

KAREN PALMER

HOW TO EAT A HUMAN HAND

BY THE TIME HE WASHED ASHORE, sun-seared and salt-whipped, the man's memory seemed to have been erased, his vision bombed by an unrelenting sun. There was no literacy to lose; he had never been able to read. Something about his slight stature, his open weeping when he was fished from the mass of Styrofoam that had carried him to shore, made him seem like Moses in the reeds. The mangled fingers of his right hand were bulbous with infection, forcing removal at the wrist during his first few hours back on land.

The 24-hour news cycle wasted no time theorizing his origins, baptizing him with a bankable name later attached to a platinum-priced survival school. His ancestry was debated while his vision cleared and trays of congealing hospital food brought his body back from skeletal. Telegenic experts told the nightly news hosts that data from a lung biopsy suggested he was a native of pristine highlands. Others insisted his toenail clipping told a different story. Attendants wondered at his pain tolerance, watching him make vigorous motions with his healing stump, almost as though twisting necks with his phantom grip.

Memories of his far-off island returned in dreams, although he admitted this to no one. First, visions of his father's farm, the rain pinging off the slanted tin roof, drenching spindly potato plants and a patch of coffee-studded shrubs. Mornings of wispy mist, afternoons of squinting against bright sun. A rotation of two grubby sweaters to combat evenings of bone-drilling damp. He resisted waking from rare dreams of riding the two-wheeler, remembering that delicious feeling of flying brought by standing on the back wheel hub, hugging his brother's scrawny shoulders as the dappled sunlight lent a disco effect to their rapid descents.

Memories of his migration to the island's only city caused night terrors, coating him in sweat. The snarling traffic, the mud roads, the menace of the thick dark made worse by shadows thrown from the few functional

streetlights. Even in his dreams there's just the single poster of Pacquiao and his raised fists hanging above the thin mattress in the rented room he shared with his brother. His brother a tech at the island's plastics factory, who'd helped get him on the midnight shift as a hot stamper. He takes it as a sign that his brother spends so much time in his dreams and wakes from these visits with damp cheeks.

His nightmares are scenes from marches and demonstrations at the factory, images of the slum boys turned security bots carrying firearms and heavy batons. In the dreams, as in life, he refuses to join these calls for better conditions yet is still somehow forced to watch those polished sticks land on the thin bones of his brother's back. The brothers wiped their bums with squares of the local news rag and took gleeful satisfaction in smearing the face of the thuggish high school dropout the island called Sir President. The leader's photos were always orchestrated so he could stand on the right, providing an unobstructed view of his blinding 14-karat earring while hiding machete scars on the other side of his neck. Even the article that announced the factory's opening carried a portrait of Sir President. And a small head-and-shoulders shot of The Pig, the wheeling-dealing pink-faced man who would one day pay the stamper, reborn and revered as a miraculous survivalist, to teach him how to stay alive.

The Pig appears in the first third of the Forbes 500 list, but the bean counters in insurance can still tell him what to do. They don't debate the merits of reopening a broken-down plastics factory on some sinking, tropical island overrun with dead-eyed cannibals and razor-back fish. They have no moral position on spending a little on graft to save a lot on gratuities. Pie charts on profit projections and political stability are not their thing. But to return to that god-forsaken place, snip a ribbon at the rebuilt factory, and maybe step out to haggle over a whittled figure of a wild man with a penis the size of a baseball bat? Well then. Then they'll consider the likelihood of The Pig's blond, balding forehead catching the eye of a sniper, the possibility that the heft of his frame will draw the attention of an entrepreneurial kidnapper. They'll sing a chorus of risk, threaten to block travel and deny any claims unless there's paperwork to confirm his mastery of survival skills.

There will be no cushy weekend of Boy Scout school, not for The Pig. No, he'll go all in for a jungle course: a series of nightly sessions with the

infamous survivalist in the woods on the city's east side, followed by a trip to the island itself. A GPS monitor will be mandatory, but mobile devices unusable. Malaria pills will be encouraged, but understood to be for pussies. The waiver form will be nine pages, single-spaced. He won't read it.

To The Pig, the survival instructor looks like the picture of the species *Homo neanderthalensis*: short, dark, barrel-chested, solid with muscles, dense with a springy coat of hair. Imported from the island via mysterious means. Down to only one hand, and no interest in sharing how that came to be.

He will start by teaching the familiar skills of a pioneer: how to build a fire; how to bring it to life with sticks or rocks; how to filter found water and spike it into potability with a dropper of bleach. The Pig will blaze through these lessons like he was born in a cave. The Pig will hike a mile, then two, then five. Weigh him down with supplies, he'll be challenged to tread water for an hour. The Pig will run these trials like he was raised by wolves, panting and howling in alpha glory, secretly wishing for more outward signs of trauma, more bruises to carry into the boardroom.

Privately, The Pig will refer to his instructor as the Noble Savage, assume he once lived off the bounty of a tropical paradise, communicated in a language akin to clicks and growls. He'll wager that once hair began to sprout in the instructor's damp places, he'd had to prove his proficiency in some spirited, potentially lethal test of manhood. Maybe lost his mitt in the process.

In a daze of dehydration and a wuss's cloud of DEET, The Pig will consider his own test—a single, solitary night on the island. In his weakest moments, he'll whisper his net worth as a mantra. The Pig has outsmarted hostile takeovers, forensic accountants and mutinies on the production floor. He's stared down hippies complaining about decreasing air quality and increasing fish die-off, and the pinkos who prattle on about worker rights and sweat shops and how we should all give a damn about the earth's limited resources. The corporate jungle has its own snakes and parasites. Those marked by the tread of his boots know who's king.

“What do you think of this country?” the instructor asks, standing at the summit of a rocky hill surrounded by bruised skies and strangely electric air. As The Pig reaches the hill's apex, he can see the island's small capital city spill out in all directions. He can see all the way to the shore, to the faint remains of his own hulking plastics factory, barely visible through its shroud

of grey smog. From this height he can also see the trail of black effluent still leaking from it, following the same timeless trajectory of currents that, unbeknownst to The Pig, once carried away his instructor.

“What do I think?” The Pig echoes, mashing a mosquito on his forearm. “I love its loopholes.”

Their landing, in the leaching light of dusk, had been precarious, the helicopter juddering to a stop on the side of a steep hill covered in the eerie remains of coconut trees who’d lost their heads in the last typhoon. The Pig was mildly alarmed when the whirlybird lifted away without word about where they were to be retrieved, yet also exhausted enough to merely follow the instructor’s lead. Through the night, the instructor led them further up into the hills, The Pig scrambling over blackened swaths left by landslides and forest fires while the instructor strode with the confidence of a man in his own backyard.

What a shithole. The Pig looks down at another patch of island paradise covered in discarded single-use detergent packets, fluttering candy wrappers, split Coke bottles, greasy bags lined with shrimp cracker crumbs and a lonely, bright yellow flipflop. The official flower seems to be a sort of thin black plastic bag that blooms en masse throughout the lush countryside. He makes a mental note to add bin bags to the product line when the factory reopens.

He is still terrorized from crossing the muddy river, where he’d lost his footing in the push of the current and plunged under, only to surface snorting and sputtering, a flood of green water dripping from his nose. He was convinced the instructor had, inexplicably, been holding him under. “What the hell?” he’d barked, plucking a leech from his forehead. “Are you trying to kill me?” The instructor pointed to a mass of waterlogged diapers sliding stealthily away, claiming their weight was to blame for the feeling of attack. The Pig dry heaved, still feeling the ghostly grip of the shit catchers as the instructor slipped quietly into the trees, leaving him to face the night alone.

The Pig continued deeper into the hills. With a sharp rock, he banged open a coconut, grinning to himself as he slurped the sweet water inside. Hours later, he pumped his fist in triumph at trapping a woolly rat, only to leave it for the ants when his fire failed to catch. Scratching his own hindquarters and listening to the screeching seductions of tree-hole crickets scratching theirs keeps him awake most of the night, leaving little energy to celebrate

having survived. As the sun rose and the instructor came back into view, loping up the hill for a reunion at the river's edge, The Pig considered this test: the whole thing had been ... anticlimactic. Where were the island's cannibals, its razor-back fish, its legendary threats? Wasn't he owed an adventure?

The instructor stops again on the hillside above the city on the return hike. He raises his stump to point at a crop of mildew-stained apartment buildings planted too close together. "Me, I lived there." His arm shifts slightly to the right, to a block of stacked shipping containers, each one scalloped with laundry lines. "Workers there, eight in a box." His arm swings even further, aiming at a large red house swaddled in a rare patch of green. "For the factory boss."

Thunder rumbles in the distance as he moves his arm a final time. "Sir President," he says, gesturing to a faux English castle The Pig's bribes helped build. It looks like a spider, eight wings of bedrooms and bathing chambers shooting off from the bronze-topped main house. Its moat is rumoured to be rife with crocs, the woods allegedly stocked to Sir President's satisfaction with exotic imports. They ring a golf course where territorial peacocks are said to use their sharp beaks to coax confessions from tight-lipped dissidents.

The Pig scratches a bite on the back of his neck for the hundredth time, drawing blood, and a warning from his teacher about the importance of hygiene. "Here, dirt get on you, it no get off."

The first drops of rain begin to fall. The Pig forces his exhausted knees to bend, following the instructor as he scurries over rocks and skids through tall grass toward the capital. He's wrong, The Pig thinks. By afternoon, this entire experience will have been washed away with a bar of the Oberlin's lavender-scented soap. Then the real test begins: renegotiating the terms of the factory's reopening.

As his brother's anger with the factory had become more vocal, the survival instructor—then the night shift stamper—had stopped acknowledging their bond. The elder brother had gotten more insistent, harassing the white foreman about safety masks and earplugs, Xeroxing articles about record bonuses at the head office, about gifts received by Sir President in gratitude for his help and allegiance, rewards for an unprecedented profit margin. His brother's band of unionists spent their short lunch breaks delivering powerful

speeches, hoping to convince the other workers to take impromptu breaks, leave early, refuse to work until there was better pay and a full suite of safety gear. To the stamper, his brother's lack of loyalty brought shame. There were plenty of men sitting in the slums listless and bored, thievery the only path to feeding their women and children. One should be grateful for pay, for honest work. He felt blessed, despite the vampiric hour of his shifts, and had only praise for the factory.

"You are being shortsighted, little brother," his elder would chide. "You think the white man works without boots or helmets or things to protect his eyes and lungs? You think he works six days and leaves half his pay at the company store?"

But to the stamper, the factory was a kind of womb, blank and over-bright, cool and sterile, soothing with its constant drone of moulding machines. The whooshing of the extrusion blower was in sync with the rhythmic rushes of his own blood. He could at last afford cigarettes and cold beers. He bought pirated DVDs and fried chicken from the street vendors. He could rent a "privacy room" for a half hour for himself and the woman from the dancehall, that one wearing the powder blue halter top, not that there had been an opportunity. But he could, if the chance came. So he said nothing when one of the injector operators was taken from the floor with blood dripping from his cheek. He stood mute as a quality inspector was carried to the infirmary with a shard of glass protruding from her eye.

He was careful in his own work, alert despite the repetitiveness of stamping and shaping tubes of plastic under high heats and heavy weights. But distractions happen, especially on days when the wind howls, bending trees and scraping against roofs until they crumple or lift. On the night the typhoon hit, the whistle of racing wind blew loud enough to drown out the factory's usual hum.

It was the bang of a section of the rusted security fence smashing into the outer wall of the PVC reactor that startled him. In an instant his thumb and index finger were mashed beneath the plates of the stamper, a bone-crushing, breathtaking pain that magnified when the uncaring pneumatic device let up its usual pressure. He slid to the floor, halfway to unconsciousness, when the toxic vinyl chloride seeping from the damaged reactor ignited, then exploded, sending bits of the factory into the storm's path, and throwing his rag-doll form out into the sea.

There is food. The Pig stands taller as the smell reaches them. Grilled game meat, if he had to guess. His joints are about to collapse in protest at their overuse when this scent wafts out from a cluster of crumbling mud huts. A bed sheet tied between two spindly trees at the entrance to the workers' village lifts and spins in the growing storm. It has been hand-lettered with a long-winded salutation: "Welcome Sir Boss from Your Loyal Employees! Safety First, Praise the Lord!"

The Pig brightens, already imaging the buffet.

The instructor claps his remaining hand against his forearm and lets out a shout, triggering the emergence of a dozen men and a few women, all wearing red caps with The Pig's logo. Their stony looks remain granite-like as he politicks: "Hi there, nice to meet you. How you doing? I'm great, thanks for this. Nice to meet you. You too, great to see you." Despite the shrinking effects of the instructor's training, The Pig looks morbidly rotund beside men no rounder than a flagpole. One, walking with a crutch, his left leg bloated and reddened with the tell-tale scars of chemical burns, escorts The Pig to a covered courtyard, where he's given a towel, a white plastic chair and a cup of hot tea. He watches as the instructor embraces each of the men. Even after they pull apart, they stand forehead to forehead, exchanging grins and grunts.

The Pig tunes out the greetings, warming his hands against the teacup. The island's famed heat has disappeared in the wind. The thought—*how does the instructor know these men?*—cannot find grip among the shoals of his hunger.

An old man cuts through the crowd, leaning heavily on a stick. The irises of his rheumy eyes are ringed in blue. Unfolding a scrap of paper, he reads with significant effort: "Welcome Mr. Boss Man. We thank you for your visit today." His heavy accent obscures the words, his monotonous delivery further blurring The Pig's attention. "Once, we were farmers," he drones. "We had good rains. And strong soil. But your factory grew money and so we sent our sons." The Pig's eyelids begin to droop—he's been on the move for nearly two days.

He jolts awake at the sound of the instructor clearing his throat. Mercifully, the speech has finished but the rain has strengthened, falling in a heavy curtain beyond the courtyard's corrugated overhang. The cooking fire has been built up until it is roaring, until its heat licks The Pig's face. The instructor now wears the same red cap as the others. Until now, The Pig has

never wondered about the life his instructor led before he washed to shore.

“Big Boss,” the instructor says, gesturing to the crowd with his mangled arm. “One lesson more. From all of us.” Lightning flashes, catching the underbelly of dark clouds. “This the final lesson, Boss Man,” he says, pointing to the gummy flesh at his empty wrist. “How to eat a human hand.”

The Pig’s nose wrinkles in disgust. This place, with its cannibals and razor-fish. “*That’s* how you lost your hand? Someone *ate* it?”

“You did,” he says.

The rain intensifies, now pounding off the roof. The instructor moves his chair closer, until their knees touch, as the other men, still wearing The Pig’s name on their heads, draw a tight circle around them. The Pig, heart racing, eyes wild, scans their faces. His vacant stomach betrays him with a loud rumble.

“You do not start with the hand. Instead, start here,” the instructor says, slapping The Pig’s haunch. “The biggest parts. Take small bites, small-small bites. Somewhere no one will see.”

At the fire’s edge, a man begins sharpening a machete against a flat rock, the blade clacking heavily against the stone’s surface.

“It will hurt,” the instructor continues, “but not you. Too bad someone hurt for you to feed—at first you feel it. But the next bite: easier. The next one: pain forgotten.” His hand touches the back of The Pig’s leg, the bulk of his upper arm, pats the soft lump of his gut. “Beside, no matter how much you done eat, there always more here, here and over here. No problem.”

The Pig rocks his chair backward, into the surprisingly strong arms of the boy who served him tea. Two others help hold him in place. The Pig’s eyes roll around the scene. His brain, feeble with exhaustion, depleted by a lack of food, panics at the meagre options for escape. He could run, but where? And for how long? “Please,” The Pig begs. “I have money! I can give you money!”

The instructor drops from his chair, crouches in front of The Pig, his stump on one armrest, his arm on the other. “Soon, only skinny parts left. But you still hungry. That hand look good now. You smart enough now to pick the bones clean. It natural, but dangerous too! Only the sleepest man don’t know when somebody gnawing at his own hand.”

He lifts his stump, caresses The Pig’s cheek with it. The Pig thrashes beneath the hands holding him. The instructor is lost, momentarily, to the mesmerizing effects of the fire. “Only the sleepest man,” he repeats before turning back to the desperate scrambling of The Pig.

The tea boy now grabs The Pig's hand, flips it over and pins it painfully against the arm of the plastic chair, exposing his wrist. The fire's dancing shadows give him a terrifying face.

"You ate too!" The Pig squeals. "You all ate. Filled your plates at my factory!"

"No, Boss Man. We fed you," the instructor says, accepting the machete in his remaining hand. "But that belly never get full. We all got bite marks from you."

At the factory, the stamper's shifts had sometimes ended with him at the bay-side window, watching the rising sun illuminate three washer women setting up their day's work. They would step gingerly into the burbling waves, bend low and rake soiled clothes against the flat stones of the beach over and over again until the water foamed and the whites gleamed. One, wrapped every day in the same red cloth, kept her waist-length hair drawn back in a braid. She would begin by throwing cooling handfuls of water up onto her back and stand every few minutes, top drenched and clinging, to wring out her work. It was a gesture imprinted on his subconscious: hand over hand, gripping and squeezing as though twisting necks.

He thinks of those ablutions after the rain stops and the fire dies down, as he undertakes a palmer's march to the mouth of the bay. He keeps his fist clenched around a handful of ash, eventually transferring it to the bowl of his doffed ballcap to step lightly into a pirogue at the water's edge. As his paddle dips below the water's surface he can see a pattern in the neon dots and dashes of bioluminescence, see them blink and fade as he makes his way further out into the bay.

He waits in the rosy light of the rising day until the silhouette of the failed factory emerges from the gloom. Rubbing forefinger against thumb, the instructor slowly releases The Pig's remains. Alone and silent, he strains to track their downward trajectory. His damaged hand swirls in the navy blues of the dawn sea and wonders: will his brother still visit his dreams or move on now, appeased.