

Bruce Golding, a "man of steel", famous for reporting on wars and natural catastrophes, goes to a Pacific island where a tsunami has wrought destruction. There he finds a new meaning in his life, and love.

GOD HAS NO CHURCH

by Trevor Steele

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TREVOR STEELE

GOD HAS NO CHURCH

Love v. journalistic objectivity



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Man of steel

Somewhat clumsily he opened his backpack and was about to let his bottom fall on the bed. As he saw some objects fall out of the backpack onto the floor, which did not look very clean, he felt a momentary anger with himself. Weary, he let himself down on the bed and intended to ignore the stuff on the floor. But that was childish behaviour, so he got off the bed and started to shove the objects back into the bag, when his gaze fell on her letter. He tossed the backpack onto the wobbly chair and kept her letter in his hand.

He looked at the paper, which was already somewhat dirty. For months, perhaps a year, he had not read it again, but he could almost recite its contents by heart. So why open it again? But some impulse pushed him to do so. He lay down and carefully unfolded the paper, which had tiny rips along the fold lines. Luckily the pillow was high enough, so he could hold the letter and read it with no strain. Yes, I do have long legs, he told

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himself: why they are aching, I have no idea. So forget that triviality and read:

Dear Bruce,

Believe me, it is not easy to write. It is all the harder because it seems I am writing to a stranger that I thought I knew for more than a decade and whose wife I have been for four – no, five years. I think I still in a way love you and even admire you, but I cannot for ever play the role of the waiting wife whose blood freezes every time she hears in a news broadcast the name of the country where her husband happens to be at the moment.

Todd does not have a father; that is the bitter truth. One day he asked me with childish directness: "Mummy, when is that man going to come again?" That you do, in your way, love your son, our son, I want to believe. I even believe – though my need to believe it is dwindling – that you love me in your way. But I know from many experiences that your camera and the warzones and catastrophe areas of the world matter more to you than Todd and I do.

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Was she correct? He had never been with Todd long enough to do father-son- things. And he had to admit he rarely thought of the boy.

Bruce, I believe one incident was a good illustration of how, from my point of view, our relationship has become impossible. Perhaps you have forgotten it; we all have our own perspective, and what is important to me might be a very minor thing for you – and vice versa. But do you remember the day when you came back from the horrors of Gaza? I was so pleased you had come back alive, nor even wounded, I wanted to take you in my arms and get you to tell me all about it; I could see you were haunted by it all. But you politely kissed me on the forehead and went off for several hours to develop the photos and select the best ones for Australian Gazette and other magazines whose names I cannot recall. I could not reach you. You were in your own tormented universe, the world famous photo journalist, and my place in that was zero. I am even afraid that the man I loved – the sensitive, ambitious, resolute young man – has become some sort of vulture feeding on the miseries of other people. Oh yes, your photos of screaming widows and

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children with hideous wounds shock the world, but do they touch you? Your accompanying articles are so coldly "objective".

If only she knew how often I have reproached myself with that possibility ...

A few times you asked me whether I felt something for Kevin. Did you want to push me in his direction? Well, the truth is that I shall never love Kevin with the passion I once felt for you, but with Kevin I can have an easygoing and harmonious relationship, and he will be a good father to Todd.

He remembered his first reaction to that paragraph. A flush of wrath that Kevin, that unworthy rival, had taken his wife, Annie, the one he had known since high school days when their feelings were "platonic". But when they studied at the same university they both felt erotic passion. And at that time it seemed to him that the main strength of their relationship was that they could both talk things through without hiding anything.

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Bruce, I am very sorry that our many years together are ending this way, but I cannot be a wife who sees the husband only a few times each year and even then knows that his thoughts are elsewhere.

How can I finish? I hope you will find answers to your questions about the world and yourself.

*With regret,
No longer yours,
Annie.*

Well, Annie was right about many things, he admitted to himself after the initial anger and shock. How could he share his tumultuous life, his wanderings from one bleeding country to another, with another person? He did not himself know what pushed him to expose himself to danger after danger. Yes, he had earned well, magazines competed to get his best photos. The world's most famous war-and-catastrophe photographer, *Newsweek* had claimed. He was quite aware of the hollowness of that fame: most of the time he was moving in dangerous, stinking places, often among corpses and blood. But did he want to change that? Would it not be better to

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sit in the evening in a comfortable sofa with his arm around a lovely woman and watch an interesting documentary? Perhaps, but he could not imagine that.

He remembered with a sardonic smile his few attempts to find consolation with a prostitute. Each time that had left an even more bitter aftertaste than the previous time.

