9. Farewell Taveuni

As we moved into the 1980s, Taveuni became more of a backwater to the rest of the nation. Only Adrian and Spencer clung to the lifestyles that had made the Tartes different. In a way, they were a complete enigma in the late-20th century. Adrian for his part was always innovative and progressive in his utilisation of the land resources and he continued to run a diverse and profitable plantation. Spencer struggled on with copra and cattle but the bottom fell out of those markets. They ruled their employees with a rod of iron and maintained an incongruous lifestyle with their houses and servants and boats and an aloofness from the other people of Taveuni. Of the Douglasses, only Eddie remained, withered and weak, but perky and jovial despite his abject poverty.

The progeny of most of the other planter families were indistinguishable from Fijians in that they were all dark skinned. Most followed the Fijian culture rather than their ancestor’s European lifestyle. The government institutions, and the stores and plantations that had been sold to local people were all run by Fijians and Indians. They had taken over the Country Club from which they had once been banned. Much of the land at Naselesele had been subdivided and bought by foreigners who settled there in their retirement or used them as holiday locations. Quite a few small tourist operations opened up for backpackers and scuba divers. Colonel Kolb sold his Vunivasa estate to other foreigners who tried a variety of crops, most of which failed. The infrastructure, roads, telephones, water and electricity remained hopelessly inadequate, as the government saw no priority to spending money on an island that no longer generated much revenue. This is somewhat surprising given that Ratu Sir Penaia Ganilau was the Tui Cakau and Governor-General and one of the most influential people in Fiji.

The Morris Hedstrom–Carpenter Group, who owned a considerable amount of land in the centre of the island, went in for cocoa and coffee on a large scale but these schemes eventually failed. Another, who bought Max McKenzie’s land at Nacogai, went in for macadamia nuts in a large way but this too failed. The only viable crops on Taveuni proved to be yaqona and dalo and growers who ventured into these crops made a reasonable profit. Yet most of the rich fertile land reverted to scrub and became unproductive. Taveuni was still called the Garden Isle but sadly it was a badly neglected garden whose beauty was due to the lushness of the growth of the indigenous plants.

In April 1981, Susie rang to say that Dad was very low. I immediately made plans to go to Taveuni and as soon as I got there I knew that the end was not far off. I arranged with Jacque to get a coffin ready and to be prepared to bring it up as soon as I gave the word. In the meantime, Vuki’s relations and Susie and I comforted him as best we could. He could only get relief when he sat up, so we
took turns in holding his head as he sat upright in his chair. He didn’t have the strength to hold his head up. As usual, the phones were out of order and it was some time before I could get in touch with Jeanine and explain the situation. By the time I did get her, it was too late and I knew she couldn’t get over in time for the burial.

By this time, Brian had become a marijuana addict. He grew it in secret places all over the plantation and smoked and ate it. Most of the time he was out of his mind. On the night before Dad passed on, he came over to the house and stood on the verandah outside Dad’s room crying out in a nonsensical way. He went on and on and refused to be silent or go away. I could see that he was completely out of his mind and when every effort to silence him failed I got Vuki’s brothers to stuff a rag into his mouth, bind his hands and feet and take him out in the garden.

Dad died early on Saturday morning. Jacque came up with the coffin and we had him lie in state on his porch which was beautifully decorated with mats and masi. Fijians and part-European groups came all day to present regu regu. This was received by Mika, Vuki’s eldest brother. Dad had apparently told Vuki that he did not wish to be buried in the family cemetery at Vatuwiri and that he wanted to lie closer to his home. So we had the men dig a hole in solid rock at the bottom of the garden. It was very difficult and it was noon before the hole was ready. A funeral service was conducted by the Anglican Vicar who came over from Savusavu. The Methodist Minister also conducted a service, as he had been asked to do so by Vuki. Finally, the Roman Catholic priest requested the opportunity to conduct a service in appreciation for all the help Dad had given to the Catholic parishioners on Taveuni. At the graveyard I gave the eulogy, as I felt I was the only one present who could speak fully on his life. It was emotionally difficult, for despite the problems we had had I did admire him for the fullness of his life and the many decent aspects of his character. He had given Jeanine and I a good start in life and for this I was grateful. Mahadeo spoke on behalf of the Indians and a chief from Vuna spoke for the Fijians.

