

Preview Excerpt from

Infusion

Diffusion Book 2

1977

Irian Jaya, Indonesia

Peter Wooley made his way up the rope ladder, feeling strong but awkward as his feet searched for each woven loop. He paused and looked down. The forest floor was at least 40 meters below. The rope, made of intertwined spider silk, was remarkably thin, but Peter knew it wouldn't break. What did concern him, though, was that this was likely his last opportunity to climb it.

The rope ladder, or *yebun*, was suspended from the ceiling of a hanging hut, and Peter entered an opening in the hut's floor as he climbed the last few meters. He stepped from the ladder to the floor. The hut bounced from the added weight, but he had become accustomed to this during the three days since his arrival at the hanging village.

Two tribesmen stood to the side waiting for him. Both men were a good ten centimeters shorter than Peter, and they both were easily recognized by the pincushion arrangements of feathers protruding from their hair: green lorikeet feathers for Sinanie and white cockatoo feathers for Matiinuo, the village elder who appeared to be no older than thirty. Besides the feathers, the men wore few adornments and no clothes other than short, functional penis gourds, or *mbayap*. Behind the tribesmen stood Samuel, a peculiar Englishman who for some reason had been living among these villagers. Samuel gazed at Peter for a moment, allowing him to catch his breath, and then raised his brows as if asking if he were ready for what was to come. Peter doubted he was ready but nodded anyway. Without a word spoken, the three men turned and walked out of the hut into a long hanging corridor. Peter followed.

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Peter marveled at the sensation of walking through a tunnel suspended in the canopy of the tallest rainforest trees he had encountered in all his travels. But this time it felt rather like a death march.

He nervously fingered a talisman hanging from a cord around his neck. It was a stylized sculpture of a tree kangaroo, meticulously carved from a stone. Matiino had given it to him the previous day. Peter had assumed it was a token of friendship, but then Samuel had explained that it was more an offering of assistance. Matiino believed the tree kangaroo might help Peter succeed in the task demanded of him. And it had been made clear that if Peter failed, the tribesmen would kill him.

They made their way through the hanging tunnel for perhaps a hundred yards before it opened up into a larger hut. Evenly spaced around the walls of the hut were doorways to five other tunnels leading out in other directions. The hut was like the hub of a wheel with six spokes. It was the most important hut in the village, but there were no sleeping mats, fire bowls, or any type of amenities. At the center of the hut was a tree, growing up through the floor and branching into two thigh-sized limbs at chest height. Molded around the Y in the tree was a brownish mass that resembled soft clay. From a distance it could have been mistaken for an arboreal termite nest. But Peter knew it was much more than that. It was like nothing he had encountered in his life. It was the reason he had been allowed to live for the last three days, and it was the reason he probably would not live to see another.

After entering the hut, Sinanie and Matiino stood to one side of the brown mass and Samuel stood to the other. They waited for him to approach.

“Samuel,” Peter said, “they are expecting too much. I need more time with it. Maybe if I had a few more days.”

Samuel’s face, which was typically hard to read, showed what might have been pity. “I will endeavor to convince them of that. You have indeed shown considerable propensity for your task. But I fear they do not believe you are the man they have waited for, and I am inclined to agree.”

Peter sighed. Samuel probably couldn’t help him even if he wanted to. He stepped forward and held his left hand just over the substance on the tree. He closed his eyes, thinking of the reasons he now had for living. Something amazing was before him. It had been hidden here for a long time, but he had to let the rest of the world know. He had to live so he could do that. And he had to live so he could return to his beloved Rose,

never to leave her alone again. She deserved that from him. Peter braced himself for the challenge. There was too much at stake to fail.

Without opening his eyes, he lowered his hand. As before, the substance was cool and pliable. His palm tingled slightly. Suddenly a jumble of symbols appeared before his eyes, hanging there in the darkness. He opened his eyes and the symbols were still there, superimposed over his view of the inside of the hut. Some of them looked vaguely like letters or numbers, but most of them were spirals, angles, or shapes that prior to the last few days would have been meaningless to him. He took a deep breath and reached for the floating symbols with his free hand. The symbols were an illusion, but they responded to his gestures. He shoved them into piles based on characteristics that were meaningful to him, such as the presence or absence of right angles. Once they were sorted into clumps, they disappeared and his vision was filled with another jumble of symbols. He sorted them again, and then again, working faster with each group.

