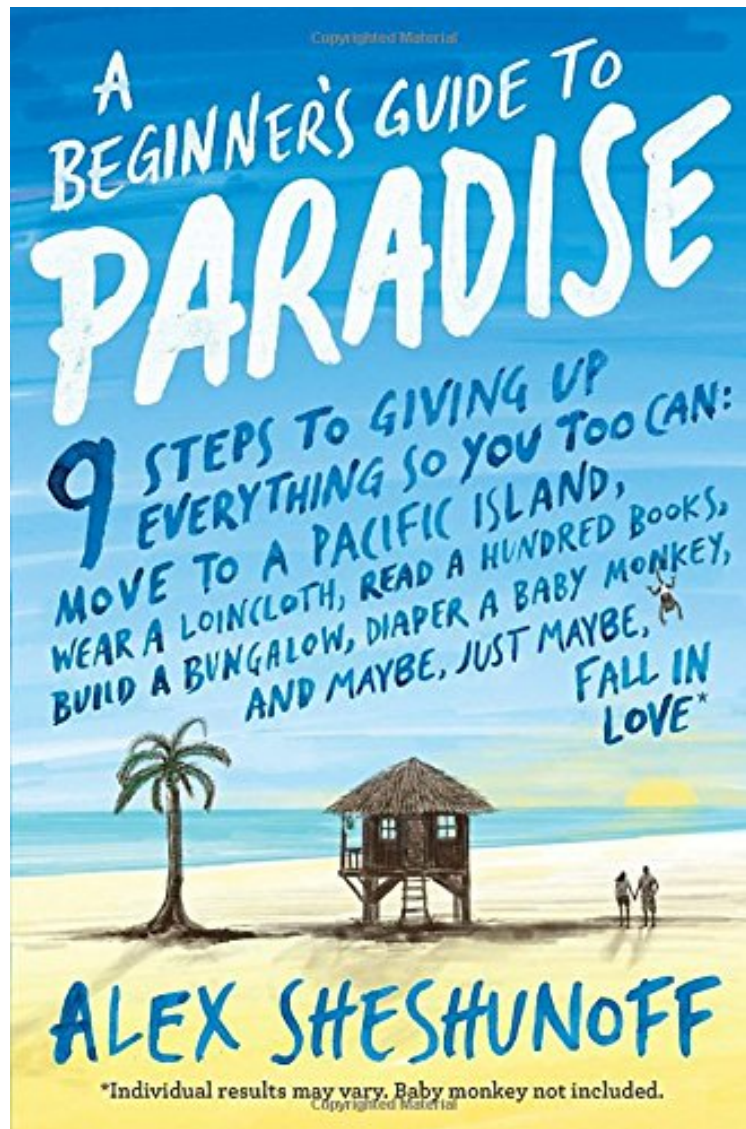


A Beginner's Guide to Paradise: 9 Steps to Giving Up Everything

Alex Sheshunoff

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Alex Sheshunoff : A Beginner's Guide to Paradise: 9 Steps to Giving Up Everything before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised A Beginner's Guide to Paradise: 9 Steps to Giving Up Everything:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Paradise Found! By CK When is Alex Sheshunoff's, A Beginner's Guide to Paradise a good book to read? When you are: a. Considering moving to a remote island in search of paradise? b. Waiting for a root canal procedure to commence? c. Trapped beneath something heavy and the only item

within reach is this book to pass the time before help arrives?d. Procrastinating from writing your own book?e. Wanting to read a delightfully absurd and insightful memoir by a talented, debut author?orf. All of the above?To give you a hint, Sheshunoffs treasure chest of poignant witticisms sprinkled with reflective prose embodies universal appeal. We have all dreamed of getting away from it all, but few of us have the moxie to do it. Albeit fueled by a quarter life crisis and an embarrassment for not having read several literary classics, Sheshunoffs pursuit is familiar and captivating, bringing us closer to understanding ourselves as we follow along with his outlandish adventures.Do yourself a favor; make a frothy, fruity drink, sit beneath a palm tree (or poster of a palm tree) and read this book. Youll laugh, cringe, and be fully engaged with Sheshunoffs life choices and results. Fun, creative, and sharp-witted, "A Beginners Guide to Paradise" is a book you dont want to miss.The answer, by the way, is f.10 of 10 people found the following review helpful. Love it!By Joel KeelerMy wife keeps asking me 'what's so funny' every time I snort while reading it. It's hilarious, introspective and speaks to the wanderlust in us that would love to pull up stakes and find out what's out there. Definitely worth a read!3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. An Instruction Book to Get to Paradise (with breaks for emotional responses)By River"Worse still, Id embraced the time-sucking illusion that loyalty to bad choices would somehow make them better."It's insights like this that drive this memoir from mere vanity to a narrative describing a transformation of perception, a transformation many of us need. I read this book in a fever while outside it was extremely cold and blustery for what felt like two weeks straight and while I was sitting under the fluorescent light bulbs for hours on end, I really wished to be on Yap with Alex. I had reservations about the memoir because I had already read *The Beach* but *A Beginner's Guide To Paradise* does not blow the same tired south easterly winds, this memoir was a breath of fresh air.The style is not only approachable but the format is engaging. Each bite-sized morsel chapter is equally delicious and adds momentum to the memoir. Alex grabbed me particularly because I too have flirted with wanting that start-up success and lifestyle and he has it all, but yet he leaves it. I could not understand why and so I too unwillingly, but in the end, satisfyingly reevaluated what exactly I was looking for.One thing that I think readers on the fence should know is that Alex really goes into great detail not just about his emotional response to the stimuli around him but the actual physical things he packs and prepares for and experiences. Above all else, the tangible nature of his narrative and his voice, like that of your good (albeit, also funny) friend recounting his tales of his great adventure, makes it an extremely fast and accessible read, good for the lazy poolside days as well as the nightly last few moments before sleep with the sleet beating on the window pane.This next section little blurb really resonated with me and I want to share it because he touches on the exact thing I would think on the precipice of such a risky adventure but he jumps and after reading this I think I might be able to as well:"I asked him to give me a second to think it over. Suddenly, I felt afraid. When is it a good idea to listen to fear and when is it a good idea to fight it? Maybe this was the moment when most people turned back to the deep-cushioned couches of their familiar lives and said, 'Nope, not for me.'"

So You Too Can: - Move to a South Pacific Island - Wear a Loincloth - Read a Hundred Books - Diaper a Baby Monkey - Build a Bungalow And Maybe, Just Maybe, Fall in Love! * * Individual results may vary.The true story of how a quarter-life crisis led to adventure, freedom, and love on a tiny island in the Pacific. From the author of a lot of emails and several Facebook posts comes *A Beginners Guide to Paradise*, a laugh-out-loud, true story that will answer your most pressing escape-from-it-all questions, including: 1. How much, per pound, should you expect to pay a priest to fly you to the outer islands of Yap? 2. Classic slumber party stumper: If you could have just one movie on a remote Pacific island, what would it definitely not be? 3. How do you blend fruity drinks without a blender? 4. Is a free, one-hour class from Home Depot on Flowerbox Construction sufficient training to build a house? From *Robinson Crusoe* to *Survivor*, *Gilligans Island* to *The Beach*, people have fantasized about living on a remote tropical island. But when facing a quarter-life crisis, plucky desk slave Alex Sheshunoff actually did it. While out in Paradise, he learned a lot. About how to make big choices and big changes. About the less-than-idyllic parts of paradise. About tying a loincloth without exposing the tender bits. Now, Alex shares his incredible story and pretty-hard-won wisdom in a book that will surprise you, make you laugh, take you to such unforgettable islands as Yap and Pig, and perhaps inspire your own move to an island with only two letters in its name. Answers: 1) \$1.14 2) Gas Attack Training Made Simple 3) Crimp a fork in half and insert middle into power drill 4) No.

