

Island of Souls

LIGHT WITHIN THE DARK



a novel

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Milan Ljubincic

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C A N A D A

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*For my beautiful parents Slavoljub and Luca,
my sisters Snezana and Tanya, my brother Steve,
and my global Soul family wherever you may be.
Thank you for your loving support and encouragement.*

Author's Note



From a very young age, I found myself asking some of life's greatest questions—Who am I? Why am I here? What is my meaningful contribution to this life? It led me down the path to becoming a psychologist, so I could understand humanity, the world, and our existence. But the answers didn't come quickly, and by no means easily. It was only in my early 30's that the mist had lifted and things started making sense. As my life path unfolded it became apparent to me that there exists a power far greater than each one of us; that synchronicity is real, and that every experience and encounter we have is just as it was meant to be.

The search for purpose and meaning is a very human journey. We must continuously be looking for ways to expand our knowledge, expand our conscious awareness, contribute in some sort of way, and recognize that our deeper purpose and meaning evolves over time. There may be struggles along the way, and the answers we seek will not always come when we ask for them. But they will show up eventually, and sometimes in ways we least expected, and only when we are ready to embrace their truth and teachings.

Throughout our human experience, we will feel both joy and despair in equal measure. The light exists, and so does the darkness. They each play a pivotal part in their own unique way. There will come a time when we must step into our fears to know our strengths and expand our spiritual awareness and evolution. In doing so, we must never lose sight of the light, even if the flame is small and a soft glow is all we see. When we choose to live from the *heart*, we have chosen to live in the *light*.

The interwoven psychological and spiritual insights in this allegorical tale are some of the guiding principles I have been blessed to receive, and have adopted into my own life journey. Written as a parable with a blend of metaphors, archetypal figures, sacred symbolism, and a twist of historical fiction, I now invite you to join me on a heart-warming adventure to the mysteriously enlightening Island of Souls.

Love, Light, & Blessings

Milan Ljubincic

Spring 2014

Contents



Map of Palmyra Atoll	<i>xiv</i>
1 Sailing to Palmyra Atoll	1
2 The Cave	4
3 Edmund Fanning.	15
4 Captain Sawle and the Miracle Tree	27
5 The Hut: A Link to the Past	38
6 The Atoll	46
7 Meeting the Gang	59
8 Klara and the Field of Butterflies	68
9 Camp Stories and Games	81
10 Kaula and the Shaman	87
11 Axè'ki	95
12 Life Refocus	103
13 Back to Betsy	117
14 The Scrolls.	129
15 Oneness: A Part of the Whole	147
16 Back to the Cave	157
17 The Big Reveal	164
18 A New Beginning	171
Acknowledgements	181
A Note from the Author.	182

*We sometimes need the darkness
to remind us of the light.*



“**I** think it’s about lunch time, wouldn’t you say, Blue?” Blue is my Australian cattle dog. I take him with me everywhere I go.

Pulling myself up from my seat, I raise my arms and stretch. I head up top to check our coordinates and Blue follows. We have been at sea for almost 28 days, with a couple days rest in Hawaii. The ship is a 38-foot catamaran, affectionately named Betsy. According to the navigation system, Blue and I are only sixty nautical miles from our final destination, a small atoll named Palmyra. The spinnaker has caught the wind, so I drop the main sail.

Autopilot appears to be right on course, so I turn to make my way down to the galley. As I step away from the wheel, a cold chill jogs down my spine, stopping me in my tracks. The breeze is warm and the sun is shining, so the chill catches me off guard. At my feet, a faint whimper from Blue. Something has unnerved the both of us. I scratch him between the ears and scan the sea for a minute or two. Nothing’s amiss. Maybe the solitude is making me jumpy. The constant quiet has put me out of sorts.

Blue and I recover from our sudden anxiety and head for the galley. I look at him and smile as he wags his tail.

As the feeling wears off, I can't help but notice how tense I'd been. Something really spooked me up there.

