

# THE THIRTEENTH MONTH

COLIN HAMILTON



Black  
Lawrence  
Press

For Theo & Will

Do you know what the worst thing about literature is? said Don Pancraccio.  
I knew, but I pretended I didn't.  
—Roberto Bolaño

# Contents

## **Part One**

Call It Courage	3
Monolithos	11
The Cinnamon Shops	24

## **Part Two**

Reasons for Moving	37
The Book of Disquiet	49
Between the Woods and the Water	63
The Spurious Glamour of Certain Voids	82

## **Part Three**

Labyrinths	95
The Savage Detectives	106
Touching the Void	121
Elsewheres	134

# Part One

# CALL IT COURAGE

So that I'd think of her each day, my mom taped a photo of her new home to the mirror above my dresser. She was living in little shack balanced among the branches of a tree. It was the kind of sanctuary I'd often dreamed of having hidden deep in our backyard, a place I could disappear into with a stack of comics, but rather than a sky-ascending Iowan oak, her tree was twisted, half stripped of bark, and it leaned out over the muddy banks of a lagoon. A ladder had been hammered into its trunk, and at the top of the ladder a screen door sat unevenly in its frame. Behind that screen everything was dark, but I could imagine her there writing the letters that would arrive every few days.

It was my sister's job to read them aloud while my dad made dinner. My mom wrote about the strange feasts she and the others made of crabs they caught by hand and boiled in creek water. She wrote about a clever pig named Musgrove that liked to rummage in the muck beneath her tree-house. She described their favorite swimming hole, which they'd clear of alligators by singing loudly and thrashing the marsh grasses with sticks. Sometimes an ornery old beast would refuse to budge, in which case they'd have to swim on the far side of the water while he lurked perfectly still in the mud with just his speckled eyes tracking them. It was quite safe, she assured us, as long as they could see the gator sunning himself on the other side of the cove, hopefully dazed by a little deer digesting in his swollen lizard belly. She wrote that she was very, very happy.

While my mom was away, I did the usual things, setting off on my bike to find my friend Steve or the twins, Nick and Dan, and we'd band together to explore the woody ravines that cut through our neighborhood. There we'd stage elaborate battles between armies of green and grey plastic soldiers, splattering them with napalm-inspired model airplane glue and setting them alight to our cheers of rat-a-tat-tat. As the sun rose higher, some adult would feed us lunch, and then invariably we'd end up at the pool, which was just down the hill and through a park from my house, our backs salty and red.

But evenings were different. After a game of kickball in the street or ghost in the graveyard through the interlocked backyards, I'd come home. When my mom was there, she'd always be the first to bed, always with a book, and I was welcome beside her if I brought one of my own, a clever lure as reading was something of a torment for me, laboring through books that others consumed in a gulp. But there, next to her, it didn't matter. If the words were a jumble, if the letters leapt back and forth mockingly, I still had my mom. Now, though, the bed was empty. My dad mostly spent his evenings with Chaucer or Montaigne, but he preferred to read upright in his study, with a glass of scotch and the freedom to wander the darkened halls of our home, typically naked, something we never discussed but which I always assumed had to do with having grown up on a farm.

When she left for Ossabaw—that was the name of it, a sandy island buffering the Georgia coast from tropical storms where she'd retreated with a colony of artists—my mom gave me a book she said I would enjoy, *Call It Courage*, and asked me to write to her about it when I was finished. Unlike the usual flimsy paperback of my youth, this was a hardcover wrapped with a rough canvas and stamped by the intimidating, totemic marks of Pacific Island tattoos. I put it off for weeks, but finally one night, curled up alone in the cave of my bottom bunk, I made myself begin. Like most of the stories I knew, this one was about a young boy, but rather than a future French knight or secret English prince, he lived on a remote Pacific island surrounded by the crashing waves. The children all played in the tides except for Mafatu, that was his name, who was terrified of the water because

when he was just a toddler his mother had taken him out into the ocean to hunt sea urchins when a terrible storm descended, and although she'd managed to save her son, she was swept out to sea and drowned. He grew up surrounded by the taunting waves that had claimed his mom. Amongst a people who made their living fishing and trading between islands, it was a terrible shame to fear the water, and he was ridiculed for his cowardice, taunted by other boys, motherless, an embarrassment to his father, and ultimately the elders couldn't even bring themselves to look at him.

As I read, alone in the dark, I could picture her swimming in her muddy lagoon, the alligator's slow and devouring gaze upon her; I could picture those clouds darkening into a storm and the still lagoon water beginning to churn. Why had she given me such a horrible book? Mafatu was a coward, and I felt all the things he was feeling. Was that what she was trying to tell me? Had she seen, as only a mother could, how my fragile soul recoiled from every challenge? If it had been a school night, my father would have eventually responded to the beacon light in my room, come to me and discovered my dismay, but it was summer, and he was lost in pages of his own; if he noticed the light at all, he was probably proud to believe I had stayed up late reading.

Since sleep was impossible, and perhaps more frightening than the known darkness of my room, I had no choice but to keep going, just as Mafatu did when he could no longer stand the taunts and humiliations and decided to face his fears by setting off into the murderous sea in his little canoe, accompanied only by his dog and a pet albatross. Doon, my loyal canine companion, was curled at my feet, in theory guarding me from dangers though unaware that they weren't sneaking in through the window but between the covers of a book. In another storm, Mafatu loses his sail, mast, and all their provisions, and the trio is left adrift over waters full of dark, silent forms glimmering beneath them. Eventually they are washed ashore on an island, which he recognizes by the scattered bones as belonging to the dreaded Eaters of Men. He knows they should push back into the waves, but they are starving and thirsty. He steals a spear from a sacred, bloodied site and uses it to fend off a wild boar and then to kill a

tiger shark—bold acts for a cowardly boy. Discovered by the cannibals, the trio barely escapes back into the sea in their shallow canoe, wandering again until they finally wash ashore back at their own island, where all the villagers rush to welcome them and Mafatu is accepted at last by his father as a brave and admirable son.

It would be, she explained, very important that we write each other frequent letters while she was away and that I told her as much as I could about my life. She promised to do the same. Her own father, she added, had written her a letter every year on her birthday, assembling a collection that became, over time, one of her most prized possessions. “Over time” was a key phrase, because she didn’t find the letters until after he’d died. He chose to keep them to himself, presumably, because many of the things he wanted to say were ambiguous at best, such as confessing in the very first of his letters that he’d never particularly wanted kids. On her eighth birthday, he wrote: “You are still growing up. And you are still frequently difficult, explosive, and sometimes scatter-brained. But you have a swell bump of curiosity, and during the past year you have devoted a lot of attention to the birds and flowers around your new home. Today I think you know more about flowers than I have ever known. The simple truth is you can be very, very nice, and increasingly often you are.” On her sixteenth birthday, he added: “This growing maturity also shows in your reasonably frequent letters home, which are interesting, very amusing, and well written—in spite of the fact that you apparently have not heard of punctuation.”

I didn’t write to her about *Call It Courage* because I had no idea what to say. Instead my letters said little at all. The score of a soccer match. That I helped my dad pick walnuts from the yard so he could mow without them exploding into fragrant, staining shards under the gas-powered blade. But when she finally returned with the first days of fall, she found it sitting by my bedside—an unavoidable prop when she came to kiss me goodnight. “Did you ever read it?” she asked innocently. Although I had been obsessing about it for weeks and had been bracing for this crushing exchange, I realized instantly she had forgotten it entirely. And with that I burst into tears, to her great confusion. Between sobs and shakes, I explained what

a horrible book it was, that I thought she had drowned, that she thought I was a coward, and she, utterly confused, assured me that she had no idea that it was about dead mothers and cowardly sons. Someone had simply suggested it as a good book for boys.

For my mom, reading and travel were intimately connected. She loved the letters and memoirs of fearless women, Mary Kingsley, Gertrude Bell, and Freya Stark, who with properly buttoned collars and wide-brimmed hats managed to be carried through Africa or to cross the Middle East by camel without missing tea, and although it took most of her life to make that leap herself, she would eventually ride a bike through the Valley of Kings and negotiate the markets of Mali. Despite, or perhaps because of her almost pathological fear of the cold, she loved tales of polar expeditions, especially those that failed, especially those of handsome, doomed Ernest Shackleton, and some nights when I couldn't sleep, she'd lie beside me and tell me about the sounds his ships had made being cracked open like nuts wedged between sheets of ice, or about what it must have been like for him in the unrelenting dark to chew on shoe leather to soothe his hunger. Any story with a little taste of death to it, somehow that calmed her.

It must have calmed me too, I suppose, because I began to collect in a discarded prescription vial a haphazard cocktail of aspirin, decongestants, anti-depressants and sleeping pills I'd pillaged from our house's varied cabinets. As the vial filled, I could feel my own anxiety lessening. I knew or at least believed that if things, mysterious Things, should ever become too bad, I had, clever boy, devised my own escape hatch. That vial hidden at the back of a drawer, a little charm, would keep me safe—not from death but from an excess of life. My mom and I might have been mesmerized by those who sucked their last meal out of a rotten shoe sole, but that kind of struggle wasn't for us. It wasn't any great surprise when she eventually took her own life.

As a little girl, she'd once journeyed along the top of a stone wall that circled the local zoo's bear den. When her sister shouted, she slipped and fell into their pit, knocking the wind from her lungs. Two huge bears, dark and lumbering, were grooming themselves at the far side of the dugout,

and startled by this sudden, little intruder, they lurched to their feet to investigate. Throughout her days, my mom could remember their yellowy eyes and her own bottomless fear as she tried to suck the air back into her chest. Then the cries as a uniformed zookeeper leapt into the pit, waving his arms to fend off the great beasts, and lifting this little girl up into her father's arms.

Late in his life, as deafness made her father increasingly remote and my mom struggled to find any conversation to engage him, she reminded him of the story of the bear pit, and she shared how throughout her life she'd often thought about his rescue, how, as long as he lived, she never doubted everything would be ok. He just smiled a little absently and said, "You know that never actually happened, don't you?" And although she was in the prime of life and he was sinking into dementia, she knew he was right.

Her father, we called him Far, was full of surprises, like the fact that he had taught himself to write in Japanese or that he kept a small pistol in his desk. His wife, "*Christine!*" as he called her, on the other hand, was mostly full of Virginia Gentleman, a low-end bourbon that was hidden behind books, under linens and sofas and at the backs of cabinets throughout their house. Christine Kleisus had been one of the prettier girls in Altoona, Pennsylvania when they met, and undoubtedly she made perfect sense for his ambitions when he was a mere junior account manager, but she became a painful embarrassment as he rose, which he in turn made painfully clear to her, and his authoritarian disdain unleashed all of our worst instincts. My sister, cousins, and I referred to her as The Claw, because when she would touch us in a failed imitation of affection, it was as though a heavy bird of prey, a vulture, was digging its talons into the soft flesh around our collarbones, and we could only respond by recoiling. Her daughters, thoroughly overwhelmed, maddened, and cared for by their dad, focused all their rebelliousness on disapproving of their mother.

A few years after my parents' divorce, my mom and her new husband hosted a Christmas party, and from their front window I watched my widowed Granny shuffle along the brick walkway through a gate to their townhome with a large, unwieldy holiday platter in her arms. Just then

my mom called me from the kitchen to hand her the wooden spoon that sat just out of her reach as she stirred some sauce—a defining, narcissistic habit of hers, asking for unnecessary help simply to make sure that I was sufficiently focused on whatever she was doing, complicit. When I returned to the window, I saw Granny had fallen down a flight of six brick steps and was lying flat on her back on the icy walk.

I must have cried out, but what I remember is dashing out the door and to her side. She was moving just ever so slightly, mechanically, muttering but clearly unconscious. I held her hand and tried to say comforting things into the void where she had receded. The back of her head, which had struck the sidewalk, was bleeding and pools of thick, sticky blood were gathering around her; some of it soaked through my pants and clutched my knee. Despite the release, her face was visibly swelling. My mom was then beside us both. “I think that’s German,” she said, trying to interpret what might be Granny’s final words but which, like so much else she had said over the years, was misunderstood and forgotten. As time slowly regained its pulse, what had been a single, all-consuming instant began to creep forward into aching minutes while we waited for help and began to feel the cold air snake around us.

In the ambulance, my mom remained quite calm, conversing with the EMS team and then the doctors and nurses as they stabilized Granny into a coma, with a mask pushing air into her lungs and a maze of tubes circulating yellowish, antique fluids. After a while, there was nothing more to do and we cabbed back to my mom’s house where the Christmas party had gone along without us, with rounds of drinks, a roast, sugars and pie. Through most of the afternoon I’d been crying on and off, in unexpected bursts and sad little whimpers, and although I’d been ashamed of my first, most overwhelming release, I also felt a flash of fierce pride that I had been brought to tears by my grandmother’s possible death while my family pretended it had no choice but to set out the appetizers and pop the bubbly, even though I secretly knew my tears had not been out of grief for dear old Granny but simply in response to the sheer horribleness of it all, the adrenaline and the fear. My aunt Douglass, who always confused me by

being a quite beautiful, less-directly related version of my mom but also smelling a bit like the goats she raised on a little farm outside of Philadelphia, embraced me and did her best to look serious. “Do you think she’ll make it?” she asked, wrinkling her nose, a gesture meant to convey concern but one remarkably close to disgust.

“I, I don’t know . . . I think she might die,” I whimpered, slipping back into my tears.

She handed me a champagne flute. “Well,” she said, clinking her own against mine, “that’s too bad.”

But it had never been Granny’s way to make things easy on others, especially her daughters. Through several visits to the hospital over the following days, they did their best to look grave for the doctors while deciding that the time had come to pull the plug. In a misguided attempt to comfort an upset nurse, my mom joked that her own living will read that if she ever got a bad cold, she didn’t want to be revived. Whatever relief they felt walking away from Granny’s bedside, driving away from the hospital, feeling closer to one another than they had in years by swapping traumatizing stories from their adolescence to great nervous laughter, whatever momentary ecstasy they found was gnawed away and replaced by something harder to digest over the coming days as Granny’s unplugged and unaided but tough old heart, that vulgar little beast, continued to beat.