

TWO FATHOMS DEEP

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(extract)



*Two fathoms of sand covered the wreck of the
French brig Arabelle, which lay hidden for two
centuries.*

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1811-1813

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A short thickset man, dressed in a simple General's uniform and his customary formidable bicorn hat and cockade, looked over the ramparts of the fort, taking in the view of the sea dyke stretching away to either side, and the distant earthworks recently constructed. The Colonel stood at a deferential distance from the Emperor, together with the impressive entourage: a Dutch Vice-Admiral, a Colonel of the *Corps Ingénieurs*, and three more Generals that I suspected were only there for show. After Napoleon had seen enough, he turned and beckoned the Colonel. Dupardieu saluted and they spoke briefly until the Colonel sought me out and called me to his side.

'Majesté, je vous présente le capitaine de Koning.'

I sprang to attention and saluted the Emperor.

'Capitaine de Koning, your Colonel is full of praise for you,' the Emperor said. Rumour had it that his command of foreign languages was minimal, much to my surprise however he pronounced my name faultlessly. *'I hear you have done very well during the construction work and even improved on my original plan. Please explain it to me.'*

'If Your Majesty permits.' I felt uncomfortable with this man, who exuded a pitiless sense of power and seemed to look right through me with his searching expressionless eyes. I thanked heaven that I spoke good French.

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In the deck over my head a thick glass wedge admitted a ray of light in the otherwise dark space. The surgeon's cabin was stuffy and tiny, hardly wider than the narrow cot I had slept in. My chest and kit bag occupied most of the deck, there was a sour smell of sweat and spilled wine, and I had woken up with a headache. Whether that was caused by the previous night's wine or by the poisonous air in the tiny space was open to debate. The main advantage of my quarters was having been able to sleep alone, undisturbed by other people moving about, although halfway through the night I had heard someone snore

thunderously on the other side of the screen. And I had been plagued by various itches, which later proved to be due to a multitude of vermin inhabiting the straw mattress of the bunk. Well, I had become used to vermin during the Spanish campaign.

Outside the hull I heard the water sluice under the ship, and the harping of the wind in the rigging, but we lay upright and I missed the sounds of a ship under way, no pounding feet of the crew running to stations, no creaking of halliards and sheets. So we were still at anchor in the same position as the evening before, and we'd shift our anchorage across the shallows to the Vlieland roads only that afternoon, as planned previously.

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'Now pay attention,' Lejeune said a few moments later. 'We will directly turn almost north to pass out of the sea entrance on the far side.' He put a man on the lead and took a compass bearing on the steeple of the little church at Hollum, which could clearly be seen above the row of dunes on the island, to starboard. 'Monsieur Monfils, are you ready to wear ship? Yes? Quartermaster, port your rudder. Monfils, let go and haul!'

The men hauled the wheel round, the *Arabelle* turned like a wind-vane and now had the wind on her port quarter as Monfils and his men braced the yards round. We steered away from the island, and although the English frigate initially made to follow us, her commander soon realised they drew too much water to follow our example. He was at risk of being trapped on a lee shore, surrounded by sandbanks, and made a sensible decision. The frigate hauled her wind whilst we were scuttling through the breakers with just an hand's breadth of water under the hull, the Bornrif shoal to starboard and another drying shoal to port. Our crew burst into cheering, shaking their fists and making obscene gestures towards the Englishman, who apparently was fleeing from us, tail behind his legs, although all he did was show good seamanship. I looked astern to the slowly disappearing church steeple of Hollum, not realising how soon I would see it back and in what circumstances.

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Despite his initial rejection, apparently Major Dehaene had become convinced of the good sense of building defences near the Hop. Two days later I

was woken at daybreak by shouting and harsh voices. As I came outside, I saw a line of men, women and children being driven out of the village by armed soldiers. They carried shovels and spades and were mercilessly pushed at gunpoint towards the Hop. I asked the sergeant in charge what was going on.

‘Orders from the Major, sir,’ was the reply. The islanders were forced to dig a deep ditch at the start of the Hop, in the shape of a square, using the excavated soil for a low earth bank inside the square to prepare for stronger defences.