In the galley I put Blue's food bowl down for him and take a deep breath, trying to shake the last, lingering sense of foreboding. I reach to open the pantry, and am again overcome by a flutter of sensation. My stomach flips and tightens and my head feels as though it's about to float away from my body. If a patient described this to me, I'd say it was a panic attack, but I've never had a panic attack in my life. It's weird, almost as if my body is sending signals my mind can't understand.

I lean against the kitchen counter to gather my thoughts. I've never felt so uneasy. There's an overwhelming sense of urgency, but I can't put my finger on the reason for it. Almost as if something demands my immediate attention, but I have no idea what it is. It's like one of those nightmares where you awake drenched in sweat and panting—and you can't remember why. The kind that haunts you for a day or two. Learned behavior, I tell myself—a result of the usual nonstop schedule I maintain back home. Maybe I'm still adjusting to life at sea without back-to-back patient appointments and a laundry list of things to do. Maybe I'm just having trouble living without chaos and clutter. I take a few deep breaths and recover, again.

I open the pantry and pull out a loaf of bread, baked fresh the night before. As I turn to the small mini-fridge behind me, I feel the next surge. The fear I've been fighting takes me fully in its clutches. There is something more intense going on than vacationer's guilt. Elusive but severe, the slippery nature of this anxiety is taking its toll. The peace I've felt for the entire trip is all but gone,

replaced by a sense of being on the brink of catastrophe. But how? Why?

Lunch abandoned, I turn to take a look out the port side window. My eyes scan the horizon—a blue ocean against an even bluer sky. Moments ago, my GPS showed that we were still a ways out from Palmyra, but there's something tugging at me, insisting that I investigate whatever it is that might be causing this sudden disquiet.

My eyes move restlessly across the surface of the water. Then, I see it. There appears to be a reef, or maybe even land, there in the ocean. I edge closer, my forehead touching the glass, squinting hard in the direction of what seems to be some kind of land mass. I see it clearly now, it's a coral reef!

"How strange," I say aloud. "We shouldn't be anywhere near a reef."

I run to the wheel, disengage the autopilot, and swing the helm to lee to tack away from the reef. As I turn into the wind to slow down the vessel, I see the wind indicator snap away from the masthead. As I struggle to drop the now entangled spinnaker, the wind softens and Betsy pushes gently forwards across the ocean surface. *That was too close!* I double-check my GPS; it still shows Palmyra fifty miles away. I'll have to get this looked at when I return home.



As I narrowly avoid disaster in the equatorial North Pacific Ocean, you may be wondering how I got to be on a yacht, sailing to an uninhabited island a thousand miles from civilization. Let me reach back in time, one year earlier, to the moment this entire story began.

This isn't the first time I needed to escape the life I know. I've been on retreats here-and-there, hiked into the wildness alone, but nothing as extreme as this. Sure I have issues, but who doesn't right? To feel emotions is to be human they say, and I know that all too well.

For me it's the dark monster within, that feeling of anxiety that seems to surface its murky head. You know, the type your soul dredges up every so often to remind you there's no escaping it, no matter how much OM meditation you do.

On the surface it appeared I had the perfect life—a successful psychology career, a loving wife, a beautiful home and all the luxuries that come with living in Santa Monica. Beneath that rainbow however, there was no gold, just emptiness. I ended up with a failed marriage in which I lost not only my best friend, but also the life I'd known. The good life vanished, all of it, all except for Betsy, and my canine pal Blue.

“I don’t want to be married anymore,” Jill told me. “I don’t want this life.”

Jill and I were married for six years, but together since our first year at university. Every success and failure I experienced, I did so with her. Everything that mattered was attached to her somehow. And now it was floating away. The wind caught it when I wasn’t paying attention and it was drifting beyond my reach. The life we’d built, the dreams for our future, all gone.

She stood and explained to me all the reasons that she couldn’t stay. I only stared back at her and nodded my head. I wanted a good rebuttal—something that would convince her she was wrong. Fear and panic swelled in my belly. My skin burned hot and my head felt heavy. Any minute I knew my thoughts would spill out before her on the floor. I was crumbling, but still I couldn’t bring myself to speak up.