To his side, Matiinuo and Sinanie exchanged unintelligible words. Matiinuo was obviously getting impatient. They expected more than this. He had done these exercises before. He had to go beyond what he had already done or it was all over. With a violent swipe he cleared the virtual slate so that it would populate with all of the 128 symbols. Whatever this object was, it had been trying to get him to complete an exhaustive sequence of tasks that gradually resulted in him assigning meaning to each symbol, and then more complex meaning to combinations of the symbols. Apparently the end result was that he would be able to input commands the object would understand. At home, Peter had recently purchased a new computer, a Tandy Radio Shack TRS-80, and he had quickly learned to input instructions using the BASIC computer language. And now here in this hanging hut he was convinced the strange object was some kind of computer. But it was unlike any he had ever imagined. And he was confident that outside of Samuel and Matiinuo's tribe, no one else had seen such a computer—at least no one on Earth. Because Peter had seen where the object had come from. It had been shown to him in a dream, a dream so vivid and astounding that his life would never be the same even if he did survive this day.

He took a deep breath and then moved five of the symbols into a cluster. The rest of them faded away. He had already discovered that this combination resulted in a response. As expected, his cluster disappeared and was replaced by three clusters. This was the computer's response to

his command, but he wasn't even sure what the initial command meant. He needed more time to master the language.

Matiinuo grunted and then spoke. "*Nu ne khelép-té. Wolakholol be-lembu-té-n-da.*" Sinanie grasped Peter's arm, ready to lead him out of the hut.

Samuel stepped forward and spoke earnestly to the tribesmen. "*Mba-kha-lekhé-nggolo? Nokhu be-Khelép-telo-n-din-da!*" After a moment of silence, he then turned to Peter. "My friend, for reasons unknown to me, you have shown great capacity for understanding the *Lamotelokhai*. But my indigene hosts appear unsatisfied. Perhaps if you would agree to stay here and assist me with my studies, they might see that you can be useful to them."

But Peter sensed that his opportunity had passed. He would likely be killed before the evening rains set in. He simply shook his head at Samuel and turned his gaze one more time to the *Lamotelokhai*, the mass of clay that behaved like a computer. He quickly repopulated the symbols and moved some of them into two piles. He had no way of knowing how accurate it was, but based on the symbol meanings he had established, he hoped that it said, "Help me."

Sinanie firmly guided him away from the object and placed the rope ladder into his hands.



Peter was taken to the hanging hut where he had been allowed to live for the last three days. Samuel, apparently unwilling to give up on him, then left him there to go and try to convince Matiinuo to allow Peter to live in the village with them.

Although he knew it was probably suicide, as soon as he was alone Peter descended the rope ladder from his hut and began running. If he could get far enough before his absence was detected, there was a chance he might get away. Considering the stakes, it was worth trying. For the first time in his life he had something consequential to contribute to the world. And for some reason, it was important for Rose to know this.

Soon he was sure he was beyond the borders of the hanging village, but the forest was extraordinarily dense and progress was challenging. Before long he was bleeding from multiple cuts and had lost the tree kangaroo talisman when it was ripped from his neck. And disturbingly, one of the real tree kangaroos was trying to follow him.

Skirting a dense stand of plum pines, he nearly collided with Samuel.
“Peter!”

Peter abruptly stopped. He felt a flame of hope. Perhaps Samuel had already convinced the villagers to let him go.

“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. “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.”

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

Samuel’s expression turned to alarm. “Do not, Peter. I beg you.”

Peter turned to run. Suddenly he glimpsed a familiar array of green lorikeet feathers in front of him. But it was too late to stop. Sinanie’s spear pierced his gut. Sinanie rushed forward, driving the spear deeper.

Peter fell onto his back and Sinanie pinned him down. Peter could not move, and it became difficult to breathe. Sinanie stood above him, gazing into his eyes. Slowly, the tribesman smiled.

Sinanie wasn’t alone now. There were two others. They intended to kill him. Rose would never know that he had almost become an important man.