I could well imagine the male population of the island being put to work, after all there was a war on and it could be seen as a form of conscription. But I couldn’t justify the brutal treatment of the women and children and made a complaint to Dehaene. He dismissed my complaints off-hand and said I could lodge my protest with the Colonel in Delfzijl if I didn’t like what was happening.

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Lejeune met my eyes, standing on the quarterdeck whilst I stood ready in the waist, next to the guns that had just been loaded. I read the despair and determination in his eyes, he nodded at me and I saluted, out of respect for the terrible decision he had to make. Somewhere forward a man began singing the Marseillaise, in a clear and strong voice, even though the Emperor had forbidden the revolutionary song. Undoubtedly he felt what was coming and took courage from the Republican battle hymn: *‘Allons enfants de la patrie... Le jour de gloire est arrivé... Contre nous de la tyrannie...’*

Other members of the crew joined in with the unknown singer, and even Grandjean, a firm Bonapartist, sang along. Without doubt it was the most glorious, but also the most terrible hour of the *Arabelle*, as she turned on her heel like a terrier going for a bull, the spray flying over the forecastle as we engaged the enemy.

As the last words of the Marseillaise sounded, we passed the enemy frigate at half a cable length’s distance and managed to fire a well-aimed broadside with the port-side battery. We hit true and hard, the enemy deck was swept clear and our carronade battered a gaping hole in the Englishman’s side. I saw their

bulwarks cave in, the debris flying through the air and heard their wounded scream, so short was the range.

Then the terrible reply came.

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Angels have red hair and freckles, there was no doubt about it. I was dead, laid out in a dark room with a candle at my head and feet, and I saw an angel sitting next to me. A redhead with freckles dressed in white, although unaccountably she had lost her wings. I couldn't feel my injured leg anymore and screamed in panic because I didn't want to be dead. The angel bent over me and held my shoulders till I calmed down.

'Monsieur, calmez-vous. Je ne vous quitterai pas. Easy, sir, I will not leave you alone.' She wasn't an angel, but a young woman of flesh and blood, in a frilled white blouse, speaking French. I had a fever, a splitting headache, my lips were parched and my tongue felt like leather. She filled a cup with water, helped me sit up a little and let me drink a few sips. She was stronger than you'd think, or perhaps I was very weak.

'My leg...', I whispered. 'What's wrong with my leg?'

'Do you speak Dutch?' She sounded surprised. 'We thought you were a French officer. The ship was French and the man who brought you ashore is a Frenchman.'

'Grandjean.'

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The attitude on the island was one of sullen resistance. The introduction of the French military conscription the previous year had only served to further increase the resentment. The young men of the island were little inclined to serve as cannon fodder in the Imperial armies and evaded conscription on a large scale. Some were hiding in a wilderness called the *Oerd* in the remote east end of the island, others had fled to the mainland with the help of friends. To some extent I could understand this, being a professional soldier myself who had chosen for warfare voluntarily, even if it was often a ghastly business. But

what prospect did military service offer an ordinary peasant boy, with an even chance of never returning home at all from a campaign?

Occasionally, doctor Maas received visitors that I couldn't fathom. They were island men, who always were received in his surgery late at night, with the door locked. It didn't surprise me too much due to his being a doctor, although I often recognised the same faces. They weren't from Hollum and I didn't know them.

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Flanked by armed gendarmes, I sat in the stuffy cabin of the packet boat, as we departed from the jetty in Nes for the crossing to the mainland at Holwerd. The skipper had needed to wait for the tide, which due to a persistent north-east wind was lower than usual. In my mind I reviewed all that had happened the previous days – the arrest of Fleur and the three smugglers, the interview in the watch-room, her surprised face when I let her go and her despair when she realised what lay in store for me. Then the arrival of the gendarmes from Dokkum under command of the fanatical Frenchman with his hard-bitten face. My future looked very dim and I tried not to imagine what it would feel like, the impact of the bullets of the firing squad on my body, at the grey of daybreak, standing blindfold against the wall of the barracks. I was in utter despair, this had to be the end of my life.

