

James Carmichael



Watching and Waiting

MATTHISON STOOD THERE AND WIGGLED HIS TOES, watching the sand cascade in mini rivulets between them. This was so relaxing. He wanted to wiggle his toes forever, but the problem would still be there when he looked up...then again, perhaps it wouldn't. Matthison crossed his fingers quietly, said a prayer and raised his head slowly, letting his eyes travel out over the sand and out onto the choppy agitated water, sparkling jaggedly in the late afternoon sun...

THE BOAT WAS STILL THERE,
AND THE HARD-JAWED OLD MAN STILL IN IT, WATCHING.

Matthison gritted his teeth and resisted the urge to jump up and down, instead he smiled at the old man as if the two of them were the best of friends. The hard-jawed old man, however, did not smile back. He never smiled back, just sat there in the boat with a nylon fishing line drifting lazily in the water, waiting. Somehow, even with the variable tint control of his sunglasses turned up to maximum, Matthison had this nasty suspicion that the fellow could see straight into his eyes. This was silly, as if this old geezer could know or do anything. Still, to settle his nerves, the vice president of *Vision Microprocessors*, Rex Matthison, reviewed the situation.

The local authorities had wondered about it at first, it was a strange place to set up business. The usual location would have been in some industrial zone, that's what the officials had been eager to show him. So, he duly toured a couple of spotless multi-storeyed glass and steel structures equipped with all the necessary amenities. He let them carry on and on about the advantages of this island's excellent infrastructure and its proud history in the informatics sector, and then, when it was just right, his face lit up with a sudden glorious revelation.

"I say, why don't we bring industry to the people?"

"Pardon me, sir?" The official kept smiling but couldn't quite grasp what this computer guru was driving at.

"Oh, forget about doing business the usual way! Forget about foreign companies isolated from the public in these industrial parks. It's about time that changed, how about *really* building this community? I want to look out of my office window and see one of your rum shops, a cricket field, or even a beach. How about that?"

"But, ah, we would have to consider the infrastructure, which may not be adequate." The official

took off his glasses and nervously cleaned them on his tie, he wasn't comfortable with novel ideas.

"Listen, forget that twentieth century mindset for a second. *Vision Microprocessors* isn't into heavy industry. We don't need a four-lane highway paved all the way to our front door. Here, take a look." Matthison whipped five RT-8 microprocessor chips out of his top pocket. "I could transport a thousand of these in your average shopping bag. Welcome to eco-compatible manufacture, folks, welcome to the new millennium."

That particular speech always did it. Everybody was so afraid to be seen as a relic of the twentieth century.

The ribbon cutting ceremony for *Vision Microprocessors* was a big bash, a gala event on the island's Atlantic east coast attended by the governor-general, a bevy of assorted dignitaries and captains of local industry. It was excellent strategy in several ways. The economic boom in the south-west of the island had definitely not trickled over to this eastern parish. The road network, so well maintained in most of the other parishes, was practically crumbling here, especially in the area they called the Scotland District. Something to do with land slippage, Matthison remembered reading. Whatever the reason, there wasn't even much cottage industry to talk about. Having a microprocessor manufacturing plant show up and provide at least fifty jobs (high-paying ones too) virtually assured the area's parliamentary representative of enough votes to last him into the next lifetime...

Matthison took his eyes off the old man and looked around at the magnificent cliffs, silhouetted against the electric blue sky. He remembered a scenery very much different, just about a year ago, sitting stiffly in a boardroom on the hundredth floor, watching antigravity hovercars whiz by just outside the window.

"Gentlemen, our 3000Mhz chip hasn't done well." The CEO always got to the point, stated the bald truth and didn't wait for a reaction, "We *can't* have another bad quarter, gentlemen, so here's what I propose. Upgrade the purity of the raw silicon. Rex, tell us how we can do that."

Matthison stepped forward, sweating profusely under his Armani suit, and started the presentation. The lights dimmed and a three dimensional map of the Caribbean slowly took shape in mid air. "Gentlemen, the main problem with our current raw silicon sources is that none of them yield above 20%. Our competitors have the same problem. Granite or volcanic sand doesn't measure up. However, sand derived from organic sources, such as coral, consistently yields 40% or more, this is due to..."

"So, where do we start looking?" The CEO again, getting to the point.

"There are several Pacific atolls with coral-derived sand, but the infrastructure is lousy. There are, however, two islands in the Caribbean region, Tobago and Barbados (Matthison pressed a button on his handset and the 3D map zoomed quickly to show two rather non-descript low-lying land masses). They look like good candidates."

"So what's the cultural angle?" Everybody in the room knew what the CEO really meant was "Any

local laws or customs to complicate doing business?"

"Well, in both cases, there is legislation against actually *owning* beaches. In Barbados, beach sand cannot be removed."

"You're kidding me, right?" The CEO sat up in his chair, incredulous.

"Afraid not...."

"What's the economic picture like?" The CEO was going for this one, you could see it in the crease lines on his forehead.

