dormitory.

That day, that was the day that I learned that I was Black.

This anecdote is from a Seychellois named Benjamin who attended a university in Montréal:

One of my classes was in a large lecture hall. One day, I realized that the rest of the seats in

my row always remained untaken, regardless of which row I sat in. This puzzled me. And then suddenly, I realized, “Ahhh, so this is racism.”

After that, I began to notice racism in many different ways, some very subtle, like whether someone gives you your change by putting it in your hand or leaving it on the counter. When I was looking for an apartment, I’d speak with the landlord on the phone about the place and would be told that it was still available. Then when I’d show up to have a look in-person, they’d tell me that it’s been taken. It got so bad that when I’d call I got into the habit of starting right off by saying, “I’m Black, and if you have a problem with that, just let me know, and I’ll try someplace else.”

“Oh, no! No problem, no problem at all!” they’d say.

Brigitte was one of my students:

Brigitte’s mother, Sonia, went to a state university in Alabama for four years. Sonia brought her three children with her who attended the local schools. Brigitte, the eldest, went to the local high school. On the first day of school, Brigitte was asked to fill out a registration form. One of the questions on the form was: “Check one: White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American.” She did not know what to put. She thought to herself, “Well, I’m from Africa, so I’ll put ‘Black’.”

That evening Brigitte told her mother about the incident and asked, “What am I?” Her mother had recently gone through the same experience in registering at college. She didn’t have an answer.

Later on in the year, Sonia had to fill out some other form that asked the same question. This time she asked the woman behind the counter, “Excuse me, but what should I put here?” The woman looked at her a moment and said, “You’re ... Hispanic. Put ‘Hispanic’.” So she checked ‘Hispanic’.

When Brigitte went to take her driver’s test, she filled out her application as she had for High School. The examiner took her form, read it, looked at Brigitte, looked at the form, looked at Brigitte and said in his southern accent, “You’re not Black!? You’re White!”

Approaching the end of my Peace Corps service, I attended an official week-long Close-of-Service training at a Peace Corps training center in Lake Naivasha, Kenya, 60 miles north of Nairobi:

One day we had a guest speaker who was a White volunteer who had previously served in Kenya, returned home to Chicago, and then came back to Kenya to work as a Peace Corps staff-member. She came to our training to share her experience of being home after living in Africa for two years. She had loved her time in Kenya and described the intense and multi-faceted reverse culture-shock of returning to one of America’s largest cities.

This was the early 1990s, and at that time in the U.S. a racial incident had occurred that prompted racists to wear buttons that had a picture of a watermelon with a circle around it and a slash through it. Upon coming home, she said she saw these on the lapels of White Chicago businessmen on their way to work.

And then something that I would not have expected happened: she choked-up. As she paused to cry standing at the front of the room, I tried to make sense of what was happening.

First, my White up-bringing had insulated me from watermelons as a racist sleight, so I wasn’t completely sure what was going on.¹⁷ But more importantly, this was the first time I had seen a White person cry over racism directed not just at an individual or someone who was with them at the time,

¹⁷ Starting in the 19th Century, African-Americans were stereotyped in racist cartoons eating watermelon, a common crop in the southern United States. For more on this see “*The Pain of the Watermelon Joke*” by Jacqueline Woodson, *The New York Times*, November 28, 2014.

but an entire racial group. Their pain was her pain.

I took that in.

What does that take, I wondered? What kinds of experiences does a person have to have to feel another group's suffering as if it was their own?

I'll end with an anecdote that happened to me at home:

One day when I was in pre-school and my sister was in kindergarten, a family friend asked us, just out of curiosity, how many Black children were in our class. And we didn't know—because we didn't know what it meant to be “Black”. So it was explained to us what it meant to be Black, and the next day after school we could say how many Black children were in our class.

Twenty-five years later, after hearing Peter's story about being with that Swedish woman in England, I remembered this incident, and I realized, for the first time, that that was not only the day that I learned what it meant to be Black. It was also the day that I learned that I was White.

