

April 2009 Raspberry & Vine Short Story Competition Winner

Kulī and the Goose Feathers by Kerry James

Detective Inspector Kulī Fīnau of the Tonga Police Force emerged from the Royal Nuku`alofa Club into the starlit night. He breathed deeply of the fresh air, threw back his shoulders, expanded his massive chest, and almost toppled over. He decided not to try it a second time and, instead, made his way uncertainly to his battered secondhand sedan which was parked under a large mango tree in the far corner where, according to a club trustee, it was least likely to bring disrepute upon the club. He was peering down to see which end was parked outwards, when he fell over a body.

He was not unduly worried. It had been a long night. Earlier on, Honourable Vasai (now he was a character!) had been hilariously wheelbarrowed out to his green ex-army heap also parked under the vast mango tree. *Oiaueē!*

A new and horrible thought struck him. Was it Noble Vasai? Had his car left without him? He lived only a block away on Sālote Road and was at the club so often, it probably knew its own way home.

‘I am sorry, sir,’ he said, with gooseberry-eyed concern to the outstretched arm, which lay very still.

Kulī blinked at the man lying under the overhanging branches of the mango tree. No, it was not Honourable Vasai’s face that looked up at him with open eyes and a faint air of surprise. It was too young, for a start. Kulī bent down, shirt seams straining over his wide shoulders and buttons straining over his paunch, while the man kept looking at him. Kulī could make out no breath or smell of alcohol coming from the wide open mouth, although the last was asking a bit much given the amount

swirling from under his own luxuriant moustache. He did not reach down for the pulse at the side of the man's neck in case he fell on him, but looked hard at his chest to see if it moved up and down. There, amongst the torn plaid of the shirt, was a gaping hole surrounded by a mass of dark congealed matter.

Kulī groaned as he pushed himself upright and phoned the duty officer at Central Police Station to get the crime scene team up here right away.

'They're not going to like that, Kulī,' answered the officer.

'Nor do I like it!' growled Inspector Fīnau, his deep voice ricocheting from the stone wall and bouncing off the trees and stars.

Curses would undoubtedly rend the midnight air as men struggled out of their beds or whoever's beds they were in. He had heard there was a lot of that going about, although he never seemed to have the time for it these days. He pulled in his gut and stood up straight. The SOC team could just get themselves along here, and fast. This body could be worse for the club's image than even his car. Prominent Members, including his own Minister of Police, would want him to clear up the matter as quickly and discreetly as possible.

The man lay like a stick figure, stiff and awkward. No blood pooled by him. It looked like he had been killed somewhere else and dumped here. Kulī looked up into the tree, as if expecting a solution, or another body, to drop out of it. The sudden movement brought his head into sharp contact with the tree trunk. For a moment, everything went black and his eyes watered.

He had not been able to see the night sky through the tree so dismissed the idea that the man had dropped through it from above, thrown down from a plane, or some

such. There would be more debris around for a start. Having exhausted all lateral, and even vertical, thinking, Kulī cleared his throat, which was purely a nervous habit.

Along with the mango leaves under the man, breadfruit leaves stuck to his chest and bloodied armpits. But no breadfruit trees grew in the parking lot. There was something else odd, shining white in the starlight, which looked ridiculously like feathers stuck out at each side of his feet, making him look like a winged god dropped from the skies by a heavenly hunter, an event as yet unknown in the annals of Tongan crime.

Kulī now did what he always did when he was fed up. He called his long-suffering corporal, Nusipepa Kaisinga, who was a walking compendium of local knowledge, patience, and unstinting loyalty to his boss, even when all these qualities were put severely to the test by his being awoken from a deep sleep in the early hours of a Sunday morning.

‘Ko au,’ muttered Nusi into the telephone.

He listened to his boss’s aggrieved tones.

‘You have a dead body?’

‘I just said that. In the club car park. It has feathers on it. Please get here.’

