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Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young professionals to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. An exempt operating foundation endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

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subSaharan AFRICA

John B. Robinson is an Institute Fellow studying the struggle of the people and island of Madagascar to survive.

Dinna Forget

DIEGO SUAREZ, Madagascar

December 1, 1996

By John B. Robinson

I awoke from my siesta drenched with a sticky sweat, feeling exhausted. The wind had died and the air hung heavy on my shoulders. Before I had the time to get to a bottle of filtered water, three steps down the corridor in the kitchen, the baby-sitter asked, "Patron, do you know somebody in Tana?"

"Yes," I responded automatically, fog-brained, heat-drunk.

"Patron," continued Virginia. "My sister's boy was attacked by a rabid dog. He needs medicine by tomorrow or the doctor said he will die of *le rage*."

"There is no serum in Diego?"

"There none at the Big Hospital, none at the pharmacies, none with the good sisters."

"Did you try the Military Hospital?"

"They said there is no serum in Diego. They would call Tana."

"So they called Tana?"

"They said they would."

"So then it's O.K.?"

"You see patron, the Malgash."

"No, I don't see."

"We Malgash." She gave me a blank stare.

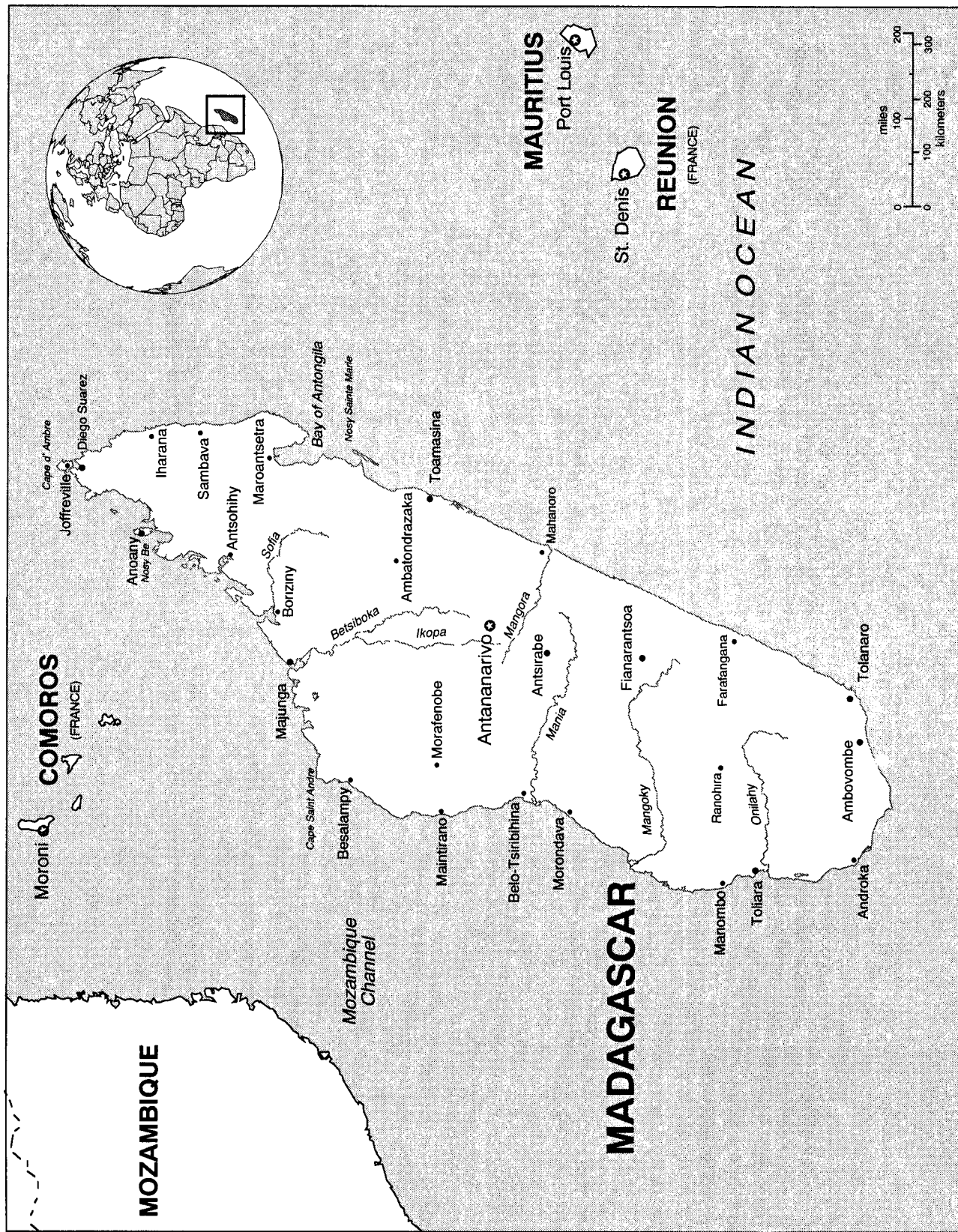
"What do you mean?"

"If you know someone in Tana maybe they could send the medicine."

"You tried everybody in Diego?"

"There is no medicine here, patron. I tried to pay the doctor, but he said, 'If there isn't any, there isn't any.'"

A few months ago I had a very good friend in Antananarivo. He was a Spanish intellectual married to a French beauty. We argued literature, religion, politics and moral responsibility from Zanzibar to Paris — always with some kind of local alcohol at hand, to be sure. Just recently he quit teaching at the University of Antananarivo to work in La Reunion. I could have counted on him for



anything, but he was gone.

"I know a taxi driver in Tana," I said.

Staring at the wall clock to gain concentration, I realized that today's plane for the capital would leave in 10 minutes.

"Why didn't you come and tell me this morning?" I asked, angry about Virginia's slowness.

"I was still looking for the medicine."

"When was the boy bitten?" I ask.

"Six days ago."

"Six days ago? And you waited a week to look for a serum?"

"We couldn't find any," she said, playing the role of a professional victim naturally, the person who always fails despite her best efforts.

Virginia has worked for me less than a month. I know her hardly at all, and I have no obligation toward her whatsoever. Yet, despite differences in age, culture, sex, class and language, there remains the fact that a fellow human being has asked me for help. Even though I find her play on my sympathy repugnant, I feel her desperation acutely.

"I'll get the serum," I said, having no idea how to accomplish the task in the next 24 hours.

Fifteen minutes later, at three o'clock, I met up with Mr. Morvan, the General Director of the only sea-salt producing company in Madagascar. He had agreed to show me the salt harvest and give me a guided tour of the company's facilities. As nothing is ever wasted in Mada, in the car with us were two university students (a very opportunistic female and someone she called her brother) and a French fishing guide who worked on the Mozambique Channel.

"How's the fishing?" I asked.

"Amazing."

"How's the ocean?"

"Too dangerous, too rough, too scary. That's why I quit."

"You quit?"

"We have seven-meter-long speedboats with twin outboards. One day a wave bounced off the bottom of the ocean and lifted the whole boat five meters in the air before slamming us down. If we had capsized everyone would have died."

"No Coast Guard is there?"

"Not even a *pirogue*. We are all alone out there and I don't like it."

Our first stop on the tour was a block of concrete and cut stone that read,

Dinna Forget

To The Glorious Memory
of

The Royal Scots Fusiliers
Who Fell In The Assault On
Diego Suarez
May 1942

The monument, standing inconspicuously near the side of the road, was surrounded by scraps of rusted cars, piles of plastic garbage and a few hostile plants.

"He telephoned the General Manager at home who didn't believe a word he said and told him to lay off the bottle."

In May 1942, to prevent the Vichy government in Madagascar from ceding Diego to the Germans or the Japanese, the English invaded. Instead of attacking the nearly impregnable pass, bristling with artillery and covered with soldiers' barracks,

the English very cleverly decided to put ashore at the Baie du Courrier, 20 kilometers distant, where the fishing guide had just quit his job (after the *blitzkrieg* of the Maginot Line and the fall of Singapore, every officer in the English High Command realized the vulnerability of fixed defensive positions).

The few thousand Colonial soldiers invaded in peace, without a single person noticing their existence. They marched along the road (used to pick up the mail when Cap d'Ambre was too treacherous to round by sea) until they came to the salt company, where they frightened the living hell out of the plant manager in the middle of the night. He telephoned the General Manager at home who didn't believe a word he said and told him to lay off the bottle. When morning came, perhaps pricked by the plant manager's hysteria, the General Manager alerted the military command, who took the report very seriously indeed. The French immediately amassed a column of troops and went out to do battle with the English in the fine tradition of suspicion and that has caused them to kill each other for centuries.

After 48 hours of machine-gun battles and mortar fire, the two commanders sat down and amicably

ended the strange affair. The monument, sorry and forgotten, was a testament to the near-sighted folly of colonial bureaucrats, cut off from the Metropole, who made selfish policy decisions in an attempt to isolate themselves from the pain of war, blind to the larger issues of right and wrong.

Mr. Morvan continued our tour by pointing out a flat plain that had most surely been a clover leaf of the bay a million years ago. The plain was ringed by a belt of mango trees originally planted by Creoles from La Réunion. The ground water is very salty, and the red/yellow mangos are renowned for their particular flavor. After independence the Malgash jettisoned the Creoles and moved into their houses, recognizable by the shuttered verandahs and hipped roofs peaked by twin wood finials. The Malagasy peasants still sit in the shade and harvest the ripe mangos when they fall, but they spend the majority of their energy planting rice in the middle of the scorching plain.

We drove on and eventually came to the limits of the salt company property. As we crossed the first several hundred acres of company land, Mr. Morvan explained, "Population growth in Madagascar is 3.2 percent, meaning that the population, as well as our market, will double in twenty years. I have already done the calculations to turn this land into salt production." Its barren location at the far end of the great bay, coupled with the fact that the company efficiently produces and distributes nearly all the salt in Madagascar, is most probably the reason the company has navigated a century of turmoil, surviving war, revolution, independence and various acts of nationalization.

As the tour progressed Mr. Morvan showed us gypsum, which he wanted to sell to a cement factory in Majunga, the immense holding dikes and the general layout of the salt fields. He knew the names of nearly all the flora and fauna that lived on the company land. Each one has a special role in an ecosystem so unique that radical transformation and adaptation is the only alternative for survival. Because the salt company is one hundred years old, the salt fields and the mangroves appear to have evolved at the same time. The dikes create a place for the mangrove to live, and the mangrove hold the dikes in place.

The process that turns the ocean to salt involves gradually changing the composition of sea water until it is 262 times denser than normal. At that point the water begins to deposit its salt, and with time, and

enough positive energy such as sun and wind, you can make as much as you want. The negative forces working against salt production are clouds, rain and cyclones. Each element balances against the others.

We went to see the annual salt harvest in action, but one of the mechanical salt harvesters had broken the very same morning, and the other broke in front of our eyes. We moved on to the gigantic washing machine, only to find it was turned off for lack of salt. The packaging line was also out of order.

"Is this normal?" I asked.

"It happens," Mr. Morvan replied fatalistically. "Either it all works together or it all falls apart."

It was six o'clock when we arrived back at company headquarters, and I asked Mr. Morvan if he knew someone in Tana who could send me the rabies serum. He hesitated a small instant, then agreed to help me to his full capacity.

"The first two doses of the rabies serum arrived the next day, Thanksgiving Day, in a sealed container holding melted ice cubes and four insignificant looking vials (two containing freeze-dried serum, two holding hydrating solution)."

By good fortune, my father went to a dinner party in Connecticut several weeks ago and happened to sit next to a Madame Colas, a charming Swiss woman whose husband turned out to be the President of a multi-national salt company. As conversations between social people in America will often touch upon the activities of

their children, my father explained that he had one son lost somewhere in Madagascar. To his great surprise, Madame Colas not only knew where I lived, but she was flying in for the salt harvest. To make a long anecdote a bit shorter, I was introduced to Mr. Morvan by his boss, played bridge one evening with Madame Colas, and consequently Mr. Morvan was inclined to do me a favor — a favor that revolved around the life and death of a five year old boy.

The first two doses of the rabies serum arrived the next day, Thanksgiving Day, in a sealed container holding melted ice cubes and four insignificant looking vials (two containing freeze-dried serum, two holding hydrating solution). Waiting for the plane, which was an hour late, I chatted with a French consular officer who had spent five years in Miami prior to his recent posting to Diego. I explained to him the situation with the little boy, and he asked me if the dog was already dead.

"It died two days after it attacked the child," I told him.

He cringed.

Virginia and I went straight from the airport to her house, where we picked up the sick boy. The boy's twin brother sensed something awful was about to happen and kicked and clutched and yelled and screamed until he had to be forcibly restrained by a neighbor. Reading the notice that came with the serum I was struck by the line, "Due to the fatal nature of clinical rabies, there are no contra-indications."

On the third floor of the near-empty hospital we found the nurse of the doctor who was supposed to be waiting for us. He was gone and the nurse was visibly surprised that Virginia had found the serum.

After a bit more searching we found a doctor in another wing of the hospital. She seemed to be aware of the situation and refused to believe the boy's mother had found the serum so quickly. When she learned I had had the serum sent from Tana she became indignant, imperious, and contemptuous. She wanted nothing to do with the injection and treated the boy's mother, the boy, Virginia, and I, as we were nothing more than impertinent peons who had overstepped our bounds. In a moment of clarity, I suddenly understood all the medical horror stories I had been hearing since I had arrived. The termites in the transfusion bottles, the bleeding worker who had only been treated after he threatened to shoot the hospital staff, the house guard who died of gangrene because he didn't know the doctor must be paid in advance.

Back in the nurse's office there were no needles. Virginia and I went to a pharmacy and found some that were clean, disposable and cost the equivalent of three portions of rice. We returned to the nurse's office to watch in horror as the nurse first dropped a vial of the precious serum, then wiped it off with used cotton. When she finished the injection she told Virginia there *was* serum at the Hospital.

"What?" I demanded.

"*Misy.*" (There is).

To make sure I understood correctly, I had Virginia translate the sequence again.

"*Misy,*" says the nurse.

"Why couldn't the boy have the serum yesterday?" I demanded.

The nurse stared at me blankly, passively hostile, waiting for me to stop being a fool. I missed something, and nobody, later in the taxi, talking with friends, or at home, could give me an adequate explanation. Either the doctor was waiting to sell the serum to somebody richer than Virginia, or the doctor was a tribalist who didn't want to admit the existence of the medicine to somebody outside her tribe, or I don't know what.

The point being, there was rabies serum at the hospital, and the doctors and nurses had purposefully withheld this information from the boy's relatives at the sure expense of his life. In America this would be criminal behavior; in Madagascar this is common behavior.

"She wanted nothing to do with the injection and treated the boy's mother, the boy, Virginia, and I, as we were nothing more than impertinent peons who had overstepped our bounds."

That night, after a fine Thanksgiving dinner replete with gray wine and mango tart, I was simultaneously haunted by the doctor's insulting remarks and filled with Thanksgiving thoughts. How could a person, even a doctor, be so indifferent to the sure death of a

five-year-old child? As Madagascar is an island, I wondered if the Malgash think of themselves as islands — as isolated entities, perhaps enlarged by their families, perhaps by their tribe, but no further and not necessarily that far. Thinking about a casual dinner party in Connecticut that helped save the life of a peasant boy in Diego Suarez, it is hard not to believe the contrary, that we are all inextricably linked together.

Every Thanksgiving Americans remember that their forbears died for a more perfect world, a better place to live. The Malgash have no national holiday that celebrates their unity (their independence, yes), and this may be the mark of a failed society. A society where people die of hunger in the marketplace, mothers cry in front of pharmacies and men burn the forests once destined to shelter their grandchildren. A society that must either learn to live together, like the plants that make up a mangrove thicket, or suffer for generations to come. ■

Institute of Current World Affairs

Fellows and their Activities

Adam Smith Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is spending two years studying and writing about Turkey and Central Asia, and their importance as actors the Middle East and the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Christopher P. Ball. An economist, Chris Ball holds a B.A. from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and attended the 1992 International Summer School at the London School of Economics. He studied Hungarian for two years in Budapest while serving as Project Director for the Hungarian Atlantic Council. As an Institute Fellow, he is studying and writing about Hungarian minorities in the former Soviet-bloc nations of East and Central Europe. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

William F. Foote. Formerly a financial analyst with Lehman Brothers' Emerging Markets Group, Willy Foote is examining the economic substructure of Mexico and the impact of free-market reforms on Mexico's people, society and politics. Willy holds a Bachelor's degree from Yale University (history), a Master's from the London School of Economics (Development Economics; Latin America) and studied Basque history in San Sebastian, Spain. He carried out intensive Spanish-language studies in Guatemala in 1990 and then worked as a copy editor and Reporter for the *Buenos Aires Herald* from 1990 to 1992. [THE AMERICAS]

Sharon Griffin. A feature writer and contributing columnist on African affairs at the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, Sharon is spending two years in southern Africa studying Zulu and the KwaZulu kingdom and writing about the role of nongovernmental organizations as fulfillment centers for national needs in developing countries where governments are still feeling their way toward effective administration. [sub-SAHARA]

John Harris. A would-be lawyer with an undergraduate degree in History from the University of Chicago, John reverted to international studies after a year of internship in the product-liability department of a Chicago law firm and took two

years of postgraduate Russian at the University of Washington in Seattle. Based in Moscow during his fellowship, John is studying and writing about Russia's nascent political parties as they begin the difficult transition from identities based on the personalities of their leaders to positions based on national and international issues. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Pramila Jayapal. Born in India, Pramila left when she was four and went through primary and secondary education in Indonesia. She graduated from Georgetown University in 1986 and won an M.B.A. from the Kellogg School of Management in Evanston, Illinois in 1990. She has worked as a corporate analyst for PaineWebber, an accounts manager for the world's leading producer of cardiac defibrillators, and manager of a \$7 million developing-country revolving-loan fund for the Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (PATH) in Seattle. Pramila is tracing her roots in India, and studying social issues involving religion, the status of women, population and AIDS. [SOUTH ASIA]

John B. Robinson. A 1991 Harvard graduate with a certificate of proficiency from the Institute of Kiswahili in Zanzibar, John spent two years as an English teacher in Tanzania. He received a Master's degree in Creative Writing from Brown University in 1995. He and his wife Delphine, a French oceanographer, are spending two years in Madagascar with their two young sons, Nicolas and Rowland, where he will be writing about varied aspects of the island-nation's struggle to survive industrial and natural-resource exploitation and the effects of a rapidly swelling population. [sub-SAHARA]

Teresa C. Yates. A former member of the American Civil Liberties Union's national task force on the workplace, Teresa is spending two years in South Africa observing and reporting on the efforts of the Mandela government to reform the national land-tenure system. A Vassar graduate with a *juris doctor* from the University of Cincinnati College of Law, Teresa had an internship at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies in Johannesburg in 1991 and 1992, studying the feasibility of including social and economic rights in the new South African constitution. [sub-SAHARA]

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