I wanted her and the life we had come to know. Just thinking of me without her made life feel empty. But I had no good debate. My lips were paralyzed and my expression stayed blank. I felt a deathblow to my guts. Every part of me ached, but to her I was only nodding in agreement because I couldn’t find my words. And so I let her go without putting up a fight.

I saw my very existence leave in a taxi that day. I felt real heartache—physically I felt it. My ribs squeezed my lungs and my blood vessels constricted. I was sure I could feel all of it. Then painful nostalgia swallowed me whole.

That wasn’t the first time someone walked away. My mother was never around. She walked out on dad when I was just a child, almost 6 years old. She walked out on all of us.

It doesn't take long to find my spot, an area that isn't inside the vegetation of the forest, but is close enough that a few towering coconut trees provide some shade. From here I can see Betsy and can keep an eye on her. I want to be sure she is safe even though there is no one on the atoll but me.

With coconut trees to protect me from the harsh Pacific sun and a clear view of my beloved, I drop my belongings and hastily build a modest campsite. I break into a hard sweat digging a fire pit and pitching my tent. The physical activity is refreshing. I feel alive. It clears my mind even more. Working with my hands instead of my mind is a welcome respite.

I work fast so I can get to the fun stuff, exploring the rest of the atoll. The island itself is only a little more than four and a half square miles. I don't imagine that I can get too lost on my exploits, which is a relief to me.

With the camp site ready, I set out with my backpack full of supplies I'll need for the day—plenty of drinking water for me and Blue, dried fruit, some protein bars, jerky, a compass, and an economy-sized bottle of sunscreen.

As a kid my grandma was always a stickler for sunscreen. I carried that with me into adulthood. I pop the cap off and take a deep breath. The smell of sunscreen and salt water overwhelms me. I can almost feel my grandmother beside me. I am eight years old again and on the beach over a long weekend.

As I start my hike, it occurs to me how very odd it is to be in a place uninhabited by humans. This island has never been occupied, which drew me to it. Now that I am here, I realize how strange it is to be alone. After years of

listening to the hardships and troubles of others, I take solace in the silence Palmyra offers.

This is exactly what I need.

I hike along the coastline and notice the sweet smell of *Scaevola*—the flowering plant that covers the island. I feel the damp air on my skin, and the drumming call of majestic frigate birds soaring above me on imposing wings. Off in the distance I notice red-footed boobies with electric blue beaks scattered along the shore. Blue stirs up trouble with the coconut crabs as we travel.

“Behave yourself, Blue,” I say. His enthusiasm for new places makes me smile.

I trek my way along the sandy shore and make it to the other side of the lagoon. While doing my research, I read something about war ships that used the atoll as a place of refuge during World War II. I imagine massive ships sneaking into the lagoons and hiding in the thick groves of the palm trees. It occurs to me that I am also seeking refuge on the island, but from a different kind of threat.

Blue is now bored with the sand and the lagoon. He is ready to get into the thick of the island. I leave the shoreline and start for the dense forest before me. My eager companion sees me heading for the tree line and races to join me. Together, we’re off to explore. I watch Blue’s tail wag and feel my heart beating along with it.

There is nothing that indicates another person has set foot on the soil before me. I know that there have been people here at one time—military personnel, other voyagers like myself, and researchers—but I don’t see any proof of that among the coconut and the towering, smooth-barked *Pisonia* trees that grow wild all over the island.

I walk without a destination, and spend the morning shaded by coconut palms as I meander along the turquoise lagoons, observing the splendor of the coral reef flats carpeting the horizon. As I ponder the reason for this uninhabited atoll, Blue disappears off in the distance.

“Blue!” I call after him. “Let’s go, Blue!”

I stop and wait for him to reappear. Nothing. I call out again. This time I am stern. I rarely have to call him twice. I can feel panic building beneath my rib cage. Along with Betsy, Blue is the most important companion I have—one of the few things I still have. I take off after him. I cannot handle another loss. I cannot lose Blue in this foreign place.

Be calm, Lucas. He’s just exploring. My thoughts bring little calm as my pulse pounds away throughout my body.