Suddenly sounds began to penetrate to my befuddled mind. On deck I heard shouts and the slamming of sails and rigging, the vessel suddenly seemed to be put on the other tack. Shortly afterwards a shattering impact against the hull threw me and my guards off the wooden bench in the cabin. Hard voices rang out on deck, two shots rang out, then a pause, a splash alongside and someone opening the hatch.

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In the course of July, Snouck brought me the news of the Emperor and his *Grande Armée* having crossed the Niemen from East Prussia into Russian territory a few weeks previously, being engaged in bitter fighting with the enemy. The Russians had been beaten time after time and were in full retreat. Napoleon was in hot pursuit, but was delayed by his heavy guns and supplies plodding after him over muddy roads. The Cossacks burned down all villages

and fields with the ripening harvest during their retreat, so as to deny the advancing French hordes food and shelter.

In due course, Snouck and I discussed the news that reached him from Russia on a weekly basis. By the end of July, as he came visiting once again in my small quarters in Frau Becker's place, to my surprise he brought a military staff map of the west of Russia, to discuss the progress of the expedition.

'The Emperor beat the Russians outside Vitebsk,' he said. 'He is now marching on Smolensk, where it seems he plans to establish his winter quarters.' He indicated the two towns on the map that lay between us on the table in my small room in Frau Becker's establishment.

'So up to now he is winning every battle,' I said.

'For the moment he seems to, but my informers also hear that the summer heat in Russia is exacting its toll. Dysentery and typhoid fever have broken out in the army and it seems the men are left by the roadside in droves.'

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Looking astern, I faintly saw the dark shadow of a sail half a mile behind us, almost invisible against the night sky. Bartels immediately ordered the lights in the binnacle and the cabin extinguished to darken the ship. Another moment and the creek turned west. Behind us an orange flash lit up the night and a gunshot blasted the stillness, the enemy having fired on the off chance of hitting us. They almost succeeded – the round shot passed over us with the sound of tearing paper, punched a hole in the mainsail and disappeared in the distance ahead of us. It was too dark to see where it hit the water.

Bartels remained his usual stoic self and cold-bloodedly changed course, turning with the deepest part of the creek. Shortly afterwards we heard a crash in the distance behind us, followed by a splintering sound, chains rattling and furious shouting. Our assailant had missed the turn and run hard aground on the shoal to the south of us as we calmly continued on our course up the creek. The flat-bottom barge with its shallow draught could easily manage shoal water – sailing on wet grass, as the sailors hereabouts said.

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Apparently Kosciuszko was one of the Cossacks, who had made a name for themselves in Poland due to their rapid, unpredictable advances which had unsettled the French time after time. But how was I supposed to go and observe French army units together with this man? He didn't look like one of ours and would stand out like a sore tooth.

'A good cover and a disguise will have to be prepared for him including the necessary papers, to enable him to travel with me,' I said. 'The French gendarmes are checking everyone passing on the roads.'

'I expect preparations for your mission will take several weeks at the very least. In addition, your departure must be timed carefully ahead of the expected advance of the Coalition forces to ensure our intelligence is up to date once they enter the Dutch north. That, by the way, will enable you and young miss Maas to go ahead with your marriage plans.' Snouck regarded me mockingly, awaiting my reaction.

I looked at him, not understanding. 'How can you know about that?'

'It is part of my work to know everything that happens on this island,' Snouck replied chuckling. 'That includes the welfare of the people I employ. If you arrive here and the first thing you do is hurry to a young lady instead of reporting immediately to me, there can only be one reason.'

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She was very weak, but also very lucid, and for a moment the years seemed to have dropped off her.

'I am dying, boy.' She spoke clearly, more than ever.

I nodded and pressed her hand. 'I know. It's all right, isn't it?'

‘Yes, it has been enough, it is my time. I had a good life, but I miss my husband so terribly. I have missed him for such a long time, you know.’ She closed her eyes for a moment and seemed to doze off, but not for long. ‘Listen, Bert...’

‘Yes?’

‘When I am gone, you must look in the attic. In the secret space behind the hatch there is an old box that belonged to Granddad Robert. You are a sailor, you know the sea, and in the box is something just for you.’

‘Granddad Robert?’