There was a genuine sense of grief around the grave but, as Jacque said later, many of them were grieving not so much out of a sense of loss of someone they loved and respected but because the great benefactor was gone. There would be no more handouts of cash or cattle or other gifts. They were distressed because they could bleed him no more. I had released Brian early on the Saturday morning. He went back to his house and I thought no more about him. But he didn’t show up at all that day and it wasn’t until the following morning that I was told he had gone out in his car and disappeared. I felt obliged to find out what had happened to him but it was not until later in the day that word came in that his car was parked right up at the back of Waimaqera beyond Qaruwalu. I got a search party together and we went up to Qaruwalu and spent many hours
trying to trace him. We found a track and followed this up the mountainside and eventually found some discarded clothes. Further on we discovered a discarded bible and finally, after another hour of climbing up the mountain, we found him stark naked crying out in a maniacal way. He was not aggressive so we brought him down to the vehicles and took him back to his house. Susie refused to have anything to do with him so I just left him in his house.

Later that day I was told that he was trying to cut the half-inch galvanised water pipe with a cane knife. I went over to the house and there he was, stark naked, hacking at this galvanised pipe. It occurred to me that he was trying to cut off the water and that he may try to set the house on fire. I approached him and tried to reason with him. He went into the house and came back with a can of petrol. He poured it onto the gateposts and set the benzene alight. I stood cautiously in the yard and watched this. Then he came over to where I was standing and poured petrol in a circle around me and set it alight. He had a cane knife in his hand all this time and I thought it best not to intimidate him in any way, so I waited and allowed the petrol to burn itself out. In the meantime he went back to hacking at the galvanised pipe. I realised that there was nothing more I could do for him so I went back to the house and called the police. When I explained the circumstances to them, they decided to take him up to the hospital, so he was bundled into the police wagon and taken away.

The next day I went up to the hospital where he was being held. There were two doctors present and I had lengthy discussions with them both. One doctor wanted to have him committed to the mental hospital in Suva while the other refused to do so. Unless two doctors certify a person he cannot be committed. So he was held there for a number of days until he stabilised. He was then brought back to the house and behaved in a reasonably rational way. In the meantime, I went through the house and found his stash of marijuana and burnt it.

I’d also spent the time going through the documents in the office. There in the dirty, musty old office environment were documents that had been accumulating for over 60 years. I worked for days sorting them out. Some were in good condition while others had been eaten by insects. I selected those to be discarded and burnt them. I put the others into boxes and took them back to Suva.

Jeanine had arrived a day after the funeral and I went to Matei to pick her up and drive her to the old home. On the way, I told her everything that had happened and it was quite a relief to get it out of my system. Jeanine was naturally saddened that she couldn’t have been there at the end, or even at the funeral, but as we wandered around the grounds of the old house where we had
grown up, we rekindled many of the memories of those early years and came to an appreciation of all they had meant to us. We both knew that this was the end of a long association with our home and it was a deeply emotional time for us.

One evening, I arranged for all the labour to come to the house and they gathered on mats on the grounds. We drank yaqona and I tried to express to them my appreciation for the loyalty they had given to Dad during his lifetime. These were people who had been born on the place, the descendants of employers of my great-grandfather. It was as much theirs as ours and I felt a closeness to them that was akin to that felt by a family. I told them that although I no longer lived there, a part of me would always be there and that they and the time I had spent with them and their families would always be a part of me.

A few days later, Jeanine flew back to Melbourne and after I had finally cleared out the office and said my goodbyes, I too headed up the coast to the airport at Matei.

It was a bright sunny day as the plane flew down the spectacular western coast of Taveuni, and I gazed down on all the homes and settlements that had been part of my life. I was overwhelmed with memories and emotion. By the time we passed over Ura where Jacque and Richard and Sandra had shared our lives, tears were rolling down my cheeks. Then there was the magnificent spread of Waimaqera’s rich flats where row upon row of coconut trees stretched from the sea to the mountains, trees that had been planted by old James Valentine, Herbert Valentine, and Dad, and the elegant old homestead and its beautiful gardens that had been built by the missionaries so long ago. I thought of the pain and anguish, the love and fulfilment, the parties, the pleasures and the bitterness that had been part of it all.

We passed over Vatuwiri and I looked down upon the cemetery where so many Tarte bones lay. Then we were over the south cape and Taveuni began to fade into the distance.

My chest heaved with emotion and I wept unashamedly as I said goodbye to a place, a way of life, and a time in history that could never be recaptured.