He was weary, but decided nevertheless to go looking for some food. That could be risky in such a cheap little place in a war torn country, but his life was a series of risks.

A pity that in the hotel there was no way of developing his latest photos. That would have to wait till he returned to Australia.

But why did he feel so tired? And the stomach pains were new.

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"Welcome home, Bruce!" His father embraced him. "Good flight?"

"Okay." Bruce's voice had no emotion in it, Alf thought.

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"Have you got only the backpack? No suitcases?"

"Dad, if you saw the countries I've just been in, you'd understand."

"Okay, my boy. Let's go home."

"Can we stop on the way at the darkroom?"

"Of course we can. But wouldn't you prefer to go home first, have a shower and a bite to eat?"

"It's not a holiday for me, Dad."

"So you're working." Alf was silent while they set off for the airport's car park. Then he said, "Son, when are you *not* working?"

"I'll start my holidays when all the wars are over," Bruce said, almost smiling. "By the way, let me off there and go on home. I'll follow by bus later."

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"My God, son, you've been a long time in that darkroom! Four hours, at least."

"Yes. Don't forget I have to choose photos for *Stern* and *The Independent* too."

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“Well, in any case I’ll have to heat it up again. I’ve given you your favourite, if I remember correctly. I hope you’re hungry.”

“Yes, I am. A bit. I didn’t eat very well in Guatemala.”

Alf put the plate into the microwave oven. He really wanted to get his taciturn son talking. He should not look as though the cares of the world were all on his shoulders.

When the two of them were seated at the modest table, Alf started. “Guatemala. I didn’t know there’s a war going on there.”

“Few know. That’s why I went.”

“I do know the Yanks are supporting a far right government. They’d hardly let a well-known journalist fly straight from Los Angeles. How did you get there?”

“Through Mexico.”

“So how did you know where to go in Guatemala?”

“Opponents of the regime helped me.”

“You took photos from the viewpoint of the opposition?”

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“Do you think the government would welcome me? After all, its death squads are doing the killing.”

There was another pause until Alf said, “No doubt you took stomach-turning pictures?”

“Yes.”

“Son, when you told me you intended taking a course in photography at the uni, I didn’t imagine a career like this.”

“Neither did I. At first.”

“Your mother had – so it seemed to me – some masochistic tendencies.”

“And you are implying ...?”

“Maybe you’re a genuine son of your mother.”

“Don’t blame her.” Bruce scarcely remembered his mother, who died of cancer when he was a small boy.

After a short silence he added, “And don’t ask me to explain my motives. I don’t understand them either.”

“And Bruce, I don’t want to exaggerate, but how is your health? Your face tells me there’s a

lot of tension in you. Did the Central American food have a bad effect on you?"

"Dad, I don't want to talk about such trifles. My job is full of stress but I'm pretty tough, you know."

"Son, you're overestimating your strength, aren't you? Always being an 'objective reporter' in catastrophic situations. That must be too much for anybody after a while."

"My colleagues think I'm as tough as steel. And I want to keep that up."

In any case Bruce wanted to change the direction of the conversation. He was not used to speaking long sentences. Writing reports was a different matter, but even then he had evolved a very concise factual style. "Anything new from Palestine? I haven't seen a news broadcast for a week."

"So we'll watch the news at seven, okay? Yesterday there was talk of yet another ceasefire."

Bruce muttered something unintelligible. Alf asked, "Of course you're welcome to stay here as long as you want. Have you decided where you'll go to next?"

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“No. Maybe I’ll stay with you for a week.”

“I thought you might go up to Brisbane and spend a few days with Todd.”

“Hm, yes, I could.”

“Annie would like that. She rang me a few weeks back and said Todd would like to meet his real Dad. I suppose you know that the marriage with that second chap ... she didn’t even say his name ...”

“Kevin.”

“Well, it hasn’t worked out. Todd’s old enough now to want to know his father.”

“That’s an idea. Maybe I could.”

They finished eating and Bruce insisted on washing the dishes.

“Come on, son, the broadcast is starting.”

“Okay, I’ll wash up later. I’m coming.”

The first item of the news bulletin was not Palestine. A red box at the bottom of the screen informed them of BREAKING NEWS. A tsunami had killed hundreds of people on the Pacific Fitzroy Island group. No pictures were available, just crackling reports from a radio station in the capital.

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Bruce for some reason nodded, as if to himself. He knew where he was going next. This time it would not be a war, but a catastrophe. And he had to get there as quickly as possible. Transport to that remote set of islands could be difficult.

Oh, a pity about Todd. Oh well, there would be other chances.

Alf glanced at his son and read his thoughts.

