Coconut Chaos

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Extract

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1

On Monday 27 April 1789 Fletcher Christian, master's mate on the *Bounty*, held dawn watch from four to eight. A serene view of the sun rising over the Pacific Ocean belied the trouble that would change his life that day. The ship, like a floating garden, was sailing from Tahiti to the West Indies with a cargo of over a thousand breadfruit plants. Some were more than seven feet high. Sunlight illuminated a coral reef, atolls and white beaches. Christian took a green coconut from the heap piled on the quarterdeck, cracked it open and drank its watery milk. He thought this an act of 'no consequence', as insignificant as the flutter of a butterfly's wings.

Had he not taken that coconut I would not have trudged round Harrods on a June day 295 years later, looking for a blouse for his great-great-great-granddaughter Rosie. I was to stay with Rosie and her husband Hank on Pitcairn Island, if a ship would take me there. By email I'd asked if she'd like me to bring anything from London. 'Not really,' she replied. 'Just concentrate on getting here.' Then she described, if I happened to chance on it, a top to go with her pants, as she called them, a top that was dark, silky, size sixteen, wouldn't crease or show the dirt, pull-on not buttoned, low cut, nipped in below the bust, wide over the waist and hips...

The escalators heaved. I looked at garments made in Taiwan and China. I considered tops by Paul and Joe, and Sonia

Rykiel's pearl-encrusted jackets. Seeking the Way Out I passed hats that looked like hothouse plants. In Bridal Wear a cordoned-off bottle-blonded Sloane, swathed in cream silk, rehearsed her once-in-a-lifetime day.

I found Rosie's blouse in Fenwicks, made in Paris by Gerard Darel, £129, crushed silk, silver with charcoal blodges, size eighteen, loose sleeves, a low V-neck... Aviva, the ample Israeli assistant, said these were American sizes and came up small. She had this blouse herself: it washed well, needed no ironing, was a wonderful gift and truly flattering.

2

The day before the mutiny, the *Bounty* anchored to get supplies at Nomuka Island in the Tongan archipelago 1300 miles west of Tahiti. William Bligh bartered for coconuts – he settled at a price of twenty for a nail. He told Christian to take a boat and muskets, supervise casking water from the river and be watchful. The Nomukans were impoverished and hostile, they had sores on their bodies and suspicion in their eyes.

At the river's edge Christian was stoned and the boat's anchor stolen. He retreated to the ship. Bligh called him a coward and taunted him that he was armed and the islanders naked. Against the return of the anchor he took two chiefs hostage and held them on the *Bounty* until sunset. They beat themselves with their fists and wept with fear, but the anchor was gone, nothing was gained, and Christian above everyone was humiliated.

Bligh was rated as lieutenant of the *Bounty*, the smallness

of the ship precluded a higher rank, but he acted as its captain and purser. He kept tight control of all supplies. The following morning when he went to the quarterdeck he thought his coconut pile was smaller. The master John Fryer said it looked that way only because men had walked over it in the night. Bligh didn't believe him. Enraged he summoned Christian, again berated him, said, 'Damn your blood, you've stolen my coconuts,' and called him a thief, a hell-hound and a beast.

Christian asked, 'Why do you treat me thus, Captain Bligh?'

'No reply,' said Bligh, then ordered the quartermasters to bring every coconut on the ship to the quarterdeck. He assembled the crew, told them, 'There never were such a set of damned thieving rascals under any man's command in the world before,' halved their daily supply of yams and vowed when the ship reached the Endeavour Strait he'd kill half of them, force the others to eat grass like cows, and make the officers jump overboard.

It was not a happy day aboard the *Bounty*. That afternoon Bligh again cursed Christian and called him a damned rascal and an infamous wretch. Christian cracked. He ran off crying. None of the crew had seen him cry before. 'Tears were running from his eyes in big drops,' William Purcell the carpenter said. 'Flesh and blood can't bear this,' Christian told him. 'I'd rather die ten thousand deaths. I always do my duty as an officer and a man, yet I receive this scandalous treatment.' Purcell tried to console him that the voyage home to England would not take long. Christian said, 'In going through the Endeavour Strait I am sure the ship will be in hell.'

Bligh's outbursts were part of his command. After them he

behaved as if nothing had happened. Purcell asked Christian why he took this incident so badly. Christian replied, 'Can you ask me and hear the treatment I receive?' Purcell said, 'Don't I receive as bad as you do?' Christian replied, 'You have your warrant to protect you so you can answer him. But if I should speak to him as you do, he would break me, turn me before the mast and flog me, and if he did, it would be the death of us both, for I'm sure I'd take him in my arms and jump overboard with him.'

