

Coconut Chaos

Diana Souhami

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Illustration: Peter Campbell

Sitting on a box by the quayside at Tauranga port on 2 July 2004 was a woman in her fifties with bright blonde hair and sunglasses on a beaded chain round her neck. She wore a padded gold jacket and white snow boots. I'd seen her before on the coach from Auckland to Tauranga. She was hard to overlook. As we drove past orange, lemon and olive groves and fields of sheep she'd sung in a clear soprano 'Soave sia il vento' from *Così Fan Tutte* and 'Evil Deeds' by Eminem. I supposed her to be accompanying what was on her iPod. At the comfort stop at Thames she ordered vegetable soup and a caramel milk shake then missed the coach. We waited for her two miles on, at the Rendezvous Motel.

'Thank you, drivah,' she said as she reboarded, without a hint of contrition for causing inconvenience. After ten minutes she called, 'Drivah, you're going too fast. And in England you'd be fined on the spot for using a mobile phone.' The driver, a young energetic-looking man, muttered in Maori. I and another woman exchanged a grimace.

In Tauranga from high on Mount Maungani I'd watched the *Tundra Princess* towed by pilot boats into the harbour, a white, silent ship on blue water. Walking the path at the foot of the mountain, where yellow-beaked birds nested in pohutukawa trees, I heard again that penetrating voice. 'You don't get many shags in Knightsbridge.' She was addressing a passer-by. Later in the day, walking round residential streets, I saw her feeding grain into the mailboxes by the garden gates.

It didn't occur to me she'd be travelling to Pitcairn. In his office, the shipping agent, Keith Thompson, had told me

about the voyage. He had bright eyes and a ginger moustache and didn't himself travel by sea because he was always sick. He said the *Tundra Princess* had an all-Indian crew of twenty-two men. Seatrade used Indian or Filipino labour because it was cheapest. He hoped I liked curry. If I wanted less spicy food I should buy it before I boarded. The other passenger, Lady Myre, was taking a large quantity of pot noodles with her.

He told me the ship's cargo of kiwi fruit, bound for Europe, had been picked in May and was packed in containers kept at 0.8 degrees and checked by a full-time refrigeration engineer. It would take at least seven days and nights for the ship to reach Pitcairn and about seven hours to unload the islanders' supplies into their longboats. In heavy seas the captain wouldn't stop. He'd go on to Panama then Zeebrugge. There was a third woman on board besides Lady Myre and me, an officer's wife. Probably I'd have my own cabin, but it was up to the captain.

I supposed that the bedizened figure alone on the quayside was Lady Myre. I was curious why she was there, and about the incident of the grain in the mailboxes. As if she'd read my thoughts, or perhaps because of the terns that swooped overhead and dived low in curiosity, she told me she loved birds and how sweet the New Zealanders were to put little houses for them at the entrance to their gardens. I didn't tell her she'd been filling their mailboxes with seed. Her eyes were translucent blue. 'Lady Maar,' she said with no apparent appraisal of me. 'Pot noodles,' she said, indicating the box on which she sat. 'Enough for a fortnight. Just add boiling water.' She asked

me if I'd been to India. I said I hadn't. 'You should,' she told me. 'It's *wunderbar*, but all they eat is curry. Makes your eyes water and gives you the runs.'

I sat with her on her noodles. 'It's a heck of a large ship for Picton,' she said. 'I was only expecting a ferry.' I agreed it was indeed a large ship – of 17,000 tons – and, as I understood it, Picton was on New Zealand's South Island, but the *Tundra Princess* was bound for Zeebrugge, with a change of crew at Panama, and it was only calling at Pitcairn for the islanders to come out in their boats to collect their supplies. I didn't doubt others must have given her the same information. She seemed incurious about facts. She said she supposed none of it mattered and that she and Garth would meet up if this was meant to be.

There followed a confusing story about Garth Dutton, a half-brother, who a decade previously had gone to New Zealand to escape an unsatisfactory marriage and a failed business. She'd tried to trace him through the internet, but now destiny would intervene. She asked me my star sign and told me she was Pisces and drawn to all things watery.

I feared she'd be an exigent co-passenger. She said her husband Sir Roland, a retired admiral, would always get her out of any fix. They'd first met in New York on Riis Beach in bay six. She'd known he was her man when he'd rescued her swimming hat from a frenzied Pekinese. '*Très galant*,' she said. 'Quite fearless.' They'd been married twenty-seven years and shared a love of the sea. When single she'd worked on a

cruise ship, the *Southern Star*, as entertainment staff. She was vague as to where she'd cruised. 'Round the world,' she said, with a wide, circling motion. 'Round and round.' They did six shows over and over and her special numbers were Somewhere over the Rainbow and Blow the Wind Southerly. 'Encores galore.'

She asked if I'd acquired a liquor licence and I pointed to my carton of wine and two litres of Glenfiddich. She'd been accorded the owner's cabin, and her crate of rum and cans of peach juice were already in it with the rest of her luggage. 'I could do with a snort now,' she said.

I had no sense of common ground. I told her how Bligh, in his open-boat navigation to Timor, rationed the men to a teaspoon of rum at daybreak when their limbs were numb with cold. I said how uncertain shipping was off Pitcairn and how the desperate paid four thousand dollars to divert a ship to collect them. 'I know all that,' she said. 'I'm not bothered. If there are any problems, Roley will sort them.'

She asked why I was travelling to Picton. I warmed again to my interest in chaos theory and the mutiny on the *Bounty* – how the theft of a coconut by Fletcher Christian and the intense relationship between him and William Bligh had as one of its tangential ramifications the fact that I was now to sail on the *Tundra Princess* to Pitcairn Island with her. I spoke of how tectonic plates move beneath the earth's surface and in time spew up islands that become worlds in microcosm, how islands sink and coral grows and atolls form, and reefs.

Her glazed look made me suppose she was as uncertain of

me as a travelling companion as I of her. She asked what tectonic meant and I said in a knowing way that it was a Greek word meaning carpenter and that geologically it referred to processes that affect the earth's crust. She said I was cute and reminded her of a marmoset. She told me how she'd stayed as a guest on Marlon Brando's island of Tetiaroa, how pathetically inappropriate his accent had been when he played Fletcher Christian, how he'd weighed over twenty stone when he died in an oxygen tent at the age of eighty, how Jack Nicholson then bought his house in Beverly Hills for five and a half million dollars and that it wasn't true that Brando got through all those millions of royalties, he'd stashed it all away – that was what men did – and if she ever divorced Roley, which she wouldn't because he was such a dear even though he did have a roving eye and a liking for a tot or two, she'd make quite sure she got the Manor House at Little Nevish because to lose that would be like losing her right arm, her *soul*, she said, and fear suffused her translucent eyes. Nor could she lose her Knightsbridge flat. She had her personal dresser in Harrods – Martina – who filled a rail with possibles every month. But, like most men, Roley had to have control of the money. It was power.

I hoped that in making the same journey as I, Lady Myre would not invade the solitary, dreamy lonely place in my mind. I feared that like my mother and Verity, she threatened to oust my new-found interest in eighteenth-century mariners who traversed the world when it was an unknown globe of wonders and adventures.