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He was lucky in that the flight from Auckland took him directly to the main island. He noticed that in the plane there were representatives of the usual charitable organisations, Médecins sans Frontières, the Red Cross, Save the Children. As well there were other passengers, two youthful looking men in smart suits. What their goal was in travelling to the stricken islands was hard to guess, unless of course they were simply on their way to South America. One of them sat next to Bruce. He introduced himself as Warren Millar. They chatted a bit about Aussie rules football -- in fact, they supported the same team, though Bruce had rarely thought about football in the last ten years. Mostly he slept jerkily while the flying machine transported them across the world's biggest expanse of water. He spent hours in that state of semi-consciousness. The stomach pains did not allow full sleep.

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Bruce was fully awake when the pilot informed them that they would soon start their

descent. His self-confident voice assured them there was no danger to the plane, even though the islands had just experienced a terrible tsunami. The capital and its airport were situated on a relatively high plateau. The main island, the pilot said, was called Dorilanu, its original name, while the capital city, or town, was Maitland; doubtless the name was a relic of the British Empire. The Pommies, he joked, had been everywhere, but we can still beat them at cricket and rugby. He then pretended to apologise if he had any English passengers. He thanked them all for flying with his company and wished them an agreeable stay on Dorilanu, or an equally agreeable flight on to South America.

But the casual, jokey voice of the captain fell silent as they began their approach to the island. Even from on high they could see what devastation had occurred on the coastal plane. Traces of wrecked houses were visible in many places. Bruce remembered the estimate that about a thousand had died on Dorilanu, and perhaps three times as many on the other islands of the tiny republic.

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Bruce had presumed that only he and the representatives of the charitable organisations would stay on Dorilanu, but to his surprise the smartly dressed men also took the bus to the island's only three-star hotel. What on earth would those young fellows be doing on an island in crisis?

In any case he soon forgot about those men. He had already arranged to interview Kalume Ostala.

As soon as he had registered in the hotel he ordered a taxi to take him to the presidential palace, another inheritance from some British consul. Bruce knew that Ostala had a good reputation among journalists.

Despite the necessity of reflecting the funereal atmosphere of the whole group of islands President Kalume Ostala received Bruce with a gracious smile. And his English was very polished, a result of years in Australia and New Zealand. "Welcome to our unfortunate republic,

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Mr. Golding. It is rare for us to receive a visit from a world-famous journalist."

Bruce shook the extended hand. "I wish to express my condolences to you and your citizens, Mr. President. I'm grateful you can give me some of your time. No doubt you are a very busy man."

The broad Polynesian face on the powerful body again gave that melancholy smile which immediately gained sympathy. "Yes. Coordinating the rescue operations is a heavy task. But I also want to appeal to the world. I've often seen your striking photos in magazines. I hope you can capture the misery and urgent needs of our Fitzroy Islands, Mr. Golding. As you can imagine, our little country depends a lot on external help. A tropical paradise, yes, but ... so many houses destroyed, so many victims ... The costs of reconstruction will be enormous."

"What are the most urgent needs?"

"Shelter. Water. Food ..." The president extended his strong arms and lifted his palms as if to pray to some god, or to the rich nations of the world.

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"I'll do my best to appeal to the world with my photos."

"I suggest you go to the island Hakilule. It seems it has suffered more than all the others."

"Is there transport to it?"

"Not regular transport. Hakilule is a very poor, underdeveloped island. Unfortunately we have only a few helicopters here. My private plane cannot land on Hakilule, there's no airstrip. But I'm sure you could hire a motorboat driver to take you there. That is, if his boat has not been destroyed by the tsunami."

"Okay. Can you suggest how I could contact a boatman?"

"Perhaps it would be a good idea to go to the tourist information office in Gandhi Street."

"Thank you. I'm keen to get to work straight away."

The broad, likeable face gave a friendly smile. "By the way, you can also photograph me. Maybe that would give some ... some authority to your report."

"Of course, Mr. President."

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Bruce prepared his camera and lifted it to aim at the sitting VIP. Instantly the smile disappeared: there remained only the grieving look of a head of state in mourning for his people. But he had to hold that expression for a very long time; the man behind the camera concentrated intensely and worked slowly, waiting for the perfect shot. The president had to accept that while he was taking photos Mr. Golding was the professional who ran the show.

At last Bruce had taken three photos and put his camera back in its holder. Again the face lost its funereal expression. "Mr. Golding, once more I thank you. Your work could be of great benefit to our tiny nation. I wish you a very good day." The president made a gesture to the two tall guards, who had stood at a discreet distance throughout, to let the visitor leave the palace.

