



THE RUBICON OF VITI LEVU

by *Desiree Bilon*

“Don’t go down to the river mouth,” our taxi driver said as he turned left onto the gravel road. “It’s dangerous. Many people have drowned there, even a famous athlete.”

Gabriele, my boyfriend, pushed a dark brown curl behind his ear. “Cosa sta dicendo?”

“He’s saying that a rugby player drowned in that river,” I said in Italian. South African Denzel clapped our driver on the shoulder. “Nothing to worry about. We’re good swimmers.”

I didn’t feel like a strong swimmer anymore. Even though I was a certified lifeguard – that was for the swimming pool. And instead of surfing the past few months, I’d been hunched over my computer tapping out my thesis.

Earlier that week, we’d met Denzel at our motel, Vakaviti – about fifteen minutes from the town of Sigatoka on the southern coast of Viti Levu, Fiji’s largest island. He was staying in the dorm, higher up on the hill from our room. A tall guy in his late twenties, he’d been surfing for ten years, eight more than us. When Denzel wasn’t off surfing at Hideaway Resort, he went spearfishing out front with his harpoon and special weights that he clipped onto his belt.

The previous night after dinner, Denzel said, “I met a Canadian guy out surfing today and he told me about the Sigatoka rivermouth. I’m supposed to meet him at eleven on our side of the river. You guys want to come?”

Gabry and I looked at each other. I’d read about the rivermouth in a guidebook: Sigatoka has Fiji’s only beach-break. Most other areas have fringing reefs but here the fresh water has prevented their formation. The break is over a large, submerged rock platform covered in sand. Surfing is at the point-break at the mouth of the Sigatoka River and beach-breaks pound the shore.

The taxi driver pulled to a halt at the end of the gravel road, in front of a green field. Denzel loosened the piece of yellow rope the driver had used to secure our boards to the roof.

“Walk down the path until you see the river. But don’t go near the river’s mouth.” His dark skin glistened in the sun. We walked alongside the tall green stalks until a brown river floated into view. There, as planned, was the Canadian.

The river was wider than I had expected. I rubbed the sweat away from my forehead with the back of a hand.

“I’ve never paddled across a river before.”

“You’ll be fine. Ten minutes tops,” the Canadian said.

We introduced ourselves but I forgot his name as soon as he said it. My mind was on crossing the river.

Denzel scrunched his T-shirt into a ball and dropped it on top of his sandals. I kicked off my flipflops. Hot mud squished between my toes. The sun burned my cheeks.

The Canadian jumped in first. His yellow waterproof backpack wobbled from side to side as he paddled. Denzel went next.

I faced Gabry. “No so se ce la faccio.”

“Sí, you can do it.” He squeezed my hand before jumping in.

I grabbed my board with both hands and launched onto my stomach, already paddling. The river was cool and had a soapy film to it. I wondered if the locals washed their clothes in it closer to Sigatoka town. The river yanked me towards the ocean as my feet cramped with adrenaline. I’d started off on the same trajectory as the others. I kicked my feet to get rid of the adrenaline and help get me back on course. A quarter of the way across, my muscles burned from paddling. Tension hung off the back of my neck. *Don’t look out to sea or that’s where you’ll go.*

Paddle, paddle.

I fixed my eyes on the opposite shore, which didn’t seem to be getting any closer. Sun scorched my lips as I paddled through the murky brown water. How could a river smell stagnant when it was flowing? I didn’t want to think about it. One by one, the guys clambered up onto the other shore.

A minute later I stepped onto the sand, chest heaving. “You guys go ahead. I gotta catch my breath.” I screwed my

feet into the burning black sand.

“Take your time. The rock shelf is over there, at the mouth of the river. We’re going to surf just off to the right.” The Canadian took off his backpack and slapped sunscreen onto his cheeks. He scooped up a handful of sand and rubbed it back and forth across his palms.

Once my breathing normalised, we trudged up the riverbank and across the blazing sand. Judging by the sound of the waves, I expected them to be big. But when they came into view, they were huge. I hadn’t surfed big waves in almost a year. My stomach knotted.

The guys waited for a lull before paddling out one by one. When I couldn’t stand the sun anymore, I jumped onto my board and paddled. There wasn’t much of a channel; the waves were breaking everywhere. Right, left, right, left. A wave jacked up in front of me; I grabbed the rails of my board and knifed it underwater. I pressed the tail down with my right foot and pounced onto my stomach, submerging. Underwater, I opened my eyes as the wave curled over me. My board and I shot out the other side of the wave, intact, my eyes stinging from the salt water.

I paddled over to the others and let a few waves go by before getting into position. The first wave I paddled for sucked me up to the crest and it looked like it was going to close out. At the last second I pulled back. I ventured farther out into the ocean, where the swells weren’t breaking. My heart pounded and adrenaline pooled in my feet. Once out of harm’s way, I kicked circles and spun to face the shore. Sand dunes and clumps of trees stretched back into the hills.

What the hell is wrong with me? I asked myself. I just have to commit. What’s the worst that can happen? I’ll get rag-dolled and maybe get a sand scraping. I scrambled under the peak of the next wave and paddled through the feeling that the wave was going to close out on me, but I wasn’t fast enough and got sucked up to the lip. The wave pitched me into a thick layer of white foam that swallowed me up, shoved me down. I shut my eyes as I was thrown around underwater.

When I surfaced, I promised to let myself rest as soon as I got past the breaking water. Like a buoy, I bobbed

along the surface while the others surfed. I gazed out to sea. The sun reflected off the water like sequins on a dance costume. I splashed water on my face to cool it down, but the ocean was too warm to be refreshing. Be glad you’re not in Canada in sub-Artic temperatures, I thought. The best day in the office is still not as good as the worst day at the beach. Try to enjoy this for what it is – an adventure.

One by one the others exited the water. It was now or never. I paddled towards the shore and under a smaller wave. I paddled as hard as I could, but the wave didn’t want me. I tried to stand anyway, thinking I could ride the whitewater back to the beach. The breaking wave knocked me down, ran me over and threw me underwater.

I came up gasping for air, flopped onto my board and pointed the nose to the beach. The next batch of whitewash threatened to rip my hands from the rails. I wrapped my legs around the sides of the board, hooking my feet. I clung on like a monkey, all the way to the shore.

Gabry and Denzel balanced their boards on their heads, shading them from the sun.

“Tutto bene?” Gabry asked.

“I’m fine.” I propped my board onto my head, wax stuck to my hair.

“The other Canadian went to the check out the surf camp,” Denzel said.

“What surf camp?”

“The one just behind the dunes.”

The sand seared my feet and I broke into a trot, towards the river, my board knocking against my head.

Back on our side of the river, we tracked down our sandals. I licked the salt from my lips and plastered on lip balm. A light hammering tapped above my right eyebrow. Dehydration. Denzel snapped a piece of sugar cane off and divided it into three parts. I sucked the end of the stalk, syrup coating my tongue, as we kicked gravel back to the highway.

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