Bernard

I'm eating dinner in my home on a weekend evening, *pwason griye*—grilled fish—that I've made with Basmati rice, the standard Seychellois Creole fare.

The truth is that I'm not in a good place. I'm more than half-way through my two years of service, and I'm gradually facing the reality of what I can accomplish here and what I cannot. This, combined with recent pressures at work and a persistent sense of social isolation, are taking their toll. Besides my homestay family—who feel like they will be my adopted family for life—and a few Seychellois who are affiliated with Peace Corps, I feel like I've made few lasting friendships here. I have dozens of acquaintances but few close friends. And it's close friends who can provide emotional support.

I am aware of the stereotype of a Peace Corps Volunteer in the Seychelles. Volunteers we've met from other countries assume that every minute we're here is like a vacation in a tropical paradise. The reality is different: there's suffering here, too. The Seychellois even have a euphemism in Creole for this clash between perception and reality. When something awful happens, they often say sardonically, "*En lot zour dan paradis*", translation: "Another day in paradise"

So when I started to spend time with Bernard, a French expatriate who I met through another friend, I was grateful to have a male English-speaking friend my own age to hang out with. Meanwhile, Bernard, who worked as a contractor for several local businesses and governmental organizations, also had a car. When you're a Peace Corps Volunteer, it's hard to turn away from a friend with a car.

In the last few days, there's something about the combination of stressors I'm feeling that has reached an apex. With my stress exacerbated by the persistent tropical heat, I've recently broken out in a bizarre heat rash on my legs. Giant pink splotches cover 80% of my skin, mid-thigh down. Warm to the touch, they are swollen up a few millimeters above the surrounding skin. Nothing like this has ever happened before in my life. The splotches don't itch or hurt, but I feel like my body is giving me a message loud and clear: "You're stressed!!!" I'm reminded of a warning we were given in Pre-Service Training about being in the Peace Corps: "The highs are higher, and the lows are lower."

Just then I see the twin beams of a car's headlights come up my driveway. As the car turns to park, I see that it's Bernard. This is one of the nice things about island living; people sometimes just drop by.

Grateful to see a friend, I get up and welcome him, offer him a chair at the table, and ask if he'd like some fish and rice. I have enough to share. He gratefully accepts.

As we catch up, Bernard gets to chatting about his social life. Currently single, he begins to describe a lifestyle of dating many Seychellois women. As I'm listening and eating, he casually mentions that there have been a few times when he's gotten a woman pregnant. When that happened, he says he would buy airline tickets to the neighboring island nation of Mauritius, fly there with her, and pay for her to have an abortion.

Abortion is legal in Mauritius. In the Seychelles, a Roman Catholic country, it's not.

As he's talking about this, I'm becoming increasingly disturbed. It's sounding like he's knowingly using abortion as his birth control method. Knowing that these young women are likely Catholic, I can only imagine how traumatic an abortion must be for them. No doubt conducted in secrecy from their families, surely such an ordeal will haunt them the rest of their lives. And the way Bernard is telling it, it sounds like he isn't giving the women a choice in the matter.

What's more disturbing, however, is the tone with which Bernard is talking about this. He might as well be talking about buying a coat. As he names that he's done this three times, he shrugs.

In that moment, I have a visceral physical reaction. It is as if somewhere inside me my faith in our relationship cracks in half like a 2x4.

Several months ago, I watched from a distance as Bernard flirted with a young, Seychellois woman. At one point I overheard him say to her, "Why do you resist me?" I didn't think much about

it at the time, but the scene haunts me now as nothing less than sinister. As a European White male with money, Bernard wielded enormous power in that moment, power that I could not see until well after.

For the first time, I feel like he's revealing to me who he is: someone who is morally indifferent to the suffering of others. I can't see endorsing such a lifestyle by continuing to hang out with him.

But there's something else. What's really bothering me isn't about him. What's really bothering me is my own naïveté. How could I have missed all this? I'd spent so much time with Bernard: group barbecues by the aquamarine waves at Intendance, my favorite beach; day-trips in his car with friends around the island of Mahé and offering to pay for his gas; movie nights in the Peace Corps office. I feel betrayed by him in a way, but, far worse, I also feel I've somehow betrayed myself.

