

Mr. Coco-Nut

By Michael William Hogan

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Mr. Coco-Nut
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Eric sat patiently in the shade watching the coconut palms sway gently in the seasonal trade winds. He'd learned the importance of patience. He'd come to respect nature's own impeccable timing. No longer did he witlessly climb the narrow trees, hacking away with his machete to prematurely bring down the heavy nuts.

As he sat there, a smile grew on Eric's lips. The elders in the village argue whether he is possessed by spirits, or just crazy. The children simply call him "Mr. Coco-Nut", a not-so-endearing yet somehow cute English language-derived term for one of the few white men among the island nation's otherwise dark-skinned populace. None of that bothers Eric. People can think what they want and call him what they want. Some day, when he finds a way back home, he will be a very wealthy man. And he will have the last laugh.

Eric's unplanned sojourn to this tiny and apparently uncharted South Pacific island group began when his dinghy drifted within eyesight of the very speck of land on which he presently sat. He had been adrift at sea for the better part of two weeks; a journey which itself began when his attempted solo circumnavigation of the globe ended

abruptly with his 16-foot home-made sailboat splitting in two during a horrific storm. But that's another story.

When he first arrived on his tiny island—well, shortly after enduring a face full of sand from a sloppy attempt to kiss the terra firma that was the subject of so many frantic prayers—he thought he was alone in a deserted place. It wasn't until after exploring the back side of his island that he realized there were many other little palm-covered clumps of sand within paddling—or even swimming—distance. The sight of smoke gave rise to a brief celebratory dance and Eric quickly retrieved his dinghy and paddled towards the nearest neighboring island. That trip was not without its own trepidation, as the prospects of unfriendly natives and even cannibalism were all too real in this part of the world. Or at least the part of the world he thought he was still in.

The fear of becoming human stew did not immediately subside for Eric when a dozen or so nearly naked native children streamed onto the beach to form a raucous reception committee. Only when a 300 pound white man clad only in a well-worn Speedo appeared—a sight that Eric, under different circumstances, would have found quite frightening in and of itself—did he begin to relax. The rather rotund man, Eric learned, preferred to be addressed as “Sir Sydney”; a moniker that served to reflect the esteem he had earned with the native people, as well as a reminder of his homeland.

Mr. Sydney proved very helpful in acclimating—not to be confused with *assimilating*—Eric to his new surroundings. He introduced Eric to the native elders, as well as the three other Caucasian folk who, over the years, had found bittersweet refuge in these islands. Each of these individuals had a story that was different yet the same: maritime accident...adrift at sea...washed ashore here. And while sharing an immediate common bond with his fellow castaways, Eric could not yet relate to their apparent acquiescence that they would never again see civilization as they knew it.

Eric's refusal to view his current circumstances as permanent gave cause to distance himself from the “defeatists” as well as his native hosts. Possessing the anti-social personality of a lifelong loner, his need for personal shelter led to a suggestion that he take up residency on the tiny deserted island onto which he originally landed. The idea suited Eric just fine and soon he was the proud inhabitant of his own tropical paradise; having only to deal with Sir Sydney and the others when the need would arise

to barter parts from his dinghy in exchange for hand-made fish traps or fruit not found on his own island.

Eric slowly made his island his home; confidence in a quick rescue delaying—at least in the early days—any progress towards much needed improvements. Eventually, however, Eric constructed a reasonably comfortable hut, a rain water catchments system; and he even amassed an impressive supply of driftwood to fuel fires. While not close to accepting his probable fate, he had certainly settled into a not-unpleasant daily routine.

Primary among his necessary chores was the need to feed his body. To that end, Eric would alternate between a day of catching fish and a day of gathering fruits and edible plant life such as taro root and the like. The fish were bountiful and the native's traps were efficient and effective. Collecting a decent variety of fruit, however, proved a bit more challenging.

Eric's island was rather small; perhaps 200 meters by 400 meters. He could count the number of banana and papaya trees on one hand. Mango and breadfruit had to be bartered for with the natives. The one thing for which Eric had a seemingly endless supply was coconuts. Coconut palms thrive in sandy soil, are highly tolerant of salinity in the ground water, and require year-round warm temperatures and higher than average humidity. Eric's island was the perfect host environment for growing coconuts.

