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## A Little Ways Off the Coast

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A dry leaf had fallen onto the open guest book from the white Phalaenopsis above. Carefully Courtney smoothed the black ribbon down between the stiff, white pages. There was a mirror above the guest book, but Courtney did not look at it. Instead she closed her eyes, letting herself drift in the noises normal for the house at that time of day. The noise of running water was María soaking the vegetables in iodine before making dinner. The noise of wind was the same wind that came every day just before the rain. Later on it would make the palm trees down on the Avenida de las Mariscones bend almost to the ground, but at the moment it was just a small wind. Softly and delicately it made its way over the blue tile floor and the furniture made of basket weave and out to the inner courtyard, where the parrot perched on a branch over the pool.

-- María! cried Courtney. (Had María soaked the vegetables long enough? If not, the ambassador would get sick again.) Have you polished the silver yet? Remember, my friend Miss Jones will arrive from New York tomorrow.

-- Señora, came a weary voice from the kitchen. Rain is coming.

Meaning (Courtney knew) go now if you insist on going out, although though Raphael or I would gladly go for you if you asked.

For there were no sewers on the island, and every afternoon when it rained, the streets flooded with mud. This made no difference to Courtney or the big black

Mercedes when she went out for ice-cream, but some indefinable difference to María.

-- María, said Courtney. You forget it is Tuesday.

Tuesdays the ambassador went diving at Playa Chemicibi, taking with him the Mercedes, Raphael, and Samantha the Irish setter, all no doubt waiting patiently on shore at this moment--Raphael picking at his new gold tooth as he leaned up against the big black car and Samantha trying, without success, to join a game of *baci* on the beach.

-- Yes, señora, said María, stubborn. But rain is coming.

Courtney walked through the living room with the wicker furniture and out on the patio. Always when the ambassador went diving, she was frightened, which was silly. For the ambassador had learned to dive in Indonesia, long before he and Courtney had met. Early in their courtship Courtney had tried to learn. She could still remember the sensation of the water during the no-mask swimming exercise--so warm on her skin, so cold as it filled the crevices of her nose. With the mask off, she could not help trying to breathe normally. In the end they had helped her to the surface, inflated her jacket, and towed her to shore. Never had she felt so humiliated.

- - María! Courtney cried. María!

Outside in the courtyard a parrot landed by the edge of the pool, its yellow and green head crooked to observe itself or the afternoon's leaves. The wind had just blown them out onto the courtyard tiles, skittering out in front of Courtney's pink espadrilles.

Odd, how there were no seasons here. They had been here almost a year, and everything was exactly the same as when they had arrived. Yet it seemed to Courtney that the whole time she had been waiting for something that never came--

safe unwashed vegetables; or reliable electricity; or snow.

-- María! Courtney cried again.

But no one came. There was only the usual silence of midafternoon, broken only by the wind as it swept through the courtyard and the pink espadrilles.

-- Here, said the ambassador. Anchor here.

One hand on the outboard, the man looked up in surprise. The rowboat was still within sight of the shore.

The motor sputtered and died. The ambassador reached over to the first tank and opened the valve. There was a hiss as the air, released from pressure, began to drift off into the blue Caribbean sky.

The man put his hands together and made a diving motion. Then he gestured toward the second tank, carried earlier by a grunting Raphael through the shallows.

-- Dive? said the man. I help you?

-- Not necessary, said the ambassador, brusque.

At once he was sorry. The man's shirt, torn at the shoulder, was stained with machine oil. Clearly he was one of those who lived from day to day.

Overhead the sky was a bright, cloudless blue. A pelican sailed by, graceful and aloof. As the ambassador opened the valve on the second tank, the cry of the bird gave way before the loud hissing noise.

The ambassador pointed to the top of his snorkel.

-- Be sure to keep this in sight at all times, he said. If I get more than thirty meters away, shout.

The man nodded. Then he turned and spat into the sea.

The ambassador raised himself up and then balanced his tall, thin frame on the boat's edge. Steadying himself with one hand, he tugged on a fin. In just a moment he would let himself backwards. After that he would remember nothing until he was below, swimming for dear life toward the surface. He had often thought that once he really learned to dive, the mind would stay conscious of its surroundings during the split second of the fall, but it never did.

A pelican cawed. There was the sound of a small motor, or perhaps merely the hum of the wind. Donning his mask, the ambassador looked out over the side. It was still shallow--twenty or twenty-five feet. He could feel the old excitement rising as he watched a school of blue tang head out to sea. It turned to a dull and sputtering rage as he remembered that while he could still snorkel, he would not go diving today or any other day.

There was a splash and then all was silent.

The man with the torn shirt took out a cigarette stub and lit it, cradling it against the wind.

Then he leaned back and watched the baci game still in progress on the beach.

-- It is a bad house, said María, wiping the silver polish off a fork but not completely.

Raphael put down the dish he had just finished drying.

--No worse than any other, he said.

Raphael was envious of María, because she got to live in the house with the

señora and the ambassador in a room of her own whereas he had to live in his barrio an hour and a half away by bus, which carried two or three times as many people as it had been designed to do. That morning he been squeezed in against an old man with a cough. It was a dry cough with a hollow sound. Even now, just thinking of it, it gave him a funny feeling. It was the same feeling he had when in the middle of the afternoon the wind came down on the Avenida de las Mariscones.

The fork fell onto the tiled floor with a tiny cling. Wiping it off once with the other end of the polishing cloth, Maria laid it next to the others in the velvet-lined box.

-- It is a bad house. The señora is strange.

--Strange? How is the señora strange?

-- Always she does nothing, outside by the pool all day long in her sunglasses except when she is so stupid as to drive the car alone. Doesn't she understand that anything could happen? Sometimes I think she almost wants something to happen.

Raphael sighed. It would be a while before they finished and perhaps then his bus would be no longer running and he would have to walk along the road by the sea wall and try to catch a ride.

-- It is because she had no mother. That explains many things, such as the foolishness with the dog.

-- She must have had a mother. Everyone has a mother.

-- Maybe. But there is no picture of a mother on her dresser--only the father, and he is dead.

-- They are rich north Americans. It is none of our business.

--It is because she is the second wife, said María. A second wife with a bad

heart.

And she shook her head, her earrings clicking back and forth like tiny castanets.

Raphael turned his back. These conversations tired him. In another minute María would connect the badness of the house to the end of the world and the Beast of the Apocalypse, both important in her religion. María belonged to one of these new religions brought to the island by North Americans in ugly clothes.

-- No one knows what is inside the heart of another, said Raphael, hoping piety might shut María up. Only God.

-- You say that because of your gold tooth, said María, closing the wooden box. The new one the ambassador paid for.

-- And you? said Raphael, crumpling the towel. What makes you say the things you say?

Dive gear on at the shallow end of the pool, Blythe Jones stared at the silver regulator in her hand. Tentatively she moved a side lever all the way up, put the regulator in her mouth, and took a breath. Then she took it out and moved the lever in the other direction.

-- This is a new one, said Blythe. It's very expensive. I'm still figuring it out.

-- I'm glad we had these tanks lying about so you could do your check-out in the pool, said Courtney. Of course it's the least we can do, really, since Rupert will be too busy to go with you tomorrow and I'm too much of a scaredy-cat to learn.

-- Oh, come on, said Blythe. So you flunked out of dive school--so what?

Normal people flunk things all the time. It's only a new experience for you.

Courtney laughed. They had been roommates in college where Courtney had been Phi Beta Kappa in her junior year, and, later, the youngest person ever to pass Ph.D. orals in economics. Then had come a blank period in which Courtney had disappeared, only to surface a year later in triumphant return from Indonesia, the ambassador on her arm. As for Blythe, she had taken an easier, or at least different, path. Since graduation she had been a broker at Danforth, Parker, and Walsh, specializing first in junk bonds and now in interest rate swaps.

-- It takes everyone a while to learn, said Blythe. No-mask swimming is the worst. It feels so weird with the water trying to come up your nose. But you should try again. It just takes some people longer.

One hand at her mask and the other holding the low pressure inflator hose over her head, Blythe began to descend. A moment later a trail of bubbles at the surface followed her body as it moved slowly towards the deeper end of the pool.

-- Down, Samantha, said Courtney, getting up from the chaise and holding the dog by the collar as it prepared to give chase to the bubbles.

Arms stretched out, Blythe lay face down at the bottom. As if in response to some invisible wave, her torso moved slowly up, then down. The parrot cawed. A slight wind swirled a leaf on top of the water.

How peaceful, thought Courtney. Her breathing had normalized itself to the same rhythm as Blythe's. And then without warning she was angry again. For it was only her own cowardice kept her from diving with every Tuesday with the most wonderful--indeed the only--person in her world.

The check-out finished, Blythe flopped down on the other chaise. Her short black hair, always wiry, was now a mass of small, intractable curls.

-- So what's the diving like here?

-- Quite good apparently. Rupert said he saw a sea-turtle yesterday at seventy feet.

Blythe frowned.

-- That's odd. I'm sure my book said that sea turtles were extinct in this part of the Caribbean.

-- Probably something that looked like a sea turtle, said Courtne.

-- Señoras, said María, appearing from nowhere with a smile Courtney recognized as one of attempted, if insincere, contrition.

