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**I**t's amazing how much more comfortable I feel on this trip. Nothing like when my aunt and I flew to Ireland a couple of months ago and I was a total basket case. Not that I'd exactly call myself a seasoned traveler. That would be a huge overstatement. But as I snooze and read and basically just chill on the first leg of my latest journey with Sid, flying high over the Pacific, I think maybe I've evolved just a little.

"Listen to this, Maddie," says Sid. My aunt's been poring over a bunch of articles that an editorial assistant downloaded onto her laptop just before we left. "Instead of protecting the public and children from violence, it is the police who are committing some of the most heinous acts of violence imaginable."

"Huh?" I look up from a Margaret Mead book I'm reading, one that Sid recommended called *Growing Up in New Guinea*. "What?"

"It's from an article about human rights atrocities being committed in Papua New Guinea." She frowns as she removes her reading glasses. "It's really tragic. I had no idea."

"Is that going to be the focus of your article?" Sid and I are headed to Papua New Guinea, or PNG, which is less of a mouthful,

so she can find out how the country has changed since emerging from the Stone Age into the new millennium.

“I’m not totally sure. But I’d like to find out.” She taps her computer screen. “And listen to this quote, Maddie. ‘As a result of HIV/AIDS, Papua New Guinea could lose up to thirty-eight percent of its working population by the year 2020.’” She turns and stares at me. “Can you imagine how many people that would be?”

Actually, I can’t. Numbers have never been my strong suit. Still, I know that thirty-eight percent is a lot, and I suppose 2020 isn’t that far off, even if it sounds like another lifetime to me.

Then Sid spews some more statistics, telling me that although PNG is somewhat remote, its number of AIDS cases is far higher than any of its neighboring countries. She also explains how inadequate the country’s health-care and medical facilities are, and I’m starting to feel seriously concerned. In fact, I’m beginning to wonder why I agreed to come with Sid on this trip in the first place.

Okay, it’s not like I came along just for the fun of it. I mean, seeing a third-world country did sound exciting to me, but I realize we’re on something of a mission too. A mission to find Sid’s story—whatever it might be. Her boss, John Something-or-other, has a real soft spot for this country. Sid said he’s been concerned about the changes the culture has gone through since he was last there eons ago. As a result he pulled out all the stops and sent her to uncover some big story. Sid writes for one of the largest magazines in the world. The problem is, she’s not totally sure what that “big” story is going to be or if it’s even big at all. “But it’ll be an adventure,” she assured me when she invited me to join her.

Now I don't want to become overly critical of the country I'm about to visit, but hearing these sad reports of corrupt police and what seems like a hopeless AIDS epidemic, well, it just doesn't make Papua New Guinea sound terribly inviting. And it doesn't sound much like Margaret Mead's version of a rustic yet peaceful South Pacific culture. Of course, she wrote the book I'm reading about a hundred years ago, but according to my aunt, Mead's observations are still a good historical reference. Even so, I'm having a hard time staying focused on her quaint little tales now. I have to wonder what caused this country to go from a bunch of happy tribal, island people to a crime-ridden country that sounds like it's in serious peril. And I'm actually feeling pretty depressed about this whole trip right now.

"Oh, Maddie," says Sid, studying my face closely. "I'm sorry to have gone on and on about these things."

"That's okay," I tell her, forcing a little smile.

"No." She firmly closes her laptop and shakes her head. "I shouldn't have put all that on your shoulders."

"But I need to know what we're getting into." I sigh. "Even if it is pretty sad. I mean the facts are the facts, right?"

"But I hadn't meant to talk about business just yet."

"Why not?"

"Oh, just because." Sid gets a hard-to-read look on her face.

"But I thought I came on this trip to help you," I remind her, feeling like I've already failed, like maybe she's regretting her choice to bring me along, like she thinks I'm too young to deal with this. "I need to be aware of what's going on."

"True."

I feel the need to reassure her of my ability to handle this. “I’ll admit it’s kind of depressing. But it makes me curious too. I mean how does a place like New Guinea become like that? Margaret Mead’s book makes the country sound so untouched and remote, and the people seem to have this childlike innocence. Well, for the most part anyway. They also have some pretty strange ideas about a few things. But they seem very moral and proper, especially in regard to sex. Mead even calls them puritanical. What happened?”

“Things must’ve changed.”

“Well, I’d like to figure it out. I’d like to know what made their country change.”

“You’re sounding more and more like a journalist, Maddie.”

I smile at her and inwardly sigh with relief. “Thanks.”

“Just the same, I really didn’t want us to get buried in all this... not yet.”

“Why not?” I ask again, curious as to her sudden change of attitude. “I thought that’s what this trip was about.”

“As I told you, Maddie, this trip is also supposed to be your birthday present. I don’t want to see you all serious and gloomy on your birthday.”

I laugh. “You mean the birthday that will never be?” I’m well aware that we’ll be passing over the International Date Line during this trip. This will automatically kick me out of August 9, my twentieth birthday. As a result, August 9 will be erased from my life-experience calendar forever—the day that never was, at least for me. It’s kind of weird but kind of cool.

“Hey, someday you might thank me for skipping that day,” she points out. “Instead of being fifty in thirty years, you’ll only be forty-nine.”

“But I *want* to turn twenty! It sounds so much more sophisticated than nineteen. I mean, maybe I’ll make that missing birthday thing work for me when I’m really old,” I say for her benefit, “but for now I’m proclaiming myself to be twenty. Okay?”

“Not so fast, Maddie. You’re not twenty yet.”

“So you mean I have to wait until we actually cross the date line?” I glance at my watch, which is still on Pacific Daylight Time, and it says it’s 1:36 p.m. “When will that be anyway? The middle of the night?”

She just laughs and reopens her laptop, but she also has this slightly mysterious expression on her face. Like maybe she’s got a surprise up her sleeve. Perhaps a mini-birthday cake hidden back there with the flight attendants. Hopefully chocolate.

Anyway, I can’t be too bummed about the skipped date since my family and friends already celebrated my “unbirthday” before I left. My best friend, Katie, who is thankfully no longer engaged, threw a very cool surprise party for me just yesterday. Of course, they all gave me a bad time about having my birthday “erased” by the International Date Line, teasing me that I’d still be nineteen when I came back. After a while, I almost started to wonder.

Consequently, I did a little research of my own last night. I was curious as to why the world even needs an International Date Line in the first place. But it seems that if a traveler went west all the way around the world, journaling the days or marking them off the

calendar, that person would end up with one extra day by the time he got home. Now that seems a little crazy, but it's true. It has to do with clocks and time-zone changes and the globe spinning, and to be perfectly honest, it sort of messes with my mind a little.

Some of the passengers on this flight are pretty stoked because their final destination is Honolulu, Hawaii. The rest of us will remain on board this "direct flight" to Sydney, Australia. We're only stopping there so the plane can be refueled for the second leg of our journey. I already told Sid that I'd love to get off the plane just so I could brag to my friends that I'd been in Honolulu, even if only for a few minutes, but she said that would probably be impossible, due to security. Even so, I think I can still *say* I was in Honolulu, even if my feet never actually touched the ground. At least I've got a window seat on the left side of the plane, which, according to the flight attendant, should help me get a quick peek at Pearl Harbor right before we land and maybe even Diamond Head after we take off again. Then we'll fly all night and reach Sydney the morning of August 10. And August 9 will be permanently erased from my calendar. So weird.

After a while Margaret Mead puts me to sleep. When I wake up, I can hear the pilot announcing that we're only fifteen minutes from landing. I push up the vinyl window shade and look out in time to see amazingly blue water and some green and brown islands below. "It's so beautiful down there," I say longingly to Sid.

"Uh-huh." Her nose is still in her computer.

"The water is all these shades of blue," I tell her. "Sapphire, turquoise, aquamarine...and it's so clear I'm sure I can see the bottom of the ocean."

“Uh-huh,” she mutters again. Whatever she’s reading must be really interesting—probably depressing too.

I want to ask a flight attendant to point out Pearl Harbor, but they’re already getting buckled into their jump seats, preparing for the landing. So I just look and try to figure things out for myself. Too bad I didn’t think ahead to get a travel brochure or something. Well, if nothing else, I can say that what little I saw of Hawaii was really, truly beautiful. Maybe Papua New Guinea will be beautiful too.

