

Bliss

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THE ISLAND, THIRTY-FIVE MINUTES BY AIR OFF THE COAST OF BELIZE, is too small for anything like a runway. Instead it offers ‘a place to land’, a slice of cracked pavement from which two oil drums are removed as our single-engine plane sets down. From the window I can see a few cabins nestled among the palms; there is one slightly larger building, the *cantina*, I assume, where meals would be communal. My husband warned it would be rustic; *bucolic* was the word he used. I’d guessed as much from the brochure; plumbing was listed as an amenity.

A three-legged dog announces our arrival as the oil drums are duly returned to the pavement. This, we are told, prevents any ‘unscheduled’ flights. Ours is the only scheduled flight for two weeks; we are the island’s only guests. Six couples, all of whom have come for a single purpose: bliss.

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“JUST TRY IT,” MY HUSBAND WHISPERS on the first morning, above the creak and whirr of an overhead fan in our cabin. I lie tangled among thin white sheets, not yet willing to surrender a dream of scented tropical breezes dancing across my oiled skin as I bask on a pristine beach of soft, toasted sand, and a chap in a loin cloth fans me with enormous palm fronds while another offers iced drinks festooned with brightly coloured swizzle sticks, fruit, and gay little paper umbrellas . . .

“C’mon, try it with me.” My husband’s voice is strained, his breath laboured.

I open my eyes. Wearing a fully zipped acid green wetsuit, he hovers over the bed blowing mightily into a snorkel.

“Well, whaddya think . . .” he says between breaths. “D’ya wanna do it?”

I sigh, push the sheets aside, climb out of bed. He sighs too. We’ve had this conversation before.

After breakfast with the ‘gang’—ten strangers armed with the latest underwater technology and a shocking sense of immortality—my husband and I leave the cantina, walk along the beach where I remind him that if nature had intended for people to breathe underwater, they would have gills. He quickens his pace.

“And just what’s so fascinating,” I continue, running along beside him, “about leaping backwards off a boat while manacled to a load of heavy equipment, breathing apparatus and a tank of oxygen in—*fingers crossed*—working order, then descending into the middle of the ocean into possibly murky water rife

with all manner of creepy one-eyed aquatic stuff, knowing that at any moment you could face a situation that renders you incapable of determining which way is up?"

He spits into his mask and finger-paints saliva over the Plexiglas surface before answering. "Well," he says, "It's pretty nice down there."

"It's pretty nice *up here*," I counter. "You should take a walk sometime and have a look." But I know the suggestion is pointless; walking isn't his thing. Even as we stroll along the beach, he's wearing flippers.

As we near the dock the sun begins to rise, lifting itself right out of the sea, silently and in its own time as it's done for millennia. Day breaks in an amber glow and I stand and stare as if I've never seen sunrise before. It occurs to me that this is why we travel, not only to discover the new, but to broaden our appreciation of the familiar. I whisper to my husband: *Isn't it breathtaking . . .* but he's already off, lured by the more powerful intoxicant of diesel fuel, its noxious stench filling the air as the dive boat revs its engine. He inhales deeply.

"You don't know what you're missing," he tells me, shifting his eighty-pound bag of dive gear from one shoulder to the other.

Soon the gang assembles and embarks. Couples, he's no doubt thinking, people who actually love each other. I notice none of them speak, which, in his book, is the truest sign of love. That, and compliance.

Someone asks if I'm coming along and I snort, "Ha ha! No sirree . . . no I certainly am *not* . . . ha ha ha!" Heads turn, then quickly turn away.

Crammed with a dozen bodies and mountains of equipment, the boat shoves off, reversing slowly, gradually pointing itself ocean-ward until a roar of engine sends the thing lurching at the horizon. I wonder, for a moment, if I should have joined them, tagged along just for the fun of being in a gang. But then, God only knows where they're going; there was some talk of a blue hole. Didn't sound good.

I stroll back along the beach, aware that I'm alone on the island. And have nothing more dangerous planned than to not wear sunscreen on my legs until noon. I take a long breath and smile at the trees.

After sprawling a while in a hammock, with a book, I yawn, stretch, swim, and repeat the process until the three-legged dog comes by. I've learned his name is Bill; we take a walk together around the island and he shows me a pond where a family of alligators sun themselves. He doesn't seem bothered, so I too am nonchalant. We walk through warmly scented forest in a thousand shades of green, where birds with red, yellow, fluorescent blue feathers sing in

languages I've never heard. Eventually we end up at the cantina. Felix, the cook, tells me I'm the first person he's known to have come on a dive holiday and not dive. He says he's normally on his own at lunch; do I mind eating what he eats? No, I don't mind, I say, and he makes *arroz con calamares* with *sofrito*, a spicy tomato and green pepper sauce. Bill gets bones and scraps and curls up on the deck of the cantina. Felix asks if I've seen Pearl, a dolphin that hangs around the dock sometimes when the dive boat is out.

"She'll swim with you," he tells me.

After lunch I go down to the dock to look for Pearl and am amazed when she appears as a flash of silver, circling, moving closer. She raises her head; I can see her blowhole open then close again as she dives. She makes room as I slide into the water, swims away, returns with a gentle nudge to my ribs, like an old friend. For close to an hour we swim, dive in tandem. She surfaces every few minutes, shakes her head; I notice we're both smiling. I feel like a member of some marine sisterhood and follow when she heads for open water; I want to see her world, meet her friends. I'm suddenly fearless. But she speeds up and then she's gone. And I'm grateful for her wisdom.

Back at the cabin I have a nap and wake with a contented dolphin grin, decide on a bit of snorkelling and a shower before heading to the cantina.

I tell Felix about Pearl. He says now that she knows me she'll look for me at the same time every day.

"The divers never see her," he says. "She's scared of the boat, won't come when it's in dock."

"Smart fish," I say.

"Mammal," says Felix. He tells me Pearl has been here for as long as he has, twelve years, and she's still on her own; he keeps expecting her to start a family but she doesn't seem to want to settle down.

We look at each other, smile. "Smart fish," we both say.

Felix makes a couple of *mango batido*, frozen milkshakes with honey and freshly picked fruit, and we sit together on the deck of the cantina, lean back, put our feet up on the railing, look across the ocean; the world has turned crimson and gold. Mango coloured. As waves lick the shore with tiny smacks, he tells me about mangoes, how they're his favourite fruit, how they're related to cashews and poison ivy, and I listen, feel my shoulders sink, gelatinous, to somewhere near my knees.

"I wonder when the divers will be back."

"Could be anytime now," Felix says, "unless they ran out of gas."

The air is scented with wild ginger, I inhale, close my eyes, and then in the distance—the buzz of the dive boat.

It arrives as it left, in a fanfare of noise and fumes; divers gather their gear chaotically, each vying to be the first to get off. I look for my husband among the rubble, anxious to hear some deep-blue-yonder stories in colourful *it's-nice-down-there* detail. Someone vaguely resembling him heads in my direction, generally soggy, eyes swollen and face blotched with red spots. I pretend not to notice.

"How was your day?" I ask, and he coughs, spits out something I hope is salt-water and says his day was okay except for the part where his mask got too tight and he didn't know why that would have happened. I suggest it might have been due to an excess of spit. He offers no further comment, and we walk back to our cabin in silence save for the rhythm of his flippers whacking the sand.

In the fading light of an island sunset, as the quivering blood orange globe makes its seductive descent against an indigo horizon—my husband, bless him, rinses debris from his buoyancy vest with a garden hose.

"So what did you see?" I ask, sipping the last of my *batido*, newly tanned legs draped over the arms of a chair on the tiny porch of our cabin.

"Nothing really," he mumbles. "Some coral. Pretty nice coral, and a couple of fish. Oh, and a shark."

"*Oh-and-a-shark?* That's big news, isn't it?"

"Not that big," he says, "it was just resting against a rock."

"Great White?"

"Nurse."

He seems tired and generally unenthusiastic in his storytelling, so I tell him about my day. Figuring I'll save Pearl for a big finish, I start with the snorkelling; I tell him how it went well until I was charged by a school of small, angry, white fish.

"How could you tell they were angry?" he says, blowing salt out of his nose.

"Well, I'm pretty sure I saw one of them snarling . . ."

He rolls his eyes. "Don't you get bored on your own all day?"

I say no, not in the slightest, and prepare to tell him about Pearl, but it seems there's more salt in his nose that has to be attended to. He blows and spits and I can't be bothered shouting over the din.

"Forget my day," I say. I want to know more about the shark. "Was it something like this?" I show him page 156 of my *Guide to Tropical Sea Life*, which I'd brought along so I'd know what bites and what doesn't.

"Yeah," he says, and his brow wrinkles as he reaches for the book. He stabs a

pale, pruned finger at the picture. "In fact it looked *just like that—EXACTLY like that!!!*" The colour is returning to his face, his eyes light up, and he's getting pretty excited generally, and I think, geez, if looking at pictures of fish makes him this happy, why doesn't he just stay on land with a pina colada and flip through the book?

So I ask.

A film of disappointment clouds his dive-engorged eyes, and his head, little strings of seaweed still attached to it, falls forward as if in defeat.

"You just don't get it, do you?" he says, slowly raising his sad pink eyes to meet mine.

I study the blotches on his face. I think they're spreading.

"Being out there," he begins wearily, "I mean . . . you can't just look at a book . . . there's a *difference*."

A difference.

I instinctively feel this is key and am breathless at the possibility that he may be about to explain the intoxicating hold that diving has on him, on everyone it seems, and how it could have that hold on me too, and then we could be one of those loving dive couples who don't speak. He's about to let me in on one of the most intimate aspects of his soul.

"Yes, yes," I say, leaning forward. "*A difference, go on . . .*"

"The difference is that, well, it's just *different*, that's all. The shark was facing the other way for one thing."

"What other way?"

"In the opposite direction than the book," he explains. "The book shark is facing right; the real one was facing left."

We stare at each other a moment, and I see the hopefulness creep into his eyes, and I realize he actually believes he has said something. I can almost hear him praying *Oh please God let her finally understand because—I cannot make it any clearer than this . . .*

And then it occurs to me. This is it. This is what it's all about. The real shark was facing left. That's the difference. You either get that or you don't.

There is nothing else to say.

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BILL AND I HAVE ACQUIRED THE HABIT of rowing around the island every morning in an old weathered boat. We've made fascinating discoveries, such as the ruins of a lighthouse which Felix tells me was the refuge of a man and wife after their ship capsized. They lived there eight years eating whitefish, mango and bread-

fruit, drinking coconut water. Felix said the man became adept at alligator wrestling while his wife amassed an extensive collection of handbags. I tell him I prefer martial arts to wrestling.

I've made peace with the angry school of white fish, and sometimes I follow manta rays just to see where they're going.

Felix's lunches are as delicious as his stories; his talent is wasted on the cantina fare for divers who, as he says, eat like birds at breakfast, take crumbs for lunch and have water-logged taste buds by dinner. He shrugs, says it's their loss. I agree and each day devour *pescado asado*, paella, *aji relleno* and warm mango tarts in reverential silence with deep breaths between bites.

Afternoons, I spend with Pearl. At the end of the first week she arrives with a baby at her side. I run to tell Felix he takes pictures while I swim with them. We decide it's a girl and name her Minnie Pearl.

No one but Felix knows how I spend my days; no one asks.

Each evening, before the dive boat returns, I sit on the deck of the cantina, watch the sun set into the ocean. Sometimes I see Pearl and her daughter, flashes of silver in the distance, and I raise my glass to them. They're bottlenose, I learn from my fish book, related to the killer whale, their main enemy is the shark, the left-facing variety of course. I leaf through pictures of basket starfish, eagle rays, familiarize myself with the habits of the curious giant stinking vase sponge and memorize dive terms so that at dinner with the gang I don't end up saying, "Narcosis, I'm all for that, why I plant at least two dozen each fall . . ."

And during the communal dinners, when the blotchy, pink-eyed people compare their rashes and underwater digital photographs and talk at length about the fun of throwing yourself overboard into unknown depths, hoping the boat doesn't leave while you're stuck in a cave at a hundred feet, and what a lark it is to charge about all day in a reeking tub fighting off nausea, I nod.

I get it.

Well then, why not join the fun, they ask, and when I respond with a smile—not a hint of a snort, mind you, just a sad little smile—they take it as a case of mild depression and shake their tiny seaweed-encrusted heads in pity.

Suits me fine. Tomorrow Felix is making grilled whitefish with mango salsa and chilled avocado soup for lunch. And at sunrise, Bill and I are off to do tai chi with the gators.