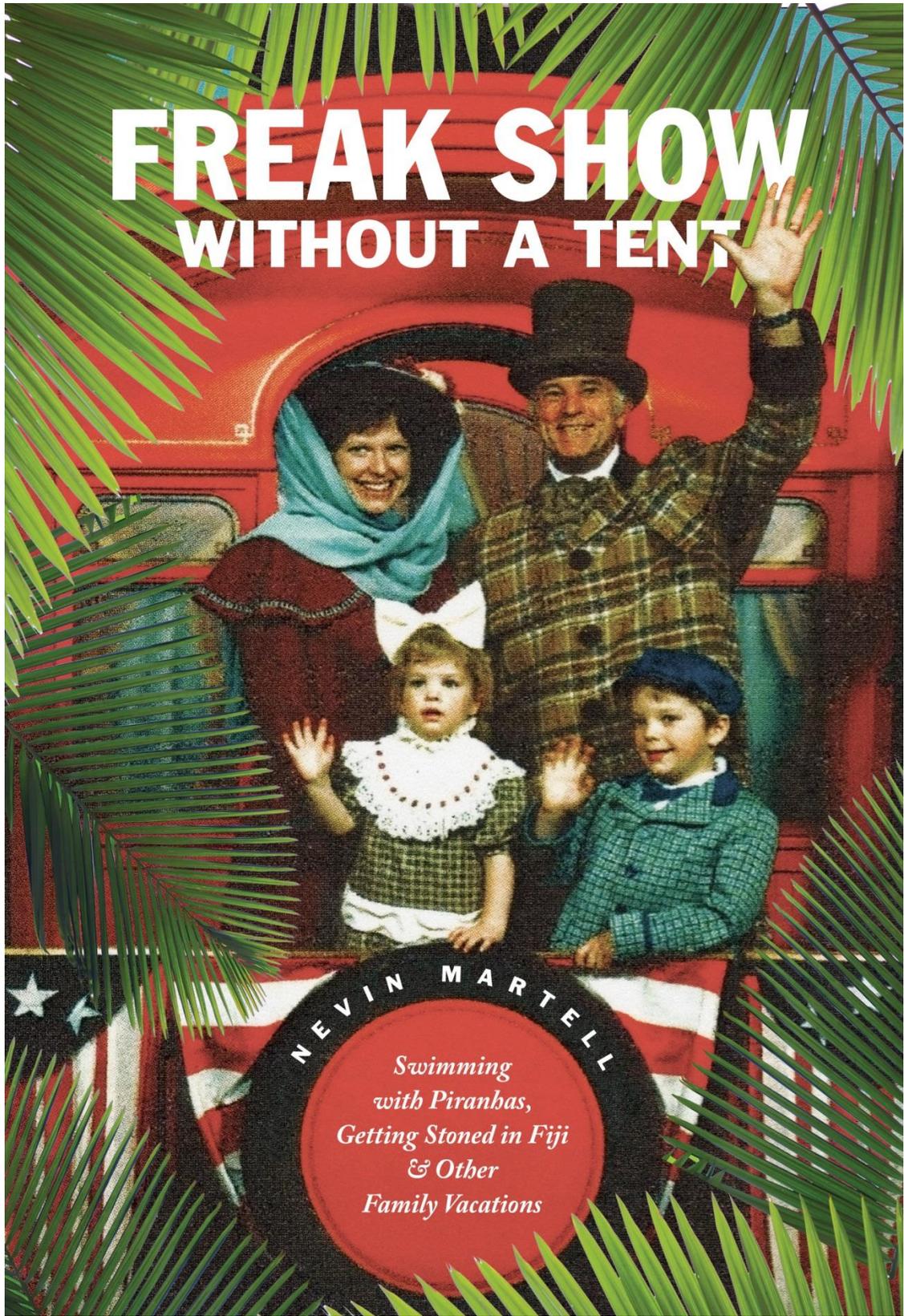


FREAK SHOW WITHOUT A TENT



NEVIN MARTELL

*Swimming
with Piranhas,
Getting Stoned in Fiji
& Other
Family Vacations*

Freak Show Without a Tent

Swimming with Piranhas, Getting Stoned in Fiji and Other Family Vacations

By Nevin Martell

Chapter Excerpt

On Sale June 24, 2014

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**Possibilities Publishing Company
www.possibilitiespublishingcompany.com**

Real Men Wear Bark Penis Sheaths

[Vanuatu 1986, Age 12]

Pan Am used to give out winged pins to young passengers, American Airlines passed out decks of cards, and Delta provided first-class flyers with a shoehorn if they were having a problem with their loafers. However, as I stepped onto the Air Fiji flight heading to Vanuatu in the South Pacific, a beaming stewardess in a tight-fitting polyester skirt and blazer greeted me with a lei of off-white shells.

“Welcome aboard,” she said as she slipped it around my neck.

I didn’t know the proper response, so I half-bowed back like I’d recently seen Daniel-san do in *The Karate Kid*. Shuffling past her down the aisle, my latest accessory delicately clinking like a New Age wind chime, I couldn’t help but grin. No more chores, no more homework, and no more boring routine. We were headed to paradise! I could only hope that this flight was less eventful than our trip to Nevis.

Our destination was the capital city of Port Vila on Efate, one of more than 80 islands that make up the Republic of Vanuatu. It would have been an odd choice to most vacationers, who usually only debated whether to go to Disney World or Club Med. Not us. My father burned with an insatiable wanderlust, compelling him to pick the most out-of-the-way places in the world for our trips.

Unlike many of the families I knew growing up in western New York and then eastern Pennsylvania, ours was not bound by the usual conventions. Dad had owned Martell’s, a successful Manhattan restaurant, for well over two decades. However, when he sold it in 1985, he was suddenly afforded freedom and the funds to explore the world.

The family didn’t hold him back from his dreams of exploring the lesser-known corners of the planet. Josephine and I could easily be taken out of school for substantial stretches or simply transferred into new ones. Not yet 40, my mother was unattached to a professional career, though taking care of the three of us was undoubtedly a full-time job with plenty of overtime and not enough gratitude from her charges.

Without strong ties keeping them held down, my parents had moved us to New Zealand on my 11th birthday, which I hope will always rank as my least-attended birthday party ever. Both of them had fond memories of traipsing through the Land of the Long White Cloud on their honeymoon. However, that had been over a decade ago.

They hadn’t done much research before we’d arrived in New Zealand, so we started out living in Russell, a rustic fishing town on the northern tip of the North Island. That decision turned out to be the equivalent of deciding you’re going to move to America and randomly picking Podunk, Idaho, as your new hometown. Ultimately, we ended up in Nelson, at the uppermost end of the South Island, a more modernized seaport that felt not unlike a small city in the Pacific Northwest.

Our new address was a perfect base of operations for my father's plans to practically retrace Captain Cook's travels through the South Pacific. That was how we had ended up heading to Vanuatu. Though Dad had only bought the country's guidebook in the airport on the day that we departed, he had been talking about the potential adventures that lay ahead for weeks beforehand. There was no doubt that something special was in store for us, though none of us really knew what that might be.