“Blue!” I holler into the trees as I trudge along at a near jog. My agitation increases and not just because Blue has gone missing. I come to an abrupt halt. A bristling sensation travels up my spine. Something is off; something is wrong. Suddenly, I hear barking off in the distance.

“Blue?” I yell.

I stop for a second and let out a breath. My chest loosens a bit and my thoughts slow down. The dread that was enveloping me starts to ease up some and I try to follow the sounds of Blue’s frantic barking. I continue to call out as I jog toward his howls. I know Blue well; I can tell he isn’t hurt. But he is making quite a fuss. He’s obviously come across something he feels needs my attention.

Blue’s barks grow louder and more intense as I trot further inland. Knowing I’m headed in the right direction, I quit calling his name to listen. I can tell that he is standing still, wherever he is. By the sound of his howls, Blue has to be close. I start to run, and then stop hard.

Before me is a cave. Blue is inside. I take a few steps forward without saying a word. I cannot see my noisy companion yet, but I know he is close.

“Quiet, Blue,” I order as I stand at the entrance of the cave.

My eyes trace the walls and ceiling of the stone chamber Blue has discovered. The place is beautiful. The walls are encased with an opal-like crystal—some mineral I’ve never seen before. The crystal collects every scintilla of light that enters the cave and twinkles against the dark that surrounds it. It’s mesmerizing.

I take several steps forward and feel the ground give way beneath me. My own shouts fill my ears as they bounce off the walls of the cave. My body feels weightless. Time is rushing by and barely moving simultaneously.

Everything is dark. I’m choking on my own heart as I blindly grab for any roots or a rock—anything that will stop me from falling deeper into whatever it is.

I’m going to die in here. This is it.

Finally, I slam to the ground. I must have stumbled into some kind of chasm. I feel something warm and damp on my face. I still can see nothing, but I know something is near me.

Am I blind? Am I conscious?

The warm, damp sensation moves to my left hand, then my right. The warmth fades and I hear something. It sounds like whining. I can hear, but I can’t see. I can feel earth beneath me, but I don’t know how far I’ve fallen or how to get out. Fear and darkness gulp me up. I feel claustrophobic within them—like I cannot escape.

I cannot collect myself enough to figure out what is going on. It’s too dark. I have no idea where I am now or how I am going to get back to the ground above.

Breathe, Lucas. Concentrate.

Slowly my eyes come into focus and begin to adjust. My head starts to come clear and I can see I'm in the exact same spot I was when I fell. That warm sensation is Blue's tongue on my skin. I didn't tumble down some hole at all. I must have passed out for a moment. Weird, I never have fainting spells.

I pull myself up to my feet and brush the floor of the cave off my clothes. Blue isn't paying attention to me anymore. He's staring into the cave, a guttural sound coming from deep inside his body. The hair on his neck is bristled. The muscles in his neck are tense.

"What is it, Blue?" I whisper as I put a hand between his shoulder blades. I feel his skin twitch under my palm.

"I think it's me," I hear echo from within the cave.

Again I nearly choke on my own heart. My breath is caught behind it. I suck in a gulp of air and swallow hard. All the blood in my body drains to my feet. It's balmy and warm even in the cave, but I feel a chilly breeze hit my exposed skin as I try to figure out what it is I just heard.

"I think I've startled the both of you," the voice says.



What in the hell is going on? I can't possibly be hallucinating from lack of social contact so early in my journey! It took Chuck Noland much longer than this to start talking to a volleyball.

"You can hear me, can't you?" I hear the voice say, and it seems to be getting either louder or nearer to me.

I can see nothing inside the cave save the sparkling of the minerals. I squint to find the owner of the voice and I clutch the knife hanging in its sheath from my belt. That is something my grandfather taught me. Never go anywhere without a good knife.

"Who's there?" I call into the cave. "I'm a—I'm armed," I stutter. I can hear my voice shake as it bounces in the cave.

"Hello there."

A man appears holding his hands in front of him to show me he isn't a threat. He's a little over six feet tall with drowsy hazel eyes and a round face that looks perpetually juvenile. I can tell he's well into his thirties despite the baby face. There are laugh lines at the corner of his tired eyes and I can see the permanent markings of his facial expressions etched into his forehead.

"I'm Edmund," he introduces himself and waits for me to speak. I just stand looking at him so he goes on. "I guess you just got in."

I stand for what feels like weeks as I try to figure out who this man is and what he's doing on Palmyra. He is obviously American; I can tell by his accent. I hadn't seen any indication that there could be anyone other than me on the island. The appearance of this Edmund is causing my brain to do flips in my skull. As far as I could see, there is only one part of the island that would allow for a boat to anchor—the west lagoon, in which Betsy is resting after her long trip. There is no way I could have missed another boat.

After a long pause I decide I had better find my voice again and ask. Standing shocked and mute is getting me nowhere.

"I'm sorry to be so direct," I finally say, "but who exactly are you?"

The man looks at me with an amused grin. He sees the knife I'm clutching and takes a step back. I quickly let go of the knife and go on.

"It's just, I thought I was the only one here."

The mysterious man that seemed to materialize out of nothing is Edmund Fanning. He fancies himself an explorer and his enthusiasm is something to behold. Everything he says, he does so with the zeal of a freshly-reaped convert. He is on fire for life the way evangelicals are on fire for the Holy Scripture. It seems the wear and tear of everyday life robs most of us of such enthusiasm by the time we hit our thirties, so Edmund's gusto is a bit foreign.

"I've been here for years now," Edmund explains as we exit the cave. I nod in response. "That's why you don't see a boat anywhere."

"I had no idea people lived here," I tell him as I observe a chunk of the mineral from the cave in his hands.

"It filters water," he explains, lifting the mineral to eye-level.

"Ah."

"And in response to your assumption, I don't think that many people know we're here," he says with a smile.

"We?" I ask.

"Yes, we — plural," he answers.

"There are more?"

"Oh, sure," Edmund chuckles. "Did you think I was a recluse?"

"I guess I didn't think that far into it." I glance around to see if I can spot sets of eyes hiding within the foliage around us. All of a sudden an intense sense of unease creeps into me. It is that same troubled feeling I got when I was in the galley of the catamaran earlier in the day. I can't help thinking about this stranger and his gang slinking around the island. I am beginning to wish Blue and I were alone.

"They're not here," Edmund assures me, obviously in response to my eyes scanning the forest.

"Oh, sure," I mutter.

"And if you're worried about being rampaged, robbed, or taken advantage of in any way, don't fret."

"I wasn't," I reply quickly.

"Really," he goes on. "Everyone here came for peace and quiet and nothing else. We all actually wound up here at different times and have formed a tight-knit community."

Again Edmund waits for my response, but I stand quietly trying to take it all in. I glance at him and down at Blue. I scan the island. My mouth curves into a frown and my eyes narrow. I hate it when wrenches are tossed into my pans. And Edmund seems to be a wrench.

“We don’t think of ourselves as owners of this place and we don’t see those coming to visit as trespassers.”

“I suppose that’s a good. . .”

“We aren’t pirates or thieves,” Edmund interrupts me. “We are just people looking for a fresh start and a new outlook on life.”

“Sounds familiar,” I say trying to soften my expression.

“Like everything on this island, we do not harm anything that is not out to harm us.”

“Okay then,” I mumble. “Nice to have met you I guess.”

I turn from Edmund to go about my day. Blue catches up to me and I let my hand fall to rest between his ears for a moment as we walk. I take a cleansing breath and try to gather myself. Edmund’s presence makes my shoulders tense and clutters my peacefulness. It almost offends me that he is here. I know he was here before I was, but I feel *he* is the intruder.

I’ve travelled all this way to get some peace, and here I am with some tourist group with their own baggage.

I stop and turn to face Edmund again. I will not let these people ruin my sabbatical. I will not let this stranger invade my time.

“So is there anywhere I can go that isn’t inhabited?”

“Sure,” Edmund answers.

“Could you tell me where?”

“I suppose. . .”

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A Note from the Author

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