Bruce understood that the interview was finished. He shook the powerful hand and left the room. He remembered where Gandhi Street was. There were not many streets in the centre of that miniature capital city.

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Why did he suddenly mistrust the president? The fellow seemed a friendly type. Perhaps his own stomach pains and the growing headache had embittered his thoughts.

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He looked first at the name tag on her chest: Perpetua. Hardly a Polynesian name. But then he looked at the young officer herself and felt the force of her attractiveness: statuesque, probably half-European, half-Polynesian – a fine combination. Stop the nonsense, he told himself, she's on duty, and so are you.

"Mrs. ... ah, Miss ... ah, Perpetua ..."

Her smile showed perfect white teeth and charming dimples. "I am Miss, but everyone calls me simply Perpetua. Can I help you?"

She also speaks English very well, he noticed, and with a lilting intonation. Where had he heard that accent before? Ireland, wasn't it? And she pronounced her name not "Perpechua" in the English manner, but really "Perpetua", in the Italian manner.

"Perpetua, my name is Bruce Golding. I'm a..."

"Yes, you're a photo journalist, Mr. Golding. Even in Maitland we sometimes read magazines or papers," she said with a winning smile.

"Oh, the dangers of fame!" He was enjoying the banter with that charming girl, but quickly

reverted to his serious tone. "I'm looking for advice on how to reach the island of Hakilule."

"So you too? Mr. Jordan of Save the Children wants to go to my island too."

"To *your* island? Are you from Hakilule?"

"Yes, Mr. Golding, I want to go home, but I have to wait till tomorrow. Rusty has to complete the repair of his boat."

"Ah, so Rusty has one of those motorboats?"

"Yes, perhaps you know that the only way to get to some of our islands is by boat, and five or six men make a living that way. But only one boat, that's Rusty's, has partly survived the tsunami, and it still needs repairs. He's planning to go tomorrow."

"Perpetua ... can I call you that?"

"Everybody calls me Perpetua. And I'm glad you pronounce it the right way."

"Aren't you afraid of what you might find on your island? You do have family there, I guess."

Suddenly her aplomb, her professional tone of an attractive young officer, disappeared. "I'm very scared. I have no idea what I'll find there.

They say the tsunami was ten metres high. Oh God!"

"Doesn't the island have hills?"

"Yes, but we don't know yet who was up high or succeeded in getting there." The young woman was quite agitated. "There's no telephone contact with Hakilule. I can hardly wait till tomorrow. Mr. Golding, yes, I'm frightened. My family ..."

"I'm surprised you can work today."

"What else can I do? Sit in my room and cry from nervousness?"

Bruce fell silent for a time, because the young woman was struggling with tears.

"Excuse my question. Would it be possible for me to go with you and Ross?"

"Rusty. I'm sure you can. Mr. Jordan is going too. Mind you," she tried to recover her role as an advisor to tourists, "Rusty will demand a stiff price. And he has no competition at the moment. Come back at three o'clock. Then I'll be able to tell you when Rusty will be ready to go." She was once more the professional, but her voice had lost its playful lilt.

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“Thank you very much. So I’ll do some work till three o’clock.”

Meanwhile Bruce descended to the beach to take photos of the massive destruction of homes, boats, even some cars, and other unidentifiable objects strewn in the most unlikely places. There were men there wearing masks and searching for corpses among the rubble. Bruce asked permission to photograph some of the corpses. He had to tie a handkerchief around his nose and mouth against the stench of bodies starting to rot. One of the men told him they had to burn or bury the bodies immediately to avoid an epidemic. Then Bruce saw the huge hole dug out, and the dozens of corpses lying in it.

He had never witnessed such destruction. Battlefields at least have limits where you can take off your face mask, but the destruction of this coastline seemed to go on forever. Trees, shattered houses and cabins, remains of cars and other vehicles, household items hardly recognisable, and other unidentifiable rubbish, together with corpses of dogs and cats and wild animals he could not name – all of it jumbled

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together and starting to rot under the sweltering sun. In one place there was a carcass of a drowned dog caught in the branches of a still standing tree. And a little later he saw a severed arm; its blackening hand was still appealing for help.

It was difficult to stay in that region of death and putrefaction.

But he would certainly be able to use some of the photos. Still, he felt miserable. He had photographed more horrible scenes than these, but never before had he felt pains in the head, the stomach, and now the legs too. The first time in months he felt tempted to simply go to his room and lie down. But no, he was a professional, he had to keep working.

