

## Bitter Secrets

Claudine Jacques (1997)<sup>1</sup>  
Translated by Patricia Worth (© 2018)

What was most striking about Tomass was the visible size of the knotty muscularity on a compact, stocky body. The hands were thick and short, slightly webbed, the feet huge with spreading toes, chest straight, and head sunken between the shoulders. An abundance of frizzy hair stood tall and dense, endowing him with a certain majesty, and he had the vanity to adorn it with an exquisitely carved wooden comb.

Most often he wore an old faded pair of shorts, but now and again would don a piece of cloth that he would tie round his hips. At his neck on a string of plant fibres was the ever-present magnificent pig's tooth in a perfect double spiral: a sign he was the chief.

The impression of massive strength was tempered by the nonchalance of his gestures, an easy smile that revealed dazzling teeth and the extreme calm with which he performed all acts of daily life. His deep dark eyes always appeared to see beyond things and people. And often he would remain for hours lost in his thoughts, not eating or drinking; no one would dare disturb him. Of his four children, only Little John seemed to have the absolute trust of this formidable father. The oldest, Harry, a strapping young fellow of about sixteen who showed promise of having the same bulky stature, would shrink back at his father's approach, staring at him fiercely, insolently. On the contrary, the two daughters, Sarah and Tressy, did not have the courage to look their father in the face, and with oblique glances would try to guess his wishes.

Each girl had a deliberately chosen role: Sarah took care of the house and Tressy the crops. Sarah was beautiful with a slender waist, high breasts, long legs, a round face and large brilliant languorous eyes. Tressy was heavy, strong and brave, and though she was only fourteen, certain women in the neighbouring villages had already set their sights on this child who could help them in marrying off their sons. But the boys would hang around Sarah, keeping a distance out of fear of the father. There had been nothing more than lingering looks, signs engraved on coconut palms or messages passed through sisters or girl cousins. But there was also that story about the mother who had disappeared when Little John was still a baby. Since those days the wildest rumours had been going around, exaggerated over the years. Their family was spoken of in hushed tones; everyone imagined the unimaginable. To pass time they would frighten one another, out of necessity, to go deep into the fantastic. Under oath they would tell scraps of lies resembling truth. And nights followed days without any of them able to crack the strong man's secret.

That evening, Tomass had announced he was leaving for Ambrym<sup>2</sup>; he would be away for ten days. A *kastom*<sup>3</sup> ceremony awaited him up there. It was then that the white ship moored in the Bay of Dolphins. The seaside village was in high spirits and the news spread at lightning

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<sup>2</sup> A volcanic island in the archipelago of Vanuatu.

<sup>3</sup> A pijin word referring to traditional Vanuatuan culture.

speed as far as Port Resolution. It was a significant event, and all over the island there were groups gathering to go to the beach where the foreigners would no doubt be coming ashore.

Sarah and Harry left without further thought. It would be two hours on a bad road to get to the ship, and they couldn't dally if they wanted to be among the first to get there. From a hilltop they eventually spotted it, a majestic ship that seemed to capture all the sun's rays. Around it some small motorboats had been put into the water, and a few were already heading towards the beach.

Harry hurtled down the slope that led to the bay, not worrying about the dangers he encountered on his way. Sarah, more careful, more skilful, slipped behind him to use the track he had made. When they got to the beach, they separated. Sarah settled in with other girls on mats near the village houses. Harry joined the boys in the banyan tree roots. They all stood perfectly motionless, closely watching the arrival of the white men.

When the first officers appeared, a collective frisson stirred the island's population. These men were altogether different: only their faces and hands could be seen; the rest was covered in cloth. Were they ashamed of their bodies, protecting themselves this way from the gaze of others? One of them, the oldest, went ahead alone to the village. The chief, accompanied by six warriors armed with clubs, came forward a few steps to meet him. All of them were naked. Some had decorated their hair with brightly coloured feathers, others wore broad plaited armllets and anklets placed indifferently on the arms or legs. The talks were long, facilitated by a youth who interpreted simultaneously as they spoke. This boy had not long been back in Tanna from Port Vila where he had gone with a pastor to study theology, and had a mastery of English and French.

The atmosphere relaxed once the chief and the officer shook hands in a sign of agreement. There were whistles and shouts; the old women, curious, were the first to come up, then the children started running onto the beach and mingling among the foreigners. The women brought watermelons, coconuts and pawpaws. The white men unloaded bags of rice, condensed milk and fishing line, and exchanges were accompanied by laughter and quiet chuckling. The celebration could begin.

It lasted all day.

The organisers had come to explore the terrain for Club Med, and the next morning they had to view a part of the island to prepare a tourist itinerary for the Mount Yasur volcano. The authorisations were acquired according to *kastom*, and then the discussions about services to provide and their cost were easy due to a lack of reference, each man believing he was getting a better-than-expected deal.

Strong, energetic guides were needed. Harry was the first of the young men to leave the banyan roots. Proudly he walked onto the beach and stood tall, his feet planted solidly in the grey sand, eyes fixed straight ahead, and waited to be noticed. All present turned their focus to him.

The son of Tomass was appointed.

A meeting was arranged for the following day. In the evening, the white men went back to the ship.

In the morning they returned. Two small Japanese pickup trucks in a pitiful state awaited them. Harry climbed into the tray of the first one and sat up against the driver's cabin. Sarah quickly jumped up beside him. He waved her away but did not want to push her off in front of the foreigners, and just turned his head, whistling through his teeth to show his disapproval.

The vehicles set off. Trundling along, they took a dirt track bordered with coconut palms, poincianas, guavas, beach hibiscus, bamboo, tree ferns, huge grapefruit trees, bananas, and gigantic banyans, and crossed swamps planted with reeds. After an hour on the road they came to the foot of the volcano, and the dense vegetation, flaming and luxuriant with myriad shades of green, abruptly gave way to a desert of grey and beige sand with dunes shaped by the wind.

A dull rumbling could be heard, and from the top of the dry mountain came plumes of black smoke. The earth shook with each of the monster's explosions. They had to go round a salt lake with its dead trees, and soon the vehicles were abandoned so they could attempt the climb. From here, rocks and stones replaced the sand and the little group now had to move cautiously.

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Sarah's charms had not gone unnoticed. Even wearing a shapeless mission dress, she possessed a simmering grace. Her frizzy hair formed a halo round a broad forehead, and she had large black eyes with long curling lashes, a small nose with rounded nostrils, full well-defined lips and a delicately sculpted chin. Her neck was slender and her joints fine, her hands had long thin fingers, and her body swayed to the rhythm of her steps. The youngest of the officers, moved by this display, could not take his eyes off her. And when she stumbled, she quite naturally grabbed the hand that came to her aid. The young man drew closer and became intoxicated with Sarah's floral perfume and peppery smell. She watched him sideways, intimidated by such an unusual presence, then checked to see where Harry was. She saw him, his back to her a few hundred metres away, she sighed with relief and her whole face lit up as she smiled at the stranger before running to join her brother. Eventually they arrived at the top of the fiery mountain. The spectacle took their breath away.

An immense hole, its walls covered in ash, and in the abyss, three cavities vibrating with the movement of molten magma. A vision of hell made even more terrible by the sound of incessant explosions, the sulphurous smell of smoke that was sometimes white, sometimes black, and the danger of lava flows. A gripping contrast in this paradisiacal world: not far away, as the crow flies, was the peaceful expanse of the ocean; a little closer, the forests they had passed through; and here, this dome of stones, rocks and slabs of petrified lava.

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For different reasons, they each remained silent. Sheltering behind Harry, Sarah felt with confusion the call of the volcano. This great open mouth was trying to drag her in. Her head suddenly spinning, she grabbed her brother round the waist but he brutally pushed her away. This indecent girl certainly had no manners and only the close presence of the white men stopped him from disciplining her as she deserved. But she would get what was coming to her.

Lying on the ground, Sarah dared not move; her body was in harmony with the vibrations caused by the explosions and she was shaking all over. The young officer approached, she did not see him. She was staring vacantly into the distance at an unknown world. Did he understand her profound confusion? He shook her roughly, slapped her, then softly dabbed her face with water from his flask. She snapped out of her lethargy and her first conscious gaze was on him. They would never forget that moment when their two hearts connected. Around them a crowd formed, obliging them to step back into the world of others. Harry, bitterly angry and jealous, had already begun the descent, fuming.

Martial Delattre carefully helped Sarah to get up. With tender hands he tried to brush away the dust sticking to the skin, the hair and clothes of the beautiful Indigenous girl.

Surprised by such a sensitive touch, she did not stop him, she did not move, trusting like the child she still was, defeated like the woman she had become.

Hand in hand they descended the mountain until they reached the trucks. Silent disapproval greeted them. But nothing could spoil this moment, and in the jolts on the way back, standing against each other, their bodies were already becoming acquainted.

On the beach, the island's inhabitants were in a festive mood and had prepared a great laplap feast for the visitors. Yams, taros, sweet potatoes, bananas, pawpaws, roast pigs and coconuts were laid out on large wooden platters. The women and children, sitting off to the side, were already eating. The men sitting in a circle were drinking kava to celebrate this great occasion with dignity. Sarah recognised Tressy and Little John in the distance. She ran up to them and made herself comfortable on the mat. She would have loved to tell her younger sister everything, but was prevented by the chattering presence of the other girls. She grabbed a handful of warm food, placed it on a banana leaf and realised she was hungry. Just for a moment she thought of nothing but the sensual pleasure of eating. Then, lying down next to Tressy, she fell asleep.

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In the evening, songs and dances began. The men in a kava-induced frenzy infected the women with their intoxication, who joined them in the spasmodic rhythms. Fearing things would get out of hand, the captain gave the order to return to the ship. Only one man missed the call: Martial Delattre.

Martial had eagerly waited for Sarah to wake and had seized the moment of her planned walk to the waterfall to follow her through the long grass. The moon was full. Sarah wove around and through the shrubby vegetation with ease, followed by an impatient shadow. Eventually she stopped and let him catch up. Martial grabbed her and wrapped his arms round her, kissed her passionately, laid her on the ground and, in a wild embrace, had her. She let herself be taken, with no apparent reaction. Her silence surprised him, he tried to make out her features, noticed her eyes shining with tears, understood the gift she had just given him and was moved by it. Then gently he consoled her by awakening within her a sensuality that was aching to come alive. All night long their bodies were joined in increasing pleasure. At the first light of dawn, Martial promised he would come back for her the next time the white ship returned.

She listened to his voice as to music, her eyes half-closed, her head on his shoulder. In bad English he told her stories of foreign lands. She spoke in bislama, asked him questions, then more questions. They understood each other, lay against each other, alone, happy, hidden.

The siren from the ship gave them a glimpse of a gloomier reality. Martial had to leave. She let him get dressed, then in a whisper begged him:

'Don't forget me. I'll wait for you.'

He leant down to her, held her head firmly between his hands.

'I'll come back for you. You're mine for ever.'

He sealed his promise with a passionate kiss, then stood and left, running in the direction of the bay where the siren was sounding again.

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Sarah went up the hill from where she had looked down on the white ship for the first time, but everything was different. It was carrying away her beloved, and leaving her heavy with love and confusion. In a few hours the carefree child had matured into a woman torn. She was

learning to love, to suffer. Returning to Port Resolution she felt her life was taking on a new meaning.

Harry was waiting for his sister. His rage had only increased since the episode on the volcano. In addition, he sensed that Sarah had given herself to the white man, which aggravated his fury. When she arrived at the great hut, he threw himself onto her, punched and kicked and taunted her with insults. Sarah screamed in pain while trying to crawl outside to get away from him. Old Molly, passing by, raced up and came between them. Out of respect for the old granny, the only woman he liked a little, and because his anger had subsided, Harry left peacefully, without remorse.

Sarah took a few days to recover. She was limping and her face was still puffy when Tomass came back.

He looked at his daughter with interest. Despite her swollen eyes and the marks reddening her skin, she glowed. It suddenly seemed he had left behind a little girl, only to find himself unexpectedly face to face with a woman whom he admired, though it disturbed him. Sarah looked so much like her mother that she could have been mistaken for her. The revelation hit him like a punch in the ribs.

He drew closer, assessed her condition, then asked:

‘Who did this?’

Sarah could not risk speaking.

To accuse Harry would be to give away the reason, and she could never tell her father. He might kill her.

‘I ... I fell,’ she replied feebly.

Tomass knew the marks came from deliberate blows but he did not push it, to his daughter’s great surprise.

‘You look like your mother,’ he confessed.

Sarah, who had kept her eyes lowered since her father’s arrival, at last looked him in the face. Never before had he made a direct allusion to the mother who was missing. Her look went straight to his heart.

Rather than let her see that he was growing troubled, he rose and left. A few hours later, he returned with some plants that he kneaded and mixed with clay and coconut oil, forming an ointment; he placed it on each bruise.

For days he took care of her until the wounds totally healed. The detached affection that united them transformed into a stronger feeling. A new bond was born of their conversations. But each time Sarah tried to find out more about her mother, she would come up against a stubborn silence. And, also, the young woman would dream of Martial and wish she could talk to this father she was getting to know, and announce to him that one day, soon, she would be leaving with a foreign man to conquer another world. She knew that the next time the white ship returned, Martial would ask for her hand in marriage, or abduct her. In her naivety, there was no doubt about his return. So she tried to calm her impatience with long walks in the coconut grove. Accompanied by Little John, she would walk as far as the lookout and scan the horizon in the hope of spotting the large ship.

The father tolerated his daughter’s walks less and less. He sensed a danger that he could not describe. Every evening he watched for her return, and it was not until he could hear Little John’s laughter that he would breathe easy. He no longer went to the other side of the island

where he used to meet with a woman he had seduced. It was as though the name of his happiness from now on was Sarah.

Harry had not come home since the discipline he had inflicted on his sister, and no one was complaining. Tressy had just been asked to marry according to *kastom*, and her father had refused, for Sarah had begged to keep her young sister close to her for a while longer.

The weeks that followed were easy, slow, monotonous, but time is only what you make of it. Noticeable changes were occurring in Sarah's appearance and behaviour, her breasts were getting heavy and her concave belly was slightly rounded. Nothing was yet visible in the roominess of the mission dress, but Sarah was worried and set off to find old Molly, who at a glance confirmed her condition: she was indeed pregnant.

The young woman told her the whole story, happy to be able to trust someone with the secret buried within her flesh.

Old Molly listened with horror to Sarah's revelations.

'My poor child, my poor child ...' she said.

'Molly, he'll come back, I'm sure he will ...'

'Yes, he'll come back, but listen to what happened a few years ago in this village. Listen carefully ...'

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'A woman from here, the most beautiful on the island, the one who was most desired and who was snatched away by a man in a hard-won fight, came to a dreadful end. She too had believed in a foreign man's love and had given herself to him, but when her husband learnt of the betrayal, he chose the worst torture for her.

'Listen ...'

'Naked, her hands tied and her feet fettered with vines, he dragged her by the hair through the lava dust. She howled in fear and pain when the stones tore her skin; she begged, implored, but he would hear nothing. Long streaks of blood stained her legs, her belly, her breasts. Not for one moment did he let her go, not for one moment did he stop. Step by step, always at the same slow pace, he crossed the sandy desert and climbed the mountain. Further back, a silent group was following; a blind old woman, supported by two others, was crying as she stumbled over the rocks. The explosions were continuous, and plumes of white smoke were rising from the crater. With his hand gripping her hair powdered with ash dust, he kept going up the mountain, indifferent to the sun and to the woman's tears and groans as he dragged her like a sack.

'When he reached the top, he stopped at the edge of the hole, looked awhile at the slippery slopes down to the molten magma, grabbed the inert, shredded body in his arms, held it tightly for a brief moment then cast it into the abyss. He let out a great cry, the sound of a wounded animal.'

