

DIFFUSION

by Stan C. Smith

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Irian Jaya, Indonesia

Peter Wooley was no longer willing to die. Closing his eyes against thorns and stinging sweat, he stumbled through forest understory so dense that running was impossible. He had slipped out of the village undetected, but there was little chance of losing the tribe's best hunters once they discovered his absence. If he could make it to the river and then cross without drowning, perhaps they would give up and let him go. And if he could somehow trek sixty miles to the coast without survival gear, he might then formulate a plan to prepare the world for what he had seen. Cruelly, he had been given a reason, but almost no chance, to survive.

Peter stumbled and fell. He rolled onto his back, sucking in the viscous air hanging over the forest floor. Sunlight pierced the canopy here and there, but otherwise he stared at a solid ceiling of vegetation that was unrelenting, stretching for miles in every direction and broken only by the occasional river. Peter's breathing gradually slowed. The constant trilling of insects soothed him and pulled his thoughts from despair to hope. Perhaps he might live to see his dear Rose. He had something to offer her now, a gift like no other. For years he had given his wife little more than heartache and concern over his disregard for his own life. She deserved more than that. Peter was a reckless wanderer with a habit of planning ever-more-perilous ventures before even completing the previous one. As Rose would say, he was willing to die for the sake of a thrill. And this time he had gone too far—a solo walkabout into the remotest forest, itself potentially fatal, but then derailed by an astonishing encounter.

There was movement above. A cat-sized creature launched itself from one tree to another, its long tail held rigid as ballast. It was a tree kangaroo, common in the forests of Irian Jaya, but Peter was sure this variety was unknown to science. The local villagers had domesticated it, and its presence above him indicated that they were likely in pursuit. Peter struggled to his feet. He had to keep moving.

He plunged headlong into a dense patch of plum pines, the trees tearing his skin and clothing. Something tugged at his throat, and the cord around his neck snapped. He turned in time to see a figurine slide from the ensnared cord and fall to the ground. It was a stone carving of a tree kangaroo—the same creature he had just seen in the flesh. For a moment he considered going back for it, then he looked to the trees above and spotted the real tree kangaroo. It stared back at him briefly and then headed back the way it had come, leaping agilely between tree limbs.

Peter cursed to himself. It was going to lead the tribesmen straight to him. Leaving the figurine, he emerged from the plum pines and broke into a run, only to be forced to skirt around another patch of them.

“Peter!”

Peter stopped cold. Samuel stood before him in his skin shorts and oddly gleaming vest. Peter felt a flame of hope. After all, Samuel had convinced the villagers to spare Peter’s life in the first place.

“Samuel, I had to leave! I wanted to say goodbye, but I couldn’t risk it. The others—do they know I’ve left?”

Samuel stepped closer, his expression grim. “They are aware. You must know you cannot leave this place. You cannot bring others here; it is not yet time.”

Peter scanned the forest but saw no sign of the tribe’s hunters. “They’ll kill me, won’t they? You can stop them. Please, Samuel! I can’t stay here.”

The man shook his head. “If I am to endeavor to save your life, you must agree to remain. Stay here with me, Peter. There is much for us to do.”

Peter considered the offer. No doubt, there was much work to do. In fact, this was an absurd understatement. The substance the villagers possessed and protected was beyond Peter’s comprehension. He was no more equipped to make progress with it than Samuel was—or the tribesmen, for that matter. No, it was too big. They needed help. He had to get back to civilization. He backed away from Samuel.

“All I ask is that you give me a chance. Try to hold them off.”

Samuel’s face showed genuine alarm. “Do not, Peter. I beg you.”

Peter’s heart sank as he realized Samuel wasn’t going to help. He shook his head in regret and turned to run. Suddenly he realized a man was blocking his path. Peter glimpsed a familiar array of green lorikeet feathers in the man’s hair, but by the time his brain registered recognition, it was too late to stop. Sinanie’s spear pierced his gut. Peter grasped the shaft, but the man rushed forward, forcing him back and driving the spear deeper.

Peter tripped and fell onto his back. Sinanie pinned him down, forcing the spear in until the ground beneath him stopped it. The pain exploded and escaped as a garbled yelp. Peter could not move, and it became difficult to breathe. Strangely, what came to his mind was the meal he had shared with Sinanie only the day before. He wanted to speak, to explain to Sinanie that, for the first time in his life, he was afraid to die. But words wouldn’t form, and they wouldn’t be understood anyway. Sinanie stood above him, gazing coolly into his eyes. Slowly, the tribesman smiled. It wasn’t a taunting smile. It was more like a small kindness.

Sinanie wasn’t alone now. There were two others—maybe three. They intended to kill him, and they would do more than that. There were different measures of death. Peter knew this now; he had seen it with his own eyes. They would make sure his body wouldn’t heal and would never leave this place. Rose would never know that he had almost become an important man.

