

There Is No Crime on Easter Island

A Short Story by Nancy Pickard,

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As the five-hour flight from Santiago came within sight of its destination, the man in the window seat said to Katharine Peters, "Have you ever been to Easter Island before?"

A little embarrassed, realizing she was practically leaning over him to look out, Katharine pulled back, and said, "No. It's our first trip." With a gesture of her hand, she indicated that by "our," she was including her husband, on the other side of her, as well as the couple seated in front of them.

The man beside her pushed his seat back so that Katharine could see better.

Although they had sat beside each other for hours, they hadn't conversed, except to utter the usual courtesies of "hello," and "is my bag in your way?" and "sorry to bother you, but I need to get into the aisle." He had slept or read for most of the trip, making conversation impossible anyway. Now Katharine heard more distinctly the Spanish accent she had noticed in

his brief earlier words. When they boarded, she had seen him use a Chilean passport for his identification. He was a caramel-skinned man of late middle-age, tall enough to look even more cramped than most people would be in the small space allotted to him. Feeling sympathetic, Katharine had left him the arm rest they shared, but now she leaned her elbow on it as she looked out the tiny window. She saw her own face in the glass, superimposed on the clouds: a red-haired woman in her worried forties, with a high, lined forehead and a long, thin nose.

The man pointed to the patch of land their plane was circling.

“See the volcanos?” he asked her. “The big one at the top of the island is *Terevaka*. But the one you really want to climb is *Rano Kau*. That’s where the quarry is. That’s where all the famous statues were carved, right out of the rock walls of the crater. I always tell people, think of Mount Rushmore, only imagine if the sculptor had cut the presidents loose from the mountain and then set them up on platforms.”

“It doesn’t look like there’s much there,” Katharine said, meaning on the island.

“There isn’t,” he agreed, with a slight smile, “except for history. Everybody lives in that one town you see down there, and except for the Army base, the rest of the island is essentially one big public park.”

It was a funny-looking island, Katharine thought; it was shaped like a soft triangle with the big volcano at the apex, smaller volcanos holding down the other corners, and a bottom edge that curved in and out, as if it were rippling. Its odd configuration brought to her mind a Halloween ghost costume-- a small child with a sheet draped over him.

“I don’t see any statues,” she said, squinting.

“You will,” the man told her, “when you get closer.”

There was something about the way he said it, and perhaps combined with the impression

she had of the island looking ghost-like, that gave Katharine a shudder of unease. To hide it, she said, “Are you visiting, too?”

It came out sounding stilted, over-polite.

“No.” He took his time answering, as if the question had prompted him to think of something else, “I used to live in Santiago, but I retired here.” He glanced at her. “You might not believe it, but at one time there may have been as many as 30,000 people living down there. Now there are about a tenth that number, mostly Polynesians, and some Chileans, like me. At the worst of it, back around the late nineteenth century, there were barely a hundred people still alive on the whole island.”

The man in front of them had turned around to listen in on their conversation. Katherine and Michael’s friend Lon Reynolds was a big blond man with a receding hairline and a booming voice. Now, in a manner that suggested he already knew it all, he said: “They killed each other. They cut down all the trees, and ruined the soil. They killed the birds and depleted their fisheries. There never had been much water, and they fought over that. Maybe there was also a climate change, or maybe not. But the formerly peaceful clans who had cooperated with each other for centuries got desperate. They turned on each other in a vicious civil war.” He was using what Katharine’s husband, Michael, called, “Lon’s lecturing voice.” As was often the case, it was loud enough to attract attention, including that of Michael who glanced over with an exasperated expression. Other passengers also looked over, and listened to him. Lon noticed his extra audience, and said, “At which point, the inhabitants began to eat the only protein they had left. . .”

Each other, Katharine knew Lon meant, and hoped he wouldn’t say.

The man with the Spanish accent interrupted, but graciously. “You’re right.” His voice

took on a dry edge, and his smile turned wry. “There’s a taunt we still use on the island: *Your mother is stuck in my teeth. . .*”

“Ew!” said a female voice in front of them.

Katharine smiled to hear her friend Nadia’s predictable reaction to the cannibal joke. Lon’s wife could be counted on to puncture her husband’s more pompous moments.

“. . . but it’s also true,” the Chilean man continued, in the same dry tone, “that the slave traders didn’t help, nor did the smallpox they brought with them.”

Michael Peters spoke up on the other side of Katherine. He was several inches shorter and about 50 pounds lighter than his friend Lon, but as he liked to joke, “At least, I still have my hair.” In fact, he had it in quantity and in length, and wore it tied back in a long, now-graying ponytail at the nape of his neck.

“Don’t worry,” Michael said, with a laugh, “we’re only bringing money.”

The wry look in the Chilean’s eyes deepened. “As deadly as any disease,” he murmured, though Katharine was the only one who heard him, just as a recorded voice announced their final approach to landing.