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At three o'clock he was again at the tourist information centre. Rusty would be ready, he was told, at ten the next morning. In the office he met Barry Jordan of Save the Children. Perpetua told them Rusty's fee would be 500 dollars for each of them. He could easily pay, but Barry Jordan

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looked a little pained; could his organisation afford such expenses? Bruce did a little mental arithmetic. Rusty would be getting from each of them more than the average monthly salary. Oh well, at least one person would benefit from the tsunami.

Bruce could not resist the temptation to go down to another part of the coastline and take photos there. Soon he realised it was only about six o'clock, but darkness was already menacing.

He dined alone in a small café. He did not want to be with the other visitors, who were probably babbling about topics he would have to find flippant. And he could certainly not contribute to casual chatter while his own pains troubled him.

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That evening he lay on his hotel bed and became aware that his thoughts were becoming more and more fuzzy. That was welcome, because those searing pictures of corpses stripped of all human dignity obsessed him. He had to stop storing up such images - he already had a

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stock of thousands from many countries. They mocked any concept of a good God. They gave him no joy, but refused to go away.

Am I getting seriously sick, he wondered: I've never before had the sensation of having my whole body in some sort of vice.

With a last surge of mental energy he tried to think of something pleasant. Without warning he saw a charming face with dimples and an Irish accent. Don't be an idiot! He tried feebly to push away the image. Leave her in peace ... she's in mourning ... yes, and needs consolation ... Stop it - you're a rolling stone ... but she *is* attractive ... girl, go away, let me slee ... gratefully he slipped into darkness but somehow still imagined that the lovely young woman was with him.

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The next morning he slept longer than usual. He was grateful that the pains of yesterday had somewhat abated. Now he had to concentrate on external happenings and get away from unpleasant sensations in his own body.

He was woken up by the drone of helicopters. Out to sea there were navy vessels; he judged them to be Australian and New Zealand ships. From their decks helicopters were taking off with cargo swinging in huge metallic nets. At last the outside world was sending help to the islanders. He took a few photos, but machines were not his favourite subjects.

On the beach the work of trying to create order out of chaos was continuing. Not only local workers were toiling. They were helped by soldiers and men in civilian clothing. Bruce recognised the men from Médecins sans Frontières, the Red Cross, and Save the Children. There was no sign of Warren Millar and the other smartly dressed young man whose name he either had not heard or had forgotten again.

His breakfast in the hotel was quite spartan. But he was used to that sort of thing. Eating was

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not one of the things he regarded as important. Then he set off to find Rusty and his motorboat.

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At the agreed hour they set off. Rusty - and neither Bruce nor Barry had any idea why the dark-skinned man had such a name - entered the boat only after the full sum had been paid. He then sat down at the steering wheel next to Perpetua. The two foreigners sat at the back.

Perpetua said only, "Good morning, Mr. Golding, good morning, Mr. Jordan."

Barry Jordan had to ask, "Perpetua, have you been to Ireland?"

The young woman gave half a smile, then said, "No, but Ireland came to me." But more she did not want to say.

The worried girl reminded Bruce of an inglorious episode in his own life. After a foolish liaison with a woman in Bosnia he had flown to London, at least half-convinced he had contracted AIDS. In London he had himself examined. The first results were not conclusive, and a new test was called for. Immediately he concluded he had

the disease, and for two days he was sure he would soon look like Rock Hudson in his last days. But on the third day the doctor rang to say the tests were negative. Bruce would never forget the black despair of those days of waiting. And now Perpetua, free of any guilt he could imagine, was awaiting a different sort of verdict. The elegant charm of the receptionist had disappeared; she was a trembling girl without make-up and smile.

And Bruce was again aware of his own pains. He shook his head to try to shoo away the ache, but that only made things worse.

From time to time Rusty and Perpetua exchanged words in some melodious language totally foreign to the two white men. So the two men had to “amuse” themselves as best they could. Bruce scarcely spoke, but he was pleased that Barry was well informed about the Fitzroy Islands, a corner of the globe unknown to 99% of humanity.

Barry told him the “nation” was an arbitrary collection of islands with different languages and

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cultures, the result of British colonial line-drawing on sea maps. Fitzroy was the English captain who had first “discovered the islands”, though Polynesians had been living there for many centuries. Maitland, the capital, was the name of the first British governor. The inhabitants of Dorilanu, the biggest island, looked down on the rest, especially the people on Hakilule, the second biggest group. There had been many a quarrel between the two. The inhabitants of the other five populated islands also felt grievances, but had very little voting power.

“I interviewed the president. He seems a nice enough chap.”

“About Kalume Ostala we’re not sure what he thinks. He’s obviously intelligent, studied in Auckland and Sydney, and makes a good impression on outsiders. There are rumours that he is corrupt, but that could be just the tongue-wagging of his opponents.”