One of the men dropped his spear and picked up a club-sized tree limb. He hefted the limb a few times, assessing its balance, and then swung it at Peter. The blow glanced off Peter’s forehead. Stunned, but still conscious, Peter stared at the unrelenting canopy above. In the few seconds before more blows would come, he tried to imagine that he was

relieved it was finally over, that he had done all he could. But he knew he hadn't.

From its perch in a coral bean tree, the tree kangaroo peered over its twitching snout at the scene below. Clubs pounded flesh until the flesh was no longer a man. And still the clubbing went on. Swirling dust and flying drops of fluid sparkled in shafts of sunlight in the small clearing. Visible light and energy of other wavelengths reflected and transmitted a brutal, but meticulous, task. Tremors from violent blows coursed through soil and up the dense wood of the bean tree to clutching paws. Vocalizations and pheromones made their way to the creature's ears and nostrils, adding to the scene an emotional layer of determination diluted by regret.

The creature filtered the incoming data, discarding certain parts and wrapping the rest into a coherent package of understanding. Cognitive feelers probed the package, twisting and shuffling layers, teasing out subtleties of meaning and ultimate consequences. The arrival of the man, Peter, had been significant. He had been almost equipped for what was needed. Now the man no longer existed, but perhaps he could still be important.

The tree kangaroo turned away from the laboring tribesmen. It leapt from tree to tree until it arrived at the churning brown river the villagers called *Méanmaél*.¹ By reverse-hopping, claws digging into tree bark, it descended to the water's edge and began gathering raw materials: decaying vegetation, chewed leaves, soil scraped from the forest floor, and water.

The creature worked without urgency because time was inconsequential. Others would find their way here. It was only a matter of waiting.

CHAPTER 1

42 Years Later
Papua (formerly Irian Jaya)

Standing dead center in the Last Unknown, Quentin Darnell closed his eyes and inhaled the scent of ancient secrets. This experience was not possible back home, where every living or extinct organism had long been scrutinized and classified. Here, in the Central Highlands of Papua—sometimes called the Last Unknown—every breath yielded odors given off by microbes, worms, insects, and plants not yet identified. Which was exactly why they had come.

The others were approaching, so Quentin retreated deeper into the forest. As he moved through a stand of pandanus, a buzzing call, like a cicada, captured his attention. He spotted a most remarkable bird eyeing him from a low branch. It was a bird-of-paradise, but Quentin could not recall the specific type. Its black head, against a yellow chest and wings, was striking enough, but what gave the creature its impossible appearance were the half-meter-long blue feathers protruding from each side of its head. The feathers resembled curved, serrated swords folded over the bird's back and trailing behind. It was only a few meters away, and Quentin stood motionless to avoid spooking it. The characteristic noise of the group he'd been traveling with usually prevented such encounters, especially with animals as rare as this one.

Suddenly, the bird ducked its head, forcing the two swords to lift from its back. It dipped lower, and the swords swept forward before slowly arching backward again. It repeated the motion, and with each dip the feathers stabbed forward even more, until they finally pointed straight toward Quentin.

Voices broke the silence, disrupting the bird's mesmerizing face-off with Quentin. It fluttered away, its display feathers trailing behind, iridescent in the sunlight. Quentin sighed. The encounter had lasted less than a minute, but it would likely be the most serene experience he would have all day.

The boisterous chatter drew nearer. Any human voices would have been intrusive here, but these bore the tenor of American teenagers. One voice—it was Russ Wade—rose above the others.

“Mr. Darnell, are you taking a dump?”

Abruptly the entire group was upon him. Seven students, ranging from fourteen to seventeen, from eighth to eleventh grade, and Lindsey, Quentin's wife and colleague.

Lindsey emerged from the brush into Quentin's clearing first, leading the others. Her wavy, caramel-blond hair was still fresh from the air-conditioned ride in the minibus, and she wore a teasing smirk on her face, apparently pleased at having crashed Quentin's party.

Russ flashed his amiable grin and cartoonish eyes, making it impossible for Quentin to be mad at him. "You should've gone at the *losmen*," he said, still at high volume.

Ashley said, "Wow, you're funny Russ. Maybe consider shutting the hell up?"

Miranda, Ashley's best friend, frowned at her harshness. She said to Russ, "We just don't want you to scare off the animals."

Russ wasn't fazed. "Oh, you girls want to see animals? I thought you just came to see the *horims*." The other boys chuckled at the reference to the penis gourds worn by Papuan men, sometimes their only article of clothing. The teenagers discussed the gourds endlessly.

Ashley shaded her eyes and scanned the surrounding forest in a mock gesture. "Miranda, did you just hear a talking penis?"