"2005 wasn't good for them, removing trade tariffs and opening up their economies pretty much screwed everything, but they're still surviving with tourism and offshore banking."

The CEO studied the map, the image of those two islands reflecting in his glasses, he chewed on his pen for a few seconds, then flicked a switch underneath the desk. The lights in the room came back to full strength and the map faded.

"GENTLEMEN, BRUSH UP ON YOUR CARIBBEAN CULTURE."

Actually, it was less complicated than anticipated. Tobago was a walkover, Barbados was a bit more tricky. The hardest part was explaining the micro-tunnelling devices. Why would a computer chip manufacturer need to go digging? One of the PR execs thought up a really good one: the sandy soil needed to be dredged down to bedrock to insert pylons before construction could start. The local bureaucrats bought it.

It was straightforward after that. Sand extraction proceeded at about 1.4 metric tonnes per week (any higher than that would produce detectible ground vibration). The processor chips were zipping off the production line on time and *under* budget. Environmental groups came snooping around and found that the plant's waste emissions were well below UNEP recommended environmental toxicity levels. Various charitable and sports organisations came cap in hand and *Vision Microprocessors* sponsored four cricket clubs and three football teams. Hey, to keep the island's beauty unspoiled, they were actually replacing sand being quarried out. It was synthetic stuff with not an atom of silicon in it, but you couldn't tell it from real Bajan sand unless you knew what tests to perform... that is, if you could get to it, since the extraction process was taking place about 20 feet below ground level. Everything was working out.

EVERYTHING EXCEPT THE HARD-JAWED OLD MAN.

Nobody but him fished here. Strong currents and turbulent waters made this part of the east coast unsuitable for swimming and the surfers did their thing further down the shore. Fishing boats, if there were any, usually anchored at least two miles out. That was why they selected this area, for its splendid isolation, and out of nowhere comes this old man every afternoon, casting his line out and waiting. Sometimes the dead of night would find him still there.

They photographed him and ran his image through every database, no match. He wasn't a Green Peace operative, an overhead satellite had photographed the interior of his boat down to the last

fish hook. No evidence of surveillance equipment. He was just an old fisherman, always chewing on something that made his jaw muscles stand out. This made no sense, and Matthison didn't like it. So today was the time to get to the bottom of this.

Looking directly at the old man, Matthison turned around slowly and whistled. With a whir of solar-powered engines, a mini hovercraft sailed across the sand dunes and came to rest where Matthison stood. The old man looked on dumbfounded as the hovercraft swirled over the sand and effortlessly glided onto the water.

"Good afternoon, caught any fish yet?"

"No."

"Oh, ain't that a shame. Tell me something, how long you've had this little boat?"

"Near fourteen years."

"How about exchanging it for this little baby? We've seen you fishing these last couple of months and there's definitely a need for a change in your routine. One of these hovercrafts equipped with an electronic fish finder could do..."

"Thanks, but don't worry."

"Hey, don't think of this as charity. We are all about giving back to the community."

"Very good fuh you." There was a certain finality about his words.

For the first time, Matthison was able to study this old man up close, hear his thick Bajan accent and see his rather threadbare clothes, sitting in a rather dilapidated boat. This old geezer was supposed to be a problem? What could this paranoid pensioner possibly do or know?

"Hey, tell me, how do you like our little outfit?"

"How I likes your outfit? I likes it as much as this crab!" And with that, the old man retrieved from the depths of his boat the stiff cadaver of a large crab and threw it into the hovercraft, startling Matthison in the process.

"What the hell!!!...wait a minute, but you said you didn't catch anything."

"You asked me if I caught any *fish*, I didn't, only dese land crabs."

Something the old man said made Matthison do a mental double-take. "Hey, you caught *land* crabs out here? But land crabs don't go in the ocean...."

"They do, if somet'ing chase dem out de sand."

"Well, ...they probably got confused or something...you know, came up and missed their hole."

"Boss man, land crabs *always* know where to find their hole, and any land crab does got more than one hole, and even a foolish land crab know de difference between water and land. I count at least 30 crabs comin' up through de seabed an' drownin'. T'irty crabs could be so foolish, all together?"

"Hey, damned if I know." Matthison gazed intently at the old man, "What do you think?"

"I t'ink de land crabs drownin' and de fish stayin' away from here, I never see dat yet." The old

man slowly turned his head and skewered Matthison with an unblinking stare, but said nothing more.

"Really? Well, we'll investigate that, and if you ever feel like visiting us, just pull the boat up and stroll on in!" Matthison was back to being chirpy. The hard-jawed old man was back to being silent.

Matthison wanted to say something else, but decided not to. He spoke into the boat's audio console and the craft turned around and headed for shore. Matthison smiled wryly to himself. An old pensioner sitting in a boat out there getting all worked up over crabs, out of touch with this millennium, a relic. He would talk to the PR boys about making some sort of donation to this old man, refurbish his house or something. This island needed more companies like *Vision Microprocessors*, to get with the new millennium. 🐼