

SEX, INTRIGUE, AND DEADLY PURSUIT—ST. CROIX, 1981

by Robert D. Sutherland

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In my mystery novel *The Farringford Cadenza* (The Pikestaff Press, 2007), there is a climactic chase in which a resourceful young woman must escape from a ruthless, extremely powerful man and his henchmen if she is to preserve a priceless artifact and save her own life. I decided that an island would provide an ideal setting for such a chase. For someone desperate to flee, an island can be a trap. Whichever direction you run, you quickly come to Land's End. To leave, you need some form of transport—an airplane or boat; but if pursuers are monitoring the airport, and no boats are available, you've no choice but to stay. If the island is small and not familiar to you, if you don't know anyone who can be trusted to hide you, you must find some way to hide yourself—which is difficult, because in a static residential population a stranger stands out and immediately attracts attention. If your pursuers have the resources to scour the island and are determined to find you, in time they will.

Convinced that the proper island setting for my chase would heighten suspense, engender an anxious claustrophobia, and entertain readers with colorful and exotic detail, I chose St. Croix in the Caribbean, one of the American Virgin Islands, which my wife and I had visited in 1981. That year, on March 14, the residents of Christiansted, the largest town, celebrated St. Patrick's Day in spectacular fashion with free hot dogs and beer, a seemingly endless parade consisting of numerous brass bands and convertibles showcasing school royalty, and hordes of spectators dressed in green filling the streets and mingling with stilt-walkers fifteen feet tall. My photographs and the notes in my travel journal enabled me to re-create the scene when I wrote the novel twenty years later.

How does a story that begins with a composer's death on a train crossing Pennsylvania in 1947 wend its way to a failed seduction and a deadly chase in St. Croix in 1981? Well, by way of greed, lust, revenge, misadventure, puzzle-solving, a symphony concert in New York City, and a series of murders in Baltimore.

The Farringford Cadenza is a suspenseful, humorous mystery that subtly skews generic conventions to continually surprise readers with reversals of their assumptions and expectations. The story is not easily summarized; the unique manuscript of a major unpublished musical work (a cadenza for solo piano that occurs in a concerto by Charles Philip Farringford) disappears when the composer dies on a train returning home to New York after three public performances of the concerto. From the testimony of those who heard it, the missing cadenza acquires legendary, even mythic status. Thirty-four years later the manuscript turns up in a Baltimore flea-market; but immediately following a triumphal press conference, it's stolen in the first of three breakins that occur on the same night.

The Farringford family hires a female detective, N. F. Trntl, to recover the manuscript. What she never learns (but the reader does) is that, for a variety of motives and purposes, at least ten individuals and groups are avidly seeking the manuscript. Most of these are not aware of the others, or become so only when their paths continually cross.

One of them is fabulously wealthy Victor Zyzynski, who wants to possess the manuscript for inclusion in his mostly-stolen collection of unique artifacts. But it's not just the manuscript he desires: it's the music itself, which he's convinced will cure him of a physical inadequacy he's endured for many years. But to be cured, he must hear the music performed by a superb pianist—specifically, by Rosamond Foxe, a beautiful young musician and Farringford specialist he's secretly long desired to add to his collection. Zyzynski does not realize that Rosamond has a prior romantic attachment to Felix McKay, one of detective Trntl's associates; rather he mistakenly assumes that it's another pianist, Peter Shipley Abbott (whom he has long hated as a rival) who has lustful designs on Foxe.

In Baltimore, Trntl does find Farringford's manuscript but, through carelessness, is robbed of it by Zyzynski's henchmen. Having finally obtained the manuscript, Zyzynski tells Rosamond that he will have an opportunity to purchase it on the island of St. Croix from the thief who stole it from Trntl, but that he will need Rosamond to go with him to authenticate it. She reluctantly agrees to accompany him, but clandestinely lets McKay and Abbott know where she's going. Not trusting Zyzynski, they fly to St. Croix also, to be on hand to rescue her if need be.

On the island, in his well-guarded compound, Zyzynski shows Rosamond the manuscript, gives her time to practice playing the music, then tries to seduce her in order to effect his cure and satisfy his sexual hopes. His scheme fails grotesquely because of too much champagne, too many oysters, and Rosamond's revulsion. Aware that he wants permanent possession of both the manuscript and her, she takes the manuscript and escapes from the compound. An island family gives her a lift into Christiansted where the St. Patrick's Day celebration is just getting underway. When Zyzynski finds Rosamond and the manuscript gone, he sends his henchmen in hot pursuit.

Now, I'm going to share some of the notes I made in my travel journal in 1981 in order to illustrate how on-site factual observations were used to shape and vivify a piece of fiction. In using the notes, I had to be sure that the fictional rendering did not read like a travelogue. The correspondences between the notes and their novelization are in square brackets following the journal entries.

"Friday, March 13. . . . Christiansted is on the northern coast; we approached it from the south through pleasant wooded meadowland, then drove through outlying streets and proceeded north past market squares and residential neighborhoods to the downtown area. Our hotel is on the harbor, the front door and restaurant windows facing the water." [This is the hotel where Felix McKay and Peter Shipley Abbott stay after they arrive in St. Croix; the approach to downtown resembles Rosamond's arrival in Zyzynski's limousine.]

"Immediately outside is a boardwalk that follows the waterfront and provides access to the shops, which line it. Many of these sell clothing and leather goods, or else are souvenir boutiques." [Fleeing one of Zyzynski's henchmen, Rosamond Foxe enters such a store, hides in the fitting room, and buys a change of clothes, hat, and sunglasses to disguise herself.]

"Tourists are everywhere. Some distance down the quay east from the hotel entrance is a waterfront park on the far side of which is a large yellow fort built in the Danish colonial period. The architecture of the downtown buildings is a peculiar mix of Danish and Caribbean: stone or brick covered by painted stucco, two or three storeys high, with the upper storey(s) extending out over the sidewalk to form a 'roofed' gallery or colonnade which provides walkers protection from sun or rain. These covered sidewalks extend for

blocks However, some buildings have upper storeys with clapboard siding, and look decidedly Caribbean.” [Described incidentally during the chase.]

“Saturday, March 14. . . . All along the quay people were excitedly moving toward the downtown area. The annual St. Patrick’ Day Parade was about to start. The streets running in parallel down to the waterfront were jammed with people of all ages, and everyone was wearing green in their clothing: sometimes a whole dress, or clacks, or maybe just a hat or a green sash with a white blouse.” [Members of the native family who give Rosamond Foxe breakfast and a lift downtown are wearing green. Though minor characters, I really love this family.]

“We asked a young man who was walking in our direction about the celebration. ‘Oh, it’s great,’ he said: ‘All the school royalty come by in convertibles; there are bands, and stilt-walkers. And free beer and hot dogs. By afternoon the streets are ankle-deep in beer cans!’

The streets, the sidewalks, the galleries beneath the second-storey overhangs were jammed with people. In the far distance, out of sight, brass bands were playing different pieces simultaneously, the cornets and drums reverberating, echoing and bouncing from building walls in a pulse-quickenning cacophony.” [Viscerally described as the chase progresses.]

“. . . . The convertibles went by with dignitaries and ‘royalty’. The young girls who were the queens of their respective schools were elegantly dressed and wearing crowns. Periodically in the procession brass bands marched past. Once the parade had passed, the streets filled with people again, and mingling in the crowd were many stilt-walkers, dressed in green shirts and long green trousers that covered the stilts, their heads elevated some fifteen to twenty feet above the pavement. Both men and women were on the stilts; most were wearing white visored eye-shades. It was fascinating to observe the skill and dexterity of the stilt-walkers in threading through the mass of people while striding, turning, stalking along the second-storey parapets.” [Organically made part of the ongoing action; Abbott nearly knocks one stilt-walker over.]

“To get a sense of what the buildings were like inside, I went up a flight of exterior stairs to enter a second-storey tavern. It was spacious, pleasant, not greatly crowded. People stood along the bar, and a few men were playing

pool at a table near the center of the room. . . .” [This is the tavern that Rosamond Foxe and Peter Shipley Abbott enter in an attempt to elude Zyzynski’s goons. Big Verna the tavern-keeper (one of my favorite characters) sends Rosamond to the women’s washroom to exit down the fire escape. When Jerry, one of Zyzynski’s men, comes into the tavern hunting Rosamond, Big Verna stands her ground:

Looking carefully around the room, Jerry ... found none of the few women present to be Rosamond Foxe, then focused on the door marked HENS. Crossing quickly to it, he found his way suddenly blocked by a large woman in an apron.

“Hold it, sonny boy, you ain’t goin’ into the ladies’ room. Just find somethin’ else to do. Nobody gets by Big Verna.”

Jerry stood poised on the balls of his feet, trying to decide what to do. “I’m looking for a woman who came in here,” he said finally.

“Well, you ain’t gonna find her in there.”

“Hey, Verna,” called a man from a table near the door. “You need some help over there?” He stood up; six or seven other men stood up, and two came from the pool table cradling their cues.

“Nothin’ I can’t handle, boys. Thanks.” To Jerry: “Now, mister, you better leave. I don’t want your trade.”]

“Back to Christiansted for the night. The streets were clean; no indication that there had been a parade or that beer cans had been ‘ankle-seep.’ We strolled on the waterfront in the evening, watching natives and tourists. One extremely tall black man, lanky and thin, a Rastafarian with matted and dusty dreadlocks, came ambling through the park, his alert and restless eyes surveying the crowd.” [In the novel, a similar Rastafarian comes into the park at night and sits smoking marijuana on a bench near Peter Shipley Abbott, who—much to the Rasta’s puzzlement—does not seem to notice his presence.]

I recorded these journal entries simply to remind myself of things we saw and did on our trip. They proved to be extremely valuable twenty years later when I was writing the novel. But the notes provide only physical descriptions, summary judgments, and external details. The novelistic uses to which the observations are put, their dramatic resonance, and the roles they play in the fictional narrative derive from interpretations and connections conceived through the play of imagination. The actual people we saw (e. g., the Rastafarian walking in the park) provide only suggestive prototypes or

templates for their fictionalized versions (e. g., the Rastafarian character on the bench who tries to attract Abbott's attention). And of course some characters are *not* based on observed prototypes, but are totally the products of imagination (e. g., Big Verna).

As a mystery novelist, the thing I found most appealing about St. Croix was its normalcy. It's not an island ruled by a vicious dictator or awash with political upheaval, not one of those we encounter in fiction peopled by zombies or featuring terrorist enclaves, spooky houses, and mad scientists. It's populated by normal people living their lives in normal ways, celebrating their St. Patrick's Days as a meaningful ritual, and dealing with the tourists as best they can. The tourists are probably the strangest folks on the island (particularly those who make notes in travel journals)—but being patient with them pays, and they don't stay long.