-- Some Coca-Cola? Orange juice? Something to pass the time?

-- Not now, said Courtney, noting with pleasure that Blythe looked impressed. When the ambassador gets back.

There was a splash as Samantha fell, or walked off the edge of the pool.

Courtney's eyes wandered over the stone patio with its blue tiles to the room with the wicker furniture, over which hung the two shadow puppets, sharp-edged and glittering, that dated from the ambassador's years in Indonesia. The ambassador had still been married to Adrian when he lived in Indonesia. Adrian had known how to dive.

Courtney sat up, watching Samantha paddle back and forth.

-- Look Blythe--I don't suppose you could teach me to dive while you're here.”

Blythe frowned.

-- I'd love to, Courtney, but I'm not trained for that, you know.”

There was a pause, during which Courtney reflected upon the fact that Blythe not only had, as always, bad skin, but now a slight if definite air of an old maid as well.

-- How is Rupert, anyway?

-- Oh, much better, said Courtney. A bit of the trots now and then but otherwise fine. All that gastro trouble he had last year seems to be pretty much cleared up. We've showed María any number of times how to wash the vegetables in iodine but sometimes she gets a bit careless.

-- So you're sure he doesn't have that awful thing they thought he might have--what is it called? That thing that thins the population in Indonesia like a modern version of the plague?

The parrot, its green and yellow head swinging ever so slightly on a branch overhanging the pool, made a surprised noise.

Courtney looked out calmly over the tops of the sunglasses.

-- Oh yes, she said. We're quite sure.

The ambassador was sitting on one of the wicker couches, the latest issue of Divemaster on his lap and a whiskey-and-soda by his side--the latter in case Courtney got up thinking he had been sick again, as indeed he had.

At last the house was quiet. On the other wall, he could see the sparkle from the two Indonesian shadow puppets. One was male and one female, but in their filigree gold surfaces, their sharp disjointed limbs they were more like each other than anything he had ever seen. It pleased him to own things that were beautiful and of no use. It was an excessiveness that allowed him to feel he was spitting on the dark side of life.

It had been in Indonesia he had first gone diving. He had still been married to Adrian then, although not very much married. He had snorkeled first, knowing that if he started with diving it would be another thing he would have to study,

patiently and carefully and perhaps in the end be a source of pain and boredom, for always he had a tendency to take things that gave other people pleasure and make them difficult.

But in the end he had done it, plunging off the side of a small boat like the one he rented now at Chamicobi into a new kind of silence. A silence in which there was fear, and many things that had to be remembered all at once.

You had to squeeze your nose and breath slowly and deeply, your fingers pinching your nostrils off as you breathed air into them to equalize the pressure between the spaces deep inside your body and the water pushing on it from all sides. At the same time you held the buoyancy compensator hose over your head with your hand on the button so you could shoot a bit of air in your jacket if you felt pain in your ears or, for that matter, anywhere else. All the gear that had been so cumbersome in the boat suddenly became as much a part of you as your arms and your legs, and you heard a noise that came from somewhere very far away, and then you realized that the noise was your breath, and the little white bubbles swirling around your body were the air you had just exhaled, and you were still frightened, but not so much, and there was something exhilarating about it too.

Later, he found he could close his eyes anywhere, breathe slowly and deeply, and from the ends of the earth orange and green parrotfish and black angels would rise up and encircle him. Out of the corner of his eye, he would see, behind a clump of elkhorn coral, swimming harmlessly away from him and the other divers, the tailfins of a lazy, unaggressive shark. At the bottom, in the dust, the dark red swirling legs of an octopus. At night, when he had thought it would be the most frightening of all, everything was so very strange he completely forgot to be afraid. The sea, which seemed so vast and indifferent in the day, now consisted of small, warm spaces carved out by the rays of the torches in the divers' hands. Everything was some shade of blue or black or silver except the fish that were still awake. Eyes open, they swam out of the darkness, then darted off at the sight of prey. The divemaster touched something and it flashed a swirl of white light, incandescent, like paper lanterns or the fireworks down on the Avenida de las Mariscones at Carnival.

-- Look, said the divemaster in hand-signals. His hair floated out around his head, twisting in the rhythm of the current like seaweed. Follow me.

-- Señor, said the man in the torn white shirt.

They were at the site behind the island. The first of the clouds had just burned off. It was too hot to stay in the boat any longer with a dive suit and boots on.

--Señor, said the boatman in a thin whine. Do you want me to help you with your tank?

The ambassador pulled his mask down over his face.

-- Not necessary, he said with pride. I have no tank. I have learned to dive with the pearl divers of Indonesia.

-- Rupert! Rupert! Are you all right?

It was Courtney's voice, coming from the bedroