

IN AND OUT OF THE PACIFIC

1

LEET DE LOOR and Gretchen Schoelkopf didn't much like each other, but here in Naviti, they needed each other. Much of their life centered about tennis. They were each other's best game and played four or five times a week. Leet was in charge of the resort's tennis activities, including the upkeep of the courts, and she gave lessons to the guests. Gretchen and her husband, Matti, managed the resort.

Leet, a strong-minded girl, was biding her time, but for what, Gretchen didn't know. Gretchen did know that Leet had lots of offers from guests to take off. Some were legitimate business opportunities, in New Zealand, Australia, occasionally Japan, the US, Europe. Many of them, male guests who took lessons on the orange clay courts, or who played in the Sunday round robins, regarded Leet as a pleasant dividend of the resort. The dividend was visual, aural, never—as far as Gretchen could see—tactile. Gretchen told her husband that Leet would have taken off long ago if it hadn't been for their tennis matches. He remained puzzled that so attractive a young woman stayed here working for peanuts. "I don't get it," he said. "She going to spend her life here?"

"That's her problem, not ours," said Gretchen.

She and Leet hadn't opened up much to each other. They'd exchanged little more than forehands. Neither was very reflective, or curious, and the apparatus of self-revelation was clogged by competition and their responsibilities. Still, there were hints enough to make Gretchen sense that Leet was the same sort of exile that she was. Of course, she had deeper roots here. She and Matti had been sent out by Pacific Resorts to run the Naviti Hotel. This was something that could be understood by the people among whom she'd grown up. She was fifteen, no, seventeen years older than Leet, married, and, as this world went, out here in the Pacific, she was well off. She had many responsibilities—the help, the books, the tours, the transport of guests to and from the airport in Nadi. Leet had only the courts to worry about. Still, they were both exiles, that is, far away from the life they might have—as girls—expected

to lead. For each of them, part of the reason that life wasn't led was a shameful father.

Easy to say those two words, "shameful" and "father" ("*schändlich*" and "*Vater*" in the language she usually spoke with Matti), but the shame of these fathers led to two daughters finding themselves on the other side of the world.

Georg Heitz and Pieter de Loor. Two men who'd crawled out of Europe stinking of filth they'd help make. Unable to keep it from those around them—though they'd constructed their lives to do just that. How many years would it take to clean the family wash? How many generations from the eaters of sour grapes to those whose teeth would not be set on edge?

Leet's latest offer had come from an elderly American who had been watching them play tennis. When they'd changed courts for the first time, he'd said, "Would you mind if I watched you play? I love to watch good tennis."

"If you think we're good, then of course watch us," said Gretchen. To Leet she said, "You don't mind an admirer, do you? Of your serf and folly, I mean." One of the few flaws in her English was the use of the Germanic "f" for the English "v".

"Suit yourself, Sir," said Leet, with that flash-off-metal smile whose charm was hard for anyone to escape.

When they made a good shot, the man applauded. And when they shook hands at the end of the match, he asked if he could buy them a drink.

"Not me, thank you," said Gretchen. "Errands. But I suppose Miss de Loor could use an Orange Crush."

2

Leet had had a lot of offers, many of them voiced. Accustomed to lust for her person and admiration of her cheer, she'd learned how to deflect them without serious injury to the offerer. Keneret's offer was unusual: a shortcut to celebrity and money that might even be approved by her mother. In any case, it was not to be given the automatic if gentle turndown. "Would you be fooling a girl, Mr. Keneret?"

Keneret was big, solid, nice-looking in a gray-haired, dignified, dark way. Leet had seen all sorts of people from all sorts of places in this,

for them, remotest of all places. Mostly she saw fair, open-faced Aussies and Kiwis. There was something ingrown and cautiously self-regarding in Keneret's face, something in the dark eyes and lined forehead made him seem another order of being. It was hard to tell how old he was, at least fifty, but there was something unfinished and unsure in him, despite the depths, something else, too, something powerful, that was in his speech. "I would, I have, but not now, not you. You're not the usual girl, not in looks, not in life, I suspect. I guarantee nothing, but if you have a little talent—we can talk about what that means—you'd have a fair shot at making it."

They sat across the counter from each other, Leet backed by the yellow and black cylinders of tennis balls, the pegged board on which the rackets hung, the clipboard with the pages of round robins and tennis lessons, the soft drink fridge; the little world of her business. Behind Keneret were the orange-red clay courts, the coconut palms, hibiscus, bougainvillea and guava trees, the blue sky, the purplish green cones of hill, the cabins, and the well-tended lawns of Schoelkopf's Naviti Hotel on the Coral Coast. Her address for four years. Who would have thought it? Maybe it was time to think of getting on. Life was bearable, no, pleasant, but days, like waves, just rolled on. There was no real shape to life. It was flat as her good body. Serviceable, but nothing to build on, count on. Even if it were Paradise, which it wasn't, what did it have to do with *life*?

At the hotel now there was a young—younger than she—Aussie football player, here with his team for a match in Suva. His ribs were bandaged, much of the rest of him bare. He proposed to swim at high tide. She'd said okay. An occasional erotic hour with a transient was her speed, enough to give point to a day, maybe two days. But a week? A season?

"What does it involve?" she asked Keneret. "I don't know how to go about it. I mean, it might be fun to try, but do I have to, is it that you want me—to go to bed with you?"

"I do," said Keneret. "But I don't make it a part of the other. I'd have too much trouble that way. Let's talk. Later. I'll tell you what you have to know. At least you'll learn something about the business. And I'll have the pleasure of talking with you."

In her white shorts and sky-blue tennis shirt the girl with the odd name struck him as a stunning anomaly here in the middle of the Pa-

cific, as if one of the jungle-covered hills had turned into a sixty-story Hilton. Maybe more unlikely, the way things went. With her short hair, green eyes, fine nose, lips, ears, chin, her strong slim legs, slight breasts and beautiful movement on the court, it seemed to this professional user of scenic talent a waste, as well as a surprise. Suppose she were a Chris Evert, marooned forever in the Pacific? That she wasn't. Though her strokes were perfect, she missed lots of shots—and showed a grand amateur temper when she did. Miss de Loor. "Leet. Short for Aletheia. 'One who tells the truth.' Greek," she said. It was mystery enough for a film. But she had a lesson to give. They could meet at the Wauwauwau Room for a drink at six, when she'd be finished.

Anyway, it was one thing to become a subject of a film, another to become a performer in it. The theory underlying the erotic penumbra of the movies was that if a woman appeals strongly to a film man—to use the classic example—it might mean she'd have a general audience appeal. Especially as he could film her. This silent erotic conspiracy of the movies hadn't kept silent long. It had become one of the standard story lines of pictures once they became self-conscious and started filming themselves. Even in these last decades of sexual ease, it was a standard story. From Chaplin and Pickford on, movie stars became instant aristocrats, and from then to now, thousands of the prettiest and brightest *polloi* were drawn to the enobling camera.

During his thirty movie years, Keneret had very rarely used this instrument of seduction; still, there were a few hundred hours in fifty or sixty cities that were special because he had at least talked about movie-making with—to think in his old way—makable women. The talent search often ended in the sack.

Sitting with his gin fizz in the Wauwauwau Room waiting for Leet, Keneret imagined a mild rebuke from Spear for the story he hoped was coming off. *"There was this green causeway surfacing in the low tide. Going out to this three-tree island. Very pathetic and forlorn. A scattering of early—maybe late-lunch—boozers. In this thatch-roofed, open-to-the-breezes room, a bar in the back, a couple of good-humored native waitresses in big skirts and yellow blouses, you looked out to gulls, trees and long-tailed birds coming out of cliffs. Except for a little island, there was just sea and coral barriers. Very pleasant with a little booze-buzz and a Java cigar. I almost forgot what I was there for.*

An advantage of decrepitude: need is too weak to dominate you. I can hardly remember when it was like a pit bull.

"The danger," Spear might say, "is you can't recover the feelings that brought you there in the first place."

"So you behave sensibly, talk your way out of it. Or, since it doesn't matter, you just talk. Give paternal advice. Describe your magic world for the girl. Othello."

Leet hadn't bothered to change, and apologized. "They save a room for me when they have it, but they're all booked up. I've got a cabin in Segatoku."

A gentle voice. Lovely English with some odd rhythms and off-center vowels let you know she'd grown up speaking something else. What she apologized for was the opposite of repellent. "So I couldn't take a shower. Forgive me." He imagined her pushing an iron roller over the courts.

"You could bottle her fragrance," Keneret would tell Spear. "She drank what she said was a drink she'd made up, rum and kava. Kava's the local drink. I tried it, plain: water after you've done a week's laundry in it."

"Did you get stirred up?"

"She interested me. Her look interested me. Her being there interested me. And of course she had a story. There's always a story. If there's life, there's story."

"And where there's story, there's attraction."

"Usually."

3

Keneret felt that he could pry a story out of an oyster. Story was powerful. Every person contained one, though sometimes didn't know it. When the story was drawn out by the magnet of interest, it enchanted storyteller if not listener. Leet de Loor not only had a story, but a fragment of history, a story that was a fragment of or an adjacence to public events. The events had taken place decades ago, on the other side of the world. Having it eased out of her in this thatch wigwam hanging over a huge marine indifference—a kind of geographic absolution—made it seem quaint, the history of a lower species.

Three nights ago, his first here, Keneret had been asked by the waitress where he was from. "Los Angeles," he said.

"Is that in Spain?"

At first surprised, then amused, Keneret reflected, "Why should she know any more of the US than I of her island? After all, it has a his-

tory, too.” Before he’d come, he’d spent ten minutes looking it up in the *Britannica*. All that he remembered of this different history to which he was indifferent is that there’d been a series of wars with the island of Tonga which lacked wood or something which this island had. There was also something about the British bringing in Indian coolies to build the roads. Their descendants owned most of the shops and divided the government with the older Polynesian and Melanesian people who had made the astonishing dugout journeys from far-away Malaysia. There’d been coups, in- and external takeovers, a colonial period and, since the end of World War II, independence. In short, a full history of the sort one took seriously, but for Keneret, the history was a chapter of anthropology in which he was not interested. For him, the point of the island was that it was out of history, a spot of vacation—emptiness—en route to Australia, where there was serious business. So just as his smiling, easy—or was that only apparently easy?—waitress didn’t know about the great city of Los Angeles in the great country across the waters, so he didn’t know the history which may or may not have engaged her, but which shaped part of her life. On the other hand, Leet’s story had broken off a history which for Keneret had blood in it. That it had to be wooed out of this remote mistress of the orange tennis courts, set in the palmy bowl amidst thousands of square miles of oblivious blue, augmented its strangeness.

“You know, for years we didn’t know we were abandoned. That word was not in our vocabulary.” “We” meant her brother Marc and her mother. They were “in the country” while their white-haired father made his difficult way in Paris, where he had once been important. How important was the question with which a tribunal had confronted him, and for which, finally, he was censured but not imprisoned. He had played a role in writing the first statute of racial specificity in modern French history. Under the Pétain regime, this defined the Jews as a criminal- or out-caste. And the Vichy statute preceded German demands for one.

Leet learned about it only when her mother received a letter from Rio de Janeiro that told them to look upon “your husband and father as a page torn out of your lives. Adieu.” Pieter de Loor would have liked it to have been torn out of his own, though since 1982, when the publication of a popular book which devoted a chapter to his misdeeds and self-exile brought him out of the Brazilian shadows, it looked as if it were

to be the only page for which he'd be remembered. His very try for oblivion became his notoriety. For Leet, this topped the harm that had been done decades earlier. She and Marc had been deserted by a father they loved, and who, she was sure, had loved them. (He had caressed them, written them, brought them cakes that were not available in the depths of the country.)

In the country they lived in the house in which their mother and grandmother had been born, one of forty inhabited houses which made up the village, Meillac-in-Gers, the heart of old Gascony, to which her mother's grandfather had come as schoolmaster in the 1890s, fresh from his studies in Bordeaux, where he met the Meillac girl he married. He was a foreigner, a Belgian Flamand whose parents had come into France in World War I fleeing the Huns. The countryside was a network of his wife's relations. In Trie, Tillac, Rabiston, Marciac, Mirrand, Estampes, Casteljanc, in towns, villages and the annexes of villages, her family was spread, cousins and aunts of every degree. Meillac was what Leet knew, the stone houses, gray, rose, somber orange, the walls so thick that the hottest days did not penetrate them and which in severe winter days were so cold that only the heaviest socks and sweaters could keep the blood running. Meillac was sheep, cows, horses, ducks, dogs, flies, swallows, crows, the slopes of hills, the fields of corn, the pines and palms, the wire fences, the graveyard, the church steeple, the war monument, the one-room school with the ten or fifteen students founded by her great-grandfather. In her last years there, there was, on the paved road, a public telephone cabinet, which, with television antennae, and the newspapers which came daily to Miélan, the nearby town and the mail, linked their Gascon remoteness to the great world.

The personal story and the storyteller are so often close that inconsistencies and even contradictions are usually buried in the telling. Leet was not a skilled storyteller, and it was clear to Keneret that she'd seldom if ever told much of her story. Lack of skill was compensated by charm and beauty. Movie-makers know all about that. There was a stunned look in Leet's tanned, clear-angled face, as if every word that came out of her was a surprise to the ones that had come before and the ones that followed. Perhaps, he thought, it's her telling these French events in English. "She may be seeing them in a new way, is confused about them." It was usually best to let the storyteller just go on; you risked losing ev-

everything if you interrupted, but since Leet was unsure and, who knows, could stop any minute, he took the chance and said, "But all that had passed long before you were born."

"What?" she said, leaving the little world of her story and seeing not just a screen of sympathy on which she'd been projecting it but an elderly, male face, paternal and strange at the same time. "I don't follow—"

"The trial, the tribunal, your father's—you know, when they didn't send him to prison. Wasn't that just after the war, fifteen years or so before you were born?"

"Uh huh. Sure. And no one ever spoke of it, though I know now—at least, it's what Marc and I believe. That was the reason my father didn't work nearby and only visited us. I mean, the old people knew, and he wasn't their favorite. But like Mama's father, he'd always been *le flamand*, and we accepted that. Then when we were six and seven, the book was published, and the newspapers took it up. He was accused of playing an active part in the writing of the racial statute, though he was younger then than I am now. I guess that's what made him think he'd never get rid of it. He couldn't go through again what he'd been through once. He'd made this life for himself as a correspondent, visiting us as often as he could, talking for years about settling down with us somewhere, never doing it, but thinking, I'm sure, that he would, as time passed and everything was forgotten. It was the reason we didn't know anything was wrong for a long while—Marc and me. He came only maybe once a month. Every visit was a holiday. It made it hard to lose when we finally knew we'd lost it. Mother didn't tell us for years, only that there were delays, he was deep in things, but we knew. A look or two from her friends would have been enough, joined to what we felt, missing him. Children aren't supposed to miss anything for long. But our missing was a pain that didn't go away. Mother smelled of abandonment, the shame and fear of it, and that's contagious, it doesn't go away, you can't run from it, it follows you, it's part of you, like snow's whiteness. You are the shame. It's what you are.

"I think he thought we wouldn't be part of the ugly history if he went away. If he'd come back to the village, the hatred would be there and would spread to us. If he deserted us, we'd be pitied, and it's safe to be pitied. That was the last sweet he brought us. His worst mistake. At least for me. I don't judge what he did. I didn't look into it. Marc

read the book. 'He was a collaborator.' '*Un collabo.*' That word means almost nothing to me.

"Am I a coward? Was he? Is it the right word? An ostrich hiding his head? Maybe the ostrich knows it's his most valuable part."

"You protect what you have to protect," said Keneret. "Heroism and cowardice may not come into it. What happened to your mother?"

Leet looked into her drink, rocked her head a little, a kind of transferred smile followed by a real one. "She was ostriched, too. The *grande dame* of the village. Busy with everybody's life, putting up her tomatoes and fruit, reading, gossiping, cleaning, sewing, milking, taking care of her vegetables. She tried making Armagnac, but she didn't have the knack. She kept busy, kept quiet. Some run to silence, some to noise; some just run. I'm like him; I ran. As soon as I could. I was tempted to go after him, to Rio. Then I thought, 'You'll make trouble for him. He could have a new wife and family.' I may still go, though now I don't know whether I love or hate him. Sometimes I want to know about him so much it's like that ache in your bones when you've got the flu."

"I am surprised," said Keneret, restraining himself from taking her hand in his, "Neither you nor your brother has followed this up. There may be other books about him. He was obviously a brilliant young man. Perhaps he made a brilliant career in Brazil."