When we touched down on Efate and the flight crew opened the door, the cabin flooded with moist tropical air. I breathed in deeply, adjusted my shell necklace, and double-checked that my fanny pack was fastened tightly about my waist. Bring on the paradise! As I disembarked, I made sure to bow to every member of the crew I encountered. No one would ever be able to accuse me of being an impolite out-of-towner.

Driving through Port Vila a short while later, the rays of the unrelenting South Pacific sun pried open my travel-bleary eyes. The city still felt like a colonial outpost; there were reminders of times past everywhere you looked. We passed a couple 19th-century mansions that still clung to their majesty, even as they slowly succumbed to the ravages of time, hurricanes, and the brutal decaying effects of salt air.

Vanuatians hung out in front of small stores chatting and enjoying cold beers in the hot afternoon. As we zipped by an open-air market, the rich scent of coconut oil mixed with fresh fish, ripened pineapple, and a faint undercurrent of diesel to create an intoxicatingly exotic aroma. A few tourists dotted the sidewalks, garish in their big sun hats, oversized sunglasses, and brightly colored bathing suits.

Unfortunately, our hotel was more North America than South Pacific, which didn't sit well with my father. "Looks like Cleveland," he muttered.

I had never been to Cleveland, but I knew it wasn't a compliment.

"Don't worry," he needlessly continued. "We'll get out to the *real* Vanuatu soon enough."

I didn't quite understand what wasn't real about the Vanuatu I was standing in just then. This all seemed very real to me.

My sister and I had barely put our bags down and fought over who would sleep in which bed – I ended up in the one by the balcony, which I thought was the nicer option – before Dad appeared in the doorway of our room.

"Come on, kids. Let's go exploring."

He sounded like a children's television show host who really loved his job. This was probably at least partly because his bartender-turned-restaurateur-turned-retiree career arc allowed him to never grow up. You can't argue with such youthful enthusiasm, even when the speaker was nearly 60 years old. I was fried, but I still found it impossible to say no.

"Should be fun," I half-heartedly replied, wondering if it was possible to maybe, just maybe, squeeze in a quick nap before we headed out.

Jo looked up from her suitcase to deliver a deadpan, “Totally,” before returning to her unpacking.

Dad apparently didn’t notice our marked lack of energy and enthusiasm, or just chose to ignore it. “This is going to be an adventure! And who knows where it’s going to take us?”

“Who knows?” I echoed tentatively with a weak smile. “Into the great unknown. Right, Dad?”

He came over to give me a manly half-hug across the shoulders. “Thatta boy. All right, I’ve got to get my camera gear together.”

Disappearing as abruptly as he had arrived, he left us to prepare ourselves for our inaugural survey of Port Vila. Always the pragmatist, I strapped on my fanny pack and filled it with a couple of packages of cheese and crackers, a box of raisins, sun block, and a pocket-sized copy of *Robinson Crusoe*.

“Come on, Jo. Let’s get down there before he has a conniption.”

“Why is he being such a dick-tater?” she enunciated fiercely.

“Who cares? I’m hungry.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” Jo snapped on her own turquoise fanny pack across her travel-rumpled Guatemalan dress and pushed me towards the door. “Move it, junior dick-tater.”

When we met my parents in the lobby, it looked like a reunion of two totally different families. While Jo and I had barely been able to get ourselves together, Mom and Dad had somehow transformed themselves into dead ringers for the stars of *Romancing the Stone*. My mother’s hair was pulled back into a loose ponytail, and she was wearing a lavender top with embroidered edging. Dad sported khaki shorts and a loose white linen shirt unbuttoned halfway, subjecting every passerby to an eyeful of his graying chest hair.

Dad quickly formed a strong opinion about our more rustic traveling getup. “You guys could be Lois and Clark,” he quipped.

“Who are you then? Christopher Dumbass?” Jo shot back.

“Or Vasco da Asso,” I added helpfully, figuring that it was always best to redirect Jo’s ire in an alternate direction than my own.

Mom wasn’t amused with the way the conversation was heading. “No Dumbass. No Asso. Don’t worry; you both look very cute.”

She shot my father a look to keep him from disagreeing with her; he just shrugged. “I know everyone is a little worn out,” she said diplomatically. “Let’s stop bickering and get a bite to eat.”

If there was one thing that could always put an end to arguments in our family, it was food. Forming up ranks, we headed outside. Walking down the street perked me up and made me realize that my

belly was feeling more than a little empty. I could have eaten the cheese and crackers or the raisins in my fanny pack, but I was seasoned enough to know that you never eat your supplies on the first day. Just look at what happened to the Donner Party – worst party ever.

A few blocks from the hotel, my nose caught the scent of a deep fryer working overtime. The source of the smell was Bloody Mary's Restaurant, which advertised fish 'n' chips, milkshakes, burgers, and "island fare." The promise of fatty fast food reminded me of the States, so it was reassuring to see this little slice of wannabe Americana in the faraway heart of Melanesia.

"What if we stop here?" I suggested, nudging my sister.

Jo took my lead and rolled out her sad puppy eyes. "Yeah, I'm starving, Dad."

My father hemmed and hawed for a second. Clearly, he wanted to keep going and canvass the entire town before coming to a dining decision, but he was swayed by our pitiful looks.

"I guess we could try it," he conceded.

"Mmm, mango milkshakes," my mother cooed as we steered into the shade of the restaurant's patio and sat down in sun-bleached plastic chairs at a small table with a red-and-white-checkered tablecloth. A half-filled ketchup bottle and an old mayonnaise jar brimming with homemade hot sauce sat at its center. The waiter brought over menus, but little did he know that he was wasting time and energy. One of the rules in my father's travel book was that menus are for stick-in-the-muds.

Without even glancing at the options, Dad asked, "Do you have any specials?"

The waiter was clearly thrilled. "An adventurous eater. How wonderful."

My father preened and puffed out his chest as if he'd just been awarded a gold medal in the Olympics.

"Christopher Dumbass," my sister whispered out of the side of her mouth. I nodded, coughing my laughter into the napkin.

"Maybe you'd like to try the Millionaire's Salad?" the waiter inquired.

"What's that?" My father was clearly intrigued; so was I.

"We shred up the whole heart of a coconut palm," the waiter said, making slicing motions with his hands. "Since we're taking the tree's heart, we kill the entire palm just to make the salad. We call it the Millionaire's Salad because it's the most expensive item on the menu." He chuckled loudly at his own joke.

My father looked impressed by the proposition, but Jo was horrified. "Don't kill the tree, Dad," she pleaded. "Would you chop down a maple tree just to get a jug of syrup? I bet you wouldn't."

Dad was torn. He looked between the expectant waiter, who was offering a taste of the *real* Vanuatu that he yearned to experience, and his daughter, who would pester him for the rest of the trip for being a tree-killing monster.

The waiter tried to tip the scales in his favor. “If you are interested, sir, I can have them go cut down the tree right now.”

Luckily for the poor palm on the chopping block, my mother stepped in with a pragmatic suggestion. “This sounds like it might take a long time, honey. Wouldn’t it be more fun to be out exploring the island instead?”

Dad nodded. “You’re right, dear.” He turned back to the waiter. “I’ll take the coconut crab and a gin and tonic.”

Jo and I exchanged relieved glances as we each ordered fried poulet fish with French fries and virgin piña coladas; my mother opted to try a vegetarian sampler platter with taro and yams, and a glass of water.

As the waiter shuffled back to the kitchen with a defeated slump to his shoulders, my mother got out the guidebook and my father got that fanatical look in his eyes again.

“There’s all sorts of stuff we can do,” he told us gleefully, like a kid explaining the possibilities at an amusement park. I was pretty sure he’d barely read the guidebook that he had purchased just a few hours earlier, and surmised that Dad was flying by the seat of his pants. It was a strategy that would become his hallmark in years to come.

“There’s a factory here that makes buttons out of shells. I’d like to check that out,” my mother said.

“Maybe,” my dad hemmed, but I could tell that a visit to the button plant was not on his ideal agenda. Not *real* or exciting enough.

“Oh, look at this, there’s a glass-bottomed boat tour, too,” my mother continued, valiantly struggling to mold this into a trip the rest of us might actually enjoy.

Dad decided to draw a line in the proverbial sand, reminding me that we hadn’t even had a chance to see a beach yet, despite the fact that we were on an island in the South Pacific.

“Alison, we should really be considering the big-picture elements of the trip.”

“You can also take a tour of the Mr. Juicy soda factory,” Mom added, as if she hadn’t heard him. “That might be fun for the kids.”

My father looked even more crestfallen at this idea, but I was totally on board. Considering how carefully Mom regulated our sugar intake – having a super sweet piña colada was a vacation-only special treat – going to the source where high-fructose corn syrup-based beverages were made was almost better than Halloween treat bags, Christmas stockings, and Easter baskets combined.

“That sounds very cool,” I chirped, my excitement betraying any attempt to sound nonchalant. As misfortune would have it, nobody was listening to me.

None of these options were sitting well with my father. “Let me see that, Alison,” he bothered to ask as he all but lunged across the table to rip the guidebook from my mother’s hands. He flipped through it with a quiet desperation until he finally alighted on a page that seemed to buoy his spirits.

“Ah, look here.” He tapped the page. “There’s a national cultural center right here in Port Vila. That would be the best place to start.”

He put down the book with a satisfied smile that meant that our plans had been made. A cultural center? That sounded incredibly boring. The name itself held all the glamour of phrases like “agricultural college” and “home economics.” It certainly didn’t sound like the kind of place where you found an exciting adventure or the *real* Vanuatu.

* * * * *

Despite my misgivings, we found ourselves walking up to the Vanuatu Cultural Center and National Museum the next morning. I was instantly uninterested in the building itself and what it might hold when I saw the giant cauldron sitting out front. According to the weatherworn placard, it had once been used to boil visiting missionaries alive. The short paragraph was unclear about whether the tradition still thrived, which was unsettling.

As I stared into the black iron depths, I wondered what it must have felt like to be cooked to death. Being routinely forced to take a bath in a tub full of scalding hot water by my mother was bad enough, but at least she wasn’t planning to eat me alive after I cleaned behind my ears. Clearly a trip to the cauldron was to be avoided at all costs.

Inside the center, there were more signs that foreigners hadn’t always been welcomed with seashell necklaces and promises of paradise. A giant glass case displayed an astonishing array of hand-carved spears, cudgels, and war hammers (maybe to “help” any missionaries who didn’t like the looks of the cauldron). This was far more interesting than I had anticipated. I kept my fingers crossed that there was a gift shop, where I might be able to buy some replicas of this weaponry to keep my sister in line.

Farther down the hall there was a series of wooden canoes, each hewn out of a single tree by a lone craftsman. Having barely assembled a beyond-rudimentary toy racing-car kit with my father for my Cub Scouts’s Pinewood Derby, I couldn’t begin to fathom the skill and patience required to build such a vessel. As we were all taking in the handiwork, a thin man with too much nervous energy, a sweat-spotted blue *guayabera* shirt often favored by Cuban barbers, and a graying, pointed goatee came up to us.

“Are you folks enjoying yourselves?” He grinned, not unlike how I imagined a local addressed a missionary who was about to become the main course.

“Oh, yes, this is very interesting,” my mother graciously responded as she moved on to the next case of artifacts, hoping to sidestep an interaction with this peculiar character.

Dad couldn't pass up the opportunity to connect with a local and extended his hand. "I'm Ralph. This is my wife Alison and our two children, Nevin and Josephine."

"I'm Kirk Huffman," the man replied as he wrung my father's hand with the kind of enthusiasm usually reserved for Stanley meeting Livingstone for the first time. "I'm the curator here."

"What are the chances?" my father exclaimed excitedly, half-turning to us, hoping some eager looks would materialize on our faces. "We came here to try to figure out what to do on our trip. I bet you've got your finger on the pulse."

Huffman smiled. "You're lucky; the vines are their most elastic at this time of year."

I was still staring at him with a "What the hell are you talking about, crazy man?" look on my face when my father dived into the breach.

"Vines?" he asked uncertainly. "Like the plant?"

"Come into my office and I'll tell you more."

Huffman ushered us all into an overcrowded room with piles of academic books, old magazines, and loosely arranged papers cluttering every possible surface. Small wooden statuettes, half-full Mr. Juicy bottles, and dusty shards of pottery punctuated the chaos. There was nowhere to sit, so we all stood awkwardly, wondering if we were going to accidentally break some priceless ancient artifact.

For the next hour, as we grew hotter, more cramped, and more uncomfortable, Huffman regaled us with stories about *nagbol*, better known as land diving to Westerners. Every spring on nearby Pentecost Island, divers jumped off manmade wooden towers in the middle of the jungle with nothing but the aforementioned – and not-so-sturdy-sounding – vines strapped to their ankles.

It's basically bungee jumping minus the safety harness and the multimillion-dollar insurance policy, but it's no sport.

While *nagbol* is a rite of manhood for young jumpers, the whole ceremony serves as a fertility ritual that ensures that tribes enjoy bountiful yam harvests. To me, it sounded like the most insane way to ask God a favor, a needlessly dangerous way to prove you had some *cojones*, and a bizarre way to pass an afternoon. However, to my father it was that really *real* experience that he'd been seeking.

"Does that sound like fun or what?" he crowed as we walked out of the cultural center, a reservation booked out to Pentecost the next day with the help of his new friend.

I didn't even know the words to a dinnertime grace, so I had a hard time comprehending the faith required to trust my life to a rickety tower and some flimsy jungle creepers. Though my fingers were tightly crossed that we didn't meet anyone with a cauldron, I was excited about the trip.

This would truly be an adventure. We were going to see a ceremony that had been practiced for hundreds of years. It would be like stepping into a time machine and whizzing back to the primitive age before telephones, Saturday morning cartoons, and cheese that came in aerosol cans. Suddenly our family vacation was on a Jules Verne-styled quest of epic proportions.

