PAUL THEROUX

YARD SALE

As things turned out, Floyd had no choice but to spend the summer with me in East Sandwich. To return home to find his parents divorced was awkward; but to learn that they had already held their yard sale was distinctly shaming. I had been there and seen my sister's ghastly jollity as she disposed of her old Hoover and shower curtains and the chair she had abandoned caning; Floyd senior, with a kind of hostile generosity, turned the whole affair into a potlatch ceremony by bestowing his power tools on his next-door neighbor and clowning among his junk with the word 'freebie.' 'Aunt Freddy can have my life jacket,' he crowed. 'I'm not your aunt,' I said, but I thanked him for it and sent it via the local church to Bangladesh, where I hoped it would arrive before the monsoon hit Chittagong. After the yard sale, they made themselves scarce – Floyd senior to his Boston apartment and his flight attendant, my sister to the verge of a nervous breakdown in Cuttyhunk. I was glad to be deputized to look after little Floyd, and I knew how relieved he would be, after two years in the Peace Corps in Western Samoa, to have some home cooking and the sympathetic ear of his favorite aunt. He, too, would be burdened and looking for buyers.

At Hyannis Airport, I expected a waif, an orphan of sorts, with a battered suitcase and a heavy heart. But Floyd was all smiles as he peered out of the fuselage, and when the steps were lowered and he was on them, the little plane actually rocked to and fro: Floyd had gained seventy-five pounds. A Henry Moore muppet of raw certainty, he was dark, with hair like varnished kapok and teeth gleaming like Chiclets. He wore an enormous shirt printed with bloated poppies, and the skirtlike sarong that Margaret Mead tells us is called a lava-lava. On his feet were single-thong flip-flops, which, when he kicked them off – as he did in the car, to sit cross-legged on the bucket seat – showed his toes to be growing in separate directions.

'Wuppertal,' he said, or words to that effect. There was about him a powerful aroma of coconut oil and a rankness of dead leaves and old blossoms.

'Greetings,' I said.

'That's what I just said.'

'And welcome home.'

'It doesn't seem like home anymore.'

We passed the colonial-style (rough-hewn logs, split-rail fence, mullion windows)

Puritan Funeral Home, Kopper Krafts, the pizza joints, and it occurred to me that this part of Route 132 had changed out of all recognition. I thought: Poor kid.

The foreknowledge that I would be led disloyally into loose talk about his father's flight attendant kept me silent about his parents' divorce. I asked him about Samoa; I was sure he was aching to be quizzed. This brought from him a snore of approval and a native word. I mentioned his sandals.

He said, 'My mother never wears sandals. She's always barefoot!'

I determined upon delicacy. 'It's been a hard year.'

'She says the craziest things sometimes.'

'Nerves.'

Here was the Hyannis Drive-In Movie. I was going to point out to him that while he had been away, they had started holding drive-in church services on Sunday mornings – an odd contrast to Burt Reynolds in the evenings, the sacred and the profane in the same amphitheatre. But Floyd was talking about his father.

'He's amazing, and what a sailor! I've known him to go out in a force-nine gale. He's completely reckless.'

Aren't the young downright? I thought. I did not say anything about the life jacket his old man had given me; I was sure he had done it out of malice, knowing full well that what I had really coveted was the dry pinewood sink lost in the potlatch.

'Floyd,' I said, with a shrill note of urgency in my voice – I was frantic to drag him off the topic I knew would lead him to his parents' fractured marriage – 'what about Samoa?'

'Sah-moa,' he said, moving his mouth like a chorister as he corrected my pronunciation. So we have an emphatic stammer on the first syllable, do we? I can take any amount of well-intentioned pedantry, but I draw the line at condescension from someone I have laboriously diapered. It was so difficult for me to mimic this unsayable word that I countered with 'And yet, I wonder how many of them would get Haverhill right?'

Floyd did not move from his Buddha posture. 'Actually, he's wicked right-wing, and very moralistic about things. I mean, deep down. He hates change of any kind.'

'You're speaking of –?'

