

The Purple Tides of Hanga Roa
by Shane NORWOOD

At certain times of day, under certain kinds of light, looking east from the summit of the great caldera of Rano Kau, when the boundless capricious Pacific deigns to change her mood to accommodate the eyes of men, the ocean appears purple. There is no other color to describe it.

Nor is there a phenomenon to account for it. Not depth, or salinity, or coral, or the presence of something that lives and grows on the sea bed or flourishes in the water. Such is the purity of the sea around the islets of Motu Nui, Motu Iti, and Motu Kao Kao that no plankton dwells there. An atmospheric condition? A Loki trick of the clouds? Some impurity in sea or sky? There are none. The air and water of Rapa Nui is the cleanest and clearest in the world.

Therefore how do we describe it other than as a mystery? The same beautiful mystery that shrouds the island and hides her secrets in the dim distant mists of time. Mayhap some dull scientist may describe it as mathematics. A combination of diffusion and angle of the sun's rays or the prismatic effect of the relative density and temperature of different layers of waters.

But that is not so. It is magic. The presence of something other than the explicable. The resonance of an ancient power. The same unknowable power that inhabits the island, and imbues the sad and silent abandoned Moai with their timeless charisma. The magic of something now lost to humanity, the lingering echo of things that we once knew but have long forgotten.

And you can still feel it. Even the most jaded cynic or world weary city dweller can feel it. Stand anywhere along the west coast at sunset, with the wind in your face, and look to the sun, and you will feel it. A beautiful mournful longing for a world gone forever. It is one of the things that makes Rapa Nui the most unique place on earth.

Chapter 1.

By a lagoon under the shade of a palm sat an old man and a boy. The old man was lined and veined. His wrinkled brown skin was like the bark of a tree and his hair was white but he was still strong. The boy was about five or six with sturdy limbs and a round handsome face. His hair was flame red. The old man was holding two pieces of obsidian. He was teaching the boy how to nap a spear point.

"It is hard, grandfather," the boy said.

"I know it."

"But you make it look easy."

The old man laughed.

"I have had much practice. You must persevere."

“Grandfather,” the boy said.

“Yes, my son.”

“Why is my hair red, when all the others have black hair?”

The old man put down the obsidian and looked at the boy.

“Nobody knows,” he said, “I too had red hair when I was young, and I too asked the same question. But nobody could explain it to me. But there is a legend.”

“What does it say?”

“It says that long long ago, in the time of my father’s fathers, a strange boat came from the east. It was made of wood such as no one had ever seen before. It was so light that one man could easily lift a whole tree. But was soft and useless for anything else but boats. The boat was big, bigger than ours and on it were many men. But they were all dead except for one. And this man had red hair. He also was close to death but the people took him in and cared for him and he recovered. He lived with the people, and eventually took a wife. Of course he spoke a language that none could understand, nor did he speak ours, but he communicated in signs and pictures. He drew a map of an island, and beyond that a great land with high mountains. And he drew the stars and we knew them. He died before he could learn our language, or we his, and tell us from where he came. But he left behind a son. A boy with red hair. And ever since the sons of the red haired ones have been born with red hair.”

The boy’s eyes were wide with fascination.

“So we come from the stranger.”

“According to the legend.”

“And what of the island. Was it real?”

“We do not know. The story says that after the man died, the King asked if anyone would go and seek out the new land. Seven men volunteered, and they sailed away to the east in a great canoe. For many summers the people waited, but the men were never seen again.”

“Did they find it?” the boy asked eagerly.

The old man smiled gently and patted the boy on the head.

“Nobody knows, my son. They are just stories. Come, let us go. I am hungry.”

Capitan Reinaldo Villagran was happy. It had been an easy flight, with good weather all the way, and a tail wind, and now excellent local conditions for a landing. Clear skies and only the very slightest of cross breezes. Very unusual at this time of year when the fickle wind could come whipping down from the slopes of Rano Kau and sweep across the runway so that he would have to slide in low in the lee of the hills and crab in sideways onto the tarmac.

Not only that, but his beloved football team, O’Higgins of Rancagua, had beaten the contemptable Colo Colo three nil away from home in Santiago. And he now had a three day layover in Rapa Nui, before taking charge of the Tuesday flight to Tahiti. So life was sweet for El Capitan.

Because of the following wind, they had time and fuel to spare. They were early by twenty minutes. He had time. He knew that the people from the hotels and tour companies would only just now be arriving at Mataveri, leis and signboards in hand, waiting to plaster on their smiles and welcome the tourists, and that the families and friends would be still rolling up in their big battered trucks, the backs filled with children and dogs, waiting to welcome home their loved ones.

Capitan Villagran spoke to the tower. He told them that he was going to take a turn around the island, to let the passengers enjoy the view. The tower confirmed. It was a

regular event when circumstances allowed and the passengers loved it. While the Chief Steward made the announcement El Capitan sent the Airbus A320 into a long shallow bank, coming smoothly around with Hanga Roa to starboard. There were gasps and cries of appreciation as he tilted the starboard wing and the magnificent heights of Terevaka hove into view. Passing along the majestic North Coast and around by Anakena, he headed out to sea and then swung around again in a great wide condor swoop and came back the same way, so that the passengers on the port side could enjoy the view.

It wasn't exactly in accordance with strict aviation procedure, but this was Rapa Nui. Things were different. And it wasn't as if the air traffic controllers were exactly overwhelmed. Plus the fuel in Rapa Nui was subsidized. And anyway, Capitan Villagran was in a good mood. Three nil!

Billy was on the port side of the plane. He had a window seat, business class. He watched the light shift across the cabin floor as the captain made the turn and caught his first glimpse of the island as the airbus banked over. He was excited, but he restrained himself as the other port side passengers stood up and peered out of the starboard windows. As anxious as he was to see the island, he wanted to enjoy the anticipation, and he didn't want to behave like a tourist.

Not that he thought there was anything wrong with being a tourist. Quite the contrary. Good luck to them. Just getting to Easter Island was an adventure in itself, and anyone who had made the effort to make the journey for whatever motive was to be admired. He smiled to himself as he heard the gasps, and the ooh's and the ahh's, the comments of appreciation as the people caught sight of the island.

It's just that a tourist was not how he saw himself. It was complicated. It would be fair to say that Billy was a man in the grip of a certain confusion. A man who had lost his way, and to whom all the former certainties by which he negotiated his path through life had suddenly become less sure. In his own mind he was, in some respects almost a refugee. An asylum seeker seeking asylum from himself. On the run from some obscure malaise and vague discontent. Not that he was a man given to taking himself too seriously or averse to having a laugh at his own expense.

For example refugees don't sit in business class drinking champagne for five hours, nor do they carry a battered copies of 'Ulysses' and Moby Dick stuffed into their cabin baggage. A point in favor of his refugee status, at least as far as he was concerned, was that his cabin baggage was all he had. He was travelling light and unencumbered in every sense of the word. He had divested himself of everything he had, both in the material sense, and the emotional sense, so that now all he had in all the world was what he was standing up in, his bank account, and some cash in his pocket. Plus a hotel reservation, if that counted. Everything he needed or would need, he would find on the island.

He looked around at the other passengers. It amused him to observe how easy it was to guess, with a reasonable degree of certainty, where the people came from. There were no back packers or students up there in business class, of course, or holiday makers in the strict sense of the expression. These people were business people or 'serious' travelers. But still they managed to give off subtle or not so subtle clues as to who they were, and why they were here.

The couple opposite him were a dead giveaway. The way they dressed, their body language, the things they were saying to each other. They were collectors. The kind of people who run around the world, ticking off exotic and far flung places from their 'been there, done that, seen it' list, firing away frantically with the old Canon or Minolta, and moving on.

Billy pulled himself up and gave himself a mental slap on the wrist. *'And who are you?'* he thought. *'What makes your reason for being here so special, Mr. Different?'* Most of these people just want to see the sights and enjoy themselves. Wow? Imagine that, Mr. Soul searcher. Going somewhere just to have a good time and take a few nice photos. Have a swim and some tasty food. Watch the sunset. I mean, what's wrong with these people?'

