

ONCE UPON AN ISLAND

Written by

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Based on the book by David Conover

FADE IN:

EXT. BEACH - SUNSET

The tropical sky vibrates with color as the sun makes its descent. Coconut palms stretch over waves that claw restlessly at the sand.

In the distance, a man peers into a camera on a tripod.

THROUGH THE LENS

The sunset. Palm fronds framed right. Small adjustments - there, just so.

DAVID CONOVER looks up from his camera. He's 24, powerfully-built, capable. But as he lifts a cigarette to his lips, his hands are shaking badly. He scans the horizon, waiting.

A SOUND begins in the distance, grows. FLAPPING wings.

David quickly bends over the camera.

THROUGH THE LENS

A dark shape streaks into the palm branches, then another, then dozens. Scores of long-necked sea birds, pitch black CORMORANTS, glide home, flapping, SCREAMING. The branches tremble as they land.

The commotion quiets as the birds settle, black silhouettes against the deepening sunset. Suddenly - all is quiet. They become invisible, blending with the silhouette of the tree. A wisp of smoke blows past the still branches.

David straightens without having taken a picture. He replaces the lens cap - it clatters in his trembling hands. He's in uniform, World War II camouflage.

INSERT TITLE: "PHILIPPINES - 1942"

Behind David is a grisly scene - bodies of TROOPS splayed on burned driftwood and blackened sand. The setting sun paints the obscene carnage crimson and gold.

David removes the camera from the tripod. His COMMANDING OFFICER joins him, nods toward the ground.

OFFICER
Did you shoot that, Conover?

THE BURNED BODY OF A CIVILIAN - rags, coulee hat, sandals.

DAVID
I *photographed* him. Sir.

The officer pins him with a sharp look. David meets it without flinching.

OFFICER
What about this?

The officer nudges something with the butt of his rifle - a smaller body, burned, barely recognizable as human.

David's face is carefully neutral.

DAVID
The light's gone, sir.

OFFICER
Next time. Move out.

David folds the tripod and fixes it to his pack. He shoulders his carbine and heads for the line of weary SOLDIERS picking their way through the dunes.

They march past the tree where the cormorants flew to nest. David searches the branches.

The quick, hard PING of a sniper's bullet cuts the silence. David crumbles. All goes black.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

A sudden loud FLAPPING. David bolts upright in bed, alert.

A window shade flaps as a TRAIN passes somewhere too near by.

INSERT TITLE: "APRIL 1946"

David slumps. He wipes his face, breathing hard.

JEANNE, 24, stirs and sits up beside him. She's beautiful - startingly so, but also strong and intelligent.

JEANNE
What? What's wrong?

David lunges out of bed, naked, and slams the window shut.

THROUGH THE WINDOW

Nine feet away, an old neighbor, MRS. CRAWFORD, peers through her own window - it looks directly into David and Jeanne's bedroom. She glares at David's naked body, scandalized.

David glares back, then snaps the curtains shut.

JEANNE (CONT'D)
Keep it open. It's hot in here.

DAVID
It's also loud in here. It's
making me crazy.

David stalks back to bed, sits on the edge.

DAVID (CONT'D)
Does that gargoyle next door ever
leave her perch? She might as well
have a chair in our bedroom.

JEANNE
Shame on you. Mrs. Crawford
embroidered these pillowcases for
us as a wedding gift.

DAVID
Does she have to watch us use them?

Jeanne caresses David's shoulders.

JEANNE
Shhh. Come back to bed.

David relaxes slightly.

JEANNE (CONT'D)
We need to start getting up earlier
to beat the traffic. I punched in
ten minutes late today. If it
happens again, they'll dock my pay.

DAVID
Just the bedtime story I need -
L.A. traffic. Got anything on mud
slides or rising crime?

Jeanne rests her cheek on his shoulder.

JEANNE
Grouch. Does your back hurt? Is
that what's keeping you awake?

David's jaw twitches.

DAVID
Quit asking about that, okay? It's
fine.

JEANNE
I'm just trying to help.

Jeanne falls back against the pillows.

DAVID
Sorry. Didn't mean to bite your
head off.

Jeanne smiles and pulls him down on the bed.

JEANNE
Hmm. In that case, I have another
bedtime story.

EXT. LOS ANGELES HIGHWAY - DAY

Traffic. Low-hanging smog. Cars nudge toward exits.

INT. DAVID'S CAR - MOVING - DAY

Jeanne applies make-up in the mirror. She glances at David.

He clenches the steering wheel, face grim.

JEANNE
If you hold that steering wheel any
tighter, it'll break.

DAVID
It's this blasted traffic. And
this smog! I can't even breathe.

JEANNE
Let's put on some music.

Jeanne flips on the radio.

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
--as fuel, building material, and
gas prices soar in response to
wartime shortages--

She quickly snaps it off.

JEANNE
Or we can just look at scenery.

DAVID
What scenery? Look out there.
What do you see?

Jeanne dutifully looks out her window.

JEANNE
Cahuenga Boulevard.

DAVID
Know what I see? Surging masses of
drones driving through empty,
pointless lives, powered by fear.

JEANNE
Huh. No wonder they don't let us
merge.

DAVID
Fear of the time clock. What
other's think. Fear we'll lose the
little pile of meaningless crap
we've managed to accumulate. No
beauty, no peace, just pointless...

An angry car HORN sounds. David BLARES back.

DAVID (CONT'D)
Back at you, jackass!

JEANNE
Honey, you've got to calm down!
Think about something peaceful.
Tell me about... what's the most
beautiful place you've ever seen?

David takes a deep breath, blows it out.

DAVID
Easy. Wallace Island in British
Columbia. You've heard me go on
about it.

JEANNE
Tell me about it now.

DAVID
Well, you remember, I was a
counselor at a boys camp there--

JEANNE
A deserted island in the middle of
nowhere. A crazy caretaker with
ghost stories.

David relaxes a little.

DAVID

And... it's beautiful. So beautiful you can hardly believe it's real. Mist hovering over fir trees. A lagoon like a giant mirror. Ducks, deer.

David pulls up to the curb and stops the car. Jeanne makes no move to get out.

DAVID (CONT'D)

Here you are.

She rests her head on his shoulder.

JEANNE

I have a couple minutes. Tell me more.

DAVID

Okay, so... The sunsets are amazing. And there are these birds. Cormorants, they're called. At dusk, they fly into the trees. They're not like gulls or other sea birds - cormorants need to dry their wings, or they'll die. So every night, they all come streaking into the trees. These long-necked black birds. There'd be this... there'd be this flapping...

He falters, his eyes full of pain again. Jeanne lifts her head, studies him.

JEANNE

Oh, David.

He avoids her eyes.

DAVID

Better get inside.

Jeanne's looks at him with fierce love and determination.

JEANNE

No. The masses can surge on without us for awhile. We never got a honeymoon because of the war. We'll go now - to Wallace Island.

EXT. TRINCOMALI CHANNEL - BRITISH COLUMBIA - DAY

David pulls hard on the oars of a cockleshell, muscles straining with effort. Jeanne clings to the sides, scans the horizon as they glide across the calm channel.

JEANNE

The channel's wider than I expected.

He's enjoying the physical challenge.

DAVID

Two miles. I've done it before.

Jeanne sits forward, excited and awed, as they approach a fir-clad island.

DAVID (CONT'D)

There. That's the cove!

EXT. WALLACE ISLAND - CONOVER COVE - DAY

The beauty of it is breathtaking - a lagoon ringed by sandstone beach, towering green firs, and madronas. Wildflowers spill over sun-bleached rocks. A perfect mirror image of the wooded cove shimmers on the water's surface.

David noses the boat into the natural harbor. He eagerly leaps out and drags the boat to the beach.

DAVID

Welcome to Wallace Island!

David lifts Jeanne in his arms and carries her to shore.

EXT. WALLACE ISLAND - DAY

David and Jeanne explore and play.

SERIES OF SHOTS

* They run, splashing along the shoreline.

* They share a wine and cheese picnic on the north point of the island with its stunning vista of the channel.

