

Can the Islander help Monica and Ray understand the true penalty for their thoughtless destruction of coral and choose the better way in a post-capitalist world where money does not pay the bill?

Boomtown Atoll

by

Arthur H. Manners



I love searching the island’s tidepools when I’m on break. My wife says you find the best tech out on the sandflats, but she hasn’t worked here since she was a girl. Ocean currents are still changing all the time, as the last ice

shelves calve town-sized chunks into the ever-warming

waters. And plenty more cities have vanished beneath the waves in recent years.

I bagged two wave-weathered smartphones yesterday, and I'm hoping I can make it a streak. I work the morning beach-clearing shift, cleaning oil spills and clearing wreckage. Just a standard labor job, and the equatorial heat still lays me out sometimes. But it keeps me carbon negative, so it keeps food on the table.

On my breaks I make a little extra money foraging for whatever washes in from the flooded cities dotting the horizon.

Today I move around the headland to one of the more isolated beaches. The waters are too shallow for big loot, but the rusting archipelagos of glass and steel offshore shed plenty of things of value.

I'm searching for wearables. People say it's the microchips, but the islanders are really after the rare-earth metals. It takes a lot of neodymium and dysprosium to build a self-sustaining infrastructure. The technology has come a long way, but there's no getting around the

trouble of sourcing raw materials for wind turbines and electric vehicles, especially after large-scale mining was outlawed—made only worse when we had to stop trawling the deep oceans for trace deposits, lest our fleets be followed home by desperate pirates.

The coral on this side of the island is growing thick, its iridescence adding to the display of refracted sunbeams shimmering off the tropical lagoon. If I squint, I can glimpse the drowned city streets beneath—

The wind carries a cry from farther down the shore. I scan the water and spot a motorboat careening into the lagoon, bouncing over the coral and tearing off chunks. The boat spins out of control, its hull shredded, and lodges on a coral outcrop a hundred yards offshore. It immediately starts to sink.

The people inside wave and call for help.

I dash for my skiff and chug out to meet them, picking my way between the coral, sticking to the deeper waters outlined in a mental map I have built up over decades. I'm as worried as I am furious, and before I can even pull up

beside them, I'm yelling, "You better have a good excuse! Do you have any idea how many extra shifts you'll owe for that damage?"

A man and a woman scramble aboard, sunburned and dehydrated, and babbling in English. Off-islanders. From somewhere on the North American continent—but those nations were scattered in the wake of floods and storms and endless wildfires. I haven't heard such voices in a long time.

"Is this the way to the spaceport?" the man slurs through chapped lips.

I glare at him, then study the damage to the lagoon. A long streak of destruction runs from their boat out to the darker waters beyond the barrier reef. An ache slides down my chest and pits in my stomach.

All our efforts, all our pledges. We've begun to think that we're making real progress, healing the world, undoing all those wrongs. At least here, in our little island nation, we can enact real change. I forget that the rest of the world still exists, still struggles and consumes itself. I forget that

a single thoughtless action can undo so much of what we have achieved.

Our new world is a delicate leaf blown about in a hurricane.

“Did you come across the shallow sea?” I say through gritted teeth.

They don’t reply, sagging against the bottom of my skiff from heat exhaustion.

I draw a slow breath to ease some of my anger. “Where did you come from?”

I spare them enough attention to make sure they’re not in immediate danger. They look well enough, just disheveled. Though, absurdly, the man is wearing the tattered remains of a pre-Fall business suit.

He summons his strength and hauls himself into a seated position. “Is this the *way*”—he points over my shoulder, speaking in the slow exaggerated fashion of a Western tourist—“to the *spaceport*.”

He mimes a rocket launching, making jet engine noises.

The woman makes a pre-verbal noise of agreement, pointing vaguely at the sky.

I heave another long sigh. Mother Earth, deliver me from the deranged fancies of late capitalism. *Planet dying? No problem! Just abandon the entire world and start over. No need to change your behavior. Keep doing what you're doing somewhere else. Consume, discard. The universe is ripe for conspicuous consumption.*

“Even before the Fall, that was a rotten way to talk to people,” I say. “I’m not even from here and I’m offended.”

“Wh...what?”

“Sit back. You don’t want to fall in. I might not be able to fish you out.”

And you might cause even more damage with your thick skull.

I take us ashore and beckon them into the shade of the jungle canopy. “Drink. Slowly.”

They collapse and comply, and I make them eat a small amount of dried fruit. They revive in just a few minutes, sitting up and blinking as though surprised to find themselves here.

I watch them carefully, and once I’m sure they don’t need medical attention, I make a firm decision. “It’s a grave crime to destroy so many corals. The punishment is steep.”

They look at me wide-eyed.

“H-how steep?” the woman says.

“Now, now, no need to do anything rash. We can pay. We have money,” the man says, reaching into his jacket pocket. He fishes around, frowning. “Somewhere. Hold on.”

I can’t stand looking at them, so I walk back into the surf to survey the damage. I hate the thought of bringing yet

more suffering into the world, but I know what I must do. For the greater good.

The couple whisper fiercely to one another for a few minutes, then the woman staggers into the water. She is in her late twenties and, while she doesn't wear a suit, she does wear the frayed dignity of a Western one-percenter like a protective blanket.

"I think we got off on the wrong foot. I'm Monica, that's Ray." She looks at me with a mixture of fear and hope, shielding her eyes from the sun. "We're just trying to get to the spaceport."

Ray stands nearby, arms akimbo. "They're building ships, big ships. I saw it on the news... back when there was news. They're heading into orbit to start over. You gotta help us."

"I can't help you until you pay for the damage you've caused," I say.

"Oh, for crying out loud, it's coral!" Ray cries.

Monica waves Ray to be quiet.

“No, Monica. I’m done! The whole world is a smoking ruin, and this guy is worried about some stinking rocks in the sea.”

“It’s taken a hundred years for the people who own these islands to grow back their coral, after it was blasted by dynamite and bleached by acidic waters,” I say. “It’s symbolic of what they’re rebuilding. Of the care and attention it takes to rebuild, to not just tread water. And you’ve just destroyed their heritage all over again, without even noticing, so that you can get to some other place.”

They cringe, glancing at one another.

“Look, we’ll pay you. Whatever you want. Get your damn coral fixed. This oughta buy you plenty of bandaids or whatever.” Ray holds out a fistful of American dollars.

I don’t have the heart to tell him that his cash is worth more as recycled linen.

I turn back to the ocean. I don’t need the weight of punishing them on my shoulders. But while this place is my home now, I will always be a guest here. The specter

of who I used to be, not so different from Monica or Ray, will always loom over the world; I will always owe a debt.

“You’re obviously not a local. You’re stuck too, I bet? Look, you can come with us.” Monica points over the horizon. “We have connections. We know someone on the launch program. We can get you in!”

“Thanks, but I have a job here.”

Ray barely disguises a scoff. “It’s okay to say you got marooned. Everyone’s marooned. Stop the self-righteous act, huh?”

Monica steps in front of him, a long-suffering look in her eye. “Look, we really are sorry. Come with us. You know the way, right? I just know you do.”

“Yeah, I know the way,” I say darkly, thinking of the great columns of exhaust that blow this way daily, scarring the upper atmosphere with ice-encrusted toxins, as the world’s last billionaires make demented gambits to flee the planet.

“Come on, we need to get moving,” I say. “I need to think about what to do with you. If we stay here somebody else will find us. Then it’ll be out of my hands.”

I have already made up my mind. Their fate is sealed. But I can’t let them know that. Not yet.

“There must be some way we can return the favor. We really are sorry,” Monica pleads.

“Look, I’ll think about it, but we have to move.”

“Maybe we’ll just run and take our chances,” Ray says.

“Be my guest. These jungles are a maze.”

I walk into the jungle, and after a solid minute of silence I hear them crash into the underbrush, running to catch up. I grow quiet as we march along the coast, brooding over what I must do.

“Come on, at least settle this: you’re not from around here,” Monica says at last.

“Holland. You’re probably too young to remember, but many countries sank or burned at almost the same time.

They called us the First Fallen. Hundreds of millions of refugees wandering the planet looking for some place to settle, being turned away at every border. I've had a lot of practice at wandering."

Through the undergrowth and close-set trees, we glimpse buildings, roads, farmland. All of it new and clean, but also melded with the jungle, built into it rather than replacing it.

"What is this place? I expected huts and a few fishermen in sports jerseys," Ray mutters.

"In the old world, these people were at the bottom of the barrel. Every petition to the United Nations, ignored. Every plea for the biggest emitters to stop, shrugged off."