He smiled to himself, and turned back to the window. *'Caught you again, you fraud,'* he thought, *'The only difference between them and you is that they have a return ticket and a plan, and you don't.'*

He heard the change in the engine and felt the acceleration, and the thrilling roll and bank as the captain made his turn. As the Airbus levelled out, there it was. Billy involuntarily caught his breath. Magnificent. Illuminated and bright green in the late afternoon sun, incredibly beautiful, a tiny triangular emerald glowing in the middle of the immense rolling tides. The three great peaks, the sea cliffs, the white pounding surf on the rocky shores. Billy felt his pulse racing, He wanted time to stop and speed up at the same time. All his half-pretended reserve failed him. It was superb.

Hiva was a bounteous land, and life was easy. The sea and the soil provided. Fish and shellfish from the rich thriving reefs, octopus and squid, crabs and lobsters. Sharks and wahoo, ono and dorado from the wilder seas beyond the lagoon. Bananas and coconuts and wild fruits from the forests. From the fields, yams and taro and sugarcane, crops that grew so easily that you barely had to lift a hand to raise them. Chickens and pigs, wandering half wild, pecking and rooting around the villages. Lazy dogs sleeping in the sun all day. Wild fowls wandered the lush jungles, and seabirds laid their eggs in the cliffs. The rains were frequent and the lakes were full. There were crayfish in the streams. Rivers ran in the valleys and waterfalls cascaded from the heights.

The people lived in open sided huts, set on stilts above the water. Days were warm and the nights were cool and the winds were balmy, except for the wild storms that sometimes raged in from the sea. But they did not last and soon the black angry clouds dispersed and the sky became blue again and the still waters of the great lagoon were restored to tranquility. The people lived in peace and traded and shared and strife was rare for there was neither need nor reason, for each had all that was needed and more.

But then came the time of great disorder and chaos. Others came, invaders from the west, fierce warlike men in great canoes, and bloody battles were fought. The people retreated to the hills and took refuge in the steep valleys. Fortifications were built. The peaceful days were gone and constant fighting, raid and counter raid, became a way of life. It became a war of attrition, ferocious competition for land and resources, and always more and more people arrived from the west and the whole cycle started all over again. Many succumbed or were subjugated and enslaved.

The tribe of Hotu Matua suffered. They were few in number and were sure to be eventually overwhelmed. And so they loaded everything they had, into two great canoes, and sailed out across the lagoon and through the reef into the great blue Pacific. As the sun set behind the island, Hotu Matua bade his people take a last long look at Hiva, for they would surely never see it again.

They sailed northwest, to the islands of the Tuamotus, where they would be welcome. For eighteen days they sailed. They saw the land and were happy for the journey against the currents had been slow and provisions were running low. But trouble had proceeded them, for there also was conflict and calamity. Great war canoes paddled out towards them. Savage painted warriors attacked. They were barely repulsed in a vicious costly fight.

Hotu Matua sailed on. To the southeast. There was only one chance, one slender hope, as tenuous as a dream, but he had to take it. There was no choice. There was nowhere else to go. It was either dare or die.

There is a feeling. People who have travelled a lot know it. You put your foot on the dock or on the tarmac, and you just know. You are where you are supposed to be. And you don't want to be anywhere else. It's inexplicable, and illogical except perhaps to people of certain specific belief systems, but it's priceless. Billy felt it as soon as he set foot on Rapa Nui.

It was a hot evening, and the gentle wind was warm and the sun gilded the tops of the palms as they softly danced in the slow breeze. Billy was the first person out. He stepped down from the plane and walked across the hot runway, smiling as he saw the sign. 'Welcome to Mataveru.' A great carved wooden whale, heavily varnished, shone in the light.

Without luggage, he walked straight past the carousel towards the door. A policeman approached him with a yellow Labrador on a lead. Billy smiled and let the dog smell his bag. The dog wagged its tail. The policeman nodded. Billy walked on, past the posters, and adverts and the booths with the hotel reps. A very pretty girl smiled at him. Her dark hair was wild. A headscarf was trying to restrain it, but was losing the fight.

The girl had a scar on her face but it somehow enhanced her prettiness. She indicated the dog with an upward movement of her chin, and made the action of smoking a spliff with her fingers. Billy inclined his head and smiled back, and walked out through the glass doors.

The air! It was incredible. The purity. It was almost as if you didn't have to breathe, as if the air just flowed in and out of your lungs of its own volition. Billy was momentarily taken aback. After the toxic soup that serves for air in Santiago it was simply a joy. He closed his eyes and luxuriated in the sensation. In his mind, Billy was transported back to a time when all the world was like this. When all the air, all over the earth was like this, clean and unpolluted. Before.....

Billy opened his eyes and brought himself back. He was surrounded by a vanguard of official welcomers. A bright gaudy friendly phalanx in colorful dresses and Honolulu shirts, garlands of frangipani and bougainvillea looped around their arms and placards held before them like shields. These were the hotel and guest house people. Focused, watching the doors, warming up their smiles. Behind, relaxed and laughing and joking, families and friends greeted each other. Someone was playing a ukulele. Beyond, minibuses were lined up, and a file of taxis guarded the flanks.

Billy scanned the front rank of the welcome brigade. He spotted a very handsome bespectacled middle aged lady. Her uniform was informal but immaculate. Her hair was tidy and she wore subdued makeup. He could tell she was not from the island. On her board was his name. He stepped forward.

"Good afternoon," he said, "Billy James."

The lady smiled.

"Hello Mr. James. Welcome to Easter Island. My name is Leticia. Our driver will show you to the bus."

"Thank you, Leticia." Billy said.

A heavy set dark skinned man of indeterminate age came over. He was wearing a polyester Steve McGarrett shirt. It was at least a size too small and he looked uncomfortable in it. His prodigious belly protruded through the stretched buttons. He grinned and held out his hand. Billy took it. It was like getting hold of a ham shank.

"Joe," the man said, "Welcome to Rapa Nui."

"Thanks Joe. Pleasure to meet you."

Billy followed Joe to a bus. It was a twenty seater..... Billy climbed in. The AC was on. He left his bag on the seat and climbed back out. Joe looked at him.

“Something wrong, bru?”

“No, Joe, No. Everything is fine, thanks. I was just wondering. How many people are coming with us?”

Joe looked at his list.

“Sixteen,” he said.

“So how long before we leave?”

“Hard to say. By the time they all get their luggage, ‘bout half an hour maybe. Bit more.”

“But not before then?”

“No, why?”

“Where can a man get a beer around here?”

Joe grinned.

“Well, there’s a bar in the departure lounge, if you want to pay too much for your beer, or if you want, if you go left out of the gate and take the first right, that puts you on the main street. A hundred yards down there’s a supermarket.”

“Okay, thanks. I’ll do that. You want something?”

“No man, I’m good.”

“Alright then. But don’t go without me.”

Joe grinned again.

“Don’t worry, bru.”

They rolled slowly out of the gate, turned right, and headed through the center of the island. Joe took a seat right at the back. They hadn’t made it past the length of the runway before Leticia grabbed a mike and went into her routine.

“Longest runway in the Pacific.....Extended by the Americans inon the left you can see where NASA.....”

She was sincere and well informed and her voice was melodic and well-paced, but Billy was zoned out. There would be plenty of time to learn. Plenty. He looked out of the window at the dwindling light and the hills, and the horses and cattle on the side of the road. He sipped his beer on the sly, and lay back in his seat.

This was not what he wanted. This was not why he came here. Air conditioning and lectures. He was thinking about his short walk down the main street. The things he had seen on that brief foray. The people he had seen. The huge palm tree at the top of the road. The light, the colors, the sounds and smells. Marvelous. A great mysterious bazaar of the exotic and the mundane, beauty and squalor holding hands, a siren voice calling to him, and another voice, an inner voice, warning him, admonishing him, telling him to tie himself to the mast, to look before he leaped. Well tomorrow was another day.

