

Jane Downing

From the Archive

The cool air sighed as the glass doors closed behind her. In the archive Steph could forget the heat and the bushfires—and her own personal conflagrations. No-one was behind the front desk so she turned the ledger around and signed her name against the date. She checked her mobile for the time and noted it in the IN column; she also noted there was no text from Tomas, no telegraphic apology for their latest fight. She turned her back on the grey light outside. As a child, she'd only associated storms with snow and ice. Now fire was the prefix on the television news—especially on a day like this.

The air-conditioning filtered out the grit and smell of smoke and allowed her to be transported into another world. Three cardboard boxes were piled at her work station on the far wall of the book-lined study area. The archivist who looked like a bear and walked like a ballet dancer had left a note on top: *this is the end of it*.

Steph shivered. He couldn't have meant anything ominous; she'd brought the meaning in through the door with her.

They weren't heavy, the boxes. She transferred them one at a time onto the floor so they were now piled in the opposite order. Her laptop found the WiFi. She checked her email. Nothing from Tomas. Her family's policy of no-news-is-good-news didn't help in this situation. She checked Weatherzone and the Country Fire Authority websites from her favourites tool bar. The CFA had a map dotted with red flame icons. Half the eastern seaboard was on fire. The numbers sounded preposterous. She could feel tears forming and suspected they were more for herself than the people losing their homes and the sheep being offered up as walking barbecues. She looked around the room. This archive held a small collection; few Canberra researchers ventured so far from the National Library. Dr Gunsekera was in his corner bent so close into his papers his nose almost touched the words. There was no-one else around to witness her embarrassing self-pity. Dr Gunsekera was the sort of dry old twig she'd expect to evolve in this sort of environment, which could not support abundant life. If these boxes were truly *the end of it* she'd be gone soon too.

An unforgivable amount of dust was layered inside the last-come-first box. It wasn't hard to imagine she was the first to lift the lid since the day some long-retired hand had

deposited the material and written in a neat but overly-rounded script: Pusu and Bulalaha 1859–1871.

The missionaries had ventured everywhere. Steph didn't even recognise the names of these islands or know which group they belonged to. She felt no lifting breeze of curiosity as she shifted papers and coughed back the brittleness of what was not, on a closer look, dust, but the disintegration of corners and edges. Her hand landed on a solid object: a black leather volume, perhaps 9 cm by 14, the size of a personal prayer book. She opened it randomly and was showered with crusty insect casings. Dr Gunsekera looked up at her startled *EEK*, his glasses a flash across the room.

"I'm sorry," she said, over-loudly; two words she'd been steeling herself not to say since her fight with Tomas. Dr Gunsekera lowered his nose back to his chosen grindstone.

She read the first words on the page. "I am writing this to keep myself from going mad."

Steph turned the journal to its blank frontispiece and then the inside back cover. A small index card was lodged there, inscribed with the same methodical round handwriting as the box. Names, dates, locations; the author categorised and boxed, mad or not.

Mrs. Florence Oldfield, wife Rev Oldfield, missionary 1859–1871

Pusu and Bulalahaha, the Pearl Islands, North West Pacific

Steph glanced back at the box. Back at the extra *ha* on the second island's name. Everyone had bad days. Ha!

"16th January 1871

I am writing this to keep myself from going mad. I cannot help running my hand across my bald scalp, but it had to be done; and now I look mad as well and the Reverend is in full flight with the poor converts Ezekiel and Job as his only witnesses. I will listen to him no more and have locked the door into our private chamber. My hand finds the tender spots. The lice had their playground long enough to draw blood. I am not one to do things by halves—see I am here—so it all had to go. He called me a Delilah, yet isn't it my, wasn't it my, hair to shave with his dull, tired razor?

He will not bully the names of the culprits out of me, and I will not record them here for I do not trust my hiding place. They are good girls and the lice are not their fault. Our heads lean in when I teach them their letters and they must come close when I read the Gospels, so full are they of eagerness and questions. Lice hop. It was in God's design thus.

They are European lice besides. My husband will not hear it, nevertheless the seamen on the trade ships bring them. My flock go down to the dock to buy lengths of cloth because now they can see their own heathen nakedness. They have nothing to exchange except the very breasts and thighs they wish to cover. He writes home of a comely, clothed congregation and I do not disabuse him with the truth.

I saw myself in the corner of mirror I have left, the remnant of the glass we brought with us, smashed on arrival—the seven years of bad luck are all but over. In the reflection, I appear as one doing penance. Whatever for: I only wished to stop the godless-awful itch.

It reminds me of a heathen story Nene told me yesterday about the perfidious cocoanut crab. _____”

Steph felt that little shift in the chest that comes with discovery, the frisson across the skin of the heart as the breath is held and the eyes are dared to prove it, prove it, before the whoop of joy can be set free.

The islands of the Pacific had legends and myths and fables as numerous as the islands themselves. Her task was to rediscover versions of the stories before Christianity had sanitised the telling. It was an irony that the writings of the missionaries, peddling their alternative myths, was the place to look. The Tippett Collection held their archives, the perfect place for the Grimm-Only-Child as she called herself: a modern day collector of fairy tales.

More than a hundred years after Nene entertained the wife of Rev Oldfield, Steph transcribed the coconut crab into her computer. Her fingers danced over the keyboard, caught on the rhythms and comfort of habit, until poor bald Florence turned back to her own concerns. She read on a little further into the journal after the myth ended to see if more found refuge there. But no, the news was from England—the stories Florence craved were from home. The mail came with some commotion and the missionary was screaming even more loudly. He was overwhelmed because the enemy was coming. “He has lost interest in me,” Florence wrote, “and it breaks my heart.”

Steph pulled her mobile out of her jeans’ pocket. Maybe she should ring Tomas. But first, she told herself, she’d need to add some context for the crab legend, some background about these strange twins, Pusu and Bulalaha. She lifted papers in and out of the box, skimming contents, stopping to read further.

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Take for example this exchange with the informant named Samson, son of Job and Rachel (born Indoakalo and Nene). It casts some light on how the indigenes themselves viewed the rivalry between the Protestant and Catholic missionaries.

BG: Do you remember the first missionary to arrive?

SD: He was old, old man. Go when I child only. Wife him teach in school, over there that way. Mother tell me much much. Love wife belong him.

BG: Are there stories in your family about the time when the Fathers came?

SD: Father Bernard and Father Ignatius big men. Wear black. News come. Enemy coming. My father tell Rev angry like stingray. Flapping, barb in tail. Enemy coming, he shout. Two moths come then flying. Black [name given: unable to distinguish syllables]. Wings big like hands, you see in mountain way. They bad. Bad news coming.

BG: An omen?

SD: Yes, bring bad things. Rev, he should look at moth. We all Catholic now in yellow church back that way.

BG: Was there a big fight between the missionary and the Priests?

SD: No, Voice of God tell us. New way all good. Jesus has big voice for us.

Note: The Voice of God appears in many stories from this time. There appears to have been a spiritual aspect to the conversions which we miss when we track the documentation from the various Societies and Mission Boards.

The mobile vibrated against Steph's pubic bone; the echo of a text dropping into her inbox. She jumped from her seat and grappled it out, pushing wrong buttons, retrieving the two words: CALL ME. In capitals; a virtual shout. An imperative! She felt some chemical commonly interpreted as love flood her cheeks.

It was far too forbidding to go outside to make the call. The heat was like a wall; Steph pushed against it and then retreated to the reception. Two students from China huddled in one corner over identical iPads. Steph knew as much as the next person about mobile etiquette—not much—but she wanted privacy. The corridor to the left was lined with etchings and black

and white photographs from the islands, the original titles and descriptions uncensored: “heathen jungles,” “a typical heathen,” “wild bushmen”; a nod to Paradise in the crystal waterfalls and blooming hibiscus and leaning palms and wide smiles.

Her grizzly Valentino was hunched over his computer in a side office. She knew nothing about him really, beyond his size and his incongruous grace. He could be writing an opus on the varieties of cicada in the local environs, or he could be playing endless, soul-numbing hands of patience. He didn’t look up as she clattered into the dark stairwell. With a hand against the cool concrete wall, she felt her way down to the Rest Rooms.

“Tomas? Tomas?” Nothing. There were no bars, no reception, here in the bowels of the building. Steph splashed her face and tried to imagine waiting three months between letters from home. You *would* write a journal to keep yourself from going mad, she decided, as she searched her face in the tired public toilet mirror. “No these are not laughter lines, Mum,” she sighed.

If Tomas was caught in the fires he’d surely try ringing, and if there was no such urgency, she decided she wasn’t going to jump to his command. She wasn’t going to be bossed around.

“Dear Messrs. Smith and Dock

Unsettling news has reached us here. Rumours arrive with every ketch and schooner: the Papists number twelve, in the manner of the Apostles; the Papists bring horses; the Papists bring a wooden church prefabricated in Sydney, complete with glass windows. I need not remind you good gentleman that in the twelve years past we have not had the wherewithal to imagine glass in our window frames. Souls have nonetheless bloomed under the gentle rain of Christ’s teachings. Yet I fear this coming storm. Heathen superstition and the heresy of the Catholics are a Satan’s marriage that I can well imagine.

Included in this package is a list of provisions etcetera. We are entering a tunnel and you must press upon the Board that they must send us light and miracles.

I place myself in God’s hands on the 17th day of January 1871. Rev J Oldfield

tea rice sugar potato flour

oil kerosene cloth printed cloth sail

cloth nets hooks bonnets boots

hymn paper galvanic battery magic

lantern show mirror cuckoo clock

Steph hadn't spent the last six months amongst the Pacific collection to remain ignorant of the miracle of the magic lantern show. *Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic* may have been a law coined by a sci-fi writer in a later century but the concept was well known amongst the missionaries. Their converts were courted with glass slides of snow and tulips and backlit photos of themselves developed in Sydney and sent back. The cuckoo-clock was new to her as one of the cheap tricks they used. Her grandmother had one; she remembered her fascination as a child, running through the house on the approach of the hour, holding her breath until the whirr and clunk of some hidden mechanism released the bird into the dusty dining room. She loved going back there at Christmas, was still fascinated by the magic of it.

She checked her mobile again. It was becoming a compulsion. There were no new messages. She wanted Tomas to be the one to ring first; and to be the first to apologise. After all, he'd started the fight with his request. They were still too young to have children. He hadn't laughed when she'd been flippant.

Dr Gunsekera pushed his chair back across the linoleum floor and Steph felt schoolgirl-guilty that she wasn't reading the next letter from the box as he passed. She hid the mobile under Florence Oldfield's journal and shuffled dry, yellowed paper and checked her email and the CFA site. Boring emails, more fires. The number of fires labelled "out of control" had risen. The temperature outside had hit 40 and moved up. She made herself look busy with the journal, accidentally became so.

"28th January 1871

I try to tell him it is all in God's hands. I am an echo, throwing back the very words he used in my times of trial and suffering. He stares at my muddied petticoats and my cropped hair as if he is doubting my place in the Creator's grand design. His eyes roam across the space between us. I tell him there is nothing he can do to stop the Papists coming. I fear there is malice in my voice.

Outside it is Paradise on earth. We came to offer these benighted people Paradise after death and found plenty and sloth and such beauty in nature's gifts. The mountains tower and the streams burble and I want to go and sit under the breadfruit tree and be healed by the

sunset. Voices will murmur stories in the darkness. How can Mr Oldfield whine of fetid squalor in his letters to the Mission Board?

He raves about the Papists though they have not yet come. He invokes the names of the dead as witness to his right to build a church and congregation here: Rev Evans, he rests at one corner of this fanciful church, and at the other three corners he places the bones of ‘Mrs Oldfield’s three sons. He cannot even own them as his beautiful boys though I saw his love as he held each above the baptismal font. Now he imagines Peter, Luke and Benjamin are in Heaven soliciting God’s aid in The Good Fight. I had not thought to give birth to martyrs.

When I ask him to give us another child he rises from bed and snarls. All his passion is for the priests who are but days away, according to Job’s account.

I watch the sunrise above the highest peak of Pusu.”

Steph tried to ring Tomas from her desk. No-one was left in the room to overhear her, but if there had been someone, they’d only have heard her hang-up again.

Dr Gunsekera came back into the room, passing close to the central table. Steph glanced up. His mouth was full and he was chewing dramatically. His Adam’s apple wobbled as he gulped. He must have something really interesting to get back to, she thought.

“Transcription / Interview / 5/12/62 / Gloria

Which stories has Granddad been telling you?

The Voice of God

It’s still there. You’ll hear it on Sunday. You’ll be here on Sunday I hope?

Yes, many Sundays. So you know the story about the Voice of God?

We all know the story.

Can you tell me the version you remember your grandparents telling you?