With the shame of this realization, something starts to happen in my body. My head starts to feel light. I've been mostly silent, at first trying to be a supportive friend. But now I'm struggling to process what he's been telling me and how I feel about it—on top of the other stressors I was already carrying. As Bernard keeps talking, the blood slowly drains from my head.

The next thing I know, I'm bent two inches above my plate of food with my eyes closed. I can hear a strange clucking sound. Disoriented, I gradually gain the awareness that I must have blacked-out, not enough to fall forward into my food, but close. Apparently, the clucking sound was my throat trying to breathe while unconscious.

I open my eyes and slowly raise my head, the blood beginning to return.

"Are you alright?!", Bernard asks with alarm.

"Yes," I say, "but ... I need to lie down"

I slowly walk to my bedroom and lie back on the mattress. I bend my knees because I've heard it helps pool blood into the upper part of your body. I'm in a cold sweat.

As I gradually start to feel better, Bernard asks hesitantly, "Was it ... because of ... what we were talking about?"

Weakened by what's just happened, my typical politeness filter is off-line, and I give an honest yes.

For the first time that evening, Bernard becomes quiet.

Night Dive

The sun is just setting across Beau Vallon Bay as we speed towards the tiny island of L'Îlot ("Lee-low") in the twin-engine fiberglass dive boat. It's raining slightly. In the ten minutes that it takes to get there, it is already dark.

L'Îlot is little more than a jumbled collection of granite boulders, each sculpted smooth by millions of years of the Indian Ocean's pounding. In the center of the island three palm trees and a few bushes peek up from behind the rocks. That's all there's room for.

There is a strong current between the mainland and L'Îlot, so we will stay to the leeward side of the island during the dive. The boat is anchored, and the Divemaster, Bobby, gives us the briefing on the local terrain. My buddy on this dive will be my instructor, Mike, who is from Germany. He's the first teacher I've ever had who is younger than I am (by one year). This will be the last dive of my Advanced Open-Water Diver Course.

I zip up my wet suit as the boat crew undoes the safety harnesses that strap each of the divers' tanks to the scuba (Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus) rack down the center of the boat. Each diver prepares their mask and puts on their weight-belt and fins. When he gets to my tank, I take it and put it on the bench next to me. I check the air pressure gauge on the handheld console: 200 bar (PSI). I loosen the straps of the Buoyancy Control Device (BCD) vest and put my arms into the two straps. The tank is strapped to a frame on the back of the BCD. After putting on the vest, I tighten the shoulder straps and secure the gauge console under the waist belt so that it doesn't bang around when I roll backwards into the water.

I hang the strap of my underwater flashlight around my neck and turn it on. I put on my mask and put the air regulator mouthpiece in my mouth. Breathing is completely normal. With the heavy tank now on my back, I carefully raise myself up and sit on the edge of the boat railing so that my tank is hanging out over the water behind me. The boat-hand looks out over the edge of the boat to make sure that no other divers are beneath me. "Clear!" I hold one hand over my mask and regulator so that they don't come off when I hit the water. I stick my legs straight out in front of me so that the back of them don't collide with the boat railing at the knee when I go over.

I fall backwards off the railing.

Your body is straight and pointed downwards when you hit, so your head goes under first. You then hear the tank and the rest of you come in with a muffled splash. I used to keep my eyes tightly closed during this process, but now I keep them open throughout. Upside-down, your head goes down about 6 feet before you begin to bob back up to the surface. My light is now floating upwards illuminating my yellow flippers above. I stare up at them as I rise, and my feet break through the surface. My BCD rights me, and I inflate it like a lifejacket so that I don't have to tread water. The water is warmer than the night breeze. I swim over to the anchor line where Mike is waiting for me to begin our descent.

He gives the thumbs-down signal, and we deflate our BCDs and sink underwater. The sound of the wind and waves abruptly cuts off. I point my light downwards as we descend into the blackness. In the sea water the brilliant beam of the flashlight is sharply defined. The staff of light follows a twist of your wrist like a sword cutting through the darkness. But there is nothing to see. The ocean floor 18 meters below is well beyond the reach of my light. There are no visual cues to orientation except the direction in which your bubbles leave you each time you exhale. Armed with our light sabers and oxygen, we gently fall into the silent black hole.

