



Source: Ian Traynor, 'Turkey raises hopes of peace with Kurds', *Guardian Unlimited*, 24/07/07.

Tags: [storytelling](#), [reconciliation](#), [violence](#), [politics](#), [Papua New Guinea](#)

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She also has a reckless streak, this princess...Sometimes, deep into the night, she'll start experimenting with the length of her pauses, stretching them out as far as she imagines the king's patience will allow, hoping against hope that the heaviness of his gaze is fatigue, not desire.

*One fat ugly despot...two fat ugly despots...three fat ugly—*

'Right, now I'm going to fuck you, then my boys are going to fuck you, then we're going to slit your throat and dump your body by the side of the road.'

'No, please, my husband, my lord, I beg of you—this part of the story is very hard to tell but I will find the words. I promise you.'

'Go on then.'

And Scheherazade goes on. But there will be other pauses. She has friends in far away places and needs to dwell in their stories too.

Tonight she's thinking of things that her friend, the amateur ethnographer, told her about his 'field trip' to the island of Bougainville in Papua New Guinea...

By dusk, you are meant to have sorted out your accommodation for the night. The travel advisory notice on the embassy website is quite explicit about this: do not go out at night in Papua New Guinea. And the Lonely Planet Guidebook—normally so upbeat—reminds readers about the recent history of civil war in Bougainville: 'stay off the island unless you're travelling with a local person who knows exactly what they are doing—and, even then, think about it.'

The ethnographer has come to study the post-war reconciliation process and Peter—a man whom he has just met five minutes ago—is offering to be his guide: 'You can walk with me tonight if you like. I will take you to Moratona. People will be praying and singing all night and they will come forward to reconcile with their former enemies.' The ethnographer agrees, runs back to his room to put on some extra mosquito repellent, grabs his torch, tops up his water bottle, and they head off.

The road is easy enough at first but then they turn off onto what feels like an overgrown bush track. It's been raining hard in previous days and there are places where you simply have to slosh through water and mud up to your knees. There also seems to be a plague of frogs at this time: they stare vacantly when picked up by the light of the ethnographer's torch; they don't always deign to hop off before the next footfall.

The ethnographer is not sure why Peter insists on walking behind him, rather than leading from in front. At one point, he realises Peter is no longer there at all.

Stop. Panic. Slow down. Breathe. '*Peter, yu stap we nau?*' he asks in his faltering pidgin English. The batteries on his torch are running very low.

Finally a black shape moves out of the night, white teeth breaking into a smile: '*Yu no ken wori. Mi stap bilong changim batteries long torch bilong mi, tasol.*'

They start to walk side by side whenever the track allows. Peter asks about changes to the 'salary cap' imposed by the administrators of the National Rugby League Competition in Australia. Peter, it turns out, speaks excellent English. The ethnographer tries to sound knowledgeable and mentions that he lives near Leichhardt Oval ('you know—home of the Wests Tigers').

The ethnographer is also doing his best to explain why he has come to Bougainville: 'A few years ago, I started reading about the "crisis". I know that the Australian Government, before we granted PNG its independence, had forced the people on Bougainville to sell their land so that a British-Australian consortium could set up the largest open-cut copper mine in the world. I know that when the people of Bougainville rebelled and wanted to secede from PNG, we gave the PNG Defence Force everything they needed: training, guns, ammunition, mortars, shells, patrol boats, helicopter gun-ships...We advised the PNG Government to withdraw all services, to impose a total blockade on trade, media contacts and humanitarian relief and to wait until Bougainvillian people turned on each other. I know that 15,000 to 20,000 people died between 1989 and 1998, almost one in ten of the island's inhabitants. I guess I wanted to know if it really is possible for people to reconcile after something like that.'

Peter and the ethnographer walk on in silence. Another hour, perhaps an hour and a half later, Peter stops. He shines his torch to the left into a patch of jungle undergrowth.

'During the crisis, there was a group of *raskols* operating in this area. They were what we call "skin" BRA—young men who were supposed to be part of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army, who were meant to be protecting us from the PNG Defence Force—but who were really just criminals. They accused two old women from Moratona, the place where we are going, of being sorcerers and of working against them. They held the women captive for months. They stripped them naked, put snakes around their neck, made them dance and fondle each other. There was nothing these women could say to prove their innocence. The *raskols* raped them repeatedly and eventually hacked them to pieces with bush knives. This is where they dumped the bodies...The young men who did this are from my clan. I am their paramount chief. Tonight we will try to reconcile with the families of the women...You know, if you are really interested in the possibility of reconciliation between Bougainville and Australia, after what your government did to us, you should talk to your leaders. Next time, it would be better to bring them with you. *Yumi go nau.*'

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Paul Dwyer.