The next morning, we were up at five o'clock to get to the airport for our day trip. As we waited in the hotel lobby for my sister to come down, I saw a postcard about land diving in the gift shop. Next to a picture of a little lad in mid-fall, a small blurb explained, "Young boys follow trustingly in their fathers' footsteps to early learn this spectacular feat." I laughed out loud. If Dad ever asked me to jump off a tower to make sure everyone had their daily allowance of carbs, I'd head out the door to start my career as a professional hobo. These Vanuatuans were made of strong stuff!

When we got to the airport, I learned that Vanuatuans thrived on uncertainty and danger at every turn. The plane we were taking to Pentecost was a patched, re-patched, and patched again single-engine Cessna that had probably been in service since it came off the assembly line in the early '50's. Worse yet, it looked like the mechanic didn't have much of a budget for repairs. Duct tape was used to cover holes and brace the key junctures where the wing struts attached to the plane.

"Don't worry, it's stronger than steel," the expat American pilot reassured us with an easygoing grin that I prayed wasn't enhanced by a string of hair-of-the-dog beers in the airport bar.

As we walked up to what I was certain would be our collective coffin, my father inspected the repair work. "That stuff is a miracle," he nodded sagely. "You can use duct tape for anything."

Christopher Dumbass, indeed. Suddenly, I wasn't so excited. The only miracle I could see happening was if we survived this mockery of aeronautical engineering. Watching other people fall out of the sky was one thing; falling out of the sky in a duct-taped casket was another thing. But we didn't have a chance to debate our chances of survival before the pilot fired up the engine, cutting off any debate and sending us past the point of no return.

"Strap yourselves in," our Grim Reaper yelled over the tumult, but he didn't need to prompt us. We would have put on parachutes, helmets, and life preservers, if only they were available.

Taxiing to the end of the strip, he turned the plane into the wind and away from the sun. As he gunned the engine, I gripped my armrest – only to have it come away in my hand, trailing a bit of silvery gray tape. So much for the miracle of duct tape!

Squeezing my eyes tight, I tried to drown out the din. Every part of the plane was shaking, rattling, and clanking, producing a most ominous dissonance that reminded me of our midair disaster on the way to Nevis. In an unexpected moment of clarity, I suddenly realized that I had stopped breathing and was holding in the air. I hoped it wasn't my last breath. The noise increased like someone was cranking the volume knob far past the max.

Suddenly, the noise subsided dramatically and the sound became more of a drone than a wail. I slowly cracked open my eyes, peeking through my drawn lashes like a lion suspiciously searching the savannah for hunters. Sky, beautiful blue sky, stretched out before us, dotted with gargantuan clouds hewn into floating Arctic icebergs. Below us, the sun glinted off the ocean, creating an endless stream of sparkles that stretched to the horizon.

A few minutes later, we passed close to the neighboring island of Ambrym, where a heavy mist shrouded the volcano rising up at its center. It was one of those definitively primordial vistas that seemed to make you forget that you were living in the 20th century. Looking down, I imagined

peering through the patchwork of jade, chartreuse, and emerald foliage to discover a prehistoric world below. Dinosaurs stalked through the forest, giant kaleidoscopic butterflies flitted through the muggy air, and white-faced monkeys swung between the trees.

Quickly we passed over this lost world and soon Pentecost came into view. I looked around vainly for a landing strip, but all I could see was a long mucky meadow near the coast.

As if he was reading my mind, the pilot yelled back, “It doesn’t look like LaGuardia, but it does the trick. I just hope they keep the goats off the runway this time.”

I tightened my seatbelt and wondered if the plane came with airbags. Not that it mattered; they’d probably be made of duct tape anyway.

Crap.

Well, it’s been fun.

The pilot banked sharply and nosed the plane toward the ground. Crosswinds buffeted the Cessna, and it shook violently. I looked out the window at the duct tape, wondering just how strong it really was. We were in an angled dive; the earth was rushing up at us. This time, I kept my eyes open, but only because I was too petrified to close them.

Why did I always get on the doomed flights? It’s like Dad only knew how to buy one-way tickets to hell.

Then, suddenly, the pilot leveled out and touched down with a lightness that defied all logic and expectation. The sound of mud slapping against the undercarriage and the bleating of the goats mixing with the guttural roar of the plane covered my explosive sigh of relief as we came to a stop.

We disembarked as a pair of dirt-encrusted jeeps pulled up and two men got out. Our pilot greeted the drivers and began unloading boxes of food and bags of mail, which were quickly packed into the backs of the jeeps. Once this was done, one of the drivers came over to us. He was dressed in a set of faded standard-issue olive cargo pants and a shirt that claimed his last name was Miller and his rank was that of a colonel, but I was pretty certain that he never spent a day of his life in the service.

“I’m Nicholas, your guide,” he told us in heavily accented, clipped English. “Welcome to Pentecost Island. This is only the third year we are allowing tourists to come here, so you are some of the first outsiders to ever witness the *naghol*.”

Collectively, we gave a very impressed-sounding “oooh.” It looked like Dad had scored the authentic Vanuatuan experience for which he had been searching.

We were so impressed by this turn of events that we were oblivious to another single-engine plane until it buzzed overhead, preparing to touch down. We watched as it looped around before it cut its own V through the sludge, scattering goats in the process. It pulled up a few feet away, whipping us with the sharp breeze of the propeller. The pilot hadn’t even had a chance to cut the engine before the plane’s door opened and four men jumped out like they were a Special Forces unit.

“Film crew,” Nicholas informed us knowingly as he gave them a familiar wave. “They’re making a movie about the *naghol*.”

These filmmakers defied my expectations of Hollywood big shots. Instead of channeling the svelte style of *Rodeo Drive*, these guys preferred a more rough and rugged aesthetic. Clad in well-worn jungle khakis and dirty hiking boots, they all boasted a few days’ worth of unshaven scruff. They looked more like adventurers searching for cities of lost gold rather than Spielberg wannabes. They certainly weren’t searching for a pale-skinned family of four. After giving us a cursory glance and a perfunctory greeting, they piled into the second jeep and zoomed off.

We were on a tight schedule on Pentecost; there was just enough time to watch the ceremony before we’d be making a mad dash to get back to the plane. There were no hotels on the island, and overnight stays were prohibited. And since there was no proper airport – which meant there was no air traffic control, no homing beacon, and no gift shop where you could buy land-diver action figures or a “Land Diving Is De-Vine” bumper sticker – the pilot could only land during full daylight and in good weather. Even a landing in the evening or during a light shower would be suicidal, so the pilot stressed the importance of making it back to the landing strip by four o’clock.

“Pentecost can be a really dangerous place, so you don’t want to spend the night.” He gave a wave. “Did you see that cauldron they have in front of the cultural center? They have one here that’s for the guests.”