‘My father.’

Your psychiatrists say grief is a great occasion for rationalizing. Still, the Floyd senior I knew was indiscernible through this coat of whitewash. He was the very engine of change. Though my sentence was fully framed, I didn’t say to his distracted son, That is a side of your father I have not been privileged to observe.

‘Mother’s different.’

‘How so?’

‘Confident. Full of beans. Lots of savvy.’

And beside herself in Cuttyhunk. Perhaps we do invent the friends and even the parents we require, and yet I was not quite prepared for what Floyd said next.

‘My sister’s pretty incredible, too. I’ve always thought of myself as kind of athletic, but she can climb trees twice as fast as me.’

This was desperate: he had no sister. Floyd was an only child. I had an overwhelming desire to slap his face, as the hero does in B movies to bring the flannel-mouthed fool to his senses.

But he had become effusive. ‘My sister … my brother … my grandmother’ – inventing a fictitious family to make up for the one that had collapsed in his absence.

I said, ‘Floyd dear, you’re going to think your old auntie is horribly literal-minded, but I don’t recognize your family from anything you’ve said. Oh, sure, I suppose your father is conservative – the roué is so often a puritan underneath it all. And vice versa. Joseph Smith? The Mormon prophet? What was it, fifty wives? ‘When I see a pretty girl, I have to pray,’ he said. His prayers were answered! But listen, your mother’s had a dreadful time. And, um, you don’t actually have any brothers or sisters. Relax. I know we’re under a little strain, and absolutely bursting with Samoa, but –’

‘In Samoa,’ he said, mocking me with the half sneeze of its correct pronunciation, ‘it’s the custom to join a local family. You live with them. You’re one of them.’

‘Much as one would join the Elks around here?’

‘It’s wicked complicated.’

‘More Masonic – is that it?’

‘More Samoan. You get absorbed kind of. They prefer it that way. And they’re very

easygoing. I mean, there's no word for bastard in Samoan.'

'With so little traffic on the roads, there's probably no need for it. Sorry. I see your point. But isn't that taking the extended family a bit far? What about your parents?'

'He thatches roofs and she keeps chickens.'

'Edith and Floyd senior?'

'Oh, them' was all he said.

'But you've come home!'

'I don't know. Maybe I just want to find my feet.'

Was it his turn of phrase? I dropped my eyes and saw a spider clinging to his ankle. I said, 'Floyd, don't move – there's a creature on your foot.'

He pinched it lovingly. 'It's only a tattoo.'

That seemed worse than a live spider, which had the merit of being able to dance away. I told him this, adding, 'Am I being fastidious?'

'No, ethnocentric,' he said. 'My mother has a mango on her knee.'

'Not a banjo?' When I saw him wince, I said, 'Forgive me, Floyd. Do go on – I want to hear everything.'

'There's too much to tell.'

'I know the feeling.'

'I wouldn't mind a hamburger,' he said suddenly. 'I'm starving.'

Instead of telling him I had cassoulet waiting for him in East Sandwich, I slowed down. It is the fat, not the thin, who are always famished; and he had not had a hamburger in two years. But the sight of fast food woke a memory in him. As he watched the disc of meat slide down a chute to be bunned, gift wrapped, and clamped into a small styrofoam valise, he treated me to a meticulous description of the method of cooking in Samoa. First, stones were heated, he said, then the hot stones buried in a hole. The uncooked food was wrapped in leaves and placed on the stones. More hot stones were piled on top. Before he got to the part where the food, stones, and leaves were disinterred, I said, 'I understand that's called labor intensive, but it doesn't sound terribly effective.'

He gave me an odd look and excused himself, taking his little valise of salad to the drinking fountain to wash it.

‘We always wash our food before we eat.’

I said, ‘Raccoons do that!’

It was meant as encouragement, but I could see I was not doing at all well.