‘You’ve been drinking.’

‘That’s what I do at the club,’ explained Kulī, even more aggrieved.

‘*Sai*, okay,’ sighed Nusi, and went to get dressed.

In the few minutes it took Nusi to get to the Royal Nuku`alofa Club, nowhere being very far from anywhere in the nation’s capital, the SOC team had arrived and set up portable arc lights and poked about with torches while Kulī stood under the tree

gloomily watching their progress.

‘What have we here?’ Nusi asked the team.

‘Male, about thirty years, with gun wound to the chest. No other visible injuries. We’ll know more when we get him to the hospital for an autopsy,’ replied a clear, efficient, and definitely female voice.

Of course, it was the new recruit, a keen young woman, Constantia Kupu.

‘Sorry to get you out so late, Constantia,’ rumbled the voice from under the tree, suddenly treacly with concern.

Nusi had wondered how long it would take his boss to glom onto the fact that the lovely Constantia was here. Kulī smiled down at her, foolishly, in Nusi’s opinion, as the officers packed their equipment and shooed away onlookers.

‘Any sign of the weapon or bullet?’

‘Nothing here, sir.’

‘The feathers?’

‘Not sure, but I’d say they’re goose feathers.’

‘What do you make of that?’

‘The only geese near here are the Queen’s,’ replied Nusi, pointing his chin at the Royal Palace just visible through the trees.

‘How good a shot is Her Majesty these days?’

‘I will run you home now,’ said Nusi, who did not like the Royal Family to be even remotely the subject of jest.

Kulī cheerily waved goodnight to the SOC team and smiled fulsomely at Constantia, his white teeth gleaming in the starlight.

‘Full report tomorrow, eh?’

‘It’s Sunday,’ cried a disembodied voice.

Others held back their laughter but Constantia’s high-pitched giggle was unmistakable, if quickly suppressed.

‘Sunday is already today, Constantia,’ said Kulī, very deliberately. ‘Tomorrow is Monday and normally regarded as the first day of the working week.’

‘Yes, sir,’ said Constantia, who liked and admired Kulī beyond measure but wished he would not drink so much, even on his nights off. It was not good for him and when his brakes failed on the beer, his words and actions sometimes ran downhill too.

Kulī put his large hands on the hood of Nusi’s car to steady it. Surely, they were not going to have an earthquake now on top of everything else? He waved away the police van and nearly overbalanced again. He really was very tired.

‘Identify the deceased, Nusi?’

‘Maybe an out-of-towner,’ said the fount of knowledge, shaking his head.

‘An outer-island boy?’

‘More like overseas. The jeans and shirt are not like you get here. With all this travel and emigration, it’s getting harder to place people.’

Kulī slept very soundly until bells clanged out all over Nuku`alofa at nine-thirty am calling the faithful or the very deaf to ten o’clock morning church service. The sofa

was quite comfy to sleep on as he knew from past experience, but the cushions were dusty and made him sneeze. This he did now with verve. Dust flew into up the air and half his head went with it. He fell back and opened one eye. A shaft of sunlight promptly cauterized it.

Why had no-one recognised the man, not even Nusi, who had a fifty-thousand-mugshot-capacity brain? He tried to rearrange his limbs and thoughts to greater effect but it was no good. The amount of beer he had taken on board last night demanded an immediate trip to the bathroom.

Today was Sunday, as he had reminded dear little Constantia, when by law and custom no work was allowed in Tonga. Instead, people prepared earth ovens, cooked, overate, slept, and attended church services, choir practices, and Sunday School. For some, it must be quite the hardest day of the week and the reason why they slumbered at their desks for the rest of it. Kulī usually abided by the Sabbath by staying in bed all day. Unfortunately, last night he appeared to have not quite made it there. Now, he would go to get his car while people were at church and unlikely to witness his ungodly activity.

The day was warm and before he had walked a mile his clothes were wet with perspiration. By the second mile he began to feel better than he believed possible when he woke up. He really must leave the car behind more often, he thought; walking really set up a man of his healthy build. You could almost hear the military band accompany the swing of his arms as he turned off Vaha`akolo Road and into Sālote Road, which ran along the back of the Royal Palace. The road was blissfully empty of people except for two girls in white frilly dresses with pale golden woven waist mats, who hurried

towards the Free Wesleyan Church where their King and Queen were attending divine service.

‘You’ll be late,’ thought Kulī. Their frantic footsteps in tiny black patent button-over shoes told him they already knew that.

Kulī looked at the expensive houses opposite on Nob Row, ‘Nob’ here standing for ‘Noble of the Realm’, where not a curtain moved. Noble Vasai lived in one of them but he could not see his vehicle. It was probably no more welcome here among the rows of new SUVs than it was at the Royal Nuku`alofa Club. He quickly gathered his thoughts. Loitering near the Palace was an offence that might at any minute bring a Royal Guard on sentry duty from one of the gates at either side of the Palace grounds. It was also an offence to wear sunglasses near the Palace. Kulī snatched his from his face and folded them into his top pocket. They were rather nice glasses and had cost a lot of money, and he did not want them confiscated. He supposed also, as he was working on the Sabbath, he should arrest himself.

He strolled along casually examining the trees above the back fence of the Palace, like a tourist with an intense interest in arboriculture and fence construction. Heavy foliage overhung the high old wire fence providing a screen from prying eyes for the Palace. A rare old sandalwood tree, an almond, and several *tavahi* jostled beneath tall casuarinas that waved grey-green feathery arms against the clear blue of the morning sky. He saw gaps where rusted wire mesh had come away from metal fence poles, but no hole large enough to admit a man. The geese honked away in their pen. They were fearsome creatures: these guardians of Eternal Rome and Nuku`alofa’s Royal Palace.

Beside the ornate twelve-foot-high rear gates he spied a solitary breadfruit tree. Unlike the robust specimens outside his office at Police Headquarters at Longolongo, this one, wedged between other trees and against the gate, was tall and spindly. Several of its branches had recently broken off giving Kulī a glimpse of the high red Palace roof and the upper verandah decorated with white wooden fretwork. The gates, locked with a huge padlock and chain, had not opened in his memory, but the left gate now hung slightly askew, the metal hinge shining where it had broken off. Kulī saw splashes of dark rust colour on the faded red paint and guessed they must have got there some time after Friday night's deluge, which had totally inundated the Royal Nuku`alofa Club car park.

He peered between the gate's railings to where dozens of geese strode about with their wings and necks outstretched. He looked from the top of the goose pen to a casuarina overhanging it and from the casuarina to the breadfruit tree. His long almond-shaped eyes were honey-coloured as they caught the sun. Hmph. It might just work.

Now that he knew what he was looking for he found dark patches in some of the breadfruit leaves, in the hollow at their base where they uncurled from the stem. Extricating his Swiss army knife with some difficulty from the pocket of his jeans, which were filled to the brim with him, he cut off breadfruit leaves and held them up in front of him like a bouquet.

He was not unobserved. An old lady stood before a frame house dwarfed by new double-storey Nob mansions on either side. She looked as frail as a wraith, but Kulī knew the old ladies of Tonga much better than to believe it.

‘The people that own the vehicle that parks over there are still at church.’

‘Who might they be, *finemotu`a*?’

‘Noble Vasai and his son’s and heir’s family. The son and his wife have two new vehicles in the garage and put the father’s old wreck over there: horrible great thing that backfires like a cannon. Well, goodbye; I’m going in to my dinner now.’

Her narrow shoulders bent to one side, she walked back up her garden path in jerky little steps as if pushed along by the puffs of wind that ruffled the air.

Kulī put the breadfruit leaves into an evidence bag in his car at the club, marked it with a felt pen, and locked the door before heading down Hala Tu`i, the monarch’s road, past the Palace to the *malae pangai*, the royal meeting ground, by the harbour. The Royal Standard fluttered atop the Victorian palace and a guard stood in a sentry box by the side gate tensely fingering his gun, an Uzi, by the look of it. His face was covered in perspiration. Kulī stood idly under an ancient Norfolk pine working out more angles from the corner of his eye. He then walked back up the short road, got in his car, drove home, and went to sleep.

The next morning he strode into the incident room.

‘What progress have we?’ he asked.

‘No identification of deceased yet; but they are goose feathers,’ said one.

‘And goose shit on his shoes,’ said another SOC officer.

Kulī looked at Constantia. The use of an impolite word was the boys’ way of testing her. Constantia came from a high-born family and was also highly trained and very bright. It was a coup to have her in the crime scene team and Kulī did not want to lose her, for many reasons.

‘Okay, so we know he’s been around geese,’ he said.

They all tittered, except Constantia. Usually, she was eager to mix ideas with the men on the team, but this morning she looked pale and preoccupied.

‘Constantia?’

‘Sorry, Kulī, no.’ She turned her huge eyes to him, flustered.

The team filed out and Kulī had picked up the phone to call Vaiola Hospital when Constantia came back to retrieve a case from the floor where she had left it.

‘You’re all over the place this morning, Constantia; not like your usual well-organised self,’ smiled Kulī.

He prided himself on how he handled new recruits as he looked across at her now with what he fondly imagined to be the avuncular concern appropriate to her commanding officer.

Constantia promptly burst into tears. Kulī looked on in pure amazement.

‘I’m sorry if I’m letting you down. My mother has asked me to pull strings at the Department of Immigration to get a visa for my cousin, and I don’t want to compromise my position on the force. I should be handling this better, but I’m not.’

Kulī admired her concern. People pulled strings all the time in Tonga; it was how the place worked, like a puppet show.

‘Your cousin wants a visa?’

‘It’s more complicated.’

Kulī sighed; in his experience family matters usually were.

‘My cousin is my mother’s sister’s child. She’s fallen head over heels for a man we don’t really know. He’s Tongan but he’s here on a US passport with no visa to stay

in Tonga. So...I have to get him one.'

'An overstayer in Tonga; that's new!' said Kulī. While Pacific Rim countries clamoured about Tongans without visas and railed against the Polynesian 'overstayers' in their countries, wide-scale emigration now meant overseas-born Tongans had to get entry visas to their country of origin.

'I don't want to sponsor this man. I don't even know him. He just came out of nowhere and swept her off her feet. My cousin has even left her fiancé for him. My mother takes her part, because the girl's mother is her elder sister.'

Her mother was a force to be reckoned with. She was a high-born aristocrat, who made Constantia high in terms of birth rank.

'You don't like her, your cousin?' enquired Kulī.

Although the ideology of Tongan kinship did not allow it, not liking relatives was endemic. Suddenly, he did not like the cousin. The thought of her betrayed fiancé aroused painful memories of his own.

'We're... different. I want a career. She's a lady-in-waiting at the Palace.'

'Ah,' said Kulī. That was where people of high-rank often served in menial jobs, to surround the royals with their own kind as guards, equerries, secretaries, chefs, and gardeners.

'Well, Constantia, you have attained a proper profession, so just go on with your work. The reliance on blood rank to get on is over.'

They both knew it was not, but they must act as if what he said were true.

Kulī felt suddenly unsettled and decided to go in person to Vaiola Hospital.

'What kind of weapon would make a wound like that? Well, I'd say a .303 like

our dads' would do it. Bullet went in his back and came out through the front, killing him on the way. Chap would have dropped like a stone. You have the bullet?' asked the medico, as they stared at the dead man's chest.

Kulī waved aside the question like the fly that should not have been in the room, but was.

'He's been dead a day or more, and not in the parking lot. Where was he killed? Was it a garage or a workshop of some kind? I found paint particles on his skin and clothes.'

'What kind of paint?'

'The kind used to paint metal, red and green particles.'

Kulī thought for a moment before his brow cleared. Yes, that fitted.

He walked out of the chilled morgue into the warm air and called the Commander of the Royal Guardsmen.

'Can we meet? It's rather urgent that I speak to you.'

'I have to be at the Palace Office in about twenty minutes. That any good?'

'I'll see you under the banyan tree in fifteen,' replied Kulī.

The guardsman was as good as his word and met Kulī by the Palace Office. The two greeted each other and chatted amiably for the required few moments.

'I'll come to the point; I need to look at the roster of your lads on Palace sentry duty.'

'I have one somewhere but I know where they all are without having to look at it. I choose particular chaps depending on what's happening at the Palace.'

'Who would have been in that sentry post over there on Friday evening?'

‘Sione Kapapulu, a good chap; he was on yesterday too, as a matter of fact.’

So, the nervous shiny-faced officer was Sione.

‘He must have done something *kovi* for you to roster him on at leisure times,’ joked Kulī.

‘What? Oh, yes; or, rather, no. His young lady works in the Palace and he likes to be near her. They’re engaged to be married, actually.’

‘Of course; he’s engaged to...’

‘Virginia Tupou. You have a relative of hers working for you! Don’t know that her family was awfully keen on the girl joining the Police Force; but perhaps she might raise your social profile from below ground level.’

Kulī’s heart hit the side of his chest.

‘What’s all this about anyway?’

‘One of the Royal Guards might have seen something at the club on Saturday night, and I’d like your permission to speak to them.’

‘I appreciate that, Kulī. It’s just possible one of them saw something useful. I heard you made rather a night of it and a chap dropped dead at your feet. Making work for yourself now, are you?’

They both laughed heartily.

‘Any idea who did it?’

‘I might be onto it,’ said Kulī, who felt ill at the thought.

‘Well, if you want to speak to Sione you’d better be quick. He’s off to New Zealand this afternoon on the early flight. He asked me for special leave. Sick aunt, or something. It might be a while before he’s back.’

‘I’ll do that. Just one more question: the guards are equipped with Uzis now, aren’t they?’

‘Yes, by courtesy of a generous aid donor, we changed over from the old .303s. In my eyes, the .303 is still the infantryman’s rifle, but these Uzis are much better for short-range fighting. After all, we don’t have much call to pick off people from hillsides around here since we don’t have any hills. Why do you ask?’

‘I’m interested, that’s all,’ smiled Kulī.

He was not smiling when he walked into the station at lunch time. Constantia flushed as she put down the phone.

‘That was my mother again. My cousin’s even more distraught. The man I’m meant to speak to Immigration about hasn’t been seen all yesterday or last evening. No one knows where he’s gone. He’s probably run out on her after, you know....’

She blushed a deeper crimson.

No, thought Kulī, pulling up a chair. No, I think the man crept into the Palace late on Friday night or early Saturday morning for an assignation with your cousin. He crept out again down the path by the side of the goose run. He climbed onto the goose shed and into the casuarinas to get out of the grounds as he had done before, only this time he was shot dead with a .303 rifle by Sione, that fine young Royal Guard and jilted fiancé. The man’s body dropped through the breadfruit tree, bounced off the old gate breaking its hinge, and onto the roof-rack of the green rattletrap parked directly beneath where it lay unnoticed in the shadows until the elderly nobleman, Vasai, drove it down the road on Saturday night, and parked at the Nuku`alofa Club under the mango tree next to me. When his vehicle pulled away, the body caught on the low branches and

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dropped onto the Club parking lot. But how am I going to prove it and, worse still, how am I to tell you?

‘Let me speak to your cousin. Her name’s Virginia, isn’t it?’

Constantia nodded, the horror a second away.

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