I hold my light against my gauges and then take it away. The dials are luminescent, so I can now read them easily. The depth gauge slowly increases: six meters, ... 8, ... 12. If I inhale deeply, I make myself more buoyant and can slow or stop my descent. We descend past a strobe light that Bobby has attached to the anchor line to help us navigate back to the boat at the end of the dive. I hold my nostrils and exhale frequently to equalize the pressure in my ears. Other than that, you do

not feel the increasing atmospheric pressure. My mask pushes against my face, but only because the oncoming water is pressing against its flat faceplate. Near the bottom at 16 meters we will be at 32 atmospheres. I look between my depth gauge and my beam of light that is pointing straight down. I finally make out the coral texture of the bottom at the end of my beam.

At 14 meters, I can make out the area. The bottom is mostly white sand, with some large granite rocks jutting up around us. Behind us, the boulders of the island begin that continue back up to the surface. Mike has a camera with him, and we head towards one of the rocks. To help me keep off the bottom, I put a shot of compressed air into my BCD with the black button on my hand controller. They call this “maintaining your buoyancy.”

To help motivate you to keep off the bottom, blackish sea urchins blanket some areas of the granite. There are dozens and dozens of them, huddled together in clusters, each black and spiny, about the size of a grapefruit. If you bump into one too hard and the spines penetrate your neoprene wet suit, the barbs can sink into your skin. They cannot be pulled out. You just have to wait for weeks, sometimes months, for them to come out. Putting vinegar on helps dissolve them a little. Even long after they’ve come out, you can sometimes feel where they were. I am continually surveying my area with my light to make sure there is no new rock in my way that is covered with them.

Some of the urchins have folded their spines together in small bunches. It looks like a punk rocker’s hair-do. Are they sleeping? As I examine another urchin more closely, I can see the thin brilliant blue pattern in-between the spines that crisscrosses its shell. I hover above it, head down, with my bubbles passing up my legs. I see another one with what looks like white sand sprinkled on top. As I look at it, though, what I thought was sand miraculously dissipates into a small white cloud and evaporates into the surrounding water. Excretion? I watch a little longer and notice that some other urchins are doing the same thing.

They are spawning.

We pass some red corals covering a granite boulder. At this depth during the day, the water filters out most of the sunlight to leave everything in dull blues. But now with our artificial light sources, we can see in true colors. Mike takes a picture of a brilliant yellow starfish draped against the red coral background. Off in the distance, schools of fish weave back and forth, their silver bodies reflecting our small amount of light. They remind me of the swirling reflectors on so many bicycle wheels one might see traveling by the side of a road at night.

We go over to the base of the island. In a crevice I spot a box fish. It is about a foot long and grayish. Its body is structured in four distinct sides, each virtually making right angles with the others. It has huge black eyes about the size of quarters. It hovers in the crevice and beats its two little fan-like pectoral fins in circles like tiny helicopter blades. Mike takes a picture of it.

As we glide over another boulder, what at first glance looks like a small rock begins to move across the granite surface. I get closer and see a shell with tiny legs sticking out of it. It’s a hermit crab. But on the back of his shell are two long white plant-like tubes. These worm-like creatures have attached themselves to the shell. They are squatters at the crab’s homestead. This three-creature ensemble looks quite odd as the crab tries to out-run us. He sprints along the surface of the rock with the two white tubes swaying in the breeze behind him and runs headlong into a sea urchin. Oops. He stops for a second, as though dazed, like he’s in some Laurel & Hardy short. He re-orient himself and tears off down the other side of the rock into the security of the dark. He’s afraid of the light.