The four friends walked single file down the steps from the aircraft onto the runway at *Mataverí* airport. Slim, dark-haired Nadia Reynolds led the way, followed by her husband Lon, both in crisp, colorful designer resort attire, and then Katharine and Michael Peters who looked more as if they’d plucked their jeans and t-shirts off the top of a laundry pile.

“This is it?” Nadia asked at the bottom. She stared around, looking and sounding disappointed. Two Polynesian men slowly pushed luggage carts toward the LAN CHILI Boeing 757 on which the friends had just flown in. Beyond the one-story terminal, the land was flat and

brown, sparsely populated, rising to cliffs in the distance. “There’s nobody here! This looks like the middle of nowhere.”

“What did you expect, Nadia?” Lon was sarcastic. “O’Hare? LaGuardia? There are only two flights here a week.” He held up a pair of fingers in front of her face. “Two. We’re not in Chicago anymore. You do realize, Nadia,” he lectured, “that we’re 2,000 miles from South America. Why do you think it took us five hours to get here? This is literally the most remote inhabited spot on earth.”

“Well, yeah,” Nadia said, “but I didn’t know it would *feel* like it.”

“Yes!” Michael Peters, made a fist and pumped it triumphantly in the tropical air. “We did it! We have finally come to the ends of the earth!”

“My purse!” Katharine’s face blanched and her eyes widened in panic. The foursome had picked up their luggage and were now walking toward the front doors leading onto the island proper. Because the island was a Chilean territory and they had come from Santiago, they hadn’t even had to go through customs. Their arrival had been disarmingly casual. But now, Katharine frantically checked her other bags. “I’ve left my purse somewhere! It’s got my passport, and our money. . .”

“Well, *that’s* gone,” Nadia said, “you’ll never see *that* again.”

“Michael, did I give it to you?” Katharine pleaded with her husband.

“No, I don’t have it—“ He looked stunned, then panicked.

”Come with me!” she begged all of them. “We have to find it!”

With Katharine running in the lead, the other three walked rapidly behind her toward the “No Entrada/Do Not Enter” sign on the door through which they had come only moments earlier.

Before they could get there, however, Katharine's seat-mate, the tall Chilean man, pushed it open. Seeing them rushing toward him, he smiled broadly, and held up a large straw object for them to see.

"My purse!" Katharine exclaimed, running up to him. "Oh, thank you!"

"You left it on your seat," he told her, kindly.

Michael shook the stranger's hand with as much vigor as if he'd saved their lives. "Thank you very much. *Muchas gracias*. I can't believe we got it back. I was sure it was long gone."

"On Easter Island?" The man's eyebrows rose. "Oh, no. There was no way you weren't going to get it back."

"Why not?" Nadia demanded.

He smiled at her. "Because there is no crime on Easter Island."

"Right," Nadia said, and laughed.

"No, really," he told her, earnestly. "There isn't."

"You must have one hell of a police force," she said, cynically.

"We don't have a police force."

"You're kidding," Lon Reynolds exclaimed, for once having been taken by surprise.

"Why not?"

The tall man in the bright floral shirt and khaki trousers smiled again. "Because there is no crime on Easter Island."

His name, he told them, was Manuel Noriega. "Just like the former dictator of Panama," he said, flashing his charming smile. When he learned they had no hotel reservations--because they'd heard it wasn't necessary during low tourist season--he helped them select a *residencia*

from among the several offered, in person, on the spot, in the airport—and then he hitched a ride with them in the *residencia*'s van.

“What’s a residencia?” Nadia asked, mispronouncing it.

“Didn’t you read any of those travel books I gave you?” Lon asked her, sounding annoyed.

“That’s your job,” she retorted.

Katharine, in the van’s middle seat in front of them, turned around. “A *residencia* is a private home, Nadia. We’d probably call it a bed and breakfast.”

“Oh, well I love B&B’s,” Nadia said, sounding pleased.

“It’s a good thing,” her husband said, sarcastically, “that the rest of us know what you like so we can always provide it.”

“Yes,” Nadia said, with a contented-cat grin that she directed to Katharine and Michael. “It is.” But as she stared at the scenery passing by, her expression turned sour again. “You didn’t do a very good job of it this time, though. Where are the beaches? Where’s the shopping? What in the world are we supposed to *do* here? At least Machu Pichu was beautiful, and there were markets. And Egypt was fabulous, even with all those little kids constantly begging us for stuff all the time. And Stonehenge was okay, cause we could go back to London. But this place is like. . .nothing.”

“Nadia!” her husband whispered in reproof. Lon cast a telling glance toward Noriega and the *residencia* owner who was driving the van. But in the seat between, Michael Peters burst out laughing. “What are we going to *do* here, Nadia? Gee, I dunno. What can there possibly be to do in a place with so much history and mystery?”

“I know, I know,” she said, grumpily. “Look at dumb ol’ statutes and stuff.”

Her husband rolled his eyes and shook his head. “Dumb old statutes,” he muttered.
“Dumb old statues!”

Katharine Peters, feeling embarrassed, glanced at the front seat to see if the driver and their helpful new friend were hearing and understanding what was being said in back. She was relieved when she thought she caught Manuel Noriega with a fleeting grin on his face. It was typical of Nadia Reynolds, Katharine thought, to be able to say even the most superficial, insulting, or outrageous things, and the very people she should have offended would only smile or laugh. It was, Katharine figured, a perk of beauty. Nadia always got away with things, and always would get away with things, because she was so pretty. Even now, Katharine saw Manuel Noriega glance in the rear view mirror at the beautiful, sulky, dark-haired woman in the back seat, and there was admiration in his eyes. But then his gaze shifted so that suddenly he was gazing directly into Katharine’s eyes.

Quickly, she lowered hers, and turned to look at the scenery.

She hated to admit it, but Nadia was right: there wasn’t much to see so far. Once, this island had been a thickly forested paradise; now, she didn’t see a single tree, save for a few scraggly palms near the seashore. When people said the original inhabitants had cut down all the trees apparently they really meant *all* the trees. The landscape that stretched up from the road on which they were traveling looked as spare and barren as a Midwestern prairie. Katharine shot a glance at their helpful stranger again, and was relieved to see that he was busy conversing with the driver, instead of paying attention to them. She wondered why anybody would choose to leave a country as lush and beautiful as mainland Chili, and a city as exciting as Santiago, and come to live on an island as haunted, plain, and isolated as this one, even if the ocean that surrounded it was lovely.

The two men up front stopped talking.

“What do you do here, Mr. Noriega?” Katharine blurted into the silence.

He propped his left arm on the seat back and turned around to answer her with his charming smile. “Manuel. Please call me Manuel. What do I do? I’m afraid I do what everybody else does on Easter Island, Senora Peters. I wait for the airplanes to deliver tourists. And then I offer my services as a guide around the island. If you want me to, I can show you the statues, the volcanos, the quarry, the caves. . .”

“No wonder you know so much,” Nadia said.

“The caves!” Her husband leaned toward the front seat. “You can show us the caves?”

But Katherine thought, with a start: *he called me Senora Peters*. When they had all introduced themselves, in the terminal, they had given him only their first names, since there were four of them and only one of him. But he had just then called her by her last name. She looked around to see if any of the others had noticed—and found Nadia looking back at her, one eyebrow elevated.

Nadia leaned forward and whispered, “How does he know your name? You’d better check your purse, Katy.”

When Katharine reached for her straw bag, Nadia provided cover by exclaiming, “What caves? I hate caves! You all know how claustrophobic I am. You didn’t get me into the pyramids, and you’re not getting me into any caves.”

On the pretext of getting her sunglasses, Katharine examined her purse.

As far as she could tell, everything that was supposed to be there was there. Nothing seemed disturbed, including the personal mail she had brought with her on the trip, intending to find time to pay bills, among other things. She was slipping on her sunglasses just as Manuel

turned around again, and said, “Pyramids? Stonehenge, Machu Pichu? It sounds as if the four of you travel together a lot, and you go to—“

”The world’s weirdest places,” Nadia interrupted. “My husband just wants to be able to brag that he’s been here, and Michael always thinks he’s going to have some mystical experience, and Katy likes the scenery, and I—“

”Yes,” Michael broke in, with a grin. “Why do you come with us, Nadia?”

“And I,” she repeated, emphasizing the pronoun, “come because I can’t talk them into going someplace easy, like Florida, and I don’t want them to leave me home alone.” She gave them all a half-serious, half-angry stare. “But that does *not* mean you’re getting me into any cave.”

When they alighted from the van, in the driveway of the sprawling house where they were going to rent rooms, Katy whispered to Nadia, “It’s okay. Nothing’s missing. I feel bad for being suspicious. He’s been so nice to us—“

”Maybe too nice?.” Nadia’s tone was cynical again. “Maybe he just knows how to glom onto rich tourists when he sees us.”

“Rich?” Katharine’s grin was rueful. “Speak for yourself.”

She immediately regretted saying it, because Nadia grasped her wrist and gave it a sympathetic squeeze. “Listen, if you ever need anything. . .”

She left the rest unsaid, but it was all there in the warmth of her eyes.

Katherine felt her face get hot. She shook her head. She felt touched, but also mortified. It was hard to be getting broker instead of getting better off in life. They all knew—though so far not even Lon had said it out loud—that this was probably their last exotic trip together, because it was the last one that the Peters could pretend to afford, and even this was stretching an already-strained budget to its breaking point.

“We’re fine,” Katherine assured her friend.

Nadia’s gaze was steady and skeptical, but she didn’t say anything more.

Before they could go to the caves, their new acquaintance and newly-hired guide insisted they see the most famous line-up of *moai* on the island: 15 upright statues of varying heights, all in a single line with their distinctive sway backs to the sea, and one fallen *moai* lying with its face to the sky.

“They represent chiefs,” Manuel explained, “and members of ruling families.”

“How *did* they move such huge statues?” Katharine asked him.

Lon laughed. “Mike, here, thinks it was aliens.”

Michael shot him an unfriendly look. “I’m not an idiot.”

Manuel grinned at him. “Don’t worry. If you did think that, you’d have lots of company. And then there are the people swear that the statutes got up and walked here by themselves, by magic. But the most likely explanation is also the explanation for the disappearance of the trees. They used ropes and logs to pull and roll the statues. As they built more and more statues, they needed more and more rope and logs from the trees. Add that to a growing population who needed ever-more firewood, harpoons, and boats, and something had to give.”

Lon took over the lecture. “Then, when things finally did fall apart on the island, the warriors ran around knocking over each other’s statues, until there wasn’t a single one standing. These have all been re-erected, right, Manny?”

Their guide overlooked the familiarity, and simply nodded.

“Why did they make them to begin with?” Michael asked, turning pointedly to Manuel.

“Competition,” Lon said, loudly. “Just like guys building skyscrapers today. Only back then, it was the one with the biggest statue wins.”

“How many are there?” Michael inquired, and even more pointedly added, “*Manuel?*”

“How many statues, you mean?” Again, it was Lon who answered. “Hundreds. Maybe eight hundred, altogether.”

Michael’s mouth dropped open, though he still didn’t acknowledge that it was Lon who’d been speaking. “And they knocked them *all* down?”

“Yes,” Manuel said, but Lon said, “Every damn one of them,” at the same time, and drowned him out.

“You’d think,” Nadia said, “that the statues would be facing out to sea.”

“They all face inland,” Lon informed her. “No one really knows why.”

“I think I do,” Katharine said, and when the others looked over at her, she blushed.

“Well, I mean, I don’t really know why they did it, but I know why I’d do it this way.” Her voice grew quiet, seeming to compel their attention, so that even Lon didn’t interrupt her as she said, “If I lived here in the middle of nowhere, where there was never anything on the horizon and ships never arrived from anywhere, I’d line the whole island with statues and turn them to face me, so it wouldn’t feel so lonely. . .”

The wind picked up at that moment, whistling around the statues and the living humans who had turned to stare at them.

The next morning, they traveled to the caves

“Aren’t you coming in with us, Manny?”

Lon stopped at the wide mouth of the first cave, and called back to their guide. But Manuel shook his head. “No. You’ll be fine going in alone.”

He had arrived at their guesthouse to pick them up in a 4-wheel drive vehicle loaded with bottled water and snacks, because there was nowhere on the island to buy supplies outside of town.

“Why won’t you go in the cave?” Nadia wanted to know. “Scared?”

He smiled at her. “No, just traditional. . .and cautious.”

“Cautious?” Michael looked suddenly skeptical of the excursion. “What’s there to be cautious about for you, but not for us?”

Manuel explained, “There’s a taboo against going into these caves.”

“Well, then, why are *they* going?” Nadia demanded of him.

“It’s only those of us who live on the island who observe the taboo,” he explained.

“Visitors don’t have to.”

“Why not?” Katharine asked him.

He looked straight at her. “Because you’ll be leaving soon.”

There was a moment's silence while they took in the implication of that, and then they all laughed nervously. "You mean," Lon said, "we'll be okay just so long as we don't stick around long enough for the taboo to get us?"

Their guide smiled in a way that got across the idea that he knew what he was saying was anachronistic and amusing, but that he was sticking to it anyway. "More or less. Yes."

Nadia stepped close to her husband, looked up into his face, and said: "Boo!"

That broke up the tension, and made them laugh.

"Go ahead," Manuel urged them. "I think you'll find it surprising."

"Does this cave have a name?" Lon wanted to know before he stepped into it.

"It's called the Cave of the Virgins," Manuel answered.

"Cave of the Virgins?" Nadia laughed. "Obviously, *I've* got no business going in there. You'd better watch it, Katy, or it'll spit you out, too."

Fifteen minutes later, when Katharine stumbled out of the cave looking pale and ill, Nadia glanced up in surprise and said, "Hey, I didn't think it would really happen!" When Katharine put out a hand to support herself on the exterior cave wall, and then bent over at the waist as if she was going to vomit, Nadia sprang to her feet.

"What's the matter, Katy?"

Katharine waved for her to sit back down. "Dizzy." After a moment, she straightened back up and then looked over to where Nadia was once again seated on the grass with Manuel. "There are human skulls in there."

"Skulls!"

Manuel smiled apologetically. "I warned you to expect surprises."

"You could have warned her to expect skulls!"

He shrugged. "I never know whether to tell people ahead of time. If I don't tell them, it may upset them. . .like you, Senora. But most of the time they get a thrill out of it, and they kind of enjoy the shock."

"Katherine doesn't look as if she liked the shock,".

Katherine walked over toward them on unsteady legs. "There were two of them, Nadia. Just. . .heads. . .and there may have been a few other bones—"

"Yes," Manuel said, "there are."

"It was just—" Katharine sat down near them. "Scary. Grotesque."

"And the boys loved it, I'll bet," her friend said.

"Of course. They're still in there, looking for more bones."

Manuel had warned them earlier not to touch or disturb any artifacts on the island.

"I'll have to remember to show them the finger bone," he murmured now.

"Finger bone?" Katharine asked, weakly.

He nodded. "A finger bone was found beneath one of the statues that were knocked over all those years ago. Somebody must not have moved fast enough to get out of the way."

"Gross," Nadia said.

Katharine shuddered. "It's no wonder there's no crime here."

Their guide looked surprised. "Why do you say that?"

She looked at him with eyes that still registered the shock she'd felt at seeing human skulls inside the cave. "Because there has already been enough crime on this island to last forever."

Two hours later, Katharine and Manuel stood on a slight rise, just inside a dormant volcano, watching Nadia and Lon snipe at each other. The married couple were standing in front of a partially-completed statue that towered over them. All around them lay the remains of the single basalt quarry where all the sculpting work had been achieved. Workmen from ancient days appeared to have dropped their tools and walked off the job, leaving behind them tools on the ground and several hundred statues in various stages of completion.

“These are the ugliest statues I’ve ever seen,” Nadia said, starting it.

“How can you call them ugly?” Lon shot back. “Nadia, these are the most famous statues in the world.”

“Well, Mick Jagger is famous, too, but that doesn’t make him pretty.”

“My, god, Nadia, do you have to judge everything by modern standards?”

“Do I look like a first century art critic, Lon?” she retorted, and then she waved a dismissive hand at all the statues and pieces of statues around her. “I’ve seen garden gnomes that looked better than these things.”

Standing beside Katharine, several yards away, Manuel said quietly, “Why does she do that?”

Katharine glanced at him. “Why does she act like an idiot, you mean? To annoy Lon, I think. He can be a little full of himself. . .” She smiled apologetically. “. . .as you may have noticed. He didn’t used to be so obnoxious. When we first knew him, he was lots of fun.”

“What happened?”

She shrugged. “Money. Success. Security. But Nadia’s not really an idiot, you know.”

“I know,” the guide said, and then he added, when he saw she looked surprised, “I had a

chance to talk to her alone when the rest of you were in the cave. Even in that short time, I could tell she is quite intelligent. And that it isn't true that she hasn't read a lot before coming here. She was telling me things about it before I could even tell her."

"Yeah, she always does that. We go on these trips and she pretends to be a twit, and she really knows more than the rest of us do. She holds a very high-powered job in a huge insurance corporation," Katharine told him. "So does Lon, that's how they met. But when she says that all she really wants to do on vacation is veg in the sun, she means it."

"Does she ever get to do that?"

"Does she ever get her way, you mean? Not very often."

"Which is why she does this to annoy him," Manuel observed.

"Exactly."

He turned to her. "And what do you and your husband do when you're not traveling to mystical places?" He smiled at her, which dragged a smile out of her, too. "I've got to say the two of you don't exactly strike me as corporate types, but maybe that's only because you're on vacation."

"No," she said. "We're not like that. Michael's an artist. I'm a freelance writer."

Manuel looked as if he was about to follow up that piece of information with a question, but then he closed his mouth again, as if he had decided that whatever he was going to ask might be tactless.

She said it for him: "How can we afford this, you're wondering? Since artists and writers usually don't make much money?" A little grimly, Katharine patted the straw purse that hung over her shoulder, the purse where the unopened bills still lay. "Funny thing, but I've been asking myself the same question lately."

“Then why—?”

“Do we keep coming? Because Michael and Lon have been friends since they were in college. They’ve always egged each other on.” Her expression turned a little bitter. “And now, even though the price of eggs has gotten way too high, we just keep buying them.” She broke off, and laughed, sounding embarrassed. “I’m sorry. That was even dumber than Nadia makes herself sound. I’d better go look at those ‘ugly old statues’ that I keep hearing so much about.” She started to move away from him, but he stopped her by asking, “Was it really the skulls that made you sick this morning?”

Katherine turned to look up at him.

“No.” She looked distressed again. “The men were being ugly to each other. Lon was bragging about how well he’s doing, and Michael was giving him a hard time about selling out. I hate it. It upsets me.”

She turned away, and hurried off to see the statues that many people considered to be one of the wonders of the world.

Off in a corner of the quarry, Nadia pulled Katharine aside and said, “I asked Manuel what he did for a living in Chili, before he came here, but he wouldn’t tell me.”

“Wouldn’t tell you? What do you mean?”

“I mean he fudged. He said, ‘oh, this and that, one thing and another.’” Nadia had the suspicious look in her eyes again. “So I said, what does that mean, and he said, ‘it was a long time ago.’”

“Well, he doesn’t *have* to tell us anything.”

“No, but I like to know who I’m hiring.”

Katharine grinned. “Next time we hire a guide, we’ll make him submit a resume to your personnel department.”

Nadia laughed at that. “Damn right. But, really, Katy, we should watch him. He could be a crook, he could steal us blind. Hang onto your purse, girl.”

“He already had a chance at my purse,” Katharine reminded her, and then couldn’t help but tease. “You’re the one who’d better be careful with her purse. It would be much better pickings.”

Unfortunately, it came out sounding harsh and bitter, which she hadn’t intended.

When Katharine saw her friend’s eyes widen in surprise and what looked like hurt, she rushed to say, “I didn’t mean that the way it sounded, truly.”

Before Nadia could respond, their husbands came hurrying up to them. Lon threw an arm around Nadia’s shoulders and then pointed to the top of the crater with his free hand. “I want to hike around the rim of this volcano tomorrow. Who’s coming with?”

Under his arm, his wife shuddered. “Not me, not heights.”

“How high is it?” Michael inquired of Manuel.

“On the other side, there’s a 400 foot sheer drop to the ocean. It’s spectacular, but it’s not recommended for anybody except the most experienced climbers.”

Michael looked disappointed. “That lets me out.”

“Oh, come on,” Lon scoffed at him. “You never know, you might have one of your mystical epiphanies up there.”

“I’ve already had my ephiphany for this trip,” Mike said in a tight voice.

“Oh, yeah, and what was it?”

“I had a revelation that you’re a jerk, Lon.”

Nadia laughed, relieving some of the tension. “Well, *that’s* not news!”

“I don’t care if nobody goes with me,” Lon said, aggressively. “I’ll hike it by myself.”

But their guide stared across at him with a serious expression. “I wish you wouldn’t, Senor Reynolds. It’s the most dangerous hike on the island. If you do it, you should definitely have a partner.”

Lon looked at his three mates, and when none of them volunteered, he shrugged.

“No problem,” he said, with a definite bite to his words, “I’ll just do it the next time we come to Easter Island.” It was clear to all of them that what he really meant was, *We’ll never be back here again. Thanks a lot for spoiling my fun.*

It seemed that Lon still hadn’t gotten over it by the time the friends went to dinner that night. The restaurant they chose, at Manuel’s suggestion, was basically just tables and chairs set on top of a concrete slab painted green, with a thatched roof overhead. Even the kitchen was open air, so they could watch the chef broiling their shrimp and boiling the pasta.

Lon’s words grew more snappish with every refill of his glass of wine.

Over salad, he seemed merely baffled and annoyed, saying, “I don’t know what’s the matter with you pansies. It doesn’t look like such a difficult hike to me. Hell, we’ve walked all over England together—“

”Yeah, over grass and gentle hills,” Michael reminded him.

“We’ve walked in the desert—“

”Which is, you may recall, *flat*,” Nadia said, which made the others laugh.

Her husband’s face flushed. He took a swig from his wine glass, and did not join their laughter. “I just think it would be a highlight of our lives to be up there on that ridge as the sun

comes up tomorrow. We could leave the *residencia* while it's still dark, and be on top in time for the sunrise—“

”Oh, even smarter,” his wife said. “You want to hike up there in the *dark*.”

“Don't make such a big deal out of everything, Nadia.” Lon's eyes were hot with anger. “The only reason Manuel warned us away was to keep from getting sued if one of us did fall, which is not going to happen.”

“Ha! And why would I sue *him*, if *you* act like a fool and break your neck?”

Lon's face flushed an even deeper red. “Hell, we've only *got* tomorrow, and then we're gone, and we'll never be back again. I'm telling you, you'll regret it, if you don't go with me.”

Katharine looked alarmed. “You're still going, Lon?”

“I might,” he said, aggressively.

“I can't *believe* you!” Nadia picked up her napkin from her lap and threw it at him.

He glared at her. “It's my neck.”

“And a shame there's no brain on top of it!”

By the time they finished the appetizers, he still kept coming back to the subject, only by then he'd had more wine and his tongue was even looser. “Maybe I'll hire Manuel to go with me.” He nodded his head in the direction of a long bar, where their guide sat on a stool, in conversation with the Polynesian bartender. Lon glared at Michael, across the table. “Just because you can't afford him, doesn't mean I shouldn't get to go.”

Nadia darted a glance at him, and Katharine gasped a little.

“We can afford it, Lon,” she told him.

“Really? Then why did you need me to pay for all of us today?”

Katharine looked bewildered. “We didn't—“

Michael put a hand on top of hers. "I told him we'd pay him back—"

"Out of what?" Lon sneered. "It's finally coming home to roost, isn't it? After all these years, we're finally seeing who's has been the smart one, after all. For so many years, ever since we graduated from college, you've mocked me for being a corporate guy. You and your free spirit, right? Never going to be tied down, always just delighted to go to your own work every day, never reporting to any boss. . ."

"Where did this come from?" Michael said, looking stunned.

"Where did it come from? It came from all these years of you being so smug about being a stupid artist. . ." He glanced at Katharine. ". . . and writer. Like either of you is ever going to have any real success! You draw the equivalent of box tops, for god's sake." Again he glanced at Katharine. "And you, you write ad copy for chewing gum. Yeah, there's so much integrity in that, right? You're both such *artists*. And now, guess what? After 30 years of actually getting out of bed and going to work every day, after working our tails off and earning every penny, Nadia and I get to retire with several million bucks apiece. And what do you get to retire on, Michael? Katharine? Oh, that's right, you don't ever get to retire, do you? You'll still be drawing your stupid box tops when you're 80 years old. Katharine will still be trying to find ad copy to write when you're both senile and she can't string two words together. . ."

"Lon, stop it!" Nadia tried to take one of his hands, but he jerked out of her grasp.

"Nadia and I will still be taking any trips we want to take," he plunged on, ignoring her. "And what will you be doing, Michael? You'll be walking from one end of the hall in the medicaid nursing home to the other end of the hall. . ."

Katharine pushed her chair back and stood up.

Michael shook his head, as if to clear it, and then he stood up, too. In a voice that

trembled with emotion, he stared across the table at his best friend and said, “Go on up on that ridge, Lon. Take all the chances you want, buddy. You want to take a hike, Lon? Fine! Take a hike, buddy. Take a long walk off a short ridge. Go see your sunset. I hope it’s the last one you ever get to *buy*.”

He put an arm around his wife, and pushed her ahead of him.

They were gone by the time the entrees were placed on the table.

At the far end of the bar, Manuel Noriega exchanged glances with the bartender. Lon’s voice had easily carried over to them. The bartender, a Polynesian, smiled slightly, as if to say, “tourists!” Manuel shook his head, as if in agreement, but he paid for his drinks soon after that and left without ordering dinner.

Manuel found Katharine Reynolds sitting alone on a side patio of the *residencia*.

“Is everything all right, Senora?”

When she looked up at him, her face was in shadow so he couldn’t see her expression clearly, but there was unhappiness in her voice. “Some things never change, do they?”

“What do you mean?” he asked her.

“From one century to the next, we pretty much behave just the same. Everybody gets along fine, and then before you know it, we’re knocking each other down. Did we make fools of ourselves back in the restaurant, Manuel?”

His face was shadowed, too, so she couldn’t see his smile. “Not all of you.”

When she didn’t respond, he turned quietly and walked away.

The noise of a car engine woke Katharine up with a start that set her heart pounding.

Instinctively, she turned toward the other side of the bed to touch Michael, but when she put her hand where his chest should be, he wasn't there.

Katherine turned on a lamp on her side of the bed.

Their travel clock said: 4 a.m.

Her husband's side of the bed was empty, the sheets pulled back.

She got up and turned on more lights. They revealed that the clothes he had taken off to come to bed were gone. It appeared to her that some time after she fell asleep, Michael had slipped out of bed, gotten dressed again, and then left their room without waking her, or telling her where he was going.

Katharine looked around for a note from him, but didn't find one.

She opened the door and looked out into the darkness of the back yard of the guest house. Michael wasn't on the back porch. After she had walked all around the house in her nightgown, she knew he wasn't on any of the patios, either. She saw that the big van was not in the driveway, and one of the bicycles the home kept for its guests was gone, as well.

There is no crime on Easter Island. . .

Katharine decided to believe that, and to believe that Michael had gone out—safely—for a walk along the safe, deserted streets of the town. Maybe he had indigestion, either from some of the food they'd had that day, or from the things that Lon had said to them.

She went back to bed, but didn't get back to sleep.

Shortly after dawn, the door to the room quietly opened.

Katharine shut her eyes.

She heard someone come in, and slip off clothing. Then the bed covers next to her stirred and her husband lay down beside her. She realized that if the sound of the van's engine had not awakened her, she would never have known that he had come and gone.

“Where have you been, Michael?”

She could feel how startled he was to hear her voice.