With that disturbing thought in mind, we turned our attention to our transportation for the next stage of our journey. Like the beat-up plane we had arrived in, this jeep had seen better days. Originally standard Army green when it was airdropped in during the Second World War, it was now bleached to a light olive and caked with mud. As my observant father cheerfully pointed out, duct tape covered several large rust holes near the jeep’s undercarriage.

“If this repair work is as sturdy as that plane we came in on, we’re in luck,” he declared without a trace of irony.

My mother wasn’t convinced. “Make sure you fasten your seatbelts, and no horsing around.”

The front passenger seat was the only one with a working seatbelt, so my sister and I squeezed in together and secured ourselves. Nicholas jumped in and fired up the jeep, whose engine roared to life with encouraging energy. We headed down the muddy track alongside the clearing till we reached an even muddier dirt road wending its way into the jungle. It was loud with the wind rushing in and the engine straining to carry us across the arduous landscape, so we couldn’t hear one another speak. This didn’t stop Nicholas, who kept talking at us, his thickly accented English coming through in little bits and pieces that made no sense whatsoever.

“Long time...they died...Happy Meal...John Wayne.”

“Yeah. Totally,” Jo responded, displaying her remarkable ability to convince adults that she was both listening and caring about what they were saying while actually doing neither.

Frankly, we were both more interested in what was going on outside the vehicle than in it. We were fascinated by the passing scenery – a cacophony of greens and browns spotted with the bright flashes of colorful flowers that echoed a Jackson Pollock painting. Palm trees grew everywhere, their fronds hanging over the road and their upper reaches full of green coconuts.

After 10 minutes of bumping along the crude road, we came to small village made up of a couple dozen thatched huts arranged in a rough circle. Nicholas jumped out and started unloading some crates from the back, waving over a few men to retrieve what he was leaving. The sound of the jeep engine called everyone like a giant doorbell, so people started to pile out of their huts or emerge from deeper in the encampment.

Everyone was clearly intrigued by the four foreigners because a small crescent quickly formed around the jeep. Some of the mahogany-skinned locals politely pretended to talk to Nicholas while glancing at us out of the corners of their eyes, but most of them spared the pretense and just stared at us with open curiosity.

I was just as fascinated by them. The men were dressed in nothing more than hand-woven bark penis sheaths, which the guidebook had indicated were called *nambas*. They wore a woven black belt just above their hips, which attached to the sheath and yanked their penises upward in a way that looked so profoundly painful that I caught myself unconsciously clenching my legs together. The women had an easier time of it and were topless, their breasts hanging down toward their tan grass skirts. Smiling children dressed in first-world thrift-store wear – ratty T-shirts and frayed athletic shorts – ran among them. The island throng was filled out with chickens and the occasional tusked pig.

“What are we supposed to say?” I asked my sister as several of the children gathered together and started toward our side of the car in an energetic cluster bubbling over with chattering and hand waving.

Josephine shrugged. “I dunno. Maybe find out if we can play with the chickens?”

I wasn’t sold on this fowl-centric approach but didn’t have a chance to formulate an alternate plan before the young Vanuatuans were at our window. They were all grinning, showing off teeth so white that you’d think they brushed with bleach.

“Hello,” Jo began, doing her best to match their megawatt smiles.

“Hi,” I hastily added, not wanting to appear inarticulate or, God forbid, younger than Jo.

“Hello hi,” the kids chorused back to us. “Hello hi. Hello hi.”

Then they went quiet as though waiting for us to say something else.

After a moment’s pause, I ventured, “Nice to meet you?”

“Nicometyou,” they repeated in a happy jumble, then started laughing. Jo and I just grinned back like the slow-witted cousins from out of town.

A little boy in the front near the door said something in Bislama, the local pidgin English dialect. I must have betrayed my lack of understanding because he repeated himself more emphatically. Despite the increased decibel at which he spoke, I still couldn't understand him. Abandoning all attempt at verbal communication, he simply gestured for us to follow him.

"Can we go?" I asked my parents as I unfastened our seatbelt and winched my fanny pack tightly to my waist.

"Where are you going?" my mother wanted to know, but Dad was less concerned.

"Where are they going to go, Alison? It's an island!"

"I'll come with you," Mom insisted as she got out of the car. Dad stayed behind to talk to Nicholas, who had already started chatting animatedly with some of the local men.

We gave our new friends the thumbs-up as we got out. Happy that we were joining them, they formed a rough honor guard around us as we moved toward the center of the village. My mother walked behind us, smiling at our wardens, while keeping a watchful eye on us. As we made our way between the rough huts, my nose perked up. Mingling with the scents of smoke and livestock was an enticing smell that made my stomach growl in unapologetic hunger.

But what if this was the scent of seared missionary? Were these seemingly friendly children just an elaborate ruse to get us into the cauldron?

I was contemplating making a break for the relative safety of the jeep – though Nicholas was probably in on the cannibalistic festivities, too – when we rounded a corner and I realized that the source of these delicious smells was a sturdy cast-iron skillet hanging over an open flame.

For a second I wondered how they fit a missionary into a pot that small, and then I saw a half-naked cook gracefully flip over a misshapen lump.

Could be an ear? Or maybe a big toe? I almost didn't care; it smelled divine.

The chef waited until the deep-fried morsels were golden brown, then deftly pulled them out of the seething oil and piled them on a banana leaf next to her.

"Johnnycake," one of the children explained.

Let's hope that Johnny didn't used to be a missionary, I thought.

When the kids indicated we should take one, I only hesitated for a moment. Sorry, Johnny. Picking up one of the larger treats, I took a big bite. Crispy on the outside with a warm interior like spongy bread, it possessed the smallest hint of sweetness and no discernible taste of an unfortunate missionary. This was simply Pentecost Island's answer to Dunkin' Donuts.

Josephine and the other kids grabbed their own treats, and we all squatted in the dirt to wolf them down. In between scarfing, I managed to exclaim, "Awesome."

“Awe-some,” one of the older boys repeated with a perfectly white grin.

As I sat there trying not to stare at the supernatural ivory sheen of their chompers, I realized that I must have looked equally peculiar to these island children. I was decked out in blue athletic Adidas shorts with white stripes down the side, a T-shirt advertising a Pennsylvania youth soccer league, Coke bottle glasses, and a triumphantly neon-blue fanny pack. I’d topped off my ensemble with a baseball cap boasting bright yellow lightning bolts on each side. The hat was intentionally eye-catching so that my mom could find me in a crowd. Ironically, the hat always drew a crowd, so it was a somewhat self-defeating accessory.

Despite the fact that I was a half-wit when it came to fashion, Josephine was practically a runway ingénue. Her soft round face was framed by a tumble of brown curls that seemed to give her a halo. She wore a simple embroidered white linen top that my mother had picked up on one of our trips and a cerulean skirt that set off the white perfectly. Jo just had a natural grace and poise that I could never muster. I was Luke Skywalker when he was still working on Uncle Owen’s moisture farm, and she was Princess Leia. We were an oddly contrasting duo, made all the more strange by our proximity to the island’s native children, who had a refreshing ignorance about the concept of modern style.