Joe pulled off the road and they drove down a wide red dirt track through a stand of eucalyptus and into the court yard of the A squadron of minions came forth to greet and gather and the people were ushered into the hotel. Billy climbed down last. He slipped Joe a twenty thousand peso note.

“Thanks big man,” he said.

“You welcome. Anything you need, let me know.”

Billy nodded and winked. He turned away and walked down the dark winding ramp into the hotel. Joe watched him go.

Only the Ariki Mau, the paramount King Hotu Matau did not abandon hope. The suffering of the people was great and despair was upon them, but Hotu Matua did not lose faith. He suffered for them and with them yet he did not show it. He stood strong and steadfast, his eyes fixed upon the horizon, as he had since three moons past. He was gaunt and his eyes were hollow and haunted. He had wasted away, as had they all and his ribs showed beneath his dark skin, but his hands were strong upon the tiller. He had barely slept, resting but a few moments every few hours so as not to lose track of their position which he counted by dead reckoning, casting small pieces of leaves over board to calculate their speed. By night, he set course by the Pleiades, for he knew in his heart that below them lay the place he sought, as had been foretold by the elders of Hiva.

Around him the people lay, his sons among them, prostrate and exhausted. Emaciated. The food was long gone, the pigs and dogs and chickens they had brought slaughtered and eaten. And in the vast open spaces of the Pacific of fish there were none, and nor did any bird appear other than the wandering albatrosses which were beyond reach and sailed serenely by as if in mockery. The water was almost gone, and their plants were withering away. There had been no rain for three weeks, and the skies remained clear and cloudless day and night. The first people had begun to die, and in the night, some of the old ones had slipped silently overboard into the dark water, sacrificing themselves so that the young might live. The children were given everything until all was gone. Hotu Matau knew that without rain, or land, within a few days they would all die.

And there was more. Two days before, on a turbulent night of violent gales, they had lost sight of the boat of his sister, Averipua. Sailing together, almost three hundred souls in all, they had skillfully managed the distance between them, never letting more than a dozen swells separate them. As the winds rose, they shouted and signaled to each other to close up and fasten together. But when they were only a few agonizing yards away, just beyond a rope throw's, the torment came raging in, a sudden squall howling like a vindictive harpy, the dark sea roiled and the boats were swept apart.

For a while, in the night, they could intermittently see the fires of Averipua's boat through the maelstrom, but then they were lost to the darkness. In the morning the storm had abated and the sea was calmed and huge rollers lifted and lowered them, pushing them on. But of Averipua there was neither sight nor sign, and the vast ocean was empty from horizon to horizon.

Yet still Hotu Matua did not abandon hope, for hope was all there was and while life endured so did hope. So he kept his eyes to the horizon, holding fast through the days and the nights and in the mornings the rising sun found him steady and likewise the setting sun which set his long hair and wild beard aflame for the hair of Hotu Matua was fiery red.

Three nights later, the Ariki Mau watched Orion wheel through the heavens and slide below the horizon, and presently the first glow of dawn colored the eastern rim of the world, and he summoned his friend and councilor, Tu'u ko Iho to take the helm and he lay himself among the planks and stays to close his eyes for a brief respite.

He was instantly asleep, but had rested for but a few moments when Tu'u ko Iho roughly shook him awake. His eyes were bright, and he pointed wildly at the sky.

"Tavake, Tavake," he shouted, stabbing the sky with his finger.

Hotu Matua leapt to his feet, his fatigue instantly vanquished and vanished. Shrieking and piping with their distinctive and surprisingly loud cries, a covey of Red Tailed Tropic birds flurried about the boat.

And as the light came into the world, there, upon the edge of life, in the newborn sun, great green peaks glowed red and gold. Mata ki te rangi. 'The eyes looking at the sky.' The stories were true. They were safe. They were home.