"Hilarious and brilliantly written."AJ Jacobs, editor-at-large, *Esquire* "A must read!"*New York Post* "The male answer to *Eat, Pray, Love!*"*BookPage* "Charming and ferociously entertaining."Peter Mountford, author of *A Young Man's Guide to Late Capitalism* "Witty and immensely entertaining!"*Passport Magazine* "Sincerely funny."Kirkus s "Nonfiction Winner"*Faulkner Society's Words Wisdom Award* "1st Place New Nonfiction"*Los Angeles Book Festival*About the AuthorBurnt out and facing a quarter-life crisis, Alex Sheshunoff quit his Internet job in New York City and bought a one-way ticket to Yap, bringing with him a few t-shirts and the hundred books he was most embarrassed not to have read. While out there, he'd read those books, meet a woman, build a bungalow, adopt a baby monkey, and write his own book- a hopefully-humorous memoir called *A Beginner's Guide to Paradise*.Because of his unique last name, Alex is often asked if he's somehow related to Ian Shenanigan Sheshunoff, the first-place winner of

the Diaper Derby Crawling Contest at the 2008 Alaska State Fair. They are indeed related. Ian is his son. Today, Alex and his wife, Sarah, live in Ojai, California with Ian and his equally talented younger brother, Andrew Commissioner Sheshunoff. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. No one really wants to hear about your trip (unless you were the victim of a crime, in which case, they want to hear all about it). So from the start I should say that during the two years or so that I lived in the western Pacific, I was the victim of only one crime. It was minor but culturally revealing. Ill get to that in time, but first a little background. Back in 2001, I was running a small Internet company in New York City and, confronting a sort of quarter-life crisis, I quit my job and bought a one-way ticket to Yap, a small island about five hundred miles south of Guam. My plan: read the one hundred books I was most embarrassed not to have read in college and, hopefully, find Paradise. When people hear usually by standing too close to me in a grocery store line that I once moved to a small island with only three letters in its name, they all have the same questions: How did it go? Was it a mistake? How did you afford it? The short answers to those questions are: 1) pretty well; 2) for the most part, it wasn't; and 3) by subletting my apartment and office in a good real estate market. But responding that way isn't much fun. Nor does it make me rich, rich, rich the main reason people go into writing. So I decided to create this kind of how-to manual for escaping from it all. My hope is that it might inspire you to do something similar or better choosing an island with, say, only two letters in its name. Or you might decide that staying at home is the best choice all along, which is good too. To make this more fun, Ive broken the process of moving to a small island in the Pacific into these nine easy-to-follow steps: Step 1: Make Some Big Choices Step 2: Show Up Step 3: Find the Right Island Step 4: Stop Being So Picky and Just Pick a Damn Island Step 5: Settle In Step 6: Meet Someone Step 7: Regroup Step 8: Build a House Step 9: Live Pretty Much Happily Ever After Feel free to skip around. For example, already have an island picked out? Take a pass on the first four steps. Have a partner to do this with but dont have an island yet? Ignore Step 6. Most readers, however, will just start at the beginning, read a few chapters, and then do something more worthwhile. Like help people. Or make some toast. Every so often, usually by strangers with a conspiratorial bent, Im asked, How much of this is true? The answer: basically all of it. I kept a journal the entire time I was in the Pacific, and Ive tried to be as accurate as possible with everything that gives the reader a grounded sense of time and place island histories, politics, physical descriptions, place names, etc. Also, there are no composite characters here; there'd be no need to mush personalities together as you'll see, the Pacific is home to plenty of loons. But I have taken liberties with... Names: Most of the names have been changed, especially those belonging to people I really skewer. Bruces name, however, is really Bruces name. This will make sense later. Dialogue: Ive tried to convey dialogue faithfully, but anyone who has ever read a court transcript will understand why Ive had to make some adjustments. As the writer H. H. Munro said on this subject, A little inaccuracy sometimes saves tons of explanation. Timing: There isn't much correlation between the number of pages devoted to a place and the amount of time I spent there. That's just the way life is sometimes. OK, enough of that. Photographs, maps and superspecial bonus materials are available online at either www.abeginnersguidetoparadise.com or

www.facebook.com/asheshunoff. A.S. INTRODUCTION SO THERE I WAS, IN THE MIDDLE OF THE PACIFIC... Ten days aboard the Microspirit, an aptly named freighter not so much threatened by rust as held together by it, convinced me that it was time to pick an island. Any island. So I picked Pig. Part travel agent calendar and part Far Side cartoon, the island of Pig, itself an outer island of Yap, already seemed from the pictures like a destination so familiar that I wondered why Id even bother showing up. I figured I already knew what I was in for. Id come in search of capital P Paradise. Not a unique mission, but I needed to know if Paul Gauguins Paradise still existed the one with the flowering trees glistening with recent rain, the beautiful women carrying baskets of fruit, the smiling tigers. And if it did still exist, why didnt people just move there? Was it lack of ambition or too much ambition that kept them away? Or was life simply too hard or too easy in a place like Pig? I didnt know. But I had a hunch that an ideal life is not something you just back into. An ideal life would require some arrangements. For me, those arrangements finished here, in a small cabin of the Microspirit, with me trying to tie on a thong. According to custom, I was supposed to wrap eight feet of blue cloth in such a way that it covered the right places without making me feel, well, ridiculous. I failed in both respects. Flamboyant hoops of extra material draped off my hips, yet I could feel cool air in increasingly funny places. Unsure what else to do, I crammed the extra bits inside an inner loop sufficiently loosening the outer loop to send the cottony contraption sliding down to my ankles. Then genius struck: a safety pin. In a humbling moment of desperation akin to looking for a misplaced wallet in the freezer, I scoured the floor under my metal bed: perhaps a safety pin had just fallen down there. I was in luck. Sort of. Along with a few ramen noodles, some dust, and a Pop-Tart wrapper, I found the safety pins pot-selling, high-school dropout cousin: a paper clip. Not perfect, but with optimism and a little pluck, I managed to bend the paper clip in such a way that it nicely accessorized, if not actually fastened, my loincloth. I next grabbed a Ziploc bag of Lucky Strikes and headed to the deck. My plan: present the cigarettes to the islands chiefs, take a look around, and assuming it was the Paradise I pretty much expected it to be ask if I could stay. Given the Microspirits tight schedule, Id have only an hour to make a good impression, ask for permission to stay, and rush back to the boat to get my bag of clothes and books. But I was too focused on my slipping thong to notice the absurdity of the plan. Im pretty sure what my answer would have been had a guy from Yap showed up at my door in New York and said, Do you mind if I stay here? I have this idea of Paradise, and it looks almost