Quentin glanced at Lindsey. She had a knack for intervening when the students' banter crossed the line, and he had a habit of letting her deal with it.

"Hey!" Lindsey shouted over the ensuing laughter. "This is our last field day, and we're wasting time."

Lindsey was right; they'd stretched their legs after the long ride, and it was time to get started. As they walked back to the minibus to collect the gear, Quentin mustered his enthusiasm to motivate the students once more. The kids were natives to a society of online computer games, where patience was as rare as a bird-of-paradise. Quentin also made a silent wish for this final day to go without incident. For three previous summers, he and Lindsey had brought students to the Central Highlands with no mishaps. Papua was an ambitious destination for a Missouri public school district, and more than one administrator had tried to stop the field trips. But Quentin's passionate requests to the School Board, emphasizing his deep connection to this place, had so far worked. Nevertheless, one fractured ankle or one case of chikungunya or malaria would bring it all to an end. It could even bring an end to his job.

At the minibus, Quentin said, "This is it, folks. We've talked up Lorentz Park for weeks. Today, you'll have your last chance to see things nobody has ever seen."

The eighth graders, Bobby, Carlos, and Quentin's own son, Addison, were attentive. The older kids were at least quiet. "Roberto and Russ, you guys are on insects today. Ashley and Miranda, you're on plants. Addison, Bobby, and Carlos, you guys are on vertebrates."

Bobby beamed. He punched Addison's shoulder. "Vertebrates! What'd I tell you?"

Addison was slight-framed, pale, and rarely physical. He frowned and rubbed the spot on his shoulder. But then he held up his smartphone tablet, showing the mammal guide home screen. Quentin smiled at this. It was usually a struggle to get his son to use that damn thing for anything except Kembalimo, the language game that had become so

popular the last few years.² Addison and Bobby were developing a friendship, and Addison could definitely use a friend, especially one like Bobby.

Bobby was among Quentin's favorite students. The boy was perpetually enthusiastic, in spite of his struggles with schoolwork and his parents' recent thorny divorce. Bobby was the only student who had actually earned his place on this trip. Two years ago, he'd shown up in Quentin's classroom after school, having heard about the previous summer's trip. He had asked an astounding number of questions and then had declared he would earn the money to pay his own way for the trip by the end of his eighth grade year. It had taken Bobby two years to do it, but here he was. The other students were here because their parents had paid for it, including Quentin and Lindsey's son, Addison.

Markus, their hired driver, slid from the minibus and straightened to his full height, six inches shorter than Quentin. Black skin and strong features indicated he was native Papuan, rather than Indonesian. Markus kept a tireless running commentary in mixed pidgin and English. Having driven taxis in Jayapura, the capital city of Papua province, he was amused by the odd activities of this group.

"I will help you today," he said. "We will find many *kumul*."

Quentin glanced at Lindsey. On their first day, they had taken Markus up on his offers to help, only to discover that he seemed to hate the forest and everything in it. When the kids had searched for reptiles, including snakes, he'd started referring to them as *longlongman* or *longlongmeri*, which meant crazy man or woman.

"No thanks, Markus," Lindsey said. "We'll be fine."

Lindsey took the older kids into the forest, and Quentin took the eighth-grade boys in another direction. They had agreed to stay within shouting distance of each other and the minibus, so before they had gone too far, Quentin stopped at a clearing and waited. The boys sat on the ground, succumbing to this familiar ritual.

At first it seemed quiet. There was no breeze, and the only sounds were from living, moving things. Feeding lorikeets shrieked in the distance. There was faint scratching, claws against wood, possibly a rat or possum. Nearer, they heard motion in the leaf litter—first to one side, then everywhere. Spiders seeking prey, snails gliding, millipedes and pillbugs rummaging through an endless food supply of decaying leaves, and insects of all conceivable forms, performing all conceivable functions. With each passing heartbeat, countless legs scuffled, antennae tapped and tasted, and mandibles and fangs crushed and killed.

"Did you hear that?" Quentin scanned the canopy with exaggerated movements. "That could be the *Mbaiso*!"

Bobby's eyes widened. "What's an *Um-bay-zo*?"

Quentin lowered his voice. "*Mbaiso* is Moni for 'forbidden animal.' The Moni say they are ancestors, returned in a different form." He paused. "If you find one in the forest, supposedly it can look into your past."

"Really?" Bobby whispered. Addison said, "Yeah, right."

They sat quietly. The chuckling of a honeyeater filtered through the trees.

“Have you seen one?” Carlos asked.

Quentin shook his head. “Only young people can see them, and they only appear if you have a deep love of the forest. The *Mbaiso* can tell these things about people.”

The boys rolled their eyes, but they quickly rose to their feet, eager to start searching.