Christian resolved to jump ship that night. He lashed together two masts to form a makeshift raft, packed bread, fruit and pork in a clothes bag, took nails to use as barter and gave away his Tahitian souvenirs: his carved wooden figures, black pearls and drum made of sharkskin. He intended to slip from the side of the ship in the dark and float on this makeshift raft until local Polynesians in their canoes saw him. He'd bribe them with nails to take him to a shore, then make his way back to Tahiti.

His plan was thwarted. A volcano on the island of Tofua erupted as the *Bounty* passed in the dark. The crew gathered on deck to wonder as magma and flames spurted to the sky. They thought they were viewing the wrath of God. For Christian it was an obstacle to his escape from his tormentor.

He didn't sleep. He plotted with Matthew Quintal a Cornish seaman, and the gunner's mate John Mills. Quintal got the key to the arms store on the pretext that he needed a gun to shoot a shark that was following the ship. At dawn the three men burst into Bligh's cabin, said they'd kill him if he made a

noise, pushed him to his stomach, tied back his hands, hauled him out of bed, dragged him in his nightshirt to the mizzen mast, swore at him as he had sworn at them and warned they'd blow his brains out if he tried to resist.

Of the crew of forty-five men, twenty joined in or were implicated in the fracas of Christian's mutiny. Quintal and other armed men guarded the hatches and the officers' cabins. Christian held a musket to Bligh's head and shouted orders. He made the boatswain William Cole lower the ship's launch, then ordered him and eighteen other Bligh 'loyalists' into this open boat: John Smith Bligh's personal servant, John Fryer the master, William Elphinstone the master's mate, the gunner, the carpenter, the acting surgeon, three midshipmen, two quartermasters, the quartermaster's mate, the sailmaker, the master-at-arms, the cook, the butcher and David Nelson the gardener, who grieved to be separated from the 1114 breadfruit plants he'd potted and nurtured in Tahiti.

In a scene of violence, panic and surprise these men struggled to get supplies for survival into the boat: twine, canvas, sails, a twenty-eight-gallon cask of water. William Purcell took his tool chest, John Smith got a hundred and fifty pounds of bread, six bottles of wine, six quarts of rum, a quadrant-compass, Bligh's journals and commission and some of the ship's papers. Christian said he'd kill him if he touched any of Bligh's collection over fifteen years of maps, astronomical observations, surveys and drawings, or his sextant or time-keeper.

Christian then told Bligh, 'Your officers and men are in the boat and you must go with them. Attempt the least resistance

and you'll instantly be put to death.' Then he shoved him down the Jacob's ladder at gunpoint.

The launch measured twenty-three feet long, six feet nine inches wide and two feet nine inches deep. The men's weight sank it to the surface of the sea. The mutineers veered it astern with a rope, chucked in sixteen bits of pork and four cutlasses, jeered at Bligh and his crew, then cast them adrift on the open ocean.

3

Aviva wrapped Rosie's top in layers of tissue paper. It would take up little space in my Eagle Creek bag. She was interested in my intention to visit Pitcairn Island, for she'd seen three film versions of *Mutiny on the Bounty* and once glimpsed Marlon Brando in a Florida store.

I told her of the island's remoteness, how difficult it was to get there because ships seldom stopped and it had no airstrip, how its small population was descended from Fletcher Christian and other *Bounty* mutineers and the Tahitian women they'd abducted, how some of the men who now lived there had committed serious sexual crimes, how there was no bank, shops, cars, television, hotel or anything much except coconut palms and the pounding surf.

She asked if my husband was travelling with me. There was a pause. I told her I wanted to write a book about Pitcairn. She asked if I'd had anything published. Again I deflected. I talked of my interest in tangential associations, such as how a woman sneezing in China can cause a snowstorm in Alaska,

or how Fletcher Christian taking a coconut could transform my life. I expounded on the ramifications of a chance event and how these affected a narrative. Reality, I told her, was not stable but full of disorder, confusion, and change. She looked apprehensively for the next customer, said she hoped I'd enjoy my adventure and that Rosie would like her lovely blouse and that she thought Mel Gibson much better as Fletcher Christian than Marlon Brando, because Brando wasn't quite a man, if I knew what she meant.

I took my present home on the 23 bus.

Verity liked the top but couldn't envisage when Rosie would wear it on Pitcairn. I said perhaps at Christmas or for church on Saturdays. Saturday became the Pitcairners' Sabbath after they were converted to Seventh Day Adventism by American evangelists from the Napa Valley in 1876. 'You have', Verity said, 'a confused idea of the journey you hope to make.'

I agreed. She boiled spaghetti and chopped broccoli and I spoke of a fractured world. I said that to go on a real journey was to face danger and surprise, and that only in the virtual worlds to which we now retreated was a false security assured. Verity looked uncomfortable. Some people who have descriptive names inform life's narrative with them. Among the *Bounty* crew Robert Lamb was the butcher. In my quest for flexible flights to the southern hemisphere I was being advised by Harold Wing. That Verity's second name was Lord, perhaps influenced her to deal in certainties. She kept a crucifix in her trinket box and found consolation for all horror in the liturgy of the Catholic Church.

I tried to be lighter. Didn't she find it strange, I asked, the language Fletcher Christian used to William Purcell the carpenter, about his relationship with William Bligh – when he said if Bligh flogged him he'd take him in his arms and jump overboard with him. Didn't she find that a disturbing sexual image, a fantasy of fatal bonding? It wasn't that he'd shoot Bligh, shove him in the sea, then sail off with the ship: he'd take him in his arms, jump overboard with him and hold him until the tide overwhelmed them both. To me, I said, it sounded like a lovers' tragedy not a mutineer's triumph.

Verity grated the Parmesan and said she wished I'd talk about something else. I persisted. Did she not think it probable, I asked, that Bligh buggered Christian nightly and that was what the coconut business was all about: sado-masochistic sex?

I knew she was worse than irritated because the bridge of her nose had gone white. I said that a triviality was like a pinprick spy hole into chaos, that a fire might smoulder for a long time, then a chance puff of wind would make it rage, that I thought the tattoos on Christian's arse and heart were for Bligh, that it was wrong of Bligh to call him a thief in front of the ship's crew, that on Tahiti, when Bligh wanted to be revered by Otoo the chief, he said Christian wasn't a friend – his friend, he said, was King George the Third.

'Please!' said Verity emphatically. So we talked of other things: how long the summer nights now were, and how swiftly the year had passed. Then she said she had something important to tell me and I felt a prescience, a foreboding. She said two days ago it had been her birthday and I'd forgotten

this, not even given her a card. That of itself, she said, was perhaps of no great importance but it seemed indicative of how estranged we'd become.

I apologised. As recompense, I asked if she'd like to go with me the following day to the National Maritime Museum to see the *Bounty* artefacts on display. I suggested we go by passenger ferry down the Thames from Millbank Pier, and when we returned I'd buy her lunch in the Oxo Tower. She made an exasperated noise, a sort of whistle and click of her teeth, and said she was meeting a friend.

Later in my room, as I rewrapped Rosie's blouse in its tissue paper, I mused on Verity's rebuke. Perhaps it was true that I'd become so immersed in scenes from the past and plans for the future that I'd lost my connection to the present. Verity was given to citing biblical exhortations about the sufficiency of the day. I put Rosie's blouse with my travel things and read a page of notes for my book:

Pitcairn Island is an isolated lump of craggy inhospitable rock 5 miles in diameter in the middle of the Pacific Ocean 2500 miles north-east of New Zealand at latitude 25° 0.4 mins south and longitude 30° 0.5 mins west. In 2004 it had a permanent population of 49 people, seven of whom were men charged under British law with rape and serious sexual abuse of underage girls. Other species include unnumbered rats, mice, feral cats, wild fowl, land crabs, hawks, petrels, noddy, booby and bosum birds. There are short-tailed albatrosses, cahows and dark-rumped petrels, humpback and blue whales, green sea and loggerhead turtles and bright-coloured parrot fish. There is one giant turtle called Mr, or perhaps Mrs, Turpen. Two such turtles were brought from the Galapagos Islands in 1955 but one was shot by a boy, as was a lone baby seal that tried sunning

itself on the shore. The rocks round Pitcairn have not been colonised by seals.

A phone call from mother interrupted my efforts: her usual despairing lament. A phantom vandal with a key to her house had scratched the furniture and torn the lampshades. This phantom visited nightly. Sometimes she – for the culprit was a woman – did useful things like regrouting the bathroom tiles or changing the light bulbs, but mostly she destroyed. She smeared woodstain on the Davenport, tarnished the silver, picked holes in the silk rugs and stole knickers and scarves. I enquired why anyone should want to do such pointless things. Ask her, was my mother's reply.

I supposed that many of those on the *Bounty* had sailed to the South Seas to escape the exigencies of home: debts, disaffected wives and girlfriends, paranoid mothers, failures and disappointments.

In bed that night Verity turned her back, so letting me know we were not to be entwined in sleep or the familiarity of what I'd thought to be love. I took her to be saying: Go your way, make your stupid journey and leave me free to live my life.