exactly like your apartment. One problem: I wasn't quite onshore. To actually get the last quarter mile to Pig I had to board the Microspirits dinghy, a sort of Nanospirit, which rocked in the waves thirty-five feet below the deck. I hesitated for a long moment. Getting into a small boat is always a tricky proposition. Getting into a small, rocking boat in the open ocean: even harder. Doing so on a rope ladder in a thru seemed... unwise, at best. Even if I somehow made it down, I worried there would hardly be room: the Nanospirit was loaded to the rim with elderly, topless women, and a wooden coffin. Baskets of fish and clothes and toothpaste filled the remaining pockets of space. But this was my Pacific coming-out party. I wanted to wow them. Thru and carton of smokes in hand, I stepped toward the edge but, seeing the boat so far below, hesitated again. Use the ladder, a man said behind me. His tone was helpful, not sarcastic, as though I'd been considering making a leap. I turned. It was my cabinmate, Chief Chuck from Chuuk. An enormous man, even by Pacific standards, Chief Chuck had a preference for snug white thrus. Watch, he said and, just as a wave raised the dinghy closer, Chief Chuck stepped in front of me and slid down the ladder, skipping every single rung. He landed on his side, rolled across half a dozen baskets, and came to a heavy stop against the side of the coffin. He gave a jaunty wave for me to follow. With one hand holding both the cigarettes and my thru, I took a few steps down the ladder that now swung across the side of the ship. Then a few more steps. With twenty-five feet still to go, I discovered why the inventor of the paper clip, Walter Hunt, later built America's first sewing machine: paper clips bend. My thru covered me in the same way that holding up a pair of jeans in front of a mirror covers you: it worked well enough, but not all angles were created equal. While in the Pacific, I'd hoped to reduce the number of variables in my life to find out which were the most important: take away electricity and friends and see which I miss the most but clothes were never supposed to be on the list. On my way down, I found myself fixating on the physicality of things: the handles on a woven basket, the sun reflecting off the dinghy's small outboard engine, the scar on a woman's ankle. Then gravity took over. That, frothing fear, and the basic instinct not to dangle nearly naked in front of twenty elderly women. I slid down the ladder. Effectively naked, I tumbled into the dinghy, managing to hold on... only to my Lucky Strikes. Not exactly Fred Astaire, but Chief Chuck from Chuuk was hardly Ginger Rogers. I had arrived. And I was pretty sure I'd wowed them.

STEP 1 Make Some Big Choices

CHAPTER 1 What You Can Expect to Learn in This Chapter: When do you know it's time to pull up stakes? Is it motivating or depressing to be ranked ninety-sixth in a small trade magazine's top 100 list? Four months before landing on Pig, the all-caps subject line of an email pulsed in my inbox. It read: **HOSTILE WORK ENVIRONMENT**. The email was from Shannon, a computer programmer in her late thirties who worked just across the room. While waiting for Shannon's email to load (yes, we once had to wait for such things), I glanced over to the office foosball table (yes, that too). The company I'd started with friends in college, a few years earlier back in 1996, wasn't supposed to be like all the other dot-com cash-ins; instead, it would be a better use of a new medium. The plan was to use the Internet to help people connect to their government via a database of 140,000 officials. Using just their address, users could find their council members or their dogcatchers or whomever and send them an email or an online petition. Advertising, along with a service to pay parking tickets online, somehow would pay for the whole thing. We even had a late-nineties pun for a name: E-The People. Based on a description not much longer than the above, we raised money from venture capitalists. A California investor once sent us a check for \$100,000 printed on the check were half a dozen very happy clowns. Shannon's email finally came up on the screen. Her complaint was about the new programmer, Brian. Specifically, his screen saver. I was surprised. I'd thought all screen savers were pedestrian like mine: just the standard tropical island with a few palm trees. Brian's screen saver, however, was different. It's a woman in a bathing suit, her email reported and she's squatting on a soccer ball. Hmm, I thought, that's not good. She continued. I'm formally informing you that it's creating a hostile work environment. A Hostile Work Environment is a form of discrimination that violates Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and other federal authority... p.s. I've hired a lawyer. I took a deep breath and stood up to take a walk around the office. As I passed various desks, I thought how our open, uncubed floor plan had felt so progressive, so fittingly democratic. But now that plan felt forced and naive, like the cheery yellow paint I'd so carefully chosen for the walls. And not unlike the idea that people really wanted to participate in their democracy, but only lacked the time and the tools. I paused by the desk of a youngish salesperson named Kevin. He looked happy enough, if not especially busy. I'd hoped the business would make money while making the world a better place, but it wasn't really doing either. Most Americans were finding plenty to do other than write their congressmen. The few users we did have tended to be older and from rural areas. The kind of folks with time to write letters to politicians. And not the kind of folks high-tech advertisers were scrambling to reach. Back at my desk, I closed the email. For five years, my reservoir of optimism had been slowly leaking. I'd found that starting a business was just another way of going into sales. Like any salesman, my job was to convince people to do things they didn't really want to do: investors to invest, citizens to participate, government officials to respond to letters, advertisers to choose our site from among a million others. And, apparently, convince programmers not to download screen savers with women squatting on soccer balls. I looked at my to-do list. I had a brochure to write, a consultant report to review, and a Christmas party to organize a party I didn't want to attend, much less plan. I noticed that beside my phone was a message saying one of our investors had called just to check in. That can't be good, I thought. Next to that message was the latest issue of the Silicon Alley Reporter, a lightly read trade magazine devoted to the technology industry in New York. Somehow, I'd been ranked ninety-sixth out of the hundred

most important people working in the industry in the city. Though surprised to be on the list, I also found the ranking a wee bit depressing. In a way, better to not be included. At least then you could think you'd been overlooked or were the secret Oz-like power behind the power. In theory, my life in New York had all the best ingredients: I was living in a nice apartment in Greenwich Village, I was dating a pretty Spanish woman, and I was running a little Internet company. It should have been great. But it wasn't. I wasn't destitute or bedridden or addicted to heroin. Just unhappy. Flipping through the magazines pages first looking at the four poor schmucks behind me, then the ninety-five ahead of me I realized I had two career choices: spend the rest of my life working my way up the magazines list or cancel my subscription.

