



San Serriff

1st April 1977

I cursed myself as I drove slowly across the busy lanes of New Delhi towards the Headquarters of the Ministry of External Affairs. It was just six o'clock in the morning, and if you think that the life of a Naval Attaché to the Ministry of External Affairs is a bed of roses, I will tell you it is a pain in the neck. We are sailors' not bloody pawns in the hands of bureaucracy.

"Captain D' Costa, you are late," the Assistant Secretary of State (External Affairs) said and, without allowing me to reply, threw a newspaper across the table, "Read it!"

"Sir, the weather is delightful in New York. Pakistan has lost a hockey match against India..."

"Read the front page only. I did not ask you to read the news for me," he retorted.

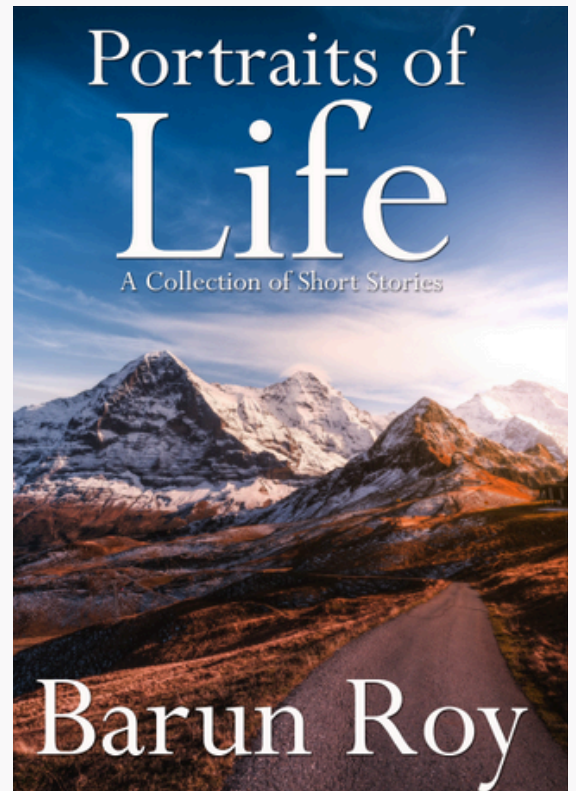
"There is a report on an Island, Sir."

"Yes, San Serriff. We have an island just under our feet, and we don't know about it," he lashed out, lighting his cigarette.

Don't believe if the board reads 'No Smoking'. In the Ministry of External Affairs, big men smoke anywhere. It proves that they are thinking!

The paper I had on my hands was the 1st April issue of 'The Guardian'. It had a lengthy report on a twin island that resembled a semi-colon. The island, which lay to the north, called Caissa Superior, took the shape of one top mark of a semi-colon; the island to the south, with a broad top and a tapering tail, looked like the lower mark of a semi-colon. Most of the developments had taken place in Caissa Superior. The capital of San

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NBU CARPE DIEM SHORT STORY

Serriff, Bodoni, was located on this island. A long oil pipeline linked the port of Claren, in the east, with Common, which lay in the west. The other major port of San Serriff lay to the north of Caissa Superior. Railways and roads connected the capital, Bodoni, to Adze Don, a coastal city, and Nomp, yet another town on the west coast. A major road ran from Erbar to Port Claren in the east.

The other island had its own charm. Separated from the island to the north by the shoals of Adze, Caissa Lower sported the highest peaks of San Serriff. Monte Tempo (6453 Metres) and Montallergo (8972 metres) provided enough challenge for mountaineers. To those who loved to romp around on thickly vegetated mountain slopes, there were pleasures to be had in abundance. Mountain streams cascaded down the hills. Many cataracts hummed eternal music as they raced down to the plains. There were shaded forest paths, cosy nests to stay, far from the madding crowds. Villa Pica was a port town on the west coast. This was connected by a road to Gillicameo, a small town in the west. Tipe was another seaport town in the south connected with Woj of Tipe, a major tourist spot.

The credit for the progress of the nation was given to General M. J. Pica. He was known to be a competent administrator and a level-headed patriot. But the report added one last thing. San Serriff faced a grave danger. This danger was caused by the erosion of the nation's western coasts. It led to accumulation on the eastern seaboard, so much so that the entire landmass slowly moving eastwards held eminent possibility of a collision. This would bring catastrophic spinoffs whose magnitude none could foresee. It was essential, felt the reporter, to take a closer look at the twin islands and the problems the tiny nation

faced and explore ways and means of arresting the damage caused by lopsided erosion. For them, this was a problem that deserved immediate attention.

"God damn it, the British knows about this island. How come we have not even heard about it?" The Assistant Secretary said, extinguishing the cigarette with such force that it seemed he was trying to kill it.

"Captain D' Costa, the Prime Minister, is extremely concerned regarding this matter; we must know more about this San Serriff."

