



ISLAND OF THE DAMNED

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“**M**illions upon millions of years ago,” goes some of the most profitable prose of the 1970s, “when the continents were already formed and the principal features of the earth had been decided, there existed, then as now, one

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— Ed.

aspect of the world that dwarfed all others.” This is the portentous opener to a James Michener book that boasts perhaps the largest protagonist ever.

“It was a mighty ocean,” Michener decrees, “a restless, ever-changing, gigantic body of water that would later be described as pacific.” This essential drama (restless yet pacific) drives page after geologic page. “Over its brooding surface immense winds swept back and forth.” Reading this writing, one suspects that Michener wanted to give his readers a sense of tectonic formation by letting them experience it (“immense tides ripped across this tremendous ocean”) in real time. “In its dark bosom, strange life was beginning to form.” Pages of

inanimate drama occur before the first coral polyp appears, which livens up the action, at least for the invertebrates.

Deep into chapter one, Michener exhausts several pages of typing on a description of the geological formation of a Pacific island. He takes you down below, where volcanoes explode and cool into deep-sea mountains on which corals coalesce over millions of years to form the underwater scaffolding that will one day support on the surface, like a cake on a stand, an island. In one watching-the-paint-dry riff, Michener actually describes how sand gets made. At last, his coral atoll gets filled in with this very sand, later is fertilized by the droppings of wind-blown birds, and eventually bursts into a tropical island paradise. Just in case we don't get the deeper significance of it all, Michener ends his inaugural pompositives with a scriptural flourish: "Master of life, guardian of the shorelines, regulator of temperatures and heaving sculptor of mountains, the great ocean existed."

In the decades since I was required to read it for a class, that book has stayed in my memory just like the author's ocean. Huge, immense, boring: the novel *Hawaii* . . . existed. But recently I returned from one of those tiny places conjured out of the ancient chaos of the sea. There I witnessed something rare and mysterious, even terrifying: the people have dug up and sold off the interior of their homeland in order to compete in the new global economy. What's left is so strange to see and elemental to visit that it's grudgingly led me back to the encyclopedist's eonic prose.

Called Nauru, the island is one of those tiny nations scattered like crumbs across the belly of the Pacific. It's just twenty-six miles south of the equator, twelve hundred miles northeast of Papua New Guinea — in the center of an expanse of the world named, as if by Michener himself, Oceania.

This island may be as far away from everywhere as you can get and still be somewhere. In the months after the turn of the millennium, I was sent there to look into accusations of money laundering. International-finance experts charged that in the late 1990s Nauru, only one-third the size of Manhattan, was literally responsible for bankrupting the former Soviet Union, which once occupied half of Asia. Cleaning dirty money in the new global economy, by the by, is quite easy. Banks of any standing are required to keep a record of each transaction, but banks registered in Nauru were not burdened by a demand for such paperwork. So money could come in and then go out to another bank with no paper trail. Any international syndicate could pay Nauru thousands of dollars to register its very own bank, and in return the island nation gained a steady income without the fuss of building a factory or putting its citizens to work.

Since that article came out, I've continued to check in on my little Pacific island as if it were an old acquaintance whose self-destructive ways have made me perversely eager for fresh gossip. Nauru was my introduction to the harsh reality of the Pacific: As with Tonga (plagued with the world's worst obesity) or Tuvalu (international purveyor of porn) or Tahiti (wracked by poverty), Nauru was once a lovely place. Whalers in the nineteenth century referred to it on charts as "Pleasant Island."

But like a runaway innocent, she has spent her beauty too easily, and now she's lost her only asset. The options are grim. The end is coming quickly, and it's impossible not to watch.

Between the rock of ecology and the hard marketplace of the global economy, Nauru is not merely being squeezed, but is coming undone. Nauru is like that opening of *Hawaii*, only sped up and in reverse.

When I was first given the assignment to write about Nauru, I called the Nauruan Mission to the United Nations in New York to make arrangements to visit the island. I was told to call Nauru's publicity agent. How's that? An entire nation has a PR flack? This was my first encounter with the formidable Helen Bogdan, spokesperson for nations, headquartered in Melbourne, Australia. She answers the phone by declaring her name as if it were a single sound, or one of those long German philosophical terms: "Helenbogdan." I told her I just wanted to visit the island.

Helenbogdan didn't buy a word of it. Helenbogdan told me the seventh Nauruan president in three years had been forced out, and though she would ask the new one, Bernard Dowiyogo, about my request, Helenbogdan was fairly certain it wouldn't work out. On a subsequent transplanetary phone call, Helenbogdan told me that Helenbogdan was sad because Helenbogdan would not be able to help me in my quest to look into the face of the new global economy and that — Helenbogdan's voice deepened suddenly — under no circumstances would I be permitted on the island.

I booked a flight at once.

When I arrived at the airport in Brisbane, Australia, Nauru's link to the Western world, I started to get nervous and wasn't able to sleep. Truth is, I'm not much of a macho journalist, and the place I had now signed on to visit was the preferred haunt of international mobsters. And a personage no less than the nation's PR person, Helenbogdan herself, had specifically stated that I was barred from entering the country. I began to sweat when I read a paragraph in a visa application saying that people without stated business had better have "sponsorship from a resident of Nauru." At the counter in Brisbane, I was asked to state my purpose. I said, "Tourism," and the woman fixed me with a gimlet eye as I struggled to keep my Adam's apple from dancing. I yammered about an adventurers' club that collected entry visas. It made a crazy sense — and, I later learned, exists.

