



Pouliuli  
Albert Wendt

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## Chapter 1

Early on a drizzly Saturday morning Faleasa Osovae—the seventy-six-year-old titled head of the Aiga Faleasa, faithful husband of a devoted Felefele, stern but generous father of seven sons and five obedient daughters, and the most respected alii in the village of Malaelua—woke with a strange bitter taste in his mouth to find, as he looked out to the rain and his village, and then at his wife snoring softly beside him in the mosquito net, and the rest of his aiga (about sixty bodies wrapped in sleeping sheets) who filled the spacious fale, that everything and everybody that he was used to and had enjoyed, and that till then had given meaning to his existence, now filled him with an almost unbearable feeling of revulsion—yes, that was the only word for it, revulsion. He despised everything he had been, had become, had achieved: his forty years as a deacon and lay preacher; his almost unlimited power in the matai council; his large profitable cacao plantation; his title as the highest-ranking matai in Malaelua; his nationally respected reputation as an orator; his detailed knowledge of genealogies and history, which was envied by other matai; his utter loyalty and devotion to his village and aiga and church; his unquestioned reputation as a just, honourable, courageous, and humble man of unimpeachable integrity; and his perfect health. (In his seventy-six years he had only been seriously ill once. He still had nearly all his teeth and hair.) Even the familiar smell of his fale and relatives now repelled him. He sniffed back the mucus in his nose, caught it at the back of his throat, pulled up the side of the mosquito net, and spat it out on to the paepae. But the feeling of nausea surged up from the centre of his chest and he started coughing loudly, repeatedly; and then he was vomiting uncontrollably, the

thick, half-digested food and bile and stench shooting out of his mouth and over his sleeping wife who, a few offended seconds later, was awake and slapping him on the back and calling to her daughters to bring a basin. But when the first bout of painful spewing stopped, Faleasa pushed her away through the side of the net, which tore with a protesting R-R-RIP-P, and toppled out on to a group of their sleeping grandchildren who woke up screaming and woke the whole aiga, who, in turn, scrambled up and around a now weeping Felefele and a Faleasa who advanced shouting at them to get out of *his* fale and scattered them with his kicking feet and flailing fists. And soon they were all through the fale blinds and over the paepae into neighbouring fale and houses which belonged to their aiga and from which, safe from Faleasa's inexplicable wrath, they observed him fearfully, unwilling to agree with Elefane, the eldest son, that their up-to-then-was-always-sane father was now suffering a spell of insanity or that an aitu had taken possession of him during the night by entering his brain, lungs, heart, and belly, especially his belly, because no human being could spew out that unbreathable amount of vomit.

'What are we to do?' Felefele asked. (All the neighbouring aiga were awake by then; and most of them were on their paepae and verandas enjoying Faleasa's performance.)

'We shall never be able to live down this disgrace,' her daughters said.

Faleasa ripped all the mosquito nets from the strings that tied them to the rafters and hurled them out of the fale—the paepae was shrouded with white netting. He then gathered all the pillows, sleeping sheets, and mats and threw them out as well. Felefele sent some of the girls to bring her treasured possessions out of the rain but, as they approached, Faleasa threatened to kill them if they touched anything, so they retreated to Felefele who, no longer worried about her husband's health but extremely angry with him, stood up arms akimbo and called to him to stop being childish and think about how their village would view his senile behaviour—she emphasised the word *senile*,

which angered Faleasa more and made him grab the large wooden chest in which all their clothes were kept, pull it clattering across the pebble floor to the front paepae, take out armfuls of clothes and scatter them across the paepae and grass, all the time exclaiming loudly that his wife and children and relatives were a pack of greedy, gluttonous, uncouth, uncivilised dogs. When the chest was empty he rolled it down the paepae; it broke into large pieces. He then sat down cross-legged in the middle of the fale, arms folded across his heaving chest, head held high defiantly, the nausea gone. 'Stay like that for all we care!' Felefele called. Then she ordered their aiga not to pay any attention to their *sick* father but to go about their normal activities as if he wasn't there.

He would remain in this position that whole morning, thought Faleasa, as though saying to everyone that he had the inalienable right to defy them and to own nothing but an empty fale, the defiant breath in his lungs, the pools of rapidly drying vomit and their honest stench; and no one, absolutely no one, was going to take any of them away from him. No one dared—the people of Malaclua went about their normal chores; so did his aiga, but they paused often to observe him. At about ten o'clock, the rain having stopped, Felefele sent Elefane to him with a foodmat laden with his favourite food—faalifu talo, home-made cocoa, and fried pisupo. Elefane didn't even reach the edge of the paepae before an unfatherly stone whispered past his head. He wheeled swiftly and scrambled back to Felefele on his aging forty-five-year-old legs, telling everyone that Faleasa was truly possessed and needed the pastor or a fofo to exorcise the aitu. Felefele sent him to fetch Pastor Filemoni. (It wasn't Christian to get a fofo.)