“It’d be strange if he was corrupt. Heads of state are people of high ideals.” Bruce said that with such a deadpan expression that Barry had to look more closely at him. Well yes, of course he

was making an ironic joke. An experienced journalist could not say anything like that seriously.

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Bruce wondered when they would see clean ocean water, but reminded himself that the tsunami left behind a filthy slime. From time to time they passed little islands without inhabitants. Fallen coconut trees gave some idea of the ferocity of the waves.

Bruce discreetly pointed at Perpetua, who was just then speaking a bit more loudly with Rusty, and asked in a whisper, "So what is the girl from Hakilule doing in the capital city?"

Barry shrugged. "She's an exception, well educated in a western manner. Maybe she's a token representative of her island? I don't know." He whispered, "And seems to have an Irish accent!"

Bruce let the wind fan his face. He would have liked to talk with Perpetua, but that would have been almost indecent in the circumstances. Her shoulders were hunched together as though

she could not bear all her burdens. He felt sorry for her: what would they find on her island?

Are you sorry for her, or do you lust after her, said an internal voice. Leave the girl alone: what could you possibly say to her in this situation? And don't forget you've elected to avoid intimate relationships. Apart from that, he added mentally, I'm in a bad way myself. What on earth is wrong with me?

He took a close look at the island they were just then driving past. No people, and the signs of the recent catastrophe were quite visible. But if he imagined the island without the tsunami, it was easy to picture it to be a "tropical paradise", the type he dreamed about as a boy – at least when the Melbourne weather was cold and wet. Why was the pretty island not inhabited by human beings? Lack of water, he supposed.

He had no doubt that all of the islands, inhabited or not, would appear attractive to human beings. And yet the Dorilanuans and the Hakiluleans had hostile relations. In so many countries he had observed the same thing: people who to an outsider looked extremely similar to

the neighbouring group nevertheless had a long history of enmity against the neighbours. In conflict situations you are immediately judged by visible signs: the colour of a soldier's uniform, the skin colour, the religious significance of your headwear. Who does not belong to the right group risks being shot or chopped up on the spot. In some Middle Eastern countries he had worn a small Australian flag on his shirt, not to say "I'm Australian" - he was embarrassed by the loud attention called to their nationality by some Australians abroad -- but to give the message "I'm *not* American". That herd instinct was so stupid, so ignoble - and so widespread. There must be some basic shortcoming in human nature. The Buddhas, Ashokas, and Gandhis have always been exceptions.

When he was little he was told there was an all-powerful God who also loved his Universe, especially his favourite creation, human beings. So why did He make such a mess in creating us? Was God incompetent or malicious?

Neither nor, he told himself. There simply is no God, good or bad.

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Despite the pains he must have snoozed, and he could hear Barry gently snoring beside him. He had a feeling that somehow Perpetua had woken him, yet she was not even looking at him. In fact her pretty shoulders had opened up again, as if to face some huge challenge.

They were approaching an island, which, to judge by her reactions, had to be Hakilule.

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When they were close enough to distinguish details, their attention was caught first of all by the wreckage caused by the tsunami. Big coconut palms were lying in various directions, in places entangled with others. Smashed parts of homes were visible in many places, they too caught between tree trunks. Just as on Dorilanu, everything was partly covered by a nauseating mud. The wrecks of cars they had seen on Dorilanu were not to be seen, so obviously Hakilule was from a technological point of view less advanced than the main island. They could see that the frightening wave had covered all of the flat land near the sea limit, and only up on the hills, perhaps half a kilometre from the shore, the catastrophic work of the gods of the sea had been frustrated. But any human being caught on the low ground would have been a certain victim.

They drew closer and closer to a wide U-shaped bay. Perpetua was already standing up in the boat and, unconscious of the three men, was sweeping with her gaze the scene. She let out a little cry; evidently she had seen something, and the men turned to look in the same direction, but

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they could still not make out anything except the damage caused by the tsunami, similar to that on Dorilanu. As soon as the boat reached shallow water Perpetua jumped into the sea and waded quickly to the shore. Her tall athletic young body rapidly covered the terrain. From time to time she leapt over a tree trunk. While she was sprinting forward, the men in the boat caught a glimpse of a large group of people that Perpetua was making for.

Bruce Golding wanted to jump out of the boat in a similar way when it was almost touching the wet sand. For some reason he had to really struggle, and for a moment could not stand up; it seemed his whole body was aching. What's happening to me, he wondered: I'm normally a healthy person, now I feel like an invalid. Now I have to get out and take photos - that's why I came to this island. For a moment he really thought of simply staying in the boat, going back to Dorilanu with Rusty, and going to a doctor.

"Are you okay?" Barry Jordan asked. Barry was the sort of person who looked upon nursing

others as a natural need. Bruce supposed he would cry if he saw a bird with an injured wing.

“Yes, just a bit tired.” Bruce forced his rebellious body to rise and clumsily threw a leg into the water. “I have to go about my work now.” The steel man Golding succeeded in pulling the other leg out of the boat.

“Bruce, when do we want Rusty to come back for us?”

Bruce turned. “I hadn’t even given it a thought. Well ... would two days be enough for you?”

“Yes, I guess I can give a detailed report to STC in two days.”

Barry used his fingers and some gestures to get across to Rusty that they wanted him to return in two days. Then he said, “Gosh, I didn’t even ask the girl when she wants to go back to Dorilanu.”

Bruce threw a finger in the direction in which Perpetua had disappeared and said, “Probably she’ll want to stay longer.”

So they gestured a goodbye to Rusty and stepped forward. Only then did they notice that

to the left of them there was a large area of flattish beach already cleared of the rubbish, though the stinky mud was still there. Obviously the islanders had made a big start on restoring their lives. Meanwhile Rusty had turned his boat and set off for the main island. Soon the rhythmic putt-putt of his engine, which reminded Bruce of a lawnmower, was no longer audible.

Barry walked slowly because he knew there *was* something wrong with Bruce. Suddenly he pointed: "Ah, now I know why Perpetua ran over there. There are lots of people working there."

"So let's go there and ..." Bruce could not finish his sentence: he could not explain it, but he had to vomit. The liquid leapt out of his mouth and dirtied the sand. Oh Hell, maybe it was a mistake to eat that sausage this morning. He swayed and wanted to sit down, but after a struggle against his body's weakness he pushed himself forward.

"You'll have to take a rest, Bruce. Don't work today."

"My work doesn't wait for a whole day. I have to go to it now," and he really had to

quieten his trembling legs. After a while he had succeeded. "Let's go."

But after a few steps Barry insisted: "Bruce, I really have to support you. You look awful, your colour's dreadful."

"No," Bruce was obstinate, but his expression was that of a man determined to stumble across burning coals. Unmercifully he pushed himself forward.

"All right, your decision, but we still have a few hundred metres to go before we reach those people up there. Let's go left to that cleared space, where you ... we won't have to climb over tree trunks." Barry almost pushed Bruce to the left, and Bruce offered no resistance. It was easier to walk where there were fewer obstacles, even if that made their walk longer.

"Look!" Barry called out.

Bruce stopped and looked. A man of large dimensions, easily recognisable as a European, had torn off his face mask and embraced Perpetua, and she was clinging to him and weeping - probably with relief. Even from that distance the visitors could see that the whole

group of workers were wearing dirty clothing and face masks.

“Probably her father,” commented Barry. “Too old to be her lover.”

In spite of everything Bruce was pleased it was apparently not Perpetua’s lover. For a second he did not even feel his pains. Oh God, said an internal voice, stop that nonsense!

“Bruce, put your arm over my shoulder. I can’t watch you tormenting yourself like this.”

“Barry ...” his breath came with difficulty, “thanks, you’re a good bloke. But I don’t depend on anybody, thanks all the same.”

The two men went ahead a little, much more slowly than they normally would. Suddenly they heard a loud cry from a powerful throat, and it came from the very tall European. The big man walked over to another man who was weeping because of something he had just found. Bruce and Barry saw that the smaller man wanted to embrace a corpse, and the European had sternly ordered him not to do that. The weeping man unwillingly obeyed, and the European touched him gently on the shoulder. So obviously the

white man was someone with a lot of authority. Two men whose whole bodies were covered in protective cloth carted off the corpse.

The closer the two visitors got the more mask-wearers they saw on both sides among trees, some of which were standing. The sounds of people at work, chopping of wood, and voices reached their ears. There were almost as many women as men. Not only the closest group was working, hundreds of others right and left were busy on the heavy work of chopping up the tree trunks and carting them off. The other types of wreckage were being removed by other teams. Men wearing protective clothing all over the body had the worst task: carrying away the bodies. Bruce supposed that huge pits had already been dug for the victims, just as on Dorilanu. He paused, asking Barry to stop for a few moments, and took some pictures. When he had taken a few photos - Barry was surprised somebody could need so long before pressing the button - Bruce put the camera back into his backpack. It looked as though he doubted he had the strength to carry the camera in his hands while walking.

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Barry Jordan said, "Look, Perpetua's coming to us."