When we were done with our johnnycakes, we wiped our greasy hands on our legs and stood up. Remembering the ritual from the Air Fiji flight, I made sure to bow deeply to the chef, who seemed pleased, if not a little confused, by my gesture. Bowing to our small horde of hosts, I discovered they knew the ritual because they all bowed right back.

Not wanting to be rude, I bowed again. They bowed in turn. I bowed once more. They responded. I was beginning to wonder if this ceremony was endless when my mother jumped in.

“That’s enough, Nevin,” she said with a light pat on the shoulder, like the ones coaches give kids when they strike out playing Wiffle ball. “I’m sure they get the point.”

“That you’re an idiot,” my sister added. “This isn’t Japan.”

“Bite me.”

Mom put the kibosh on a larger argument. “Nevin. Josephine. Stop it.”

She herded my sister, me, and our gaggle of new friends back to the jeep, where my father creatively conversed with a few of the local men about fishing. From what I could see, the conversation consisted of single words, smiles, and emphatic hand gestures.

“Big?” Dad asked, holding his arms a few feet apart to indicate the size of the fish he was imagining.

“Big big,” one of the men replied with a chuckle, waving his arms open wide toward the heavens, perhaps implying that the fish he caught was larger than an out-of-towner could conceive.

“Ahhh,” my father replied with no small amount of wonder, probably fantasizing over catching a sky-sized skipjack.

My sister and I piled back into the jeep and waved goodbye to the johnnycake posse from our front-seat perch.

“You know, you are the first white children to ever come here,” Nicholas told us as we headed over to the dive site. “They have never seen anyone like you.”

Same here, I thought. Though I’d met kids of every hue – and been on the It’s A Small World ride at the Magic Kingdom several times – I’d never been in the middle of a johnnycake-eating throng of youngsters like this one. Today had been a once-in-a-lifetime experience for all of us.

The *nagbol* was to be held at Wali, a region a few miles south of the village. It took another half an hour of bouncing around in the jeep before Nicholas suddenly pulled over to the side of the road. “We’ll walk the rest of the way,” he told us as he got out.

We followed him, our shoes sinking half a foot into the mire. With every step, there was a sloppy sucking noise followed by a small pop. If I weren’t so worried about falling into the gunk, I probably would have been making fart jokes.

Our guide led us along a slender, sludgy trail that led into the jungle. It angled up a hill steeply, but it was impossible to see where we were going because the vegetation was so thick. Peeking above us, it was hard to even see the sky except for the occasional blue blip. This was definitely not somewhere I wanted to get lost – or spend the night.

Then suddenly a clearing opened before us and a 100-foot-tall tower loomed into view. It looked equally impressive and unstable. It was built on the side of a hill with the diving side facing the downward slope, and a freshly cut tree ran down its core, forming the backbone of the spindly structure. Constructed of small, freshly cut saplings, it was held together by jungle creepers, or *lianas* as the islanders called them. Not a single nail was used.

Though many visitors would be hard-pressed to believe that land diving is a precision sport given the primitive building materials, they would be mistaken. According to what Kirk Huffman had told us the day before, building the tower was a time-honored science honed by fervent belief and the necessity of invention. The construction process took more than a month, with most of the tribe’s men chipping in.

The vines were a vital part of the jump, so they had to be selected with care. A creeper that is a tad too long or brittle – instead of well cut and supple – could result in a spinal injury or worse for an unfortunate jumper. This was especially true since these aerialists plummeted without the luxury of a helmet or a net to soften the impact should something go awry.

The ideal jump ends with the diver’s arms crossed and head bowed to the chest, so just the tips of his shoulders grazed the ground below him. In this way, he blesses the ground, ensuring an abundance of yams for his community. The higher the dive, the more plentiful the harvest. In case this blessing ended as a cursed jump, the ground below the tower was meticulously churned up to create a softer surface for those who did more than brush shoulders with it.

“Each part of the tower represents a different part of the human body,” Nicholas explained, pointing up the structure as we walked toward it. “The feet are the bottom, and the top is the head.”

He went on to explain that the tower was divided into a series of rough platforms arrayed from head to toe. Once he put it into perspective, it did look a bit like Castle Grayskull crossed with Sauron's stronghold in *The Lord of the Rings*. According to our knowledgeable guide, each man built his own jumping platform in this unpromising structure and chose his own vines to ensure that he was the only one to blame in the event of an accident. It's also taboo to touch someone else's jumping materials because demonic contamination might occur, which could lead to a bad jump. And a bad jump could be a final jump.

I made a mental note not to touch anything. While I would have loved to be immortalized in legend, I didn't think that being the white devil who screwed up the yam harvest was the way to go about it.

According to Nicholas, the older men jumped first from the uppermost reaches. The younger divers started out jumping from "only a few stories up," though even that proposition sounded patently insane to me.

How did the tribe handle boys who didn't want to dive? Were they pushed? Were they exiled off the island? Maybe they were fed to the sharks or staked out at the bottom of the tower to be devoured by fire ants?

The dire possibilities were endless, and I couldn't decide which gruesome fate was most likely, so I broached the topic with Nicholas.

"What happens if a boy doesn't want to jump?"

Nicholas grinned like the Cheshire Cat. "Vanuatu boys are very brave. Everyone jumps."

I gulped. "You don't make visitors jump, do you?"

This must have been the funniest thing that Nicholas ever heard because he let out a loud hoot of laughter. He patted me on the shoulders. "Don't worry. You stay on the ground."

He chuckled again and went over to talk to some of the men tilling up the earth. They all started laughing and turned to give me what they must have intended to be reassuring smiles. It was either that or they were beaming because they were thinking of how fun it would be to drag me up the tower and make a man out of me. I skittered away sideways like a spooked crab to the meager protection of my family.

I tried to make myself inconspicuous by burying my head in the guidebook to learn more about what I was witnessing. My sister stayed near me, reading *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*. A short distance away, my mother sat under her own tree, alternately scribbling furiously in her diary and staring balefully at my father, who was photographing the preparations.

The ever-helpful team at Fodor's claimed that there's a tradition that men may say whatever they wish with impunity before they jump. These could be their last words, so it's a chance for them to unburden their souls of any baggage they are carrying around without fear of judgment or reprisal. They could admit to adultery, theft, or even murder, but they'd be forgiven when they dove for the greater good of the tribe.

But what if they made the admission – “It was I who stabbed Frank to death with the spear” – but then didn’t jump? What if they were suddenly overcome with the weight of what they’d done, freaked out, and couldn’t bring themselves to go through with the dive? Did they still get immunity, or would the rules change without the dive in the equation? Which means that after all that, they could climb down, only to be stabbed to death by Frank’s brother, John, who would then climb the tower, admit his wrongdoing, dive, and therefore be forgiven for the murder he had just committed. I wasn’t sure, but I didn’t want to get close enough to Nicholas to ask him.

