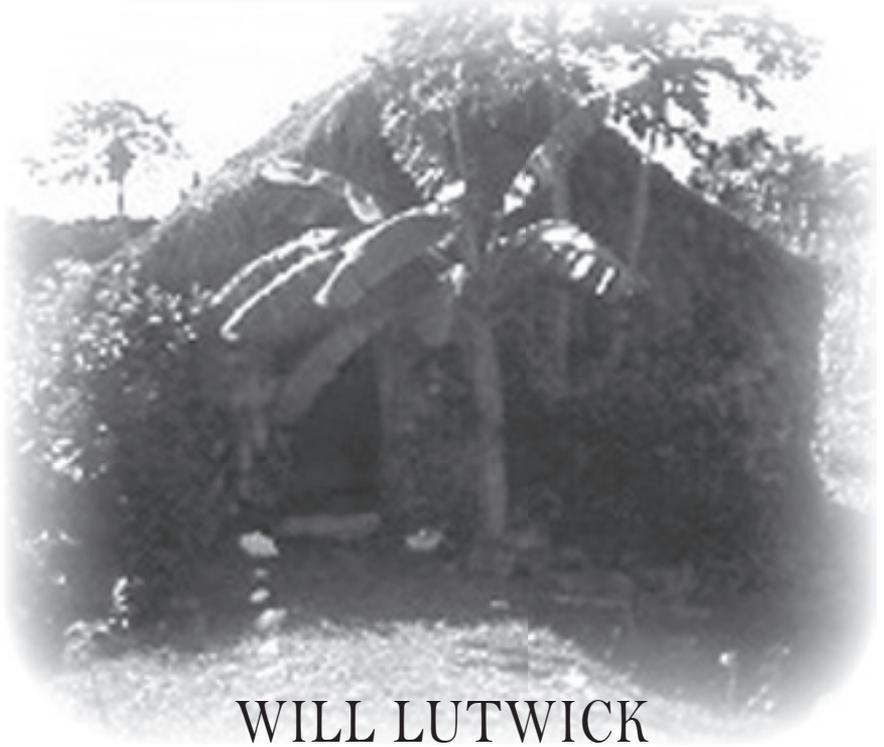


DODGING MACHETES

*How I Survived Forbidden Love, Bad Behavior,
And The Peace Corps In Fiji*



WILL LUTWICK



A PEACE CORPS WRITERS BOOK

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DODGING MACHETES: HOW I SURVIVED FORBIDDEN LOVE,
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“But he that dares not grasp the thorn should never crave the rose.”

— *Anne Brontë*

*“Like Alice, I chased the object of my desire into the rabbit hole, then
tumbled down, landing in an utterly unpredictable world. In a situation
like that, you take it moment to moment and try to keep your head intact—
physically first and psychologically second. Enjoying the wild
ride comes in a distant third.”*

— *From Dodging Machetes*

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CHAPTER ONE

Coconut palms swayed in the trade winds like tipsy hula dancers. Turquoise waves nibbled the virginal seashore. A flock of multi-hued parrots landed in unison on a nearby baka tree. They opened their beaks as if chirping their songs for me and me alone. How fortunate I felt to be working in that pristine, primitive paradise, untouched by television and fast-food joints. Then again, island life was hard. People lived in rat-infested thatched huts with no indoor plumbing, or electricity. But that was what my Peace Corps adventure in Fiji was supposed to be about—escaping the decadence, materialism, and soul-killing careers of the developed world. Discovering my true identity in a more innocent, peaceful land where the shiny-faced natives couldn't help themselves from being charming. Getting back to basics. Being one with nature. Living large with the locals. This indigenous life, fragile and endangered—I was so blessed to be experiencing it before it completely vanished from planet Earth.

“Hey, Will, call maintenance and have them turn up the air conditioning. I'm meeting with some big shots from the trade commission, and I don't want to be sweating like a pig.”

“Call 'em, yourself, Milton. I'm busy,” I said, yanking my consciousness from the idyllic scene I'd been surveying through a wall-sized window of tempered plate glass.

OK, so I wasn't one of *those* Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs), the ones who had been assigned to *the bush*. But that wasn't my fault. I didn't get to choose my station when I had arrived in Fiji a year earlier, in November 1968. I lived in Suva, Fiji's bustling capital (by island standards), and worked in the tallest structure in that region of the South Pacific. The Fiji Government Offices building was a glass-and-steel skyscraper that towered out at six stories and would look at home in any American suburban office center. I shared a concrete flat with Emmett Buck, a good ol' boy from a dinky west-Texas town, and we did have an electric oven, screens on the windows, and indoor plumbing. So I guess you could say we not only had Fiji water flowing from the spigot, we flushed with it too. And I didn't have to sleep under a mosquito net like most of my fellow Volunteers and be at high risk for getting amoebic dysentery, dengue fever, or elephantiasis, a disease that supersized the affected body parts. But we urban Volunteers had to risk diseases that our friends in the villages rarely caught, at least while *in* the villages. Such as the venereal ones, because Suva was where casual sex was most likely to happen. Luckily, penicillin was available. It was gratifying to have some accoutrements of Western civilization available, just in case you needed to bail out of a Third-World jam.

The dynamics of our work situation made it difficult for me to like Milton. Our local higher-ups thought he must be brilliant because he got his MBA at Harvard. They had never heard of Duke or Michigan, the universities where I got my degrees. So they fawned over Milton as if he were a business wizard. The truth was that he was almost as green and clueless as I was, but he was adept at self-promotion, a behavior for which I had neither skill nor interest. Our boss, Sitiveni Naitini, who was the government's director of commerce, considered me lower wattage than Milton's luminescence. That lesser support hurt my work, because I had more trouble getting cooperation from others in the Fiji government and private industry for my projects. Word would spread quickly over the coconut wireless of who was in and who was out.

But there was one advantage to playing second banana to the Harvard boy. Nobody much cared what I worked on, so I mostly

worked on what I wanted. My biggest project was pushing passion fruit to the American market. I figured with a name like that, it would be an ad agency's dream product. Who cared that it tasted like sour pickles in its natural state? It could always be sweetened to excess and chemically flavored like all the other processed fruit products that Americans thought were part of a healthful diet.

I juggled two other on-going assignments in my not-terribly-busy schedule. I founded and managed a venture where oranges were shipped from Rotuma, Fiji's outermost island, to Viti Levu, its biggest, where I and 60 percent of the country's population were living. The Rotuman oranges had thick green peels and were bigger, juicier, and sweeter than the ones from our island, so it was an easy sell. Somebody just had to get the trade going. Nobody actually cultivated oranges in Fiji—they grew wild like a lot of Fijian fruits. One of the perks of paradise.

I also was doing export marketing research for Fijian handicrafts, working closely with local cooperatives to see if Americans would buy their wares. If I were to be successful, there would come a day when Fijian cannibal forks, war clubs, and whale's tooth pendants would grace wood-paneled den walls in Chattanooga and Chicago. Their owners would know nothing about their cultural significance but would buy them because they would look cool in some catalog.



Milton was one of the Volunteers from the third wave of PCVs that landed in Fiji. We were invited there to spread American know-how and perform free labor in that then-British colony of 333 islands, which was in preparation to become an independent Commonwealth nation within a year. Our first contingent arrived in January 1968, and my group, Fiji-2, followed them a year later. Two more groups had arrived during the year after we landed, and several new ones were in the planning stage.

Our PCV population in Fiji had zoomed from zero to about two hundred fifty in only two years. As compared with some five hundred thousand locals, we were becoming almost a measurable minority group.

I sometimes wondered why the Peace Corps powers-that-were put so many of us in that small country, instead of in other poorer and far more populous nations in Asia, Africa, and South America, where starvation, war, and disease kept life expectancy to about thirty years. Whereas in Fiji, no one was starving, war was nonexistent, disease was minor, and the life expectancy of seventy years was about the same as in the United States. In Fiji, the locals were poor in material terms, but nobody needed riches in a naturally favored tropical paradise. And then I realized my question contained its answer. The much higher concentration of Volunteers in Fiji, instead of hellholes like Haiti or Bangladesh, was precisely because those places were hellholes. The Peace Corps bureaucrats in Washington surely didn't want too many of their young adults from affluent enclaves (average age: twenty-four, the great majority of us fresh out of college) sending letters back to their parents describing scenes of utter destitution, rampant infectious diseases, and crime run amok. That would not sit well with Mom and Dad, who might complain to their local congressperson. Nor would it impress the Peace Corps' recruiting target: other well-educated, under-experienced young adults. We wanted to live like the locals and improve the lot of poor people—just make it a pleasant place to hang out for two years. And that, indeed, was Fiji.

None of us were looking for the bullet-dodging experiences of our less-favored cousins who were serving their country and getting their cultural diversity lessons in an entirely different way in a place called Vietnam.



One morning Sitiveni called Milton and me to his office, a room illuminated by rays of sunshine bouncing off the surface of the Pacific.

A diploma from a New Zealand college graced one wall, while the opposite one featured pictures of Sitiveni's tall, dignified wife and their two little girls. A gold-framed photograph on a circular inlaid-wood table pictured Sitiveni standing with Ratu Sir Kamasese Mara, Fiji's George Washington, both of them wearing long-sleeved, white dress shirts, thin black ties, and *sulus* (traditional gray gabardine sarongs). I marveled how those pants-alternatives never fell when Fijians wore them. Whereas, whenever I wrapped a sarong around me, I could barely make it from the shower to the bedroom without the curtain dropping.

Sitiveni swiveled around and smiled at us with rows of teeth wider and brighter than the Cheshire cat's. His enormous brown bowling ball of a head was mounted on powerful shoulders. He spoke in soothing sentences, a modest man despite a regal native lineage and a linebacker's physique. "Milton, Will, we're getting a new employee here on our floor. She'll be Mr. Docker's personal assistant, but if you gentlemen have some typing needs and she has the time, she can do that for you. But no other work for her unless you go through me first. Remember, she's *Mr. Docker's* personal assistant." He said, "Mr. Docker's," as if the man were the British prime minister.

Gunther Docker was Fiji's chief of protocol, dispatched there by the Royal Family and so garnered a lot of respect and maybe a little deference from Sitiveni. Docker was a lean, pipe-smoking blue-blood in his fifties who hailed from the Knightsbridge section of London. I didn't know what a chief of protocol did. But of course he could use a personal assistant. Couldn't we all?

Sitiveni walked Milton and me over to the other side of our floor where Gunther Docker's office loomed much larger than Sitiveni's. British and Fijian flags were mounted, one on each side of the hardwood-paneled double doors, as if saluting the entrance. But my attention was drawn to a large mahogany desk beside the doors. Because sitting at and dwarfed by the desk was a slim, enchanting Indian girl with haunting panther eyes and split cherry lips set on butterscotch skin. And surprisingly, she was not only *not* wearing a sari, but her clover-green minidress rose halfway up her alluring thighs. I craned my neck for a better glimpse, then recoiled when Sitiveni began talking.

“Milton, Will, this is Rani Gupta. Rani is Mr. Docker’s new assistant. She’ll be doing some typing for you from time to time.”

Milton greeted her first, *damn it*, and I echoed him. Rani looked up and checked us out, the panther eyes scanning left to right. Then, with a reticent smile reflecting apparent disappointment, she brushed aside from her face an almost hip-length mane of sleek black hair and muttered a halfhearted “G’day.” She turned to the pile of papers neatly stacked on her desk, a sight apparently easier on those beguiling eyes than the drooling dorks in front of her.

Sitiveni walked away, and when he was out of the picture Milton sat oh-so-casually on the corner of her desk and said, “So Rani, tell me about yourself. What were you doing before you got this job?”

Rani looked up from her work, directly into Milton’s eyes, crinkled her little button nose, and said in lilting Queen’s English, “Will, is it? I’ve loads to get done right now for Mr. Docker and don’t have time for a chat.” Then, looking at Milton’s butt, she added, “If you wouldn’t mind, this isn’t a car park,” and with two flicks of her left hand, she backed Milton off her desk. He crumpled to the floor as if struck by a truck.

I took a cautious step forward. “Um . . . he’s Milton and I’m Will. Nice to meet ya, Rani.”

She shrugged and looked away.

That brief introduction had certainly flopped. Ordinarily at such times, I would have moved on without a second thought. Yet a faint patter in my primitive brain signaled to me that there was more to this encounter than met the eye and ear. I sensed Rani Gupta and I would have other things to discuss in the future besides typing.