The lovely young woman, still with tears in her eyes - tears of joy, probably - went to the two visitors and called out, "Come and meet my Dad!" Her intonation changed when she looked closely at Bruce: "Mr. Golding, are you feeling sick?"

Bruce looked at the girl's attractive face. Since her main fears had not come true - and no doubt they had been for her tall father - she was again the solicitous official, ready to help. He let her approach very close before answering, "Well, perhaps I ate something that didn't agree with me. But it's only a minor thing, it'll pass."

She was not convinced. "You do look very poorly, Mr. Golding. If you want, some of the men can carry you to one of the cabins up there. It seems you have to take a break, at least for a while."

"Perpetua ..." he liked to let her name slowly roll out of his mouth, and he needed time to think how to answer." Thank you, but you see,

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I've often been in the middle of a battlefield. I'll see it through."

So that was it, a sort of declaration of independence. He was an experienced international battle hero; he would not weaken and ask for help, not even from a beautiful young woman.

She understood what he was saying and had to hide a feeling of mild offence. "Very well, you're a strong man. So please come and meet my father. He's an impressive man too, as you'll notice."

"With pleasure," came an unpleasurable croak from his throat. "Let's go."

Perpetua's father stopped working for a moment (it was clear that he was directing activities) and went to meet the three: his daughter, the thin but healthy man, and the visibly sick man with a backpack.

"Welcome to our island. My name is Patrick O'Dwyer."

Barry Jordan introduced himself, and finally Bruce reached the same spot. "Hello, I'm Bruce Golding."

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"Yes, Perpetua mentioned she'd met the famous journalist."

"Mr. O'Dwyer, we wondered why Perpetua has an Irish accent," said Barry. "Our question is answered!"

Bruce suddenly remembered who it was the big man reminded him of. His large head and powerful voice were similar to those of Iain Paisley, but instead of the Northern Irish growl about "no popery!" O'Dwyer had the pleasant rhythm of some southern accent.

"Gentlemen, first of all I ask you to call me Patrick. And so there'll be no misunderstandings, I'm the Catholic priest on our island."

Bruce and Barry looked at each other, then at Perpetua, and finally at the priest. Their confusion amused him, and he had to laugh, but it was a good-natured belly laugh, and for some reason that made the two Australians laugh too. The pleasant peals of Perpetua's laughter were added.

When that moment of good-humoured laughter had passed the stentorian voice said: "Bruce - I suppose I can call you that - no doubt

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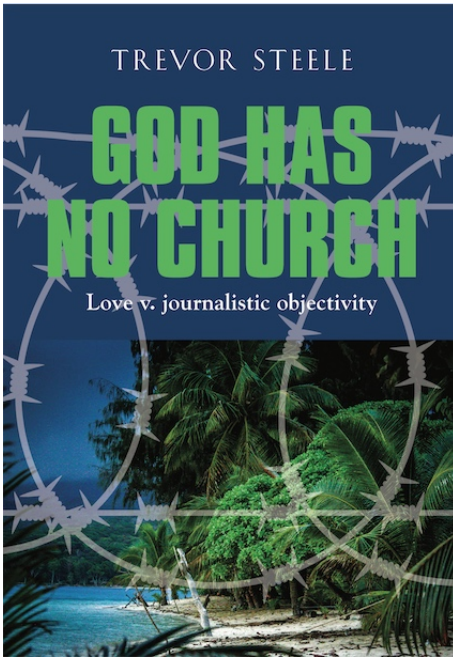
Perpetua and Barry have both advised you to take a rest. I could find a place for you up there, in fact in the presbytery. Would you like to do that now?"

A little annoyed by the insistent suggestions, Bruce repeated, "Thanks, maybe later. Now I'd like to inform the world of the situation of your people here. With my camera." And he started to unpack the camera from his backpack."By the way, I always ask permission to photograph people. Not from the corpses." Nobody laughed at that feeble attempt to joke, and Bruce immediately regretted saying that."Would it be okay to take photos here?"

"Yes, I'm certain our people would say yes, that they'd know your intentions are good. Just a moment." Patrick turned around and, putting a hand to each side of his mouth, as though with a microphone he yelled something in the local language. Several people made gestures of agreement." You can take photos. But I have to point out you really look ill yourself. Don't be surprised if they keep a close eye on you and if necessary help you."

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Bruce sighed, and stumbled a little on the upward slope to start his professional work.



Bruce Golding, a "man of steel", famous for reporting on wars and natural catastrophes, goes to a Pacific island where a tsunami has wrought destruction. There he finds a new meaning in his life, and love.

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by Trevor Steele

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