We crest a rise and I gesture to the expanse of rolling valleys draped in thick young rainforest. "None of this would have grown here before the climate shifted. Some places turn to deserts, some turn into this."

Ray hacks a hanging vine out of his way. "So, what, it's karma? The mean old superpowers got what they deserved?"

“Nobody deserves to lose everything. But justice is seldom painless. I’ve wandered the world long enough to know that you can only move forward by trying to see the upside, and by siding with people who are trying to do something, not just run away.”

“How can there be a damn upside to the entire world bursting into flames as it sinks into the ocean?” Ray mutters.

“Well, now everyone knows what it’s like to be displaced,” I say. “Maybe we have a chance to see each other more clearly.”

Something stirs in Monica’s gaze, but Ray blows a raspberry. “Sounds like two wrongs make a right to me. You’re talking about people, mister. Millions of people who could have been taken in as refugees.”

I almost ask what he’d have done if the situation had been reversed, but instead I say, “They tried. When the islands offered aid, on the condition of reparations for historic emissions, the Old West lashed out like a dying tiger.” I shrug. “So, the islanders get along without

anyone else. A closed resource cycle, optimized for stability and biodiversity instead of growth.”

“Sounds like a bunch of people deciding to be poor so they don’t have anything to lose.”

I hold up a finger. “Or literally paying people to stabilize the climate. Everyone lost their factories and refineries to the ocean, so it’s cheaper to forage and recycle. Fossil fuel distribution collapsed, so infrastructure relies on capturing the sun and the wind and the tides. There’s work for everyone. It’s a boomtown.” I glance at them pointedly. “And it’s founded on learning from past mistakes.”

Ray throws up his hands. “Okay, you made your point. How do we make it right? Work? I can work.” I see him eyeing the air-conditioned buildings in the distance.

But Monica shakes her head. “The coral. I’ll work on fixing the coral. *That’s* taking responsibility.”

I almost change my mind, but then she adds, “Then you’ll tell us where the spaceport is?”

They mistake my disappointment for indecision. Encouraged, Ray says, “Look, I worked in ESG investment. Bet you could use some help. Trading in junk and crabs makes for tight margins.”

There’s no way to tell him that this island is the least developed. That islands nearby glisten with cities clad in vertical farms, where my wife is a professor of Renewable Development. Instead, I draw a theatrical sigh. “Tempting, very tempting. But it’s too late. We’re here.”

We break out onto another beach. A dozen small boats bump against a jetty.

I tear a page from my notebook, sketch a map, and hand it to Monica. “Take a boat and head north-west for half a day. You’ll find your spaceport.”

They look at me, stunned.

“Our punishment is to get what we wanted in the first place?” Ray says.

I say nothing.

He pushes past me and heads for the boat. “So what the hell was all that? You made us think—whatever. Let’s get out of here.”

Monica lingers, pointing to another route I’d scribbled on the map. “What is this?”

I tap the paper. “The way back. If you happen to change your mind.”

Pity stirs in her gaze. “I don’t think we’ll... Sure. Thank you.”

I want to ask her not to thank me yet, but then she hurries after Ray. They both glance back at me occasionally, but before long they vanish over the horizon.

I expect it’ll hit them some time before dark; their punishment is that they don’t get to stay.

I stay there watching the ocean until well after noon. Eventually, my wife appears by my side. “You didn’t show for the rest of your shift. Thought I’d find you here.”

She notices the missing boat. “Again? Really?”

I shrugged. “They broke a hell of a lot of coral.”

“So, you take them to the orientation center and get them set up. They’d have had the damage paid off in a few months of extra duties.”

I shake my head. “It’s not enough. This place has something good, but it’s fragile, so fragile. Even a drop of poison from the old world puts it at risk.”

“Maybe so, but this is cruel and unusual punishment.”

“I thought the same thing, when it was you standing here, watching me disappear over that horizon.”

She wraps her arms around herself. “I was young. And angry. And anyway, you came back.”

“So will they, I think. At least one of them. There’s nothing like the sight of the spaceport: all those fences surrounding the launchpads, holding people back.”

I can’t go on, trapped in the eddies of memory: the endless slums lining the coast, the rocket exhaust

scorching lean-tos and blasting makeshift schools into the wash. The handful of privileged people riding a stairway to the stars, leaving the rest behind.

“That’s some tough love,” she says, laying her head on my shoulder.

I smile and take her hand. “Worked for me.”



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