Back at the house, Floyd dug a present out of his bag. You sat on it, this fiber mat. ‘One of your miracle fibers?’ I said. ‘Tell me more!’ But he fell silent. He demurred when I mentioned tennis, and at my suggestion of an afternoon of recreational shopping he grunted. He said, ‘We normally sleep in the afternoon.’ Again I was a bit startled by the plural pronoun and glanced around, half expecting to see another dusky islander. But no – Floyd’s was the brotherly folk ‘we’ of the native, affirming the cultural freemasonry of all Polynesia. And it had clearly got into his bones. He had acquired an almost catlike capacity for slumber. He lay for hours in the lawn hammock, swinging like a side of beef, and at sundown entered the house yawning and complaining of the cold. It was my turn to laugh: the thermometer on the deck showed eighty-one degrees.

‘I’ll bet you wish you were at Trader Vic’s,’ I said over the cassoulet, trying to avert my ethnocentric gaze as Floyd nibbled the beans he seized with his fingers. He turned my Provençal cuisine into a sort of astronaut’s pellet meal.

He belched hugely, and guessing that this was a ritual rumble of Samoan gratitude, I thanked him.

‘Ironic, isn’t it?’ I said. ‘You seem to have managed marvelously out there in the Pacific, taking life pretty much as you found it. And I can’t help thinking of Robert Louis Stevenson, who went to Samoa with his sofas, his tartans, his ottoman, and every bagpipe and ormolu clock from Edinburgh in his luggage.’

‘How do you know that?’ he asked.

‘Vassar,’ I said. ‘There wasn’t any need for Stevenson to join a Samoan family. Besides his wife and his stepson, there were his stepdaughter and her husband. His wife was a divorcée, but she was from California, which explains everything. Oh, he brought his aged mother out, too. She never stopped starching her bonnets, so they say.’

‘Tusitala,’ said Floyd.

‘Come again?’

‘That was his title. “Teller of tales.” He read his stories to the Samoans.’

‘I’d love to know what they made of “Weir of Hermiston.”’ It was clear from Floyd’s expression that he had never heard of the novel.

He said gamely, ‘I didn’t finish it.’

‘That’s not surprising – neither did Stevenson. Do much reading, Floyd?’

‘Not a lot. We don’t have electricity, and reading by candlelight is really tough.’

“‘Hermiston” was written by candlelight. In Samoa. It would be an act of the greatest homage to the author to read it that way.’

‘I figured it was pointless to read about Samoa if you live there.’

‘All the more reason to read it, since it’s set in eighteenth-century Scotland.’

‘And he was a palagi.’

‘Don’t be obscure, Floyd.’

‘A white man.’

Only in the sense that Pushkin was an octoroon and Othello a soul brother, I thought, but I resisted challenging Floyd. Indeed, his saturation in the culture had made him indifferent to the bizarre. I discovered this when I drew him out. What was the food like after it was shoveled from beneath the hot stones? On Floyd’s report it was uninspired: roots, leaves, and meat, sweated together in this subterranean sauna. What kind of meat? Oh, all kinds; and with the greatest casualness he let it drop that just a week before, he had eaten a flying fox.

‘On the wing?’ I asked.

‘They’re actually bats,’ he said. ‘But they call them –’

‘Do you mean to tell me that you have eaten a bat?’

‘You act as if it’s an endangered species,’ he said.

‘I should think Samoans are if that’s part of their diet.’

‘They’re not bad. But they cook them whole, so they always have a strange expression

on their faces when they're served.'

'Doesn't surprise me a bit. Turn up their noses, do they?'

'Sort of. You can see all their teeth. I mean, the bats'.'

'What a stitch!'

He smiled. 'You think that's interesting?'

'Floyd, it's matchless.'

Encouraged, he said, 'Get this – we use fish as fertilizer. Fish!'

'That's predictable enough,' I said, unimpressed. 'Not far from where you are now, simple folk put fresh fish on their vegetable gardens as fertilizer. Misguided? Maybe. Wasteful? Who knows? Such was the nature of subsistence farming on the Cape three hundred years ago. One thing, though – they knew how to preach a sermon. Your agriculturalist is so often a God-fearing man.'