If you ask me nicely. Okay. Once upon a time... Seriously, it was just before Monsoon season, nick-of-time stuff. There was no ferry like today, no schedule, all dependent on winds and tides and God obviously, and not even He could guarantee anything once the rains came. The old Reverend was in his church on the hill, bent like a paperclip in prayer. He translated the Bible you know. Wife belong Reverend was in the school and the children sat quiet until the black moths came through the open windows and whispered in their ears. ‘Come now, come to the shore, leave your desks and run.’ They ran and ran and they shouted and the women left their cookhouses and the young men slid down the trunks of the palms without

fresh coconuts and the men climbed out of the taro patches and they all ran down the bush path and gathered at the shore as the *Janet Rae* nudged the dock and the timbers shivered, boat and dock together. The dogs, the pigs, the children, all them together. The priests disembarked one by one, wreathed in black like the clouds of fog coming down from the peaks. One shouted new words, not English, a new language they called French. He raised long, long arms and commanded men on the dock to help. Crates and boxes and metal trunks were carried; three goats came on their own shaky legs. A cage of chickens made a noise like women assembling to preserve the breadfruit. Cack, cack, cack. One crate was bigger than the rest. The crew and our villagers together felt a great strain. They lifted it off the deck one inch, two, three. Slowly they shuffled down the gangplank. The captain shouted by the rail, the three priests caped and tall, shouted from the dock. It was too heavy. No-one remembers who let go first. Sweat can make the hands slippery. The crate fell. The women and children let out a wail and the crate fell and by the miracle of God it fell on the dock and not in the water. With a crash the crate broke asunder and the contents toppled and a great clanging noise rang out. ‘The Voice of God,’ our chief cried. ‘The Voice of God,’ sang all three of the new Catholic priests. The bell was placed on top of their new church tower, and from that day the Voice of God has spoken when we are baptised and married and when we die.”

“I see you have my old boxes out.”

Steph jumped several centimetres off her chair. It was not the Voice of God, but a voice in her ear nonetheless.

“Dr Gunsekera. I didn’t hear you come up.”

“You were intent. I can’t remember what exactly ended up in there from Pusu and Bulalaha. Everything I suppose.” He put his left hand in and fished about at the bottom of the cardboard box.

“I’ve been reading about the day the church bell arrived.”

“My wife tells the story well, though I suspect she embroiders on the original. Such is oral tradition.”

Steph let him flick through the papers on her desk too. She was too surprised not to. “You’re BG, the anthropologist doing the interviews?”

“We were all young once.” He lifted the gossamer thin sheets of the transcripts, ran a finger along the purple words imprinted there by carbon paper. “Gloria was very beautiful.”

“She was flirting with you.”

“Certainly. And the Voice of God rang on the day we married.” The arid lines above his lip danced as his mouth twitched into a beatific smile. Steph was surprised at how genuine her returning smile was.

“The poor Oldfields though,” she sighed. “All their hard work.”

“I interviewed their grandchildren also. Once they were back in Sussex, they had five more children and Reverend Oldfield wrote some lovely hymns.”

“You’re kidding.”

Dr Gunsekera gave a look that could only mean he was a stranger to this kidding.

“It is amazing what time does to the threads of a story,” he said.

Steph tried to imagine Florence with newly long, lice-free hair and a lapful of smiling children and a husband singing not screaming. If she could imagine that, she could imagine anything.

Steph checked the time and put it in the OUT column of the ledger.

“See you tomorrow.” The archivist behind the counter had a voice fittingly gruff, but melodic.

It was even hotter now, at 5:13pm. The smoke from the distant fires blanketed the heat to the ground. The fires all had a “controlled” symbol against them now on the CFA website. “No-one died today,” Steph had noted as she shutdown her computer.

Her eyes adjusted as she walked through the car park. Tomas was standing in the shade of one of the plane trees that divided the car park from the road, without a hat, madman. Her heart made a little gasping convulsion as if there was a hand in her chest squeezing it gently. He didn’t move. She had time to assess each feature: his firm, thin mouth, his resolute chin, his eyes hidden behind closed eyelids, in the manner of prayer.

The grey clouds rumbled. Maybe not smoke after all.

Tomas’ eyes opened. Steph took two more steps and tripped on the cement kerb, falling into him. He put a hand out to steady her so it was a slow fall of skin against skin. He turned his cheek at the last moment, letting her lips graze the abrasive stubble.

“Will I turn the other cheek?” he whispered.

Laughter rattled the fear in her, pushed it out. “I’m so sorry.”

“I’m sorry too. Forgive me,” he echoed.

“I don’t want to fight.”

His lips met hers and tasted the words as the rain started. Each drop was as big as a bucketful, as if some Pacific gods were up there holding out a fishing net, sieving the rain through. The huge, discrete drops plopped and slapped. When Steph stepped back, half of Tomas' hair was wet, and half dry.

“It'll work out, won't it?” he asked.

About the author: Jane Downing has stories published widely in journals including *The Big Issue*, *Southerly*, *TEXT*, *Island*, *Overland*, *Seizure*, and *Hecate*. She can be found at <https://janedowning.wordpress.com/>