All at once, old Molly fell silent. Her eyes, blue with age, were streaming tears; she wiped them away with the back of her hand then continued:

'He disappeared for many months, then one day he returned and life began again for him, but he remained alone, with only his children around him. The woman I accompanied was your grandmother, and afterwards I took her back to the village of her birth to be with her brothers. She died a short while after. I've kept this secret for a very long time.'

Sarah, dumbstruck, dared not understand. The blood had just drained from her veins. She kept her eyes on Molly.

'Who was the woman? Answer me ... Who was it?'

'Your mother!'

'So, it was my father who killed her ... My father ... Tomass?'

'Yes, Tomass killed her!'

'But why, why?'

'My little one, like you, your mother wanted to go away with a foreign man, like you she was pregnant, she was expecting another baby. The man who seduced her had promised her better horizons, and when he came to get her ... She was dead.'

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Sarah was aghast, all of a sudden conscious of her own fate; she understood the call of the volcano. She too loved a man who had come from elsewhere; she too wanted to leave and go far away, like her mother ... She too, in her own way, was going to betray Tomass.

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A cruel, raspy laugh came from behind the woven pandanus screen. Harry, Harry had heard everything. He now knew of Tomass's terrible secret and Sarah's transgression. In one leap he was beside the two women, and shouted:

'I'm going to kill Tomass and I'll kill your baby when it's born.'

He tried to hit Sarah but she recoiled; he changed his mind and went off shouting terrifying threats.

'Molly, if your story is true, I'll have to warn Tomass as soon as possible.'

Sarah started running as fast as she could. She ran past Tressy and Little John who were preparing the copra oven. A bit further away, Tomass was cracking some coconuts.

She yelled:

'Father, Harry wants to kill you. He knows everything.'

At that moment, Harry suddenly appeared. Tomass grabbed his machete and confronted his son's anger. He was aware his son had hated him since the disappearance of the mother he adored. Now that Harry had learnt the truth, Tomass knew he would have to fight him. The two men of equal strength sized each other up. Armed with a club, Harry attacked first. The fight was on, violent and murderous. Tomass initially tried to avoid the blows without delivering any, but soon, to defend himself, he had to attack as well. Blood spurted from Tomass's eyebrows and blinded him. Harry took advantage, raised his weapon, but Tomass was quicker and cut off Harry's hand at the wrist. With a howl like a wild animal, Harry saw his hand fall, severed, detached from his body. He staggered and collapsed. Tomass came closer, grabbed the club and crushed his skull. Most horrible of all was the sound. Harry breathed his last. He would suffer no more.

Tressy, Sarah and Little John dragged his body into the copra oven and revived the fire. No one cried.

Tomass lay on the ground, trying to recover. They stayed there all night and in the morning went back to the house together. They would still have to remain silent. They would also have to try to break the vicious cycle of fate that seemed to hang over their family. They would have to reflect on their common future.

Sarah thought about Martial, about the caresses they exchanged, the desire that sharpened her senses, the baby living in her belly, promises for the future.

Then she mused about her mother and the similarities of their fates. She thought about her father.

And suddenly she made the obvious decision: she had to forget the white man, his light eyes, his smooth hair, the inflections in his warm voice. She would not be sailing away on the big ship. She would stay with her people. With them she would be able to thrive, and her son, carrier of another blood, would bring one more stone to the structure of their family.

Sarah looked at her family's painful progress in its entirety; she could explain her mistake and forgive her mother's death. It was through her that everything had to change.

The months passed. Sarah gave birth to a little boy, his skin almost white, and gave him to Tomass.

'He's your son now. Like Little John. Like those who will follow. Give him a name.'

Tomass did not reply straightaway. He took the tiny baby in his giant hands, raised him up to heaven and implored for him the clemency of the guardian spirits.

'He will be named after me, Little Tomass.'

Sarah knew then that Tomass had positively acknowledged her son.

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That very night she slept by his side.

The big ship had just moored in the bay but it was no longer of any importance.

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