

from 'Squash Rackets'

On a metal chair outside Selina's room sat a policeman, his uniform filled to bursting point from a steady regime of starchy root crops and not enough exercise. He sported a thick Kuli-type moustache which had become almost regulation among the officers. Kuli was a hero, especially to some of the younger men, and those who could grow a moustache like his did. The policeman looked wary. With a smile, Pip showed him the fruit she had brought, and entered the room.

Selina now lay on her right side, fast asleep, with her face to the lighted window. The stiff white sheet rose gently and rhythmically with each slow breath she took. Her face was garish with bruises, yellow lotion, and cotton plasters, and the bandage over her ear slewed at a rakish angle. There were dark crevices beneath each of her eyes, and the one wrist flung out bore a plastic tube that conveyed whatever it was that dripped into her. Pip put the fruit on the grey metal surface of the wheeled tray that served as a bedside table. She had no wish to wake the girl; Selina needed sleep more than company. Besides, the chair was hard and ungiving. It was not a pleasant room to sit. The walls were painted a pale green to about four feet up the wall and cream enamel from there to the ceiling. The single window was placed so high on the wall that it afforded no view at all. Now that Selina was basically under hospital arrest, she would be safe from everyone except Kuli. She would be better off finding the doctor in attendance, thought Pip bitterly, as she set off again back down the corridor. There had to be a way to save Selina; all

she had to do was to think of it and, today, her head was full of damp cotton.

At the end of the corridor was a nursing station, identified by a wooden counter, behind which stood a desk, a chair, a telephone, and a filing cabinet. Behind all these was a tea room painted the same sickly green as the rooms along the ward. It held a sink, a shelf on which stood an electric kettle, a jar of instant coffee, sugar, a couple of chipped and stained white mugs, and a chair. This room was probably reserved for the exclusive use of medical staff. Pip, perfecting her new role of the confused *pālangi*, wandered in anyway, and sank down in the chair by a long window that looked over the hospital grounds.

She gazed across the cropped grass to the fringe of dark bushes and the lush hillside that rose behind it and tried to ease her tension by wriggling about a bit. She had no idea where to turn. Unless Selina could pin down her attacker, she was lost. Pip felt drained. It seemed to her that for the last three days she had pedalled hard on top of a ball rolling fast downhill that had now reached the bottom and bounced her off hard. She eased her neck, and lolled her head on the greasy back of the armchair where many heads had lolled before. The grass became hazy and the far-off bushes a dark blur. She dozed. Images floated by: a hand trailing a pendant necklet in water turned into a trail of dark hair. She heard a splash and found herself helplessly spiralling downwards in water, round and round, towards a dark hole. She was terrified but was unable to scream because she could not breathe. She opened her eyes with a jerk. Sunlight streamed through the window and running water splashed and gurgled into the sink. A sturdy nurse in a pink uniform flashed her an amused smile.

'I'm glad you woke up; your dream was not nice for you, I think,' she said.

'Oh, dear, I'm so sorry,' said Pip. 'I've been dreaming a lot lately. Did I make a noise?'

'You called out. But nothing bad. Have some coffee,' she added solicitously as the jug boiled.

'Monalisa!' A clear strong female voice called from the nurses' bay.

'*Ko au*; yes, I'm here. That's the doctor! We have to do rounds,' the nurse whispered to Pip, and bustled out. Pip heard her tell the doctor in Tongan that a tired *pālangi* was in the kitchen. The nurse had to cover herself against the fact that she had let a stranger off limits; after all, hospitals had their rules, even Vava'u's Wellington Ngu.

A tall young woman, her dark hair drawn back from a high forehead, appeared in the doorway and looked down at Pip, her fine eyebrows arched. She had a stethoscope around her neck and held a file board in one hand while the other was plunged elegantly into the pocket of her white coat. She had on red lipstick and designer frame spectacles and looked cool and poised and in charge.

'I'm Pip Carey. I wanted to ask about Selina `Akau,' Pip said breathlessly as she struggled to her feet and tried to smooth her hair and clothes.

The doctor consulted her file.

'She's....room 9. Ah, yes; that young woman. Well, don't worry. She'll be alright. But I'll want to keep her in overnight to make sure there's no severe concussion. She seems to be sleeping a lot.'

Pip could have told her that Selina nodded off almost every time she sat down, but was rendered speechless. She was struck not only by

the doctor's commanding presence, her beauty and her perfect use of English, but also the fact that she referred to Selina as that 'young woman', when she could not have been any older. Oh, well, she might as well face it: they were both young and very much alive whereas she looked three hundred years old, as if she had seen it all, and did not like any of it very much. The sight of the doctor made her feel distinctly in need of a wash and brush up.

'I'm Dr Teresa Puniani,' the doctor said. 'If you want to wait, we can have a chat after I do my rounds. At the moment, I'm running a bit late.' She gave Pip a sudden grin. 'Have some coffee,' she said, with a glance at the steaming kettle and the cups that had spoonfuls of instant coffee in them, before she spun on her heel and left.

'Nurse, does that policeman *have* to be there?' Her clear voice rang out.

Pip could not make out the nurse's muttered response. She sank back against the arm of the chair. She had no desire for coffee or the faintest idea of what to ask the doctor; but she did not want to go. Her hotel room, once a haven, now seemed isolated and lonely. She would wait. After a minute, she rallied and walked to the bathroom at the opposite end of the corridor from where the doctor and the nurse were conducting the medical round. All the patients could be expected to be in their rooms at this time so that she could safely use the facilities.

She stared for a long time at her face in a mirror that had blotchy stains over it and looked as if it cultured something nasty. Still, the marks added interest to her uniformly beige features. She could imagine all sorts of shapes and figures in them and, if she stared at the blotches hard

enough until her eyes crossed and went slightly out of focus, she could even see entire scenes.

'But nothing clearly or well,' she murmured.

Fragments of her dream floated back to her as she ducked her head and splashed tepid tap water over her face. There was no soap, either in the dispenser, or by the side of the basin. Ngu Hospital had no more resources than Vaiola, the main hospital on Tongatapu. One could easily become disheartened if one worked here. Looped around a wooden rod attached to the wall, a thin piece of towelling hung limply, its worn surface showing the passage of many hands. Pip wiped her face with a handkerchief that was soon wet through so she rubbed her hands against her skirt but its synthetic surface repelled the water as if it were an enemy assault. She waggled her hands in the warm air and then gave her hair a vigorous brushing and reapplied bright lipstick. The doctor, who made the hospital corridor look like a catwalk, had reminded her of how well it looked.

'Whatever works for you, kid,' she told herself. She was now, if not a lot cleaner, at least free of the coral dust that hung over the town and lodged in clothes and skin and hair. She pinched her cheeks to bring some colour into them, which was a technique she had read about in Victorian novels, but all it did was to hurt. She rubbed her sore face and looked at the result. Two angry-looking red spots had appeared high up on each cheek bone. It was not a good effect. She wondered what she could do about the drag lines each side of her mouth. Even her eyes, normally straightforward items, looked as if they wanted to slide right off her face as the lines of weariness pulled them down. She tried smiling. The experiment was not a success and made her look like a goat trying to

get grass out of its back teeth. She let her face resume its usual shape and glanced through the doorway. The weight of the huge green door swinging shut behind her unceremoniously propelled her into the corridor, and she looked back at it reproachfully. It was tall and wide so that it could accommodate wheelchairs and beds shunted about by huge hospital attendants. She felt quite unequal to it.

The time passed painfully for Pip Carey. The patches of light visible through the cracks in the window grew darker and, before long, disappeared. The pain in her limbs grew more intense as her head cleared. She could think once again. But that was all she could do, except wait.

At one point, she heard two sets of footsteps approach the doorway. Her heart beat until it hurt. The footsteps were accompanied by low murmurs. A female voice stifled a giggle. Pip's heart then skipped a beat from sheer joy. These were surely lovers come to the old house for a tryst. She heard more murmurs and the sound of clothing dropped onto the dirt floor. The stone hut was not a salubrious place, but it was deserted and private; or so the pair thought before Pip summoned up all her energy and bumped about, and screamed out through the gag. From her fear, lack of air, and cramped position all that came out from behind the overturned hull was a high faint wail. The girl screamed and the man took a sharp breath. 'Here!' Pip yelled, and thumped the planks. The

cords tightened around her and cut into her joints. It hurt! Her pleas turned into howls of misery and pain.