"But that's his life. For the little it's worth, I have mine. I hate that part of me that says he owes me something. I had my chance. I went to *collège* in Tarbes. I didn't succeed in the *bac*, didn't try the second time. I discovered tennis. I watched the matches from Roland Garros on the TV and started playing. Usually I'm awkward, but not so much on court. Forehands, backhands, overheads, that's what I can do. I won a tournament in Tarbes, I coached in a Club. Mother died. Marc and I sold the house. The English were buying houses all over the countryside, looking ahead to '92, I guess. We sold it for 200,000 francs. That same week, I saw the advertisement in *Figaro* which got me here. And here I stay. Maybe I can add, 'Then I met an American film producer who said I could be in the movies.'"

Producer. Restored to his position by the word. He'd been lost in the girl's story, one of thousands he'd heard, read and seen that came out of that European eruption of the thirties and forties. Half a century later, Europe was still not finished putting those stories to bed. They were built

into the new Europe of '89 like the pillars and capitals of ancient Rome were built into Rome's modern walls. This boyish beauty with the tilted nose and short hair had brought her father's story out here to be washed by a hundred thousand square miles of the Pacific. Swinging her racket, tootling around in her little Corolla under the jungle-covered cones of the coral island, she was as far away from those old knots of hatred and ambition as she could be on earth. But she hadn't slipped the knots.

Keneret had spent most of his life on the semi-tropical shores of the Pacific, but he too was knotted to the West. He knew no Pacific or Oriental language, next to none of their history and literature. If they were the future, he couldn't make it out. If the West were in decline since Spengler published his book seventy-odd years ago, he must be part of it. Maybe that was what was happening in Hollywood, the new Hollywood run by thirty-year-old MBAs and graduates of film school—or of nothing—the Pacification of the industry, starting with a Big Bang of technicolor, sexual felicity and casual violence. The old rules, the old scruples, the old hatreds were stored like toxic waste in distant piles. Keneret might as well be under them.

"Your story might make part of a film. Want to write it up?"

"Write? I write two letters a year. It takes me a month to get ready to do each of them. And I don't know the end of the story."

"We can supply that. We're good at endings."

"I didn't know you were thinking of me as a writer."

Keneret pushed his lips into a pout of reflection. "You're a quick young lady. I wasn't. You're a very striking young woman."

"Striking?"

"There's a cameo's strength about you." His hand made a profile in the air. "Very fine chisel work there." He brought the hand across the table to her cheek, touched it and withdrew.

Though her face didn't move, it had withdrawn, perhaps even shaken off his fingers. There was something uncaged, uncaptured in her.

"You seem very isolated out here. To me, I mean. To this old fellow passing through. Of course, what does a transient know of the places he's passing through? I know LA, I know Honolulu, I have business in Sydney, I'll soon know it, but Naviti Bay? That's a departure from the flight plan. A flight of fancy. It's hard to imagine it as anything but a stage set for a musical comedy. Rodgers and Hammerstein did one."

This washed over her. Her green eyes intensified around puzzlement. What was this grizzled old American talking about? He'd waved a gold passport at her. Was he taking it away? That's what she got for opening up her life to him. Those old spider webs disgusted him. She should have told him Gretchen's story, which wasn't all that different. There were millions with the same story, the children of grandchildren of dirty history. Gretchen's father hadn't disappeared into thin air. He'd just stayed on and died, the way people were supposed to. "I've never acted, not even in a school play. I don't think I'd be good at pretending."

"Some of the best actors hardly act. Movie acting is different. It's a way of projecting yourself. You can never tell who can do it. Some terrific stage actors fall on their faces. Then somebody walks in from the street, and all the geiger counters start clicking. I've had a lot of experience, but I can't tell for sure when it'll happen. The eye isn't a camera. I should've had footage of you while you were telling your story."

"I can't tell it again."

"I'll take some footage of you walking, talking. We'll see what happens. Don't hope. One in a thousand works out."

But she'd already hoped. Something switched off in her face. "Don't bother. You'll just waste film."

Switches were going on and off in him as well. He was angry at himself. He'd made this sweet young person unhappy. Who the hell did he think he was, Zeus, spotting a milkmaid in the hills and flying down in swanshape to discharge his almighty godhood in her?