CHAPTER 2 What You Can Expect to Learn in This Chapter: When you go to the hospital with severe chest pain and a crew from the Discovery Channel asks you to sign a release to be on their show about New York City emergency rooms, should you? What if it's three a.m. and you aren't thinking clearly? On the way home that night, I passed a bearded man selling Christmas trees near the corner of Hudson and Leroy streets. My girlfriend, Lorena, and I could certainly use some holiday cheer. We met at a wedding in Spain. She was a friend of the Spanish bride. I was friends with the American groom. That weekend, we danced for hours and hours. She was a lovely dancer. And I was smitten by her light blue eyes and long, curly black hair. We first kissed on the roof of a seventeenth-century castle. A few weeks later I returned to Spain. We'll never know if this is going to work, if we don't live near each other, she said as we walked together one night in the walled city of Avalon. She was right. She visited New York not too much later, and said she'd love to live there. A month later she moved in. But now, as the Christmas tree vendor pushed a six-foot blue spruce through a narrow metal tube, all of that seemed long ago. The tree came out the other end neatly wrapped in a tight-fitting plastic net. With one hand on the trunk, the other buried deep in thick branches, I hoisted the tree over my head and began the nine-block walk to our Greenwich Street studio. A block later the tree slipped off my shoulder. Then it started to rain. If this were a movie, I thought, snow would be falling. Instead, it was raining. Not a pouring rain, but not a drizzle either. Just a steady, cold rain. My arm was tired, so I tried carrying the tree under my arm. A few blocks later the tip must have drooped a bit because it got caught on something. I yanked. Still stuck. I looked back. The netting was snagged on the sharp stub of a former street sign. Other cities have trash on their sidewalks, but we have three-inch shanks of serrated metal sticking out of ours. I glanced at the boutique cupcake store across the street. Despite the rain, a line curled out the front. I wondered who waited in line to pay \$4.50 for a cupcake. Well, I did. Or I had. I'd even convinced myself that overpaying for cupcakes and just about everything else in New York signaled my refined good taste and not, say, what a schmuck I was. I yanked harder on the stuck tree. It stayed stuck. As annoyed by the jerky materialism of New York as by my own jerky materialism, I yanked harder still. This time, I tore a seam in the netting, causing my new blue spruce to pop open like a giant, spiky umbrella. When Lorena and I met, she was twenty-eight and still living with her parents in the family's flat in Madrid. Her father was a recently retired submarine captain. Given that Spain had only two submarines, that wasn't an easy job to get. Even with my crappy Spanish, I could tell he was charming. Her mother, however, not so much. I heard once that women who've had five children go slightly insane. Lorena was a twin, the sixth or seventh of an eventual eight kids. Almost all of the others lived within a four-block radius. Her moving all the way to New York was a scandal mitigated only by the fiction that we maintained separate bedrooms. Every time her mother came to visit, we'd plug in an alarm clock next to the couch to suggest that was where I slept. I said it was silly; she was thirty. She said it was important; she was Spanish. The rain picked up. Seven blocks to go. I couldn't see anything with the branches scratching at my face. Screw this, I decided. I'll just drag it. And I did. I dragged that tree up Hudson, across Christopher Street, then across Charles Street, and down the sidewalk of Eleventh Street through oily puddles with floating cigarette butts, through the garbage juice of an all-you-can-eat deli, probably through dog barf and late-night pee, and up a flight of stairs to our apartment. Hi, honey. I smiled wanly. I'm home. She picked a ketchup-stained napkin out of the branches and I brought you this. No vas a traerlo aqu, she said in her Castilian accent. You're not going to bring that in here. The plastic sheathing trailed down a dozen steps. Umm, OK, but the people across the landing may want to leave someday. Fine, she said. I kissed her on the cheek and propped the tree against the wall. It fell moistly against the couch. I don't think she saw the coffee cup stuck in the lower branches. Colleen and Jason still haven't called back, she said from the bathroom, just a few steps away in our small apartment. Don't you think that is rude? Or is it an American thing? We are supposed to go to dinner with them on Thursday.... Hmm, I guess it is rude, but maybe they? What? I can't hear you. Yes, I said, that it is rude but so rude, Lorena said. In Spain you always call people back. I was too self-centered, too busy, too American to see just how independent she was for a woman who'd grown up in a pro-Franco, Catholic military family. Instead I focused on her lack of doubt and how few questions she asked of me, of herself. For her, New York, the Salamanca district of Madrid, the stone-walled compound and gnarled olive trees of her family's ancestral home in Mallorca, weren't places of wonder to be explored, but a set of rules to be navigated. I told her about Shannon and the soccer ball. Lo has visto antes? Had you seen it before? No, I hadn't seen it, I said, resenting the implication. Either I was negligent for not having noticed, or worse, I had noticed it and chosen to ignore it. If I don't like this dumb little business, I said, and our employees, users, and advertisers don't either, then why am I bothering? In Spain, you always call people back. Right away. Even if just to tell them... she said, her voice trailing off. I'd hoped our cultural differences would lead to exciting, unknown possibilities. She'd make paella; I would barbecue: we would be

happy. But for three years those cultural differences had only masked a deeper problem. After finally becoming fluent in each others language, we discovered we didnt have all that much to say. So inappropriate, she said. While waiting for Lorena to finish brushing her teeth, I realized I wasnt happy. Our relationship wasnt what I felt it could and should be. My rent was going up. The company was struggling. Employees were quitting or suing or both. And it didnt seem like increasing the length of my fourteen-hour workdays was going to help anything. Two days later, I was lying in bed at about midnight, when I felt a searing pain in the left side of my chest. Sweat streamed down my forehead and pooled in the middle of my back. I was twenty-eight. A few weeks earlier I had fainted in the shower and woken up on the bottom of the bathtub. This wasnt good. I told Lorena to call 911. While lying in the ambulance, I thought, I cant believe Im going to die for this company no one cares about. Screw this. If I live, Im out of here. Not just out of New York, but out of everything else. The pain in my chest was still intense as nurses attached an IV and all sorts of monitoring equipment. Multiple lines ticked across the heart monitor. One was flat. Sticky pads pulled at my chest hair. A plastic mask pumped oxygen. The nurses looked at the machines; only Lorena looked at me. Her face was pale, her blue eyes alert and concerned. Slowly, my breathing began to return to normal and, though still dangerously high, my heart rate steadied. You had a panic attack, the doctor said nonchalantly while unclipping something. Well watch you for an hour. After that, you can leave whenever you want. Lorena went to the waiting room as a nurse dimmed the lights and the late-night hospital routines began. A bearded man in jeans approached my bed. He held a clipboard. Hello. Im with the Discovery Channel, he said. Were filming a documentary about New York emergency rooms. Would you be OK signing this release? What? We wont necessarily use your material, but just in case well need a release. No, thanks, I said, confused. I had been screwing up my life, I thought, pissing away years on this failing company, this failing relationship, this fucking materialistic city and its dead-end ideas of success, this hope that enough hours at work could make me rich, my parents proud, and democracy stronger. Worse still, I had embraced the time-sucking illusion that loyalty to bad choices would somehow make them better. And now I had seen how it would end: in a hospital, clutching my chest and wondering about all the bad choices I had made. Best case, I would die on TV. Lorena and I didnt speak for most of the taxi ride home. She looked out the window at the wet West Village streets, the closed florists, the open but empty pizza-by-the-slice places. I scratched at the plastic hospital bracelet wrapped tightly around my wrist. The stakes were too high for tweaking. I needed to toss the whole thing, baby, bathwater, and all. All I could think to tell Lorena was that I needed to make some changes. She nodded, held my hand, and continued to look out the window. Her skin felt soft but cold. I later got a bill in the mail. That trip to the hospital cost me \$500. But it was a pretty good value it made me realize I needed an escape. I knew my problems were First World problems. At least I had a job. At least I had an apartment. But simply accepting my particular trajectory, or tweaking some things on the margin, felt dangerous. At twenty-eight, a flat relationship, a hypermaterialistic city, and a job in sales werent turn-your-life-upside-down bad, but in thirty years they would be. And by that time, the cost of change, the cost of a lifetime of compromises, would be unbearable. In thirty years, I would be Willy Loman from Death of a Salesman or Sinclair Lewis Babbitt depressed middle-aged men who begin to realize theyd wanted the wrong things. But by that time it would be too late. Better, I figured, to make a break for it now.