This cued Floyd into an excursion on Samoan Christianity, which sounded to me thoroughly homespun and basic, full of a good-natured hypocrisy that took the place of tolerance.

I said, 'That would make them – what? Unitarians?'

Floyd belched again. I thanked him. He wiped his fingers on his shirtfront and said it was time for bed. He was not used to electric light: the glare was making him belch. 'Besides, we always go to bed at nine.'

The hammering some minutes later was Floyd rigging up the hammock in the spare room, where there was a perfectly serviceable double bed.

'We never do,' I called.

Floyd looked so dejected at breakfast, toying with his scrambled egg and sausage, that I asked him if it had gone cold. He shrugged. Everything was hunky-dory, he said in Samoan, and then translated it.

'What do you normally have for breakfast?'

'Taro.'

'Is it frightfully good for you?'

‘It’s a root,’ he said.

‘Imagine finding your roots in Samoa!’ Seeing him darken, I added, ‘Carry on, Floyd. I find it all fascinating. You’re my window on the world.’

But Floyd shut his mouth and lapsed into silence. Later in the morning, seeing him sitting cross-legged in the parlor, I was put in mind of one of those big lugubrious animals that look so homesick behind the bars of American zoos. I knew I had to get him out of the house.

It was a mistake to take him to the supermarket, but this is hindsight; I had no way of anticipating his new fear of traffic, his horror of crowds, or the chilblains he claimed he got from air conditioning. The acres of packaged foods depressed him, and his reaction to the fresh-fruit department was extraordinary.

‘One fifty-nine!’ he jeered. ‘In Samoa, you can get a dozen bananas for a penny. And look at that,’ he said, handling a whiskery coconut. ‘They want a buck for it!’

‘They’re not exactly in season here on the Cape, Floyd.’

‘I wouldn’t pay a dollar for one of those.’

‘I had no intention of doing so.’

‘They’re dangerous, coconuts,’ he mused. ‘They drop on your head. People have been known to be killed by them.’

‘Not in Barnstable County,’ I said, which was a pity, because I felt like aiming one at his head and calling it an act of God.

He hunched over a pyramid of oranges, examining them with distaste and saying that you could buy the whole lot for a quarter in a village market he knew somewhere in remote Savai’i. A tray of mangoes, each fruit the rich color of old meerschaum, had Floyd gasping with contempt: the label stuck to their skins said they were two dollars apiece, and he had never paid more than a nickel for one.

‘These cost two cents,’ he said, bruising a grapefruit with his thumb, ‘and they literally give these away,’ he went on, flinging a pineapple back onto its pile. But his disbelief was nothing compared to the disbelief of shoppers, who gawped at his lava-lava. Yet his indignation at the prices won these people over, and amid the crashing of carts I heard the odd shout of ‘Right on!’

Eventually I hauled him away, and past the canned lychees (‘They grow on trees in

China, Floyd!') I became competitive. 'What about split peas?' I said, leading him down the aisles. 'Scallops? Indian pudding? Dreft? Clorox? What do you pay for dog biscuits? Look, be reasonable. What you gain on mangoes, you lose on maple syrup!'

We left empty-handed. Driving back, I noticed that Floyd had become even gloomier. Perhaps he realized that it was going to be a long summer. I certainly did.

'Anything wrong, Floyd?'

He groaned. He put his head in his hands. 'Aunt Freddy, I think I've got culture shock.'

'Isn't that something you get at the other end? I mean, when the phones don't work in Nigeria or you find ants in the marmalade or the grass hut leaks?'

'Our huts never leak.'

'Of course not,' I said. 'And look, this is only a palagi talking, but I have the unmistakable feeling that you would be much happier among your own family, Floyd.'

We both knew which family. Mercifully, he was gone the next day, leaving nothing behind but the faint aroma of coconut oil in the hammock. He never asked where I got the price of the Hyannis– Apia airfare. He accepted it with a sort of extortionate Third Worlder's wink, saying, 'That's very Samoan of you, Aunt Freddy.' But I'll get it back. Fortunately, there are ways of raising money at short notice around here.