‘He fought for Napoleon against the English. Promise me to find it?’

I was at a loss. Her granddad who had fought for Napoleon? Two hundred years ago, that was impossible. She might be confused in the state she was in, but I promised her. ‘I will go and look for it. Now go to sleep, I will stay with you.’

Her eyes slowly closed. She seemed exhausted and drifted off.

The door bell rang. When I answered there was a young woman outside who I didn’t know. She was in jeans and a blue sweater and studied me uncertainly.

‘Who are you?’ She spoke with a slight accent I didn’t recognise. She was strongly built, like a sportswoman, not particularly slim, but muscular and fit, with attractive features, rebellious shoulder-length red hair tied with a string and serious dark blue eyes in a sunburned face with freckles.

I suddenly remembered to draw breath again – apparently I had held it as I had admired those eyes. ‘I am Bert – Bert Wilmink. I used to stay here years ago, in the summer holiday, with my parents. I happened to be on the island and found Aunt Huibertje. This week I came to visit her a few times.’

‘I am Fleur, her granddaughter.’ She stepped inside.

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That day we didn't find anything out of the ordinary. The search was limited to a period of about an hour and a half due to the tide. That was quite enough for Fleur, because despite the insulating wetsuit, the cold sea water drained her energy. We continued the search in the next days, in continuing quiet weather, taking the ground on the Vrijheidsplaat shoal west of Nes for the night, in view of the distance to be covered to the search area, and by day returned there to continue the search. By the end of the week, about one-third of the area had been covered, but nothing special had come up, apart from a broken bottle. It was a dull affair, until one day when Fleur, during her final dive, saw the metal detector light up, and noticed an irregularity on the bottom. She returned for her trimming vest and an air bottle and went deep, where amongst the broken shell she found a tiny black disc lying on the sand. She took it back up and on board I cleaned it up using vinegar. I looked at her, quite astonished, when I saw what it was.

It was a silver coin of 1795, and as we later discovered, a Prussian *Reichsthaler*. That could only have come from the wreck – hadn't the ship carried German silver from Bremen? I marked the position on the chart where Fleur had found the coin, and we lifted the anchor to turn back into the Borndiep with the flood tide.

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It must be near five in the morning now. As if a blanket had been pulled away, suddenly the fog lifted as the approaching dawn began to paint the sky dark blue. Ahead and to starboard there I could see further away, and to port the lighthouse of Schiermonnikoog stung through the murk with a bright flash. Ahead the green lights of the ferry route showed up, and the distant harbour floodlights on the mainland at Lauwersoog. We didn't seem to make much more progress by now, the tide must be about to turn and I needed to find a place to sail the boat aground to prevent us being hauled bodily to sea again by the ebb. The lack of a good anchor now made itself felt – all I had was the tiny kedge anchor to check us, which I didn't think would make an impression on a three-knot ebb.

I gybed once more and now sailed straight for the shoal close to port, the Oude Wal, or 'Old Shore' directly under the island of Schiermonnikoog. I grabbed the hook and tried to feel the ground. After a few tries I felt something

underwater, and shortly afterwards we gently touched bottom. The centreboard ran up and there we were, sitting comfortably aground with all sail standing.

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They sat distraught on the bench seat at the back of the wheelhouse, two crewmen, the boy and the skipper, the gin bottle on the table. The boy looked deathly pale, his hands shaking so badly he could barely hold the glass of gin.

‘Drink up, Klaas, the skipper said roughly, dropping a large calloused hand on the skinny shoulder of the boy. ‘And then bear up. In a minute you’ll go into the hold to discharge our catch – a few hours’ hard work will do you good.’

The others nodded in agreement.

‘Is it someone we know?’ the skipper asked.

‘Not one of ours,’ one of the others said. ‘He might be from a salvage boat or a yacht, but he’s no fisherman.’

The skipper got out his telephone and called 112. Half an hour later two police cars were on the quay. The coppers investigated the body on deck and called a hearse to take it to Groningen, where a forensic doctor would try to identify the body and investigate the cause of death. Shortly afterwards, after the deck had been swabbed to remove the bloodstains, the hatches were opened and the trawler could begin discharging her catch. But the ship’s boy couldn’t sleep the following night.

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The thirty minutes they had been allowed were past and I had another thumping headache. They gave me my paracetamol and I was returned to the cell. In the following days everything progressed at such a snail’s pace that it dulled my senses – the entire process seemed to be aimed at slowly grinding me to pulp until I admitted we were involved in the death of that piece of work they’d found in the harbour. Even though they kept their word in observing the two times thirty minutes a day, I was interviewed at irregular times and every time subjected to the same mind-numbing routine questions, re-phrased each time to try and nail me on something I’d say wrong by accident. The intimidation, the threats over the serious crime I was supposed to have

committed, the repeated nagging over times and places, everything was meant to unsettle me, just like Wessels had predicted. I didn't know how, but somehow I didn't give in, despite the headache, the disorientation and all the tricks habitually played in the interviewing room.

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'Have they paid you yet, or are you still waiting for your money? How much silver came out of the wreck? Half a ton? A ton? And what percentage of the loot will be yours? Three, four, five percent? The market price for a ton of silver is half a million. At five percent, twenty-five grand will make a nice sum.

Feenstra laughed disdainfully. 'Bullshit.' The policeman hadn't a clue of what had really been found in the wreck.

'It will be a matter of time before the *Butskop* is tracked down and the crew put in the slammer. We know the identity of at least two of those involved, and the loot must turn up at some moment,' Posthumus said, almost whispering, which made his threat sound even more forceful. 'If we find you have been involved in the owner's death, even if only sideways, the law will come down on you like a ton of bricks, unless you start talking. Perhaps then the judge will be easy on you.'

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After the connection had been broken, I stared at the phone in my hand, indignant at the man's patronising attitude. Speculating? Different priorities? It didn't fit their line of inquiry and was ignored without even considering it might be true. They simply were too bloody-minded to listen to something brought up, it was enough to tear your hair out. I was convinced I heard those men say 'Stangate Creek', it had been haunting me for days. I began to question what the police were even thinking of – we had almost been murdered by the scum and they had wasted days as we had been held in custody on no grounds. Meanwhile Posthumus hadn't moved forward an inch with his investigations and his offhand dismissal was the last straw.

I glanced at Fleur, who had heard my half of the conversation. 'He won't do a thing with the information about England. First they throw us in jail and put us under pressure for days instead of going after the real killers, and now this. He said I shouldn't speculate,' I spluttered angrily.

A vague idea came into my head. 'If the police refuse to do anything, maybe I should go there myself and search for clues,' I said. 'In this boat I'll be on the other side of the pond within a few days.'

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We were obliged to sail out to sea for fifteen miles to round Foulness Sand, the long sand spit that lies between the Thames and the Crouch, retracing our course of the previous day. It is a labyrinth of shoals and narrow navigable channels, not very different from our own Wadden Sea, and only late in the afternoon, rolling on the swell, we rounded the buoy that marks the tip of Foulness Sand. The tide was on the turn now, and a mile north-west of us we found the outer buoy of the Whitaker Channel, leading to Burnham. Now we turned back south-west, entering the Crouch.

Seals lay on the drying sands to either side of the fairway, as the ever-increasing tide took us inside. After a mile or so through the tortuous bends of the fairway, we sighted true sea dykes to both sides, and suddenly we were in a tidal river that looked very much like those at home. Soon we saw the entrance to the main tributary to the Crouch, the Roach, opening up to port.

Just past the corner of the dyke on Foulness Island, in the distance on a shoal on the opposite bank of the Roach against Wallasea Island, lay a black motorboat that looked suspiciously like the *Butskop*.

...

Abdul Khan had received the analysis report of the gold and silver he had brought from Sittingbourne and had been pleasantly surprised at the composition of the old metal, which was remarkably free of impurities. Expecting it to bring a nice profit in the Emirates, he had called one of his Arab clients using his PGP telephone, telling what he had on offer. After a short exchange in Arabic, he had given O'Leary orders to pack the precious metal in small wooden crates, each about thirty kilograms in weight.

Four days after Abdul Khan had visited the breaker's yard, a van appeared at Wilkes' gate carrying pre-fabricated packing cases, each about two feet long and one wide. A weight of thirty kilograms of gold or silver was packed in each case, surrounded by a large volume of polyurethane foam flakes disguising the real nature of the contents. Each case was carefully screwed shut and labelled,

and the next day a heavily loaded van went on its way to a cargo plane on a direct service from Heathrow to Dubai. The labels and cargo papers described spare parts for ventilation systems and air-conditioners, produced by a company in Eastbourne. At Heathrow a security official had been bought who managed to guide the load unopened through HM Customs. The cases disappeared into the hold of the cargo plane and the same day were *en route* to the Persian Gulf.

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In the distance a diesel engine was started. Someone else came running past, and more shots followed, from further away this time. Something or someone fell heavily on the surface of the jetty. The boat's engine in the distance was gunned and began to fade away. Fleur glanced at me in shock and after hesitating a moment she came in action. She looked over the hatch coaming towards the end of the jetty, and back to me.

Someone is down on the jetty. I'm going to check whether he is all right.'

'First get me two clean towels from the closet to tie up my arm,' I said weakly. I hardly dared look at it.

She helped me wind one of the towels stiffly around my arm, as I clenched my teeth against the pain, and made a sling of the other. With the arm supported I felt better, even though the blood started seeping through the emergency bandage and the arm began hurting me more by the minute.

'Will you manage for a moment? I need to see to that man lying there, he may be dead.'

'Take care, those people are armed,' I groaned through my teeth.

'Whoever it was, he is gone now. The *Butskop* has left, so I can safely show myself.' Fleur went outside and I felt the boat dip as she stepped off.

On the jetty a policeman lay in a puddle of blood. He proved to have been hit by two bullets and was in a bad way. Fleur needed to take only one look at him before grabbing her phone and calling 999.

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The owner of the stolen Mini opened the door, pleasantly surprised at the quick response of the police to his call. At the kitchen table he told the tale of the theft. He had woken up that night, hearing someone trying to start the car, and had run barefoot into the yard, in vain because the thief had outrun him in the car, speeding out into the road.

‘Has anything been found yet?’ he hopefully asked the detective.

Henderson shook his head and looked sceptical. ‘There is a good chance it will be taken to pieces in a breaker’s yard for spare parts. For a Mini of that vintage, spares have become a rarity. Before I forget, did you hear shooting yesterday?’

‘Now you mention it, yes – yesterday night I heard a couple of shots fired somewhere near the coast. I thought Bill Pryke was at it again – he lives half a mile down the lane. He is after a fox that keeps stealing his chickens. He has a hunting license.’

‘I think it must have been something else. Last night someone was shot dead near the church. Chances are that the killer has stolen your car to get away. You’re lucky that he got away, or it might have gone badly with you. The man is armed and very dangerous. Thanks for your time.’

Henderson got into his car again and drove off, leaving the owner of the stolen Mini gawking after him.

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‘She isn’t here?’ I put my luggage into the boat and stepped aboard. The boat must have been about twenty feet long and didn’t seem to be very seaworthy to me.

‘No, she is on the island, Water Cay, at the research centre.’ He started the outboard engine and calmly steered out of the harbour into the gathering gloom, setting a course for a dark clump of palms and a few lights in the distance.

There were only tiny wavelets occasionally throwing a little spray over us, and as I asked why there weren’t more waves at sea, he said the reef was holding back the swell. Felipe opened the throttle and after about half an hour we approached the island, which by now was hidden in darkness. A small jetty

appeared from the dark, where we tied up the boat. I took my luggage and followed Felipe to a few lights under something that looked like an awning of palm leaves.

He stepped aside to let me pass. I turned to thank him, but he had vanished, as if swallowed by the night. Crickets held some sort of a singing contest, fireflies danced through the night and soft waves rustled on a nearby beach. In the semi-darkness under the awning, a female form slid out of a hammock and, after a short hesitation as if she wanted to make sure it was me, hurried towards me.

In the lamplight I noticed she was sunburned under her freckles and red hair, and dressed in a T-shirt and long wide trousers. She looked like a hippie and was almost unrecognisable.

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