CHAPTER 3 What You Can Expect to Learn in This Chapter:

The Pacific has 25,995 islands.... How do you choose one? When making huge life decisions, how much should you rely on the casual Internet musings of strangers? I dont have statistics to back it up, but my hunch is that the three most common escape-from-it-all fantasies are: 1) running a bed-and-breakfast in Vermont; 2) moving to a tiny island in the Pacific; and 3) opening a bar. I had little interest in quilting and homemade preserves, so the first one was out. And though profiting from other peoples addictions is a better business model than online democracy, it doesnt exactly set the heart aflutter. So that left the island. A lazy mans fantasy and not especially creative but I had stared at the same screen saver for five years, only to see it disappear with each move of the mouse. And my brief stint in the hospital reminded me I had a limited number of spins around the sun better make the most of the ones I had left. In other words... it was time to make the screen saver real. Or at least try. But which island? The following Monday afternoon, I sat down at my desk and looked at my computer. Any island I had heard of I wouldnt want to go to, I realized, but how do you brainstorm a place youve never heard of? My screen saver, not surprisingly, didnt list a photo credit or a place-name. So I did the next most reasonable thing and turned to the Internet, or what I like to call cyberspace. Turns out, the Pacific has a lot of islands 25,995, in fact so I needed to narrow my search. I typed nice Pacific island into Google. The first recommended site was something called Concealed Weapon Talk. God save us from the gun-grabbers! it read. Will my supply of brass, bullets, bullet molds, primers, and powder suddenly become contraband? If so, does anyone know of a nice Pacific island I can move to? Preferably one with some good hunting and fishing opportunities. Helpful. The next site began: The Pacific Islands Business Network (PIBN) is a project of the United States Pacific Islands Nations Joint Commercial Commission (JCC) being carried out by Pacific Islands Development Program of the East-West Center in Honolulu. Surprised they didnt go with the catchier USPINJCC. I obviously needed a new approach. I typed in Really nice Pacific island. A message on a travel site came up: There were some really nice Pacific islands, but my favorite was Yap. The weather was steamy but pleasant. Best of all, the people speak English (ever since it was a U.S. territory), they use stone money, and the women are topless. JungleBuff27 I knew next to nothing about Yap, but as my grandmother used to say, If its good enough for

JungleBuff27, its good enough for me. The main difference between teen rebellion, postcollege wanderings, and midlife crises is the amount of money at your disposal. Teen rebellion is largely a budget affair expressed by cigarettes, bad haircuts, and worse decisions. Postcollege wanderings, however, are often financed by parents fearing a lapse into the bad-haircut years unless they provide sufficient funds. Midlife crises are the best-funded stage of rebellion, because, finally, the rebel himself can lavish the amount of money he feels befits the depth of his self-pity. Given my financial state, I figured I was facing more of a quarter-life crisis. I knew there were plenty of better uses for my savings: a new sofa, say, or a donation to just about any charity. But after five years of fourteen-hour days, I felt I had at least earned some tokens from life's Skee-Ball machine. Instead of the spider ring or bubble gum, I'd cash them in for a little time, time to be alone with my own thoughts and, possibly, create a better life for myself. I knew that many people had it much, much worse, but that didn't mean I shouldn't try to improve my own situation, only that I shouldn't whine or feel sorry for myself in the process. I started typing my resignation letter. But I had a problem: If you're running a company and have no board of directors, to whom do you address your letter of resignation? I walked by Shannon's desk. Umm, Shannon, can I talk to you? OK, she said, reaching extra slowly for her mouse to close a program on her computer. Where would you like to talk? Because of our open offices, the only place for a private conversation was either the supply room or the Caribbean diner around the corner. I opened the supply room door for her. Shannon, I said against a backdrop of blank envelopes and extra toner, I'm quitting. You can't quit. Why not? I said. Because you started it, she said. No, you started it. We both twisted our faces a little. Shannon, I said, the company needs someone different. This isn't right for me. OK, she said, looking at a box of staples. Well, I guess that's it, then, I said. Whatever, she said. A reasonable reaction. Why should she care about what I needed any more than I cared about Brian's screen saver? We reached for the door at the same time. As a society, we know how to respond to people who say they need a vacation. Those who are going on sabbatical, slightly less so. But indefinite idleness in a place called Yap? That was unsustainable at best, subversive at worst. At the least, it was weird. When I started telling people, from friends to my dentist, I found myself falling back on the same limp phrase: take a break or recharge my batteries, but those weren't good enough. As much as I wanted to chuck it all and move to Paradise, I felt I needed a mission, something responsible sounding. While walking home one evening, I began thinking about what I'd learned while running this Internet company: namely, don't start an Internet company. Useful, I supposed, but preferable to learn from the mistakes of others rather than my own. Passing a familiar deli that I'd never actually been inside of, I thought, What better way to do that than books? I could save lifetimes of bad decisions if I just read enough books. I liked the structure that reading one hundred great books would give my trip, a purpose to my potentially unpurposeful time in the Pacific. But which ones? That night, while Lorena slept, I started a list of the books I felt most embarrassed not to have read: Crime and Punishment, Moby-Dick, War and Peace, etc. That came to about fifty. For the remainder I started emailing friends, even acquaintances, If you could take just one book with you to a remote island, which would it be? As each reply came in, my online shopping cart filled up with compelling (if rarely purchased-together) titles like the Old Testament and Dave Barry Turns 40. A few days later and still years before the e-book, I had about eighty volumes lined up on my kitchen table. I then bought ten books that sounded like they might provide some context for my sojourn (e.g., The Catholic Church in Micronesia; Words of the Lagoon). I decided I'd pick up the remaining ten along the way. It was only after all of this that I realized I had a problem: How would I carry ninety books? I'd have to take a dozen or so and have the rest sent. But sent where? And by whom? It was time to call my mother. CHAPTER 4 What You Can Expect to Learn in This Chapter: Among the qualities one looks for in a mother, where does efficiency rank? Is the American Egg Board a reliable source of health information when it comes to eggs? Bullshit, she said over the phone. Well, Mom, that's the plan, I said. When are you coming back? Not sure. Soon... soonish. I'm bringing a lot of books. Maybe you have one you could recommend? Soonish? Books? What are you talking about? That, apparently, was a rhetorical question. And where is Yap? You know how dangerous Africa is, right? I guess Africa has some dangerous parts, but Yap isn't in Africa. It's to the left of Hawaii. Way left. Anyway, I think some time off will be good for me. Good for you? How is it good for you to wake up in someone's soup? What? You know, like that Rockefeller guy. Mom, that was in New Guinea and that was, like, fifty years ago. I really don't think I'm going to be eaten. He didn't either. Mom, no one ever thinks they're going to be eaten. Exactly, she said. I took a deep breath before continuing, I feel really good about this choice. You know I love you dearly, darling. I'm just worried. Do you want to, you know, talk to someone? Mom, I just need to recharge my batteries, take a break, that kind of thing. I assumed this was the end of the conversation until Jon Krakauer's Into the Wild arrived in the mail. I immediately called my mother. I got the book you sent. The one about the guy who heads into the wilderness and dies. Good, she said. I suggest you read it before you go. Had you peeked into my childhood kitchen any late August of the 1970s, you wouldn't have been surprised that someday I'd buy a one-way ticket to Yap. With its stout cedar beams, dark wood flooring, and off-white stucco walls, that neo-Tudor kitchen belonged more to the old Westmount neighborhood of my mother's native Montreal than the suburbs of Austin, Texas. The refrigerator, the walls, the countertops, the cabinets, the table, and the dog underneath were all the same dark, musty brown. The only thing that wasn't brown was the charcoal black stove at the center of the room. It was ignited only once a year. The last Saturday in August. That was the day my mother made a nine-month supply of scrambled-egg sandwiches for my brothers