Just then, the door opened, and the Minister of External Affairs walked in.

"Mr. Varma, the Cabinet is baffled at this report. How come all the nations have contact with it, and we don't even know it exists? And what about this problem of erosion? The island could crash with Ceylon, and who knows, even with India..."

"Sir, we are trying to learn more about it," the Assistant Secretary said. Just then, an officer walked in, handed him a paper and left.

"Sir, it seems that the Soviet Union, China and even the United States have no contact with San Serriff. The British have just been able to make contact with it."

"Mr. Varma, I have been authorised by the Prime Minister to handle this matter with all that is in my power. You must send an expeditionary force to this island and make contact with this General Pita."

"General Pica, Sir!" I said, and both of them glared at me in such a way as fathers do when their children butt in.

Ten hours later and after much commotion, which one could call discussion, Mr. Varma looked at me. He said, "Captain, you have been authorised to head an Expeditionary

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Force to San Serriff and contact General Pica. Destroyer INS Mysore, Frigates INS Trishul and INS Talwar will be at your disposal, and you will have overall authority over these ships. We will have to bring into bear the whole might of the Indian Navy. We have information that the Pakistani Navy has already dispatched their lone active submarine, PNS Ghazni."

29th April 1977.

With two frigates and a battleship, we rolled towards the Indian Ocean.

Incidentally, we could not find San Serriff anywhere on the maps we had at our disposal. We were told to 'discover' San Serriff, and according to the Minister of External Affairs, since it was just somewhere in the Indian Ocean, how hard could it be to miss! We explored for more than three weeks and found nothing. It was surprising. Once, the radar operator informed us about two battleships cruising towards us. It was international waters, no reason for concern. They were Americans; something told me they were also looking for San Serriff. We met Russians, French and many others, all searching

but not disclosing the fact, just routine voyages and naval sorties. After another week, the expedition was called off.

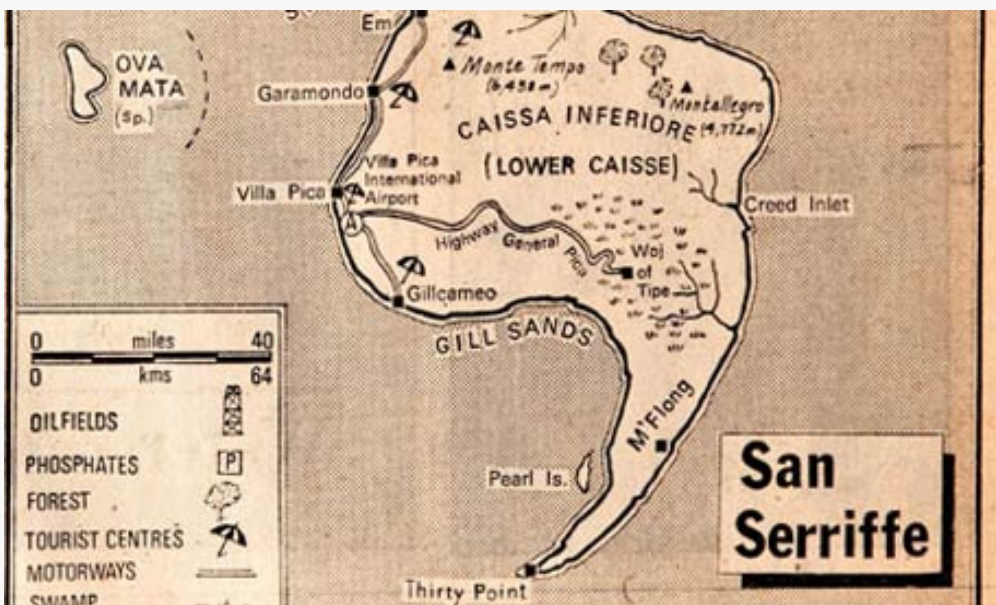
1st May 1977.

I sat on my chair at my office in the Ministry of External Affairs, placed a cup of hot tea on the table and prepared to type my report on a computer, the famed Xerox PARC, one of the only few in the Ministry of External Affairs, a 'gift' from Stanford University meant for the Indian Statistical Institute in Calcutta but diverted by zealous bureaucrats. The expedition had been a wild goose chase.

Just then, something exploded in my mind as I opened Wordstar to write my report. Pica, Monte Tempo, Montallergo, Gillicameo, Caissa Superior, God damn it! They were all names of the fonts. I quickly got the issue of 'The Guardian'. It was dated 1st April 1977.

I ran towards the Assistant Secretary's office. "We were April fooled, Sir! The whole world was April fooled," I cried.

A few days later, 'The Guardian' issued a report saying they had published it as an April Fool's Day prank.



The map of San Serriffe Island published by The Guardian on the 1st of April 1977 as an April Fools' Day Prank. (c) The Guardian.