Before long, Eric had mastered the proper techniques for harvesting coconuts. This included climbing the trees—*they could exceed 30 meters in height*—hacking free the desired number of nuts, removing the husks; and either puncturing the shells to drink the sweet water, or cracking them open to enjoy the bright white, succulent coconut meat. Along with fish, coconuts became a staple of Eric's diet.

On his fruit gathering days, Eric harvested coconuts from trees closest to his hut. One day, however, while fishing in a small lagoon at the opposite end of the island and far from his hut, he decided to supplement his lunch with a fresh coconut. There was one particular grove of coconut palms growing very close to the water of the lagoon. In fact, Eric liked fishing in the lagoon because he could stand in the water and still enjoy the shade from these trees.

After dragging a fish trap to shore and building a small fire, Eric spotted a ripe-looking coconut already on the ground. Thinking a little coconut meat would go well with his catch, he quickly removed the husk and expertly cracked open the nut. What he

found inside did not immediately register in his mind. In fact, the image that formed in his brain was of Lou's Billiards Lounge, a ratty old pool hall back home where Eric occasionally made a few bucks hustling wasted neighborhood punks.

Eric raised the half shell of the coconut up to eye level. There, resting neatly in the cup formed of pure white coconut meat was what looked like a perfectly round cue ball. No, not quite. Though close in size—perhaps a bit smaller—it was not the ivory shade of a cue ball. It was...*pearlescent*. Iridescent glints of rainbow colors blended perfectly on its creamy, lustrous surface. With his other hand, Eric lifted his discovery from the coconut shell. Not heavy like a cue ball; yet somehow solid and substantial. He held it up into the sunlight. Incredible. And unmistakable. Eric was holding what he could only imagine to be the world's largest pearl.

But...pearls from coconuts? How could that be possible? Eric quickly scrambled around the shoreline, gathering up several more coconuts. Careful to avoid amputating a hand, he excitedly de-husked and cracked them open, one after another. And, one after another, each rewarded his efforts with the gift of a perfect—and enormous—pearl. Within an hour, the ground below the grove was deplete of fallen coconuts. Nestled in a palm leaf basket was a collection of 13 giant pearls.

Eric's mind was spinning. In the weeks he'd been a castaway, he never saw another person in possession of a giant pearl; or any pearl for that matter. His grove of pearl-forming coconut trees overhanging the lagoon must certainly be unique, even to this tiny island group. The questions rattled from his brain like machine gun fire: How can a coconut generate a pearl? Did the palms somehow absorb a chemical or compounds from oysters in the lagoon water? What would pearls this size be worth back home? What are they worth here? Will the natives see them as having any value? What about Sir Sydney and the other white men? That question seemed to warrant the most careful consideration and Eric began to contemplate potential security issues. Will I be safe if the others learn of my discovery?

Eric spent the rest of the day weighing his situation and planning for his future; whether that future was to be lived out on these islands or, by grace of God and the miracle of a rescue party, spent in a life of luxuries purchased with his bounty of giant pearls.

Over the next weeks, Eric learned some important facts about his pearls. They were, indeed, exclusive to the grove of coconut palms that grew aside the small lagoon. They also could not be harvested from the trees prematurely. Exposure to air prior to “ripening” caused the pearls to explode in a gelatin mess that gave off a sulfuric odor. So, Eric resigned himself to patience and often found a shady place to sit and wait for another coconut—and its encased prize—to drop to the ground.

Perhaps Eric wasn’t much different than Sir Sidney or the other castaways that arrived before him. Over time, he came to accept that he may never leave the confines of the tiny island group. And, he eventually decided to share his discovery with his neighbors.

In retrospect, the initial fears for his safety proved laughable. Eric’s giant pearls were little more than a curiosity to both the natives and his fellow castaways. Much as Eric tried to sell their worth, the pearls offered scant bartering value. They were way too big to fashion into any reasonable jewelry. They weren’t edible and were useless as a tool. Days—possibly weeks—of prodding and intensive salesmanship earned Eric nothing more than the name “Mr. Coco-Nut”.

So, with his pearls and his dreams of rescue, Eric now spends most days sitting patiently in the shade of the palm grove; watching the trees sway gently in the trade winds and waiting for another coconut to drop.

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