After about two hours of preparation, everyone finally stopped working and started crowding around the base of the tower. The men from the village formed two rough lines with the bare-breasted women standing in a row behind them. Each man held a long stick, like a sturdy walking cane, which came up to his chest. They began a rising and falling singsong chant punctuated by syncopated hoots, yelps, and whistles. As they sang, they moved side to side, their feet stamping to the rhythm as they brought their sticks down to the ground to emphasize the beats. All of these men – and the boys who would be men – would be jumping today, but none of them looked nervous. In fact, they looked thrilled to be there.

Suddenly, my own rituals of manhood seemed so small and insignificant in comparison: riding a bike without the training wheels, being allowed to light the fuses on fireworks, and shoplifting candy bars from the local newsstand to impress my classmates. Sure, I might break my leg if I fell off my black BMX. I could “blow my only hands off,” as my mother put it. And I guess there was a chance for some time in a juvenile detention facility if I got busted with a pocketful of stolen candy bars. But these were all wildly improbable events, and they were the most extreme negative outcomes possible. When you’re land diving, serious injury – and even death – are very real possibilities.

What death-defying act would I be willing to do in order to ensure that my town would have its own version of a bountiful yam harvest? Maybe dive off the high board at the swimming pool? I would definitely not take a gainer off a tower in the middle of the jungle with only vines strapped to my ankles. These divers were exhibiting a real selflessness through their jumps, and I couldn’t find a parallel for in my own life’s experiences. I couldn’t imagine risking life and limb for the sake of my fellow man.

My sister scooted closer, ending my reverie. “Pretty crazy that those guys are gonna jump, huh?”

“Yeah. I’ve never been happier to be a tourist.”

“You couldn’t pay me enough.” She shook her head. “It looks so crazy, I wouldn’t even want you to do it.”

We turned to watch the dancers, whose pace had started to pick up. One of them broke free of the line and walked over to the base of the tower. He was an older man and his short hair was streaked with gray, but he looked fit enough to run back-to-back marathons before breakfast. He grabbed the wooden struts and began to pull himself up the side of the structure, using his feet to find niches where the sticks were lashed together with vines. As he climbed, he called out in short bursts and the dancers below replied with cries of their own.

With wide eyes, I followed his progress up the sinister tower. It was spindly and sharp, with no soft edges to reassure either the divers or the audience below. When the man reached a platform in the uppermost reaches – somewhere between where I imagined the tower’s eye sockets – he disappeared for a few minutes into the interior of the structure to retrieve his vines.

I imagined him perched up there all alone with nothing but the sun and the wind to give him comfort. He would be tying the vines to his ankles, probably wondering if he’d cut them the right length. Too long and he would be greeted with a rough ending. If he didn’t cut them long enough, his body wouldn’t touch the ground, so the harvest wouldn’t be as blessed. Both options were unattractive, but at this point, there was nothing he could do.

The diver emerged from the depths of the tower with a whoop. He walked to the edge of the platform, a small black outline against the bright blue sky. I could hear my sister suck in her breath and hold it; I was doing the same. The dancers’ singing grew louder and more animated, perhaps offering encouragement to the diver or alerting their gods that now was the moment to pay attention.

The man stood poised with his back straight a moment longer before gently leaning forward. He fell with his body curved inward, a half-fetal position. For a moment, he was midway between the sky and the earth, and then the vines straightened out, jerking him to an abrupt halt. His head and shoulders barely skimmed the softened soil before he was yanked upward in a jarring rebound. Only a few feet above the ground he seemed to hold his position, twisting slightly before tumbling back down again. My sister and I both released our captive breaths with loud whooshes as the crowd cheered.

The vines went taut, and two dancers helped the diver stand as he yelled ecstatically. They disentangled his legs from the creepers, and when he was free, he began dancing in place. Then they all rejoined the other dancers on the hill, seamlessly reintegrating themselves into the rhythm of the dance and the cadence of the chanting.

“Ah-woo-ah-woo,” the diver yelled toward the heavens triumphantly as he skipped about. I wanted to add my voice to his, but I didn’t know if that would violate the rules and muck up the yam harvest.

“I can’t believe he just did that,” my sister half-whispered next to me.

“Me neither,” I agreed, without turning to look at her, still unable to stop watching this man who had just defied death and now looked like he was raving at the greatest party on earth. “That was frickin’ awesome.”

Over the next hour, a series of men made their way up the tower only to plunge back to the earth. Some dove silently while others let out bloodcurdling howls on the way down. A few of them miscalculated their vine lengths and hit the ground with damp thuds that made me flinch. A couple of times, one or both vines broke, slamming the divers against the tower or into the dirt. But no matter what, they got up immediately, often springing up from their points of impact like crazed jack-in-the-boxes.

After all the men had jumped, it was time for the boys. I had been excited to see the older tribesman prove that they had the biggest balls in the Pacific, but seeing someone my own age jump was beyond the pale. An already impressive feat of bravery just got a million times more inspiring. The first boy to go looked like he was even younger than me, maybe only eight or nine years old. He wasn't dressed like the youngsters back at the village. Like the men, he was wearing nothing more than a bark penis sheath.

I was beyond impressed. "Dude, that's..."

"Insane," Jo finished, sounding awed.

The boy scuttled nimbly up the tower like a monkey. He seemed so eager and excited, and his quick, agile movements belied no fear. I was impressed with even this element of his achievement, which would have earned him a Presidential Fitness Award back in the States. By comparison, I had a hard time doing pull-ups and could never shimmy up the rope in gym class.

When the young diver reached a platform about three stories up from the ground, he sat down and started tying vines around his ankles. Even from where I was standing, I could see that his movements were graceful and confident. Finished with his meager preparations, the diver stood up and pulled out a dark feather he had wedged behind his ear. He leaned forward and dropped it off the edge to see which way the winds were blowing.

We all watched it tumble downward, swishing this way and that as it was lightly buffeted by the sea breeze that swept in from the coast. It touched down about 10 feet away from the base of the tower and a little to the jumper's left. He looked down at it, seemed satisfied with the result, and stepped to the edge of the platform.

I looked over at Josephine; her eyes were locked on the boy. Both our mouths were hanging open, slack-jawed in a mix of awe and anxiety. The natives below raised the volume of their chanting, and the beat of their feet moved faster and faster. This was the diver's moment of truth, his chance to prove that he was no longer a boy. He clapped his hands once, gave a shrill hoot, and then fell forward, his arms almost lazily crossing his chest as he rocketed downward. The vines straightened out, there was a snapping noise, and then the boy's head swung only a few inches from the ground.

This time I couldn't help but cheer, my voice mixing in with those of the dancers at the base of the tower. Who cares if I was violating protocol? When you blow up the Death Star, a good yell is in order. The young diver was helped up, and he started dancing, taking his rightful place with the tribe's men. He had passed the test and cleared the hurdle from youth to manhood. Next time he would have to jump from much higher up – some reward.

"Ah-woo-ah-woo-ah-way," the successful jumper yelled.

"Ah-woo-ah-woo-ah-way," the Vanuatians called back, the men triumphantly pointing their sticks toward the sky as if challenging the thundercloud passing over the sun at that moment. Apparently, the weather gods didn't take too kindly to this affront because the heavens opened up, drowning the proceedings in a sudden deluge of tropical rain.

It happened so quickly that it was like two separate film sequences had been spliced together. On the upside, I could only assume that yams required a healthy amount of water to flourish, so the tribe's prayers were being answered. Mission accomplished, land divers!

Because we were underneath the protective cover of the jungle canopy, my sister and I were spared the worst of the downpour. My mother had her own natural foliage umbrella and was equally unworried by the storm. Dad wasn't as lucky. He swore loudly as he tucked his camera under his shirt and made a beeline for the protection of an overhanging frond.

Turning back to watch the land-diving ritual, we suddenly realized that Dad getting his photography gear waterlogged was the least of anyone's worries.

The abrupt squall was accompanied by a strong wind that whipped the trees around us with a furious energy and battered the tower ruthlessly. The structure swayed in this sudden maelstrom, creaking back and forth like a broken metronome. The islanders below were unconcerned by the rain, but they had stopped dancing and seemed to be powwowing about their dive site, which suddenly looked like it was one broken vine away from a Jenga.

"Do you think it's going to crash on them?" I asked Jo in a hushed tone, somehow thinking that talking loudly might be the final straw that sent it tumbling over.

She gave me a worried look, her brow furrowed in consternation. "I hope it doesn't fall on any animals in the jungle."

Only Jo would worry about a stray parrot before a fellow human. "Way to prioritize, dude."

We returned our attention to the tower's drunken dance on the hillside because it looked like some agreement had been reached. There were a lot of solemn nodding and stick pounding going on. The group broke apart, discarded their canes, and shooed the women back.

The men gathered at the base of the tower like a pack of foot soldiers getting ready to storm the castle gates. I could hear them yell over the torrent, nothing discernible, probably their equivalent of "Heave ho." The whole mass of men then pushed against the wobbly structure.

For a moment nothing happened, then the tower started to tip toward the slope. The men moved back as the tower fell forward. It swept downward with the same slow-motion grace as one of the divers, a wooden sword cutting through the rain. With a wet, cracking crash, it struck the ground, spraying up bits of mud and cracked branches. It seemed to be straining to bounce back up, but it settled down.

Although this unexpected destruction of the tower clearly signaled the end of their annual ritual, the Vanatuans cheered wildly. Oddly enough, the rain stopped and the clouds moved away from the sun at the same time; the storm was over as quickly as it had started. Suddenly it was hot, damp, and bright. My mother came over to us as my father emerged from the jungle with his camera, which had survived its dousing. We all reunited with a mix of awe and amazement etched on our faces.

"That was something, wasn't it?" Dad asked no one in particular. "I think I got some great shots."

Mom was clearly more worried about us than the spectacle. “Are you okay?”

I gave her a sticky hug. “We’re fine. At least I didn’t have to jump.”

She pulled my father and sister in for a four-way hug. “That was really special. Just wait till you tell your classmates about this.”

“Yeah, this will definitely get me an A+ for show and tell if I can take in some of Dad’s pictures,” Jo burred excitedly. “Can I? Can I?”

“Of course,” Dad said, clearly flattered by the request. “I’ll have them blown up and matted for you.”

He was still glowing with fatherly pride when Nicholas joined us, bearing urgent news. “There’s another storm coming. If you want to get off the island today, we have to leave now.”

My father looked crestfallen at this turn of events, but I didn’t understand why. We’d seen the land diving and the toppling of the tower. By my count, I had made out like a bandit if you included the johnnycakes and the fact that I didn’t have to hurl myself into the void.

We said our thank yous and farewells and then practically sprinted down the trail – splashing, splashing, and praying we didn’t take a spill every step of the way. By the time we got to the jeep, we were soggy and dirty from top to bottom but totally exhilarated. Nicholas peeled out like he was racing in the Indy 500. The road was even more treacherous than it had been that morning, the rain having added a slip ’n’ slide factor. The jeep fishtailed this way and that as we jounced around inside. Our guide was hell-bent for leather, and if the options were a dirt floor on Pentecost or a comfy bed back on Efate, I was all for the liberal use of the accelerator.

When we pulled up to the field, the pilot had just landed. He drove the plane right up to us and didn’t bother getting out or turning off the engine. We bid Nicholas farewell and thanked him.

My mother and sister gave him hugs, while my father gave him a manly handshake-half-hug combo. When Nicholas came to me, he shook my hand gravely, but there was a glint in his eye. “If you ever want to jump, you can always come back.”

Yeah, right! I thought even as I replied, “Thanks for the generous offer. I’ll be in touch!”

We boarded the Duct Tape Express, and I ended up in the co-pilot’s seat. I pulled on my seatbelt and waved to Nicholas from my window.

The plane moved through the muck to the far side of the clearing, where an old striped athletic sock fluttering from a bamboo stake acted as the windsock. The pilot turned toward the forest at the end and gunned the engine. The Cessna picked up speed, jolting across the uneven terrain as we rushed toward the tree line. We were going faster and faster and the trees were coming at us like they were going to be the last scene in the movie of my life, but suddenly our ride got smooth as I felt the wheels lift off, and the plane shot over the tops of the palms and into the wide blue beyond.

The pilot turned to me after we'd climbed up several thousand feet, his lips curling into a conspiratorial smile beneath his mirrored aviator glasses.

“Do you want to try this?” he yelled, nodding with his head toward the yoke. There was an identical one in front of me, but I had carefully avoided touching it with the same discretion I had shown for vines and towers on Pentecost. I turned around to seek approval from my parents, but they were busy staring out the windows.

How many kids could say that they'd flown a plane? I wondered.

Not many, a little voice whispered. *Only men fly planes.*

This was it; this was my test! I glanced down at the ocean below us. Copper blue hues and flecks of white-tipped waves danced across its surface. It seemed like such a long way to fall.

Be a man for your tribe, my danger-loving Jiminy Cricket urged. *Do it!*

This was my chance. I couldn't say no. Like that boy on the tower, I had to take a leap of faith.

Uttering a quick prayer to the generic god who oversaw the day-to-day needs of agnostics, I took a deep breath and firmly grabbed the yoke with both hands. The vibrations of the plane pulsed through my arms. I could feel it twitching like it wanted to take control of its own destiny. But it was in my hands now; I was in command.

I looked over at the pilot, who still had one hand on the wheel. He gave me an okay sign with his other hand.

“Way to go, captain,” he yelled. “You're doing great.”

I smiled. I may have arrived on Pentecost a boy, but now I was a man.

I turned back to the skyway in front of me, where the blood orange sun was just starting its slow descent toward the horizon.

Even though I wasn't wearing a bark penis sheath, I whooped triumphantly, “Ah-woo-ah-woo-ah-way,” but no one could hear me over the roar of the engines.

Excerpted from Nevin Martell's forthcoming memoir – *Freak Show Without a Tent: Swimming with Piranhas, Getting Stoned in Fiji and Other Family Vacations*. (Possibilities Publishing; On sale June 24, 2014)

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