lunch. Being nine years older than me, he was on the front lines of what would become known as the Sandwich Wars. Mom, please, no more scrambled egg sandwiches, my brother would plead as he watched her quickly open a dozen bags of Wonder Bread lengthwise with a sharp knife, as a fishmonger might the last crate of salmon at the end of his shift. She wasn't the type to waste time with twisty ties. Egg sandwiches are good, she'd say. But not every day, he'd say. Then trade them for something, she'd say. That my mother would suggest such a thing to my brother revealed a fundamental misunderstanding of the market. Then, as now, I suppose, the social economy of elementary school revolved around trade, and trade required having something marketable at your disposal. Just as a Phoenician merchant might sail the Mediterranean for years and over time parlay olive oil, wine, and slaves into a villa, careful trading around the lunchroom could gradually raise one's social standing and overall position. Hence, an orange could be turned into two Fig Newtons, two Fig Newtons into an Oreo. An Oreo, plus a little talent, could land one a nonstarting position on the recess kickball team. But a defrosted scrambled egg sandwich? He was through before it began. Her first step was to turn all six burners to high; she didn't so much want a cooking surface as a full slab of heat to warm up the skillets, then start tossing in tabs of butter. Butter that turned immediately into smoke. Then, as though in the final round of a country-fair competition, she'd grab an egg in each hand and, with a quick whip of her wrist, crack its calcium-carbonate shell, flinging the contents into the superheated skillet. She'd do this over and over until the heat and the force of her will transformed gallons of embryonic fluid into fluffy yellow clouds of fat and protein. She'd then pour in salt and stir. To save time, she never stirred that skillet more than once. One year my brother came prepared. He showed her an advertisement ripped from a magazine. It had a picture of two fried eggs. The text read: Two eggs a week is fine for your health. Well, if two a week is fine, she said, two every day should be great. Mom, he pleaded, the ad was paid for by the American Egg Board. He was wise that way. But she couldn't hear. She'd already flipped on the giant wind turbine above the stove. As the eggs cooked, she'd begin whacking off crusts, not slice by slice, but in whole clumps squeezed firmly in the middle. Cutting off the crusts was her parsley on the side, her way of saying she cared. But to us, it spoke only to a deep appreciation of efficiency. And of the qualities one looks for in a mother, efficiency is rarely at the top of the list. I grew up thinking working long hours was just something you did. Unlike most moms in central Texas in the 1970s, mine worked outside the house and didn't have time to make a new lunch every day. She ran a bank-consulting business she'd started with my father in 1971. They sold technical management books to banks and, later, hosted conferences on High Performance Banking. The first year, they ran it out of the kitchen. By 1973, they'd expanded to the living room. Two years later into an actual office building. Though behind the scenes my mom actually ran the back office, my dad's name was on the door. She was happy to hand over the marquee, as she wasn't especially interested in hanging out in hotel meeting rooms with small-town bankers. My dad, however, could relate well. He'd grown up in Magnolia, Arkansas, and had the Southern accent, folksy sense of humor, and languid storytelling to prove it. So he gave the speeches and went to the many early-morning breakfasts. So many, in fact, that starting in the midseventies, a few years after I was born, he was gone two hundred days a year, giving speeches about High Performance Banking at various state banking conventions. (The fact that he'd never worked in a bank didn't seem to matter much; the ideas were concise, and the jokes funny, especially by the standards of, say, the Indiana Bankers Association.) Unfortunately, the underlying math of the business required him to travel constantly. He twice tore his rotator cuff from carrying so many suitcases through so many airports; he once told me he spent so much time in Atlanta's Hartsfield International Airport that he thought he had a pretty good chance of dying there. Starting in the late 1970s, the business evolved to include computer-generated reports for bankers. Back then, however, computers were room-sized machines that read data from index cards punched with tiny holes. To save money, my mother rented the computers at night. With my dad on the road, she'd stay up till dawn loading cards into little racks. I picture her up to her ankles in fallen chads. She brought that same intensity to most everything, including the preparation of a year's supply of lunch in a single afternoon. For the final step, she'd sweep the egg-filled skillets over the waiting formations of crustless bread and carpet-bomb the entire egg battalion. Next, after covering each puddle of egg with a second slice of Wonder Bread, she'd wrap the sandwich in a piece of cellophane and toss the still-warm sandwich into the freezer. Every morning for the next nine months, she'd fill my brother's brown lunch bags with a frozen scrambled egg sandwich, a Capri Sun, and an apple or a bag of celery. By the time I came of school age, a new school had opened a new school that, critically, had a cafeteria. But that ethos of efficient parenting that gave rise to the nine-month supply of scrambled egg sandwiches never really went away.