“Oh, I'm sorry. Did I wake you?”

“Where'd you go?”

“I couldn't sleep, so I went for a walk.”

Usually, Katharine could tell the minute he dropped off to sleep, because Michael snored. But although she lay with her eyes open for another hour, she never heard him make a sound until the sun was high enough to stream in through the windows.

At breakfast in the *residencia*'s dining room, Nadia told them that Lon had taken the van out during the night in order to drive himself back to the volcano.

“I couldn't stop him.”

She sounded more angry than worried, even though she said he had left at 4 in the morning, and it was by then already 8 a.m.

Katharine didn't want to ask the obvious: *shouldn't he be back by now?*

When Lon Reynolds still had not returned with the van by 10, and the owner of the *residencia* needed it to make an airport run, he called his friend Manuel Noriega for assistance. “Can you drive out there and look for him?” he asked. “And if you find him, tell him to my van back as soon as possible.”

By 11 a.m., when neither Manuel nor Lon had appeared, Nadia was frantic.

“I’d call the police,” she said, “if these godforsaken island had any!”

Upon hearing that, Katharine Peters burst into tears.

Ten minutes later, Lon Reynolds drove up to the guest house in the van, got out, and walked casually over to the frightened little band of people on the back porch.

“You all look as if you’ve just seen a ghost,” he said. And then he said, “You missed a hell of a show. I walked the entire rim of that crater and saw the most spectacular sunrise I’ll ever see in my life.”

“Where have you *been?*” his wife screamed at him.

He looked at her as if she had lost her marbles, and shrugged. “Since I already had the van, I drove all the way around the island to see the rest of it. Why? Is there a problem?”

Manuel Noriega stood at the airport fence watching the LAN CHILI jet take off for Santiago, taking “his” tourists with it. There was a fresh check for \$1,000 in his pocket, to match the one he had taken from Katharine Peters’ handbag when she had “accidentally” left it behind in the airplane on the day of their arrival. She was a nice, caring, efficient woman, he thought. When he had gone up to the LAN CHILI ticket counter at the airport in Santiago, his pre-paid ticket to Easter Island was there for him, just as she had emailed that it would be.

They had conducted their business entirely by email.

She had been looking for a private investigator.

He wasn’t that, but he had been a cop.

A friend passed him along to the American woman who was privately looking for a bodyguard. “I would like you to keep a close watch on our friend Lon Reynolds,” were her email instructions. “Don’t let anything happen to him.”

She had not told him what that “anything” might be.

Maybe she had not even known for sure, herself, exactly what the danger might be, but he was pretty sure that she feared that it might come from her own husband, if he was pushed too far.

Easter Island was a land of extremes, Manuel believed, a land at the end of the earth, a place where nothing ever happened and even if it did, there was nothing to be done about it, afterwards. When he had watched the acrimony grow between the two old friends, he had believed he was witnessing the possibility that something very bad, something irrevocable was about to happen.

Lon Reynolds was an obnoxious, stubborn man.

Michael Peters was a defeated, humiliated one.

After their argument in the restaurant, Manuel had driven out to the volcano, parked his car where no one could see it, and then he had hiked up to the rim to wait. The first of them to arrive had been Michael Peters, bicycling quietly up the dirt roads, and also hiking up to wait. But when he arrived at the top of the precipitous ridge, he had found, not his old friend Lon, but their “guide,” Manuel.

They had stared at each other, the two men from different cultures.

No words had been exchanged, until Michael had said, “So you’re going to walk with him, to make sure he doesn’t fall off.”

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll go back. There’s no reason for me to be here then.”

Their words could have meant anything. They hung in the tropical air.

Michael Peters turned, and carefully made his way back down, vanishing into the

darkness for awhile. When the headlights of the van appeared, and that door opened and then slammed, it was only by looking through binoculars that Manuel was able to see Michael take the bicycle out of hiding, get on it, and peddle away unobserved by his friend.

“You’re here!” were Lon’s first words when he reached the top.

“I thought it safer this way,” Manuel told him. “I won’t charge you.”

“That’s good,” Lon said, ungraciously, “since I never asked you to do this.”

I won’t charge you for saving your life, Manuel thought, as he led the way along the ridge above the sea, *because I’ve already been paid*. Lon Reynolds would never know that Katharine had used money she couldn’t afford to spend in order to keep two old friends from destroying each other like primitive men in a battle for supremacy. Manuel wondered if Michael really would have pushed his old friend off the cliff, like one of the ancient islanders shoving a statue down. And he wondered what would happen to all of them when they returned home. Maybe this strange, charged episode between them would defuse things, maybe they would safely drift apart. There was only one thing Manuel knew for sure as the jet shrunk to a dot in the sky and he turned around to leave the airport: thanks to himself and to Katharine Peters, there was no crime on Easter Island.