* David photographs Jeanne surrounded by apple blossoms.

* They make love on the beach - their own private Eden.

David and Jeanne bask in the sun, satisfied.

DAVID

Do you suppose two people could
make a living on an island?

JEANNE

Sure. Robinson Crusoe and Friday.

Jeanne lazily stretches, then abruptly sits up.

JEANNE (CONT'D)

The boat's gone!

They leap up. David scans the sea, points.

DAVID

Out there. The tide took it.
We'll have to swim for it. Hurry!

They hit the water. Jeanne squeals from the cold. They
strike out for the boat.

EXT. TRINCOMALI CHANNEL - DAY

Jeanne reaches the boat. Gasping, she grabs the side and
looks around. No sign of David.

JEANNE

David? Dav--

She's yanked below the surface. They both surface,
sputtering and laughing. Splashing and playing, they haul
the boat back to shore.

EXT. WALLACE ISLAND - CONOVER COVE - DAY

The boat rescued, David and Jeanne collapse on the beach,
victorious.

David lays back in the sand, breathing hard. His eyes
closed, he's relaxed and happy. Jeanne studies him with
tenderness.

EXT. WALLACE ISLAND - NIGHT

A campfire crackles and snaps. David and Jeanne, sit next to
it, their tent nearby. The cove glistens in the moonlight.

JEANNE

You're quiet.

David doesn't answer immediately.

DAVID
Jeanne... What if we were to stay?

JEANNE
What do you mean?

DAVID
I mean *stay*. Live here.

JEANNE
Hmmm. I've been imagining it all day. It would be heaven. Wallace is everything you said it was.

DAVID
Perfect size for a population of two - three miles long, half a mile wide. There's fish, oysters, berries...

JEANNE
How would a person make money, though? You'd still need money for property taxes and expenses and supplies.

DAVID
We could rent campsites in the summer.

Jeanne plays along.

JEANNE
No. Guest cottages. The surging masses expect luxury.

DAVID
We'd have the island to ourselves most of the year. Live off the land. Plant a garden, fish. Run around naked.

JEANNE
Eat apples off the tree. And clams - those are the ones you eat, right?

DAVID
Yup, and there's tons of them here. Jeanne, it's starting to sound downright practical!

JEANNE
(teasing)
I don't understand why everyone
isn't doing it.

DAVID
I don't either.

David restlessly jabs at the fire.

DAVID (CONT'D)
I mean it, Jeanne.
(intense)
I *don't* understand.

JEANNE
Well, people can't just quit the
world and move to a deserted
island. It's crazy.

DAVID
It's the way we live now that's
crazy. We can't even feed
ourselves or put a roof over our
heads without the involvement of
banks and bosses and grocery stores
and highways. Here, we could take
care of ourselves.

JEANNE
What about our life in L.A.?

DAVID
What about it? We have five senses
and we never get a chance to really
use them. We use our eyes to look
at a sea of cars and ugly
buildings. We breathe brown air
that stinks. We use our ears to
listen to factory noise at work and
news of people killing each other
on the drive home. But here...

They stare into the fire.

JEANNE
It's a lovely dream. This island
casts a spell.

DAVID
But that's my point - why does it
have to be a dream? Vic says the
island's owned by a local man named
Sultan. And it's for sale.

JEANNE
You're serious about this?

DAVID
It couldn't hurt to ask the price.

INT. SULTAN'S STORE - GANGES - DAY

Rustic. Bins of odds and ends. A large caged-off area in the center of the store contains basic supplies and is labeled "CASH ONLY".

MR. SULTAN, a fat, ruddy man with crafty eyes sits at a table with David and Jeanne.

SULTAN
Twenty thousand.

DAVID
Wow, that's steep, Mr. Sultan.
What kind of terms you offering?

Sultan sits back.

SULTAN
Cash. Them's my terms.

DAVID
But Vic Bettis says nobody's been out there for years and you--

SULTAN
How do you know Bettis?

DAVID
I was a counselor at the old boy's camp on Wallace in '36. Vic was the caretaker.

Sultan squints at him, a gleam of recognition.

SULTAN
You the kid from California? The spider-bite kid?

DAVID
Well, I did get bitten once--

SULTAN
Twenty thousand cash. Take it or leave it.

DAVID

There must be some kind of agreement we can reach. You want to sell, I want to buy--

JEANNE

Wouldn't it be good business for your store and lumberyard if we developed a resort on Wallace?

SULTAN

A resort, now, is it?

JEANNE

We'd start small, of course, but we plan to build cottages, a lodge, a fuel station for boats--

Sultan studies them, slyly - he knows it's unrealistic.

SULTAN

Well, that does sound mighty nice. Maybe I was too hasty there on the terms.

He makes notes on a piece of paper, then looks up.

SULTAN (CONT'D)

One third down. First payment due a year after that.

EXT. SULTAN'S STORE - GANGES - DAY

David and Jeanne confer.

JEANNE

Maybe we should wait - save up more money. Do a little research.

DAVID

People who wait for their dreams always find another excuse. We need to choose now how we're going to live and have the courage to follow through.

JEANNE

But a third down. How will we manage?

DAVID
We can sell the house. Cash out my
life insurance. Sell our war
bonds.

JEANNE
That's maybe... ten thousand.

David stares across the channel. The island shimmers far in
the distance. His jaw clenches with determination.

DAVID
We belong there. We both know it.

JEANNE
Is it worth it? Enough to risk
every cent we have? To change
every aspect of our life?

DAVID
We're young and strong. There will
never be a better time to change
our life.

They stare at each other, excitement growing.

JEANNE
The exchange rate knocks the price
down to eighteen thousand.

DAVID
So, six down, four for expenses,
and a year to come up with the
first payment.

JEANNE
Let's insist on eighteen months.
We need this summer to build and
next summer to raise money renting
cottages. Think he'll agree to it?

DAVID
All the risk is on our side. Did
you notice how fast he changed his
tune when you mentioned our plans?
He's counting on us failing.

JEANNE
Well, he doesn't know us very well.

David pulls Jeanne into his arms.

DAVID
Will you be happy stuck away on an
island with me?

JEANNE
Ask me after a few months of clams
and apples.

DAVID
AND naked fishing!

He kisses her. He laughs and lifts her in the air.

DAVID (CONT'D)
We're buying an island!

JEANNE
What will our friends say?

EXT. CONOVER HOUSE - LOS ANGELES - NIGHT

Cars crowd the driveway and street in front of a small,
stucco house.

BETTY-JO (O.S.)
You're CRAZY!

RALPH (O.S.)
You got it backwards. People work
to get OFF deserted islands.

INT. CONOVER HOUSE - NIGHT

David holds a bottle of champagne. The fizz has died.
Jeanne holds empty glasses. Their friends, BILL, BETTY-JO,
DOTTIE, and RALPH stare at them in utter shock.

DOTTIE
I can't believe you left a security
deposit. Jeanne, you could have
gotten yourself a car!

JEANNE
But you should see this place -
flowers, trees, wild mink--

DOTTIE
Mink you get at Barneys!

BILL
I'm sure it's fun to visit, but
think of what you'll be giving up.
Restaurants, movies--

DAVID
Time clocks, nosy neighbors,
gridlock.

Jean nods emphatically.

JEANNE
Tell them about the surging masses,
Dave. The fear driving the people
on Cahuenga.

DAVID
Each day, surging, fear-driven
masses--

BETTY-JO
Totally crazy. And dangerous.

BILL
He's gonna build cottages, roads, a
lodge even though he's never sawed
a board in his life. Have you ever
even held a screwdriver, Dave?

DOTTIE
Sure he has - made with vodka.

DAVID
We have a lot to learn, but we've
been doing a lot of reading--

RALPH
'Swiss Family Robinson' apparently.

SERIES OF SHOTS - LIVELY 40S SWING MUSIC

* David and Jeanne pour over tide charts and maps at the
kitchen table.

DOTTIE (V.O.)
Doesn't Jeanne get seasick?

* Jeanne and David attempt to fold up a tent. Mrs. Crawford
watches through the window.