I lay awake and thought about forgetfulness. If I went away I'd forget Verity. She'd shift to a recess of my mind, a trace element, like most of the books I'd ever read, like most of the lovers I'd ever had, a residual memory, a vague disquiet. Things had become distant between us, so why should I stay? I thought of my mother's insane forgetfulness, confusion and strange inventions. And then I remembered with pain a night of Verity's face so close to mine on the pillow, our kisses like

cool clear water, our whispered caresses, the call of barn owls in the moonlight, but not the owls in the barn at Mill Cottage – another barn another pillow. I felt regretful about separating from her and spooned her body to me in an echo of our familiar loving ways.

The ferry to Greenwich from Bankside was a trippers' bus, a soulless glass-encased catamaran. A guide gave a worn-out commentary: 'To your left Christopher Wren's monument shaped like a candle. To your right HMS *Belfast*. That's the Anchor public house. That's the Globe Theatre.' I wished Verity were with me and that we'd packed egg sandwiches and a Thermos of tea.

There was one glass case of *Bounty* artefacts on show at the Maritime Museum. The model of the ship was small but exact. It showed the complex rigging, Bligh's cabin, the ventilation grilles for the breadfruit plants and the windows to give them light. I saw the relative smallness of the open launch in which Bligh made his journey from Tofua to Timor, without charts, across the great South Sea.

There was a polished coconut shell engraved by him with 'the cup I eat my miserable allowance out of. 28 April 1789'. There was the tiny horn beaker with which he rationed drinking water for each man three times a day, one of the bullets he used to weigh their morsels of bread, his clay pipe, his little silver corkscrew, magnifying glass and reading glass. There was a facsimile of Robert Dodd's 1790 painting of 'The mutineers turning Lieutenant Bligh and part of the officers and crew adrift from His Majesty's ship the *Bounty*', and an

engraving of Bligh by John Condé, done in 1792 from a portrait by John Russell. It showed a feminine face with Cupid's bow lips, bright eyes and an intelligent brow – I wondered if it was a fusspot face and if cruelty was discernible.

I pondered the gap between the souvenirs of the museum and the violence of the ocean, between description and the thing itself, between a frozen portrait and a living face and between life and its reflection in glass.

4

Bligh, when he sailed from England to Tahiti, left behind Elizabeth his toothy, plump, round-faced wife, and three daughters: Harriet, Mary, Betsy and a fourth, Fanny, on the way.

Fletcher Christian was twenty-three, ten years younger than Bligh and unmarried. He was five feet nine, with dark skin and hair, muscled arms and bow legs. He sweated a lot, had a sticky handshake and liked to show off – turning somersaults, lifting heavy things and balancing a gun on the palm of his hand.

Born in Cockermouth in Cumberland, a market town with mills and coalmines, fertile valleys and wooded hills, he was the fifth and last surviving child. Fletcher was his maternal grandmother's family name. When he was three his father died. His mother paid for her elder sons to read law and medicine at Cambridge but got into debt, and by 1780, when she was thirty-eight, owed £6500. To avoid the debtors' gaol she moved to the port of Douglas on the Isle of Man. Bligh was living there, back from a four-year voyage of exploration to the

South Seas as Captain Cook's sailing master on HMS *Resolution*. He'd seen Cook murdered and hacked to pieces in Kealakekua Bay in Hawaii by hostile islanders – a murder that made him aggressively vigilant in his own command.

Without money for an education, Fletcher Christian joined the navy aged seventeen. He liked naval life. 'It is very easy to make one's self beloved and respected on board ship,' he wrote to his brother Charles. 'One has only to be always ready to obey one's superior officers and to be kind to the common man.' On a two-year voyage to India, on the merchant ship HMS *Eurydice*, he was promoted to acting lieutenant and watch leader. In 1785 he wrote to Bligh asking if he'd take him as midshipman on a voyage Bligh was to captain to the West Indies. Bligh had his full complement of men so turned him down. Christian persisted – said he'd work for no pay and wanted only to learn his profession from a navigator as respected as Bligh.

They made two voyages together before the catastrophe of the *Bounty*. Christian became Bligh's protégé, favoured and tutored by him. He dined with him on board ship, was a guest at his house and a family friend. Bligh asked to have him as his midshipman on the *Bounty*. Christian held him in intense regard. He described him as 'very passionate'. Bligh was his surrogate father, his role model.

Something happened to warp his respect and good feelings. Charles, when he heard of the mutiny, thought only extreme provocation could have made Fletcher act so out of character. He said he was 'slow to be moved'. He wondered if it was the stress of proximity: