

From Chapter 15: Displaced

I returned to the same spot on the planet that I had left a mere five months ago, but I returned from another time and another world where I had spent a lifetime. And I did not fit into the familiar world in England. It seemed as though I had been on a walk in space attached to a lifeline from the mother ship, and then been pulled back in to find myself on an alien spacecraft. The former, external reality of my time in Indonesia now existed only inside my head and would remain there forever, inaccessible to others. I could not prove that it had existed or still existed. My mind could not be plugged into a machine and the experience replayed with full sound, smell and emotion to an audience. Though they were tangible evidence, the notes, photographs and souvenirs, however interesting to others, were merely curious exhibits that neither had the power to recreate the environment I had lived in, nor evoke in others the exact and real feelings and emotions. And the ulcers, the last of which took six months to heal, were now out of the context they had belonged to, real yet inexplicable in the safe, sanitised surroundings in which I found myself. My mind was not settled. It was a weird feeling sensing that I had moved on, when no-one and nothing outside had changed.

In January 1978, I moved into new digs at 12 Ellingham Road in Shepherds Bush. It was a decent-sized bedsit at the rear of a terraced house, and afforded me the isolated and private habitat I needed in order to be effective at thinking, reflecting and developing my ideas during the long hours I liked to concentrate in order to find inspiration. I was at my most creative when I could shut the world out and maintain a constant focus on problems for hours on end, especially from late in the evening through to early in the morning. While an undergraduate I had at times studied all night and then appeared in lectures in a semi-comatose state.

It was to be a busy year, filled with a wide variety of social events and outings that exploited my privileged position as a resident of London. And there was a greater involvement in the affairs of the college. As well as field trips with the undergraduates, every Thursday in term time I Demonstrated from 11am to 1pm in Igneous Petrology and from 3pm to 5pm in Metamorphic Petrology, which earned me a grand total of £8.80 a week.

Dr Alex Grady arrived from Australia to begin a sabbatical from Flinders University in Adelaide, and spend a year at Chelsea College. He wanted to study the college's extensive collection of Timor rock specimens, and have discussions with members of the 'London School,' myself included. I quickly came to like Alex very much, reinforcing my appreciation of Australians that had begun on meeting Greg and Kim in Timor. Alex was a big, affable man with a thoughtful and thorough approach to his work, traits that I respected highly. Our relationship got off to a good start, and we went for a meal at the Mata Hari restaurant in Euston with Sarah and Alex's wife Jan.

Sarah had matured from a girlish student to a young businesswoman. Her clothes were sophisticated and her glorious head of hair was loosely permed and

Extract from *A Mountain to Climb on Timor* by Michael Earle

lightened to a honey-brown colour with streaks of lighter colour. We spent much time together in the first few weeks after my homecoming, either at my digs or going out to the cinema, the theatre or for dinner. We saw Clint Eastwood in *The Gauntlet*, the hilarious *Young Frankenstein*, *Star Wars*, Ridley Scott's star-studded movie *The Duellists*, and the one and only Billy Connolly in *Big Banana Feet*, as well as *Man and Superman* at the Savoy Theatre, and a Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Wild Oats* at the Piccadilly Theatre. However, from about the second week in February I saw Sarah less often, no more than once or twice a week, until I ended the relationship on 8th March just after I returned from a three-day field trip to Cornwall with Tony and a group of geology students from Utrecht University.

A specific reason did not emerge from the fog of my dissatisfaction with the current state of my life. Because of my trip to Timor I might have changed in some way, either permanently or temporarily. I think that the root of the problem lay in the delay in receiving my rock samples from Indonesia - it was three months since I had returned, and it was not clear whether they had left the docks in Jakarta or were somewhere on the high seas. My research could not continue without them. There could be several different explanations for my behaviour, but the result was that at a time of major distress I felt compelled to face the situation alone.

Three more months passed without confirmation as to the whereabouts of my samples and no one seemed able to expedite their transportation. I kept myself busy by delving into published research regarding the geology of the Indonesian region, as well as everything I could find about Timor itself – the language, the people, its history and geography. And I wrote rudimentary translations of key geological papers written in German, Dutch and French by going through the texts a word at a time with an appropriate dictionary.

It was a balmy summer that year and I spent several days sunbathing in Holland Park while the city was beset with a series of strikes. Rubbish piled up in the streets and the dead lay unburied. The extent of the disaffection was unprecedented, and the situation led up to the 'Winter of Discontent' in 1978-79 and the eventual fall of the incompetent Labour government in May the following year.

As if in concert with the mood of the country, I became increasingly discontented, a situation that led me back to the ways of my teenage years – only I was now twenty-five years old, going on twenty-six. Research took a back seat and my social life took precedence. I flitted from girl to girl, including Sarah, and between different friends in Chippenham and London. Several weekends were spent in Chippenham seeing my old schoolfriends Bernie Jones, Nick Brewer and Rob Noyes in country pubs, usually the Jolly Huntsman in Kingston St. Michael or the White Hart at Ford. And I hatched a plan with Nick to go touring across the US of A on a Greyhound bus, and we applied for Visa's.

Ironically, my rock samples arrived from Indonesia just five days before I was due to leave for America. It was too late to cancel my trip, and I didn't want to anyway, so my research would have to wait another month.