At noon Faleasa saw Filemoni crossing the road and coming towards him; the pastor's white shirt and lavalava gleamed in the light and distracted Faleasa from Filemoni's smother of flab: Filemoni, only in his early thirties, a recent graduate from Malua Theological College, and Felefele's nephew—which was why, through Faleasa's influence, he had been appointed pastor at Malaclua—was fast achieving

obese proportions. Up to this critical morning Faleasa had always been tolerant of Filemoni's inadequacies which were many: for instance, he was extremely lazy and didn't bother to compose inspiring sermons; he was arrogant and from the pulpit chastised everyone, except Faleasa, who offended him; he insisted on receiving large monetary donations for his upkeep at the end of every month; he was a shallow thinker who hid his shallowness behind a mask of glibness, bigotry, and pretensions; his breath stank but he didn't know it because he believed his total body odour to be the sweetest perfume the village of Malaelua had ever breathed; his wife and two children were intolerably spoilt, condescending, disrespectful of the faa-Samoa, an embodiment of the worst characteristics of the town where his wife was born the daughter of a government clerk. But now, as Faleasa watched Filemoni waddling self-consciously (knowing every Malaeluan was observing him) up to his fale, the dizzy spell of nausea started turning inside his head again.

Pompous pile of expensive excrement! Faleasa cursed to himself as Filemoni reached the edge of the paepae, paused, and, standing on the tips of his toes, peered into the fale. Filemoni's eyes lit up when he sighted Faleasa and he hurried up the paepae and sat down opposite Faleasa who stared unwaveringly at him.

'How are you?' Filemoni chose the informal approach (after all Faleasa was his uncle), his nostrils breathing warily because the whole fale stank of vomit.

'Touch your arse!' Faleasa greeted him.

Ignoring his uncle's profane remark—it was the first time he'd heard Faleasa, whom he respected, swearing—Filemoni prattled on about how unreliable the weather was. 'Touch your arse and smell your own foul stench!' Faleasa enlarged on his first unique greeting. Again the pastor ignored it. Faleasa raised his voice, his eyes wild with what Filemoni thought was madness, and said, 'Touch your arse and smell your own foul stench because you and your stench deserve each other!' This time Filemoni couldn't ignore it: he, Filemoni Matau, was a Servant of God and the son of an alii and therefore had his self-respect, pride, status, and

courage to protect. Faleasa was obviously sick, possessed by a vindictive aitu, so Filemoni gazed forgivingly at him, knowing he had to address the aitu directly if he wanted to exorcise it.

'Demon, what are you doing inside this good old man?' Filemoni asked the aitu.

Faleasa nearly laughed when he realised what their diagnosis of his ailment was but he decided to play along. Deepening his voice to make it sound like his mother's who had died years before, he said, 'I am inhabiting my son's body because I want to destroy his goodness.' He saw Filemoni start to tremble.

'You are his mother?' Filemoni asked. Faleasa nodded his head as if he was now mesmerised by the pastor. 'But why?'

'I can't stand his goodness. As you know, he is the most generous, most compassionate, most honest, most Christian person in Malaelua, and when he dies he will go to Heaven for sure!'

'Demon, evil disciple of Satan,' declaimed Filemoni, 'I order you, in the sacred name of Jesus, to leave the body of this good servant!'

Faleasa laughed his mother's laugh as though he was completely mad, and watched Filemoni cringe with fright. 'Touch your holy arse!' his mother, through Faleasa, shouted at Filemoni. 'You've got no power because you're one of the most wicked men in Malaelua, a Pharisee through and through. Only a truly good man can drive me out, and the only good man in Malaelua is my son whose carcass I now inhabit!' Faleasa continued to laugh shrilly, imitating what he thought was a lunatic's laughter. As he laughed he crawled slowly towards Filemoni. He, after trying frantically to control his fear, jumped up and backed away from Faleasa, who bared his teeth and neighed like a horse. When Faleasa splattered a stream of hot vomit on to Filemoni's legs he wheeled and fled down the paepae and across the malae, not daring to look back and completely forgetting that all Malaelua were witnessing his cowardly retreat.

Faleasa wiped his mouth, aware that for some unknown



reason he could vomit whenever he chose to, and decided that he was really enjoying himself. After Filemoni's failure he knew they would resort to a pagan cure—a fofo. After all, he, Faleasa Osovae, was their leader and was therefore worth saving at any cost, even if it meant using cures which the Church condemned as downright heretical. Being possessed and deranged had definite advantages: he could, with impunity, scare the excrement out of all his worthless kin and village.

Hunger tugged at his belly so he yelled for some food. Two of his married daughters, Tina and Palaa, both prodigious breeders, gossips, and relentless schemers who were always after him with their cunning ways to confer matai titles on their worthless husbands, came scrambling into the fale with a foodmat laden with food, a kettle of cocoa, and a basin of water. He tried his best to keep on looking possessed, his eyes glazed with madness, his body stiffly frozen in that defiant posture which was beginning to exact a painful toll on his old muscles, back, and backside. Warily, but still trying to smile, his daughters placed the food in front of him and withdrew to sit at the back posts in readiness to serve him. Still gazing fixedly ahead, Faleasa again used his mother's voice. 'Get out, you scheming whores!' he ordered. When they were out of sight he ate eagerly, quickly. The food tasted delicious.

Nothing about his past, he reflected, seemed real, important, vital, necessary—he had shed it all like a useless skin. Yes, he had been reborn; but he realised they would not accept his new self: they needed him to be the thoroughly domesticated, generous, always-willing-to-sacrifice-himself-for-them father, provider, arbitrator, floormat. They had grown accustomed to the taste of his old carcass. Now they would choke on the poison of his new self. He chuckled at the thought.

He finished eating, washed his hands in the basin of water, and threw everything out on to the paepae, where the plates, Felefele's best ones, smashed on the stones. Getting his ali—he was the only person in Malaelua who still used one—he lay down and was soon fast asleep. He would need all his