Off in the distance the glowing green halos of other divers glide over boulders. We come closer, and they are pointing their lights at an object on the ground. Closer still and we see what it is. A big fat tan crab, about the diameter of a basketball is crawling along the bottom. He looks like he wants very much to get away from the gaze of our lights, but he doesn’t quite know which way to run. Looking closer, I can see that he’s missing two of his rear legs on one side. He moves at a slow, awkward gait. Each of his two front claws are thick and almost as long as he is. He looks like he’s put on a pair of oversized boxing gloves, shown up at the ring, and found that there’s nobody to spar

with. We move on.

Almost an hour has passed. I shine my light on my gauges so that they glow again and check my air. 60 bars. Our maximum bottom time is 60 minutes or 50 bars, whichever comes first. I show my gauges to Mike, and he signals to head back to the strobe light on the anchor line to begin our ascent. Through the murk the white strobe pulses in 2-second flashes off in the distance. We head towards it.

Once near the boat, Mike gives the thumbs-up signal to ascend. I check my rate of ascent against his so that I don't go up too fast. The white twin hull of the dive boat gradually becomes visible looming above us. At five meters, we do a safety stop for three minutes, a precaution for nitrogen sickness. After just one shallow dive, this is not absolutely necessary, but the more dives you do in a day, the more important a safety stop becomes. After the three minutes are up, Mike rises to the surface, and I follow.

Before I reach the surface, I stay down for one more treat. I shut off my light and am surrounded by darkness. With a flick of my wrist I disturb a multitude of the plankton that are throughout the water. When disturbed, some become bioluminescent. They glow pale green for a second or so and then go out. I wave both my hands in front of me and am rewarded with a bouquet of aquatic fireflies, who soon become invisible again. I wriggle my whole body from side to side. I am enveloped in a galaxy of tiny green stars that twinkle and then just as quickly vanish.

For as long as I am under, I am completely absorbed. No aspect of my life that is above the surface intrudes upon my thoughts. It is completely tranquil and utterly relaxing.

I ascend. Good-bye, everybody.

As I break through the surface, the cool ocean breeze hits my face, and high above I am welcomed back by the gaze of my own stars.

On the ride back, I sit at the bow to avoid getting splashed by the spray from the sides of the boat. Along the shore the string of hotels makes a crescent of light around the bay. We hit each wave hard.

I feel alive.

What Does It All Mean, Anyway?¹⁸

So yesterday my uncle sends me a couple of pages from the *Wall Street Journal* just for the fun of it and as I'm looking over the front page the first thing that catches my eye under "What's News—Business and Finance" is, "The Dow Industrials gained 19.65 points to 3511.65, boosted by a late wave of computer-aided buying," and then I look at the next column over and see something about, "U.N. Forces shelled a Somali clan leader's headquarters in Mogadishu," and then there's this story in the middle column about this guy in upstate New York who's built this automatic *pancake-making machine* that can make 1,546 pancakes in one morning and in very *next* column over I learn that Disney is having problems re-releasing *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* to movie theaters because most people think they've already *seen it* on TV or on video which is *not* the case because it actually never *has been* on TV or video and Disney thinks that people are being confused by similar animated classics that they *have seen* on TV or video *but* because the re-release of *101 Dalmatians* grossed \$60 million the folks at Disney are naturally kind of concerned about all this so they've got this executive quoted as saying, "We're going to make sure we remind everyone *Snow White* hasn't been out."

So, at about this point ... I take a look at the palm tree that's in the middle of my lawn. And I look at the coconuts that are hanging clumped together up there under the fronds. And tonight is a full moon and palm fronds are kind of hard and shiny, so I see the glint of the moonlight rippling across the leaves in the gentle ocean breeze. And I look down and see the moon shadow of the tree on the grass. And I can hear the muted roar of the waves crashing on the reef in the distance beyond the banana trees. And then I look up and see the one star that's bright enough to be still seen in a night sky with the moon that bright.

Then I look back down at the *Journal* and at that line about, "The Dow Industrials gained 19.65 points"

Then I look at the palm tree again.

And then I think, "Well ... just what *exactly* does it all *mean*, anyway?"

¹⁸ A version of this story appeared in *Peace Corps Today*, Fall, 1993.



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Figure 20: Seychelles sunset from the island of La Digue at La Passe.

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