It’s 1:48 p.m. when we touch down in Honolulu—Hawaii time, that is, which I understand is two hours earlier than Pacific Daylight Time. Still, I don’t readjust my watch yet. Why bother? I observe some of the other passengers standing up and cramming themselves into the narrow aisles as they pry pieces of luggage out of the overhead compartments. It’s actually kind of funny. Like, what’s the hurry? The doors aren’t even open yet. But they eagerly stand there with their bags and purses and briefcases and things, just waiting. It reminds me of our cows back home when it’s close to feeding time. They’ll simply line up and wait and wait. Sometimes they’ll wait a couple of hours. Finally the passengers begin slowly moving toward the exit. They still remind me of cows as they amble along. It’s all I can do to keep from mooing as they go past. Or maybe it’s just Hawaii envy. I really should grow up.

“You ready?” asks Sid suddenly. Then she closes her laptop and slips it into her briefcase.

“Ready for what?”

“To get off the plane.”

“Really?” I say hopefully. “We can get off?”



"Yes," she says. "Didn't you hear the flight attendant say that we can get off here if we want while they clean up for the next flight?"

"No." I look around and notice that a lot of passengers are remaining in their seats. But maybe they've set foot in Honolulu before.

"I guess you were asleep," she says as we stand up. "The layover is at least two hours." She stands and reaches for her carry-on. "Oh yeah, if we get off, we're supposed to remove our carry-on items too. It's a security thing."

So we both get our carry-on pieces and exit the plane. I have to admit it feels so great to stretch my legs, and at least now I can honestly say that I've really been in Honolulu, even if it's only the airport. Katie will be impressed.

"Hey, do you think I have time to find some postcards?" I ask. "Or do we have to stick around here, close to the plane?"

"I think you have time," she says. "Let's walk this way."

So we walk for what seems quite a ways through the terminal, going past lots of gates, and the next thing I know we've gone right past the security check too. "Aunt Sid," I say, "we've gone too far! Now we'll have to go back through security."

She laughs. "Not today, we won't."

"Huh?"

"Happy birthday, Maddie!" She unzips her carry-on and pulls out a slightly rumpled paper lei, then puts it around my neck and gives me a big hug. "Aloha, sweetie, and welcome to Honolulu!"

"What?"

"We're staying in Honolulu, Maddie."

"What about Papua New Guinea?" I ask with concern. And,

okay, this seems pretty weird, because I was beginning to dread going to our final destination, but now I'm suddenly worried that this is it—that we're not going any farther than Honolulu! As much as I want to see Hawaii, I don't want to miss going to New Guinea.

"Oh, don't worry," she tells me. "This is just a little layover. A birthday surprise for you. I didn't really want you to miss your birthday as we flew over the International Date Line."

"Really?"

She nods. "Yes. We have two days to do whatever we please in Honolulu. And then it's back on the plane and off to the other side of the planet." She smiles at me. "So you really do want to go to Papua New Guinea after all?"

"Of course!"

We collect our checked bags and get into a hotel limousine, which takes us to a very cool hotel right along Waikiki.

"Swanky," I say as we go into a very luxurious room that overlooks the beach.

"Swankier than the inn in Clifden?" she teases.

I mentally compare this place to our ocean-view digs in Ireland. "You know, they're both swanky in their own way."

She nods. "I'm glad you can appreciate a variety of cultures."

"I'm learning."

She tosses her bags onto one of the queen-size beds and stretches her arms. "Ah, this is just the kind of break I need right now."

"Man, am I glad you told me to pack a swimsuit," I tell her as I look out the window to see tall palm trees and white sand and miles and miles of varying shades of bright aqua blue water.

“Ready to hit the beach?” she says.

“Woo-hoo!”

We change and gather our beach stuff, then make a quick exodus to the seaside, where I splash around in the energetic waves, which are surprisingly warm and nothing like the chilly Pacific in Washington State. I even let a couple of friendly guys give me some tips on body surfing, which is way harder than it looks. And finally, feeling totally relaxed and happy, I flop onto a towel next to my aunt and soak up the last rays of afternoon sun.

I could so get used to this!