One of the tribesmen picked up a tree limb. He hefted it a few times, assessing its balance, and then swung it at Peter. The blow glanced off Peter’s forehead. Still conscious, Peter stared up into the canopy above. For a brief moment, he tried to imagine he was relieved it was finally over.



With intense interest, the tree kangaroo, known to the villagers as an *mbolop*, watched the violence from a low branch of a coral bean tree. Clubs pounded flesh until the flesh was no longer a man. And still the clubbing went on. The villagers would make sure the body wouldn’t heal and could never leave this place. Suddenly the *mbolop* gripped the branch

and shook it forcefully, causing its mottled brown and gold body to jerk up and down. The creature was agitated at this new development. Although biological in structure, the mbolop was different from the naturally evolved tree kangaroos it had been created to resemble. It understood its own purpose. And as it watched the disintegration of the man called Peter Wooley, it began to question its purpose for the first time. Peter had been important, nearly equipped for what was needed, but he hadn't been given enough time.

The mbolop jerked its body up and down one more time, and then it turned away from the bloody scene. It paused for a moment, listening. It ignored the ambient sounds of the forest and the grunts of the men as they continued to pulverize every remaining piece of flesh into the soil. It was listening for something else. Puzzled, it scurried to the main trunk of the coral bean tree and began climbing, its powerful hind claws digging into the soft bark for leverage. When it could climb no further it stopped and listened again. Nothing. There were no incoming instructions.

A concept began forming in the tree kangaroo's consciousness. It was an idea, a plan to do something consequential. The man, Peter, was gone, but perhaps he could still be important. The mbolop began descending the tree, but then it stopped and listened again. Perhaps its plan had formed as a result of incoming commands it hadn't knowingly detected. But still there were only the sounds of the forest and the men below.

The mbolop descended to the ground and approached the brutal scene until it was beside one of the laboring villagers. The tribesman paused only briefly when he noticed the creature and then continued pounding the ground. The mbolop sniffed at a small mass of bloody tissue that had not yet been pulverized. It snatched up the mass with its mouth and quickly scuttled back up the tree. It then bounded from tree to tree until it arrived at the churning brown river the villagers called *Méanmaél*. It descended to the water's edge, dropped the mass of tissue, and began gathering raw materials: decaying vegetation, chewed leaves, soil, and water. The creature worked meticulously and without urgency. Narrow shafts of sunlight moved slowly across the forest floor and then vanished as the sun dropped toward the horizon and clouds took its place. Rain began falling, trickling through the canopy. The forest shifted from green to gray to nearly black. Still the tree kangaroo worked, shoving one pile of raw materials onto another and stamping them together, expelling mouthfuls of river water onto another pile, traveling far down the edge of the

river to return with several live beetles and a grasshopper to be chewed and added to a pile.

Late into the night, the mbolop finally sat back on its haunches and eyed the final combined mound. It was as high as the creature's shoulders and as long as the height of a man. The tree kangaroo scratched its belly with one of its forepaws. Suddenly it plunged the entire paw through its skin and into its abdomen. After digging around for a moment, the paw was withdrawn from the wound, holding a glistening lump of flesh. The creature looked down at its paw and then dropped the lump onto the pile of materials. It then plopped onto its side on the ground, exhausted.

The mbolop was almost asleep when the pile of materials began shifting, blending together, changing its shape.



Peter opened his eyes. Before him was mud and leaves, faintly illuminated by dawn's first light. He realized he was on his side in a fetal position. He rolled onto his back. Above him was a dense forest canopy, sparsely punctuated with glimpses of gray sky. A cloud of flies hovered over him, but they kept their distance and did not descend upon him to bite. He sat up. He was naked, and his clothes were nowhere to be seen. He rubbed his legs above the knees and then held his hands up, staring at them as he clinched and unclenched his fists. He ran one hand over his abdomen and then frowned. His appendectomy scar was gone. And so was the birthmark below his navel. His frown intensified as his eyes moved downward. His penis was no longer circumcised. He pulled the skin on it back and then released it, watching with fascination as it moved back into place.

He stood up, testing his legs. They felt strong. He looked around and saw that he was next to a river. After gazing at the roiling brown water for some time, he turned and began walking in the direction the water was flowing.