On board the plane to Nauru, I began to get a deeper sense of the country's desperation. Air Nauru was down to one plane, and I was lucky to be on it: the year before, the plane had been seized under a Philippine court order on behalf of a creditor. The flight was full, mainly of Nauruans and a few Aussies. The back third of the plane's seats were taken over by huge crates. Nothing is made in Nauru, so everything must be flown or shipped in — which, given the failure rate of the island's desalination plant, includes even *water*. Strapped in with bungee cords and lengthy, customized seat belts, the enormous boxes shifted with the occasional turbulence and seemed to cause the plane to fishtail at thirty thousand feet. I

brushed up on my rote mastery of the Lord's Prayer.

My room at the island's only hotel looked like any old Holiday Inn room, with its sagging bed, balsa-weight furniture, and threadbare curtains — except for the printed notice on the side table that asked guests to be considerate in their water use, since the country was in its third year of drought. The shower worked for me only once, for about a minute. One afternoon I had to brush with all that I had handy: a Coca-Cola and some minty toothpaste.

Soon after arriving, I decided I would walk up the road about two miles to a knot of a dozen or so official buildings, which locals grandly call the "capital city." It's as if everyone on the island has decided to play a child's game called "nation-state." The entire country is ringed by a single circular paved road; that's it. So nothing's hard to find. On the way, I passed the Nauruan golf course, which must rank as one of the world's oddest. Because of the drought, there is no grass anywhere to be seen on the nine holes. The entire course is an enormous, rectangular sand trap marked by a few struggling trees. But, then, all the trees on the island were struggling. The shore was lined with the usual tall palms (which might have swayed in the breeze had there been one), but many of the trees were obviously moribund from drought — coconutless, frondless, slightly obscene poles curving upward to a pale blister against a paler sky. I turned back, groggy and weepy from the exposure, hoping to refresh myself, maybe with some chemotherapy.

Later I took a cab — the only cab on the island — to the "capital city" and went to the place where the Nauruan government maintained all the bank records. It was a one-room joint, half of a small duplex. The only evidence of the global economy was the number of humming air conditioners sticking out of the windows, cooling the place to the operating temperature needed for computers that contained little more than bank names and addresses. I knocked on the door. A woman holding a broom answered. She insisted that she knew nothing and nervously said she couldn't let me in. The cleaning lady of the new global economy. I've met her.

In the late-nineteenth-century heyday of colonialism, when every European nation with a boat charged open-throttle to the Pacific to claim tiny islands, Germany was the first to put its jackboot on Nauru's shore. According to island legend, an early colonial officer took note of a big rock being used as a doorstep and realized that it was made of pure phosphate, a valuable ingredient in fertilizer. Right away the Germans built a small-gauge railroad into Nauru's interior and began carrying off, shipload by shipload, the island's soil.

Australia later seized the island, and during World War II the Japanese conquered it easily and moved the Nauruans to a Micronesian island north of New Guinea called Chuuk. It was the wartime Japanese who built the airstrip my plane landed on, and throughout the island one can still see Japanese emplacements, artillery, and even a crashed plane. At one point during the Chuuk exile, a Japanese commander asked the leader of Nauru to kindly send out some Nauruan girls to

work as "tea mistresses" aboard his ship. The leader replied that the commander would have to cut his throat first. The Japanese found their tea mistresses elsewhere. This proud moment, when Nauru's leader defended his people's virtue, is a story that still gets told more than half a century later. Maybe because it's the last time it happened.

After the war, Australia restarted the mining operation and earned enormous profits before the island managed to achieve independence in 1968 and take control of its finances. The Nauru Phosphate Royalties Trust raked in the cash over the subsequent decades. Healthcare and education were guaranteed for Nauruans. The quality of life, from a Western perspective, soared. Cars, electrical appliances, air conditioning, and imports of every kind were available to nearly all. The Chinese arrived to provide backup labor. In the early nineties the Trust had an estimated principal of \$800 million, making Nauru, per capita, the richest country in the world. Nauru's leaders made a number of smart investments and became absentee landlords for many residents of luxury apartments in Melbourne, Australia; Honolulu, Hawaii; and Portland, Oregon.

But, in that volatile decade, some extremely bad investments were made, too. Maybe you were in London in the early nineties and caught a musical based on the life of Leonardo da Vinci called *Leonardo: A Portrait of Love*. It was a major flop, and its primary backer was the entire country of Nauru. The Nauruan government officials flew themselves, their families, and friends to London first-class to catch the show. They booked the front rows of the theater for opening night, which was smart, since closing night was soon to follow. The entire fiasco cost \$4 million.

In 1992 Nauru bought into a scheme of "prime bank notes." This was an early-nineties scam that convinced naive investors that the super-rich secretly traded these notes for enormous, fast profits. It played into the idea, easily believed in those days, that the wealthy had set up a hidden finance system available only to those with special access. Nauru put up \$8.5 million in the deal. But, of course, the money was quickly laundered, and the investment counselors who'd conned Nauru into the scheme were long gone.

Now that the scams are over and the bubble has burst, Nauru's entire national endowment is estimated (i.e., exaggerated) to be \$130 million. And there is no other economy in waiting. Unlike on other tropical islands, tourism is nearly an impossibility. The beaches are raked with small, razorlike coral formations, making swimming dangerous. There is no natural harbor. Even the phosphate container ships are loaded via an impressive, Rube Goldbergian cantilever-piping system that reaches out into deep water. The work creates a huge phosphate cloud that often hovers just offshore, a frightening industrial phantom.

Oh, and there is one other problem — the elephant sitting in the room, and certainly the most profound explanation for Nauru's contemporary interest in money laundering: a century of phosphate mining has denuded roughly 80 percent of the island.

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