CHAPTER 5 What You Can Expect to Learn in This Chapter: How not to break up with someone you care about. Is a first kiss atop a castle, you know, enough? I had an island. I had a list of books. I had quit my company. Now I just needed to extricate myself from my relationship. The biggest problem was that there was no problem. There'd been no deceit, no affair, no crushing moment of disappointment. I wasn't eager to be single. Just the opposite. But I wanted to be with someone I could imagine having kids with and living a rich, full life together. And this wasn't it. The other problem was the story of how we'd met. I'd read somewhere that the existence of a romantic story about how a couple met has a crazily disproportionate effect on their long-term prospects. It doesn't matter if that story is fabricated as part of a courtship mythology, just as long as the story is believed by both parties. In our case, we didn't have to fabricate a story. It seemed hard to imagine that a relationship with such a promising start—kisses on castle rooftops and

all wouldnt have an equally happy ending. Or, at least, a happy middle. I knew that a hundred years ago our comfortable relationship would have been a home run, but today it felt, well, too easy. We never challenged and asked hard questions of each other. Questions like: What kind of life did we want to lead? Who did we want to become? Instead, we were just a man and a woman going through the motions of a relationship. The sum never seemed greater than the parts. So, one Saturday morning in early January, the kind of crisp and clear morning when we would normally have headed to the farmers market in Herald Square to overpay for heirloom tomatoes, I said, Lorena, can we talk? Sure, she said. We sat down on the bed. I dont think this is working, I said. What do you mean? she said. This. Our relationship. What? What do you mean? Its not working. Its not a good fit, I said, and started to cry. She started to cry too. What? Why? What can I do? This last question made me so sad. This wasnt about her giving more to the relationship. She had given so much having left her family, her language, and her culture, there was little more she could give. Its not you. Or even me. Its just us, I said. We both cried for a long stretch until, finally, she looked up and said, What am I going to do? Oh God, Im not sure. You can stay here as long as you want. Im going to leave the United States. The apartment is all yours. Why isnt it working? she said again. I thought it was working. I didnt have a tidy answer. Were just not a great fit, I repeated lamely. In retrospect, this answer was completely unfair. I thought the way to avoid a messy breakup was to be clear and repetitive. At least that seemed the best way to contain the ambiguity I felt about the breakup. But were just not a great fit didnt honor her intelligence or her very real need to understand what had happened. My panic attack, I said, it made me think I need to do things differently. Im moving to Yap, in the Pacific. Like I mentioned a while back. I didnt think you were serious, she said, shaking her head. I tried to explain some of the reasons, but, being unsure myself, I left her only confused. With so little else to work with, she was left to conclude that I was going crazy. And I started to agree.

CHAPTER 6 What You Can Expect to Learn in This Chapter: Assuming you start with the customary two, how many legs can you expect to break if you jump from the top of a coconut tree: a) 0 b) 1 c) 2

Why should you always fly out of the country from Newark Airport? Two weeks later, in late January, I hailed a taxi and asked to go to Newark Airport. On the way, I tried dropping hints to the driver that I wanted him to ask me where I was heading. Unsubtle hints like Its strange, you know, leaving a place without knowing if youll ever be back. But he didnt ask. So I just looked out the window, through oily rain smears, at the barbed-wired Northern State Prison, its prisoners hunched in wet groups of two or three near the fence. At the Budweiser building and its brick smokestacks spewing a brown hop-filled haze. At a billboard offering Newarks Fastest and Cheapest Divorce. The driver turned down his radios background squelch and muttered something about which terminal I wanted. International, I said, looking down at my ticket sleeve. It was then that I first noticed the vacation promotion on the back. In the photo, a woman was lying on the beach, her smug smile barely visible under the thin brim of her improbably flappy hat. Meanwhile, her lover was just down the beach. Wearing only a pair of snug red shorts, he was running toward her, the sun glinting off shallow ripples of turquoise sea, his glossy abs, and his bright, bright teeth. He might even have been skipping. On the right margin of the sleeve, I wrote what would be my first Life Lesson: Always leave the country from Newark. No matter where you are going the South Pacific, Kinshasa, Jakarta the parting memory of the drive to Newark will be a reminder that you are doing the right thing. Yet, as we drove, questions swirled. Scary questions like, would I become insane or enlightened after so much time with my own thoughts and a bunch of books? (The books accounted for at least forty pounds of my roller bags weight.) What if I simply limped home, savings squandered, Paradise unfound, with no further understanding of what had led me to the Pacific to begin with? Or what if I came to know myself better and didnt like what I found? Surely, there are good reasons why more people dont just buy one-way tickets to Yap. For better or worse, I was about to find out. According to my fifty-page itinerary, Id be flying from Newark to Houston, Houston to Honolulu, then seven hours farther west to Guam, before flying another five hundred miles southwest to Yap. I usually dont like to talk to people on planes, but the farther west I flew, the worse the movies seemed to become (i.e., Critters followed by Critters II). By the final leg, I was chatting up the unlucky Guamanian appliance dealer sitting next to me. I mentioned that I might stay in Yap for a long, long time. A lot of people think that, he said. But it doesnt always work out. He then told me about a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer whod been stationed on an outer island called Eurapick. After a few months he wanted to come home. When he radioed headquarters requesting a ride home, he was told it would be at least six months till they could send a ship. He radioed a few days later and said he very much wanted to go home and, please, couldnt a ship come any sooner? They again declined his request, citing the expense and distance. They said he would just have to wait. The volunteer then remembered that the Peace Corps health insurance plan guaranteed emergency medical evacuations. With a measure of ambition, frustration, and hope that most of us will never experience (and dont normally associate with government employees), he climbed the highest coconut tree on the island and jumped. He broke both legs. But he got a ride home.

STEP 2 Show Up

CHAPTER 7 What You Can Expect to Learn in This Chapter: When greeted by a topless woman in a grass skirt at the airport, will you: a) stare? b) avert your eyes while pretending to look for something in the outside pocket of your suitcase? c) give her a hug? When you find out that the previous occupant of your motel room died in the bed, do you: a) shrug it off on the basis that death isnt contagious? b) ask for a clean set of sheets? It was past one a.m. when the plane landed at Yap International Airport. Simply arriving in such a remote place felt like an accomplishment. How remote? International dialing codes are a pretty good indicator: the United States