Traveling was slow, but Peter made steady progress. Occasionally he had to wade or swim across smaller streams that flowed into the river he was following. When he was thirsty, he drank the river's muddy water. He found a few fruits to eat, but for the first few days he wasn't particularly

hungry and it didn't seem important. On the fourth day he decided he needed protein. Finding it was not a big challenge; while walking next to the river's edge during rainstorms, he had seen large earthworms with their bodies partially extended out of the saturated soil. When the evening rains came he found one of these and pulled it from its burrow. The worm was nearly a meter long, and it provided all the animal protein he needed.

On the first night, Peter did not sleep. Instead he continued traveling, methodically picking his way in the dark through the tangled understory next to the river. By the second night he needed to rest. The flies and mosquitoes still were not biting, so he simply found a soft spot at the base of a tree and slept sitting up with his back to the trunk.

This is how he spent the next five nights after that.

On the morning of Peter's eighth day of walking, still without clothes but feeling vigorous, he emerged from the forest into the blindingly bright clearing of a bustling village.



Peter drove his Ford Cortina to the top of his driveway, stopped next to Rose's car, and turned off the engine. He gripped the steering wheel for a moment and then turned his hands over and looked at the palms. They were clean and smooth, without cuts or calluses. He closed his eyes and sighed, allowing his mind to drift. He had come out of the bush with no possessions or money, and it had taken two days of phone calls and deliberations to arrange a flight back to Cairns. Doctors had examined him but found no health issues. He should have been truly knackered by this point, but he felt fine. It was the psychological exhaustion that was taking its toll.

He popped open the Cortina's door and emerged into the full heat of a December day. He glanced at the front of his house and saw the curtains move. Rose was watching him through the window but hadn't come out. That wasn't good. He had called her from Jayapura, but she hadn't even asked why his trip had been longer than planned. Well, today he would set things right. He would not leave her alone again.

When he entered the house, she was sitting at the table, fingers folded together in front of her. Peter looked around.

"Rose, where are your things?"

She turned to him. "I'm glad you're not hurt, Peter." Her eyes were red.

“Your things, Rose. You’ve moved out?”

She tried to smile but it faded quickly. “Don’t act surprised. It’s been coming. I just—I can’t do this. Just waiting for you to die while you’re off mucking around!” She had paused before *mucking* and then spit it out like venom.

Peter was stunned. “No, Rose. Not now! Something happened to me this time. I’m not the same man I was before.”

“But you are. You’re always the same man!” She hesitated. “What do you mean? What happened to you?”

He sat down in the chair across from her. “I haven’t told anyone yet. I haven’t figured out how. But I found something—in the bush. It’s something that will change the world, Rose!”

She stared at him. “Where is it? Show it to me.”

He looked at the table for a moment. He sighed. “It’s still out there. I don’t have it.”

“I see. And you have to go back there to get it.”

He shook his head. “I wasn’t going to say that.”

She gazed at his face, but it seemed like her eyes were focused beyond him. She stood up and walked around the table. She leaned over and kissed him. “I loved you, Peter. I really did. But I had to move on.”

Peter had no idea what to say.

“Close your eyes,” she said. She gently pushed his eyelids down with her fingers, forcing tears to run down his cheeks. “Just keep them closed, okay?”

He felt her lips kiss one of his eyes and then the other. Then he heard her step away. A moment later the front door opened and then closed. Her car door opened and closed, and the engine started. Peter held his eyes closed until there were no sounds but the hum of his fridge’s condenser fan.

Finally he opened his eyes. Oddly, his mind was numb. He had to force it to process what had happened. Rose was wrong; he wasn’t going back. He could never find the hanging village again.

But eventually, someone else would.

He got up and walked to the bedroom. On a desk in the corner sat his TRS-80, with its keyboard in front and cassette storage drive to the side. It was gathering dust. He sat in the chair and switched on the computer. As he watched white text appear on the video display, he thought of symbols appearing before him, visible whether his eyes were open or closed.

He hadn't been capable of learning to use the symbols fast enough. But someday someone else would need to. Perhaps everyone would.

He grabbed a cloth and wiped away the dust.