'*Te volo!* Devils!' The girl shrieked and cried out in terror. Pip heard clothing flung on, and zippers zipped. 'No; no! Don't go!' she tried to say, but each strangled moan only made the lovers more anxious to get as far away as they could from the resident demon. They left the hut at a run. Brought up on hellfire sermons, they would believe the devil himself was after them for their sin.

Pip fell back and sobbed with frustration. She doubted the fleeing pair would report to the police what they had heard, or tell anyone at all about it. If they had chosen this place, they were probably illicit lovers. The voices had sounded like those of a mature man, likely married with children, and a young woman, likely not. Neither would want to draw attention to the encounter. Sobbing choked her and she had again to concentrate on her struggle to breathe and the fight against panic. Those were her tasks. She tried to calm and loosen the cords a fraction.

Some time later, which might have been a long time or half an hour, she heard from not far away a high reedy voice singing. It was Carroll coming down from the stone steps and crossing the walkway. Again, she summoned all her strength to kick and scream, but her muffled cries hardly travelled past the doorway. If they did, he did not hear them or stop his singing. Then, all at once, he did stop and she heard him curse and swear. She redoubled her efforts but was rewarded only by the clink of bottles. It was clear that the man was stumbling down from the bar loaded with booze to take on board his old tub and sounded as if he had already taken a fair bit on board himself. As she screamed with all her might, the reedy singing started up again and

moved away. She could hear it all the way across the wooden walkway and along jetty until he and the bottles fell with a clatter into his boat. After a short intermission, the singing started up again. Carroll was probably no more than twenty-five yards across the inlet and she could not let him know where she was or in what predicament. She racked her brains for a way out, and raged and fumed until her head almost burst with pain. She was covered in perspiration and dirt from the gag, the stinking bags around her, and her own futile struggles. Where was Kuli? He must know by now that she was in serious trouble. She began to feel angry.

Just when she thought she would explode with pain and frustration, she heard again footsteps on the shingle beach, the footsteps of one person. They did not come to the entrance of the house. She held her breath. An assortment of sounds rapidly fell into place as the planks of the old boat beached in the cove scraped across the shingle. She waited in a cold sweat and silence. The broken hull that pressed in on her right side was hauled away and a dark shape loomed above her. Pip held her breath. She could not see the face but she knew whose it was. She was bundled in the bags around her and dragged across the dirt floor and through the doorway onto the beach. A minute later, the bundle that was her was pulled through the water and dumped into the boat, which was pushed farther out to sea. It wobbled from side to side as the water caught at it and it finally began to move of its own accord. She heard footsteps slosh back onto the shingle and then she heard nothing at all except the soft slapping of wavelets against the sides of the old boat.

A new real terror struck at her. She was on the water, alone and helpless, drifting out into the bay. She looked up at the stars in the night

sky. Oh, Vincent! Surely, Carroll would notice the open boat floating past his vessel? But, no! She could hear Carroll down in the cabin singing away at the top of his voice accompanied by his boom box. He would choose this time to party! The old boat knocked against one of the pylons near to Carroll's catamaran and Pip screamed and kicked again as best she could, but he did not hear. The boat slowly turned about in the water, disengaged from the pylon, and headed out from the jetty into the waters of the bay.

Pip felt a dampness creep up over her. At first, she thought that the bags around her were wet from being hauled through the water into the boat; now, she realized the boat was rotted and filling with water. It would go down, and she would disappear under the water with it. The bay was not deep but, trussed as she was, she would not manage to float. Once the hessian was soaked through, it would sink and, if she rolled over face down, she would soon drown. It would be an ignominious way to go, like drowning in a bathtub, but drown she would. With these thoughts to comfort her, Pip watched the stars and felt the water creep up her back and sides as the old boat pitched and tossed, buffeted by waves quickened by the night breeze. Oh, Vincent! She had always dreaded the sea! Kuli! she breathed. Come quickly!