code is 1. Antarctica is 672. Yap is 691. The island is served by just two flights a week both from Guam and both arriving in the middle of the night. I quickly learn there isn't demand for much more; with a population of only 6,300, mangrove swamps for beaches, and a growing leprosy problem, Yap simply doesn't brochure well. (Nor does it help that the South Pacific island of Yap isn't even in the South Pacific technically, Yap is in the Western Pacific.) With so few flights, the runway lights at Yap International are kept off until activated by an automated optical system in theory, when the incoming pilot flashes the plane's lights three times. In recent years, several flights have missed the runway altogether. Stepping into the humid heat outside made me feel like I'd been given a full-body slap by one of those hand towels they heat up in microwaves at Japanese restaurants. It smelled about the same too. It had just rained, and the smell was of dust and wet concrete. On the tarmac I joined a line of people waiting to pass through customs in a little open-air metal shed. Planes pause on Yap for such a short time the pilots don't shut down the engines, meaning it was impossible to talk to anyone. I looked behind me. How silly was it to arrive in such a giant machine in search of something as seemingly simple as Paradise? A bit like pulling up to a marina in an aircraft carrier and asking where one might find a Mountain Dew. And would Paradise really just be a place on the standard route system? After all, it didn't seem quite right that I'd be able to just fly away the moment things got difficult. Yet, almost immediately, I was smitten by Yap. Everyone with me in line was smiling. They weren't strained polite smiles either, but broad glad-to-be-home smiles. Some wore T-shirts; others wore collared shirts. Almost all wore plastic flip-flops. Their thin hair was black and wavy, their skin a light mahogany with an occasional constellation of black freckles. Unlike Americans, who seem to gain weight in their middles, the Yapese, in this line at least, gained weight more evenly, as though their whole bodies were simply swollen. Their faces weren't jowly but rounded, such that the flat disks of their cheeks forced their dark eyebrows and brown eyes into a seemingly permanent but kindly squint. As I approached the front of the line, a man handed me a customs form. Whatever doubt I still had about buying a one-way ticket to a place with only three letters in its name vanished at the ninth question: (9) Are you bringing prohibited goods such as narcotics? Yes or No Circle One. (Remember, honest answers are important.) If the charm and optimism of that question wasn't enough to make me burn my passport, the welcoming committee was. After passing through customs, every arriving passenger whether local or tourist was given a wreath of flowers by a young topless woman with long braided hair. Sure, I thought, visitors to Honolulu also get leis, but they have to order them for themselves before they arrive. And they're almost never presented by topless women. Welcome to Yap, the young topless woman said with a smile, and approached to drape the flowers over my head. I didn't quite know where to direct my eyes as she put the lei on: was it rude to look at her chest? Or rude not to look? I started to give her a hug, but that seemed weird. Then I reached out to shake her hand, but that seemed weirder, so I just smiled politely and thanked her. On the curb, I asked the one taxi waiting for arriving passengers to take me to the cheapest hotel in Yap. He obliged. From first appearances, the Ocean View Hotel was nowhere close to the ocean, but it did have a room with a lamp and a thin mattress. I fell deeply asleep. The following day, I stumbled outside. The light was completely different from back in New York. Perhaps due to Yap's proximity to the equator (just 650 miles) or the humidity (approaching 99 percent), the light made everything appear richer, more vivid, as though a high-contrast filter had been applied to the whole island. The sleepy streets, at least, could use it. A dog lay in the middle of the road, its long ears slumped on the dirt. Nearby, a cat slipped into the weeds growing around the base of a telephone pole supporting just two drooping wires. The small road in front of the hotel curved by the water's edge, but the motel's view was mostly of mangrove forest thick, twisting shrubs with spindly roots growing into the mud and crumbling concrete buttressing a shoulderless road. I approached a man in his midtwenties painting a thin coat of white paint over the faded white paint of the motel's front entrance. Mornin, I said. Hey, you're the guy who just checked in, right? he said, dipping his brush. Yes. Into room six? he said. Ya, I think so. Why? I said. A guy died in that room last week. I think he was from Switzerland. Maybe Sweden. No, I think it was Switzerland. You know what happened? I said. The circumstances seemed more important than the country of origin. Well, I know it started with an SD. Do you know if they threw out the sheets? He hunched his shoulders in that way that says, Not sure, but if I were you, I'd move to room seven. I thanked him for the update and asked where I might get some breakfast. Check the store, he said. Before I could ask if there was more than one option, he stepped around the corner, leaving me with the dog on the street and the whines of crickets. In the distance, I could make out a few rolling hills covered in shrubs. I started walking. An open-air Laundromat next to the motel sat empty and idle, maybe closed permanently. I passed what appeared to be an abandoned house, its tin roof secured with a scattering of discarded tires. A quarter mile or so later, I arrived downtown. It consisted of three concrete buildings: a bar, a small strip-mall kind of thing with a grocery store, and a video store that sold vodka in large plastic bottles. In the distance I could see an empty basketball court with a metal roof, just across the street from a harbor made of faded gray concrete protecting a rotted wooden fishing boat. Plastic bags lined the road, but with no wind to blow them into the sea or against one of what I'd learn were Yap's two stop signs, they simply sat there, the equatorial UV rays breaking the bags down into their most basic elements, just as they appeared to do to most everything else on Yap. At least there are palm trees, I thought. As I approached the store, I glanced at the eight-and-a-half-by-eleven sheet of paper posted on the Plexiglas door. It was titled Yap TV Guide and listed a mix of crime dramas and sports from no particular network, but all American. It wasn't a diverse mix. COPS! was broadcast twice a day; Monday Night Football on Monday, Wednesday,

and Friday. I opened the door, expecting bells to jingle, the way they do in a mom-and-pop drugstore, but the door opened silently. The only person inside was a topless woman of grandmotherly age behind the cash register. She didn't turn as I entered and instead just stared down one of the aisles. Broken fluorescent lights struggled to illuminate half-stocked shelves. A few boxes of frozen chicken wings, some dusty pots and pans, a two-week-old newspaper from Guam, and some gum. I bought a stale Three Musketeers breakfast and walked back outside. In the few minutes I'd been inside, Yap seemed to have become twenty degrees hotter. Heat waves shimmered off every surface: the tin roof of the bar, the cracked asphalt of downtown road, the top of the phone booth whose receiver dangled limply, as though its last user had just combusted in the concentrated heat of the booth. In the hazy distance, I saw a pickup truck turn down a dirt road. Curious what all the fuss was about, I started walking. For two or three miles, I passed what had looked like shrubbery from a distance, but now I could see it was jungle. Not jungle with soaring trees and howler monkeys and exotic predatory orchids. Instead, just a tangle of green vines with dull green leaves drooping from a thick coat of beige road dust. So far at least, this wasn't exactly what I'd been expecting, but I didn't want to judge too quickly. Perhaps Yap would just take some getting to know. And its small size made that seem plausible. Just fourteen miles from tip to tip, Yap is roughly the shape of Delaware but, at thirty-eight square miles, less than 2 percent its size. In other words, the entire island of Yap isn't as big as the capital city of America's second-smallest state. More of a suburb, perhaps. A little farther along, I passed a small cinder-block house, but it was abandoned. There wasn't broken glass in its window openings—just no glass at all. A wooden fence surrounding the house had long since collapsed. Twenty minutes later I came to a huge white warehouse surrounded by barbed wire and weeds. The gate was padlocked and no cars were parked outside. A small white sign read Kingtex. As I'd later find out, Kingtex was Yap's largest and most illicit employer, but for now, it didn't seem like much of a destination, so I turned around. On the way back, I was relieved to see a motion truck trundling toward me. Though it wasn't yet noon, the truck had its headlights on. Or headlight. It had only one functioning light, which, as far as I could tell, was one more than needed on Yap day or night.

CHAPTER 8 What You Can Expect to Learn in This Chapter: Is a coin that weighs four tons convenient or inconvenient? If she had one, would Goldilocks have used a guidebook? As much as I had dreamed of sitting on a small island and reading all day, after a few weeks I found I simply couldn't. Each day, I'd read for two, maybe three hours, with a warm Diet Pepsi on the wooden bedside table, before needing something else to do. For the first few days, that meant simply watching the fan above me wobble noisily against the faded ceiling. Amazing, I thought late one morning, that ceiling fans get dusty. I guessed there must be little airborne eddies, calm places in a man-made storm, not dissimilar to the one I'd created for myself out here. After the wobbling fan (and the occasional dead-end thought), I'd spend an embarrassing number of minutes watching geckos stalk flies. I loved the drama, however small, of prey and predator. Then I'd go back to reading, pausing occasionally to scratch the early, awkward growth of my mustache and goatee. (Lacking sufficient testosterone or hairy genes, my facial hair grows only around my mouth and on my neck; it isn't nearly as sexy as it sounds.) Eventually, when my eyes blurred and the musty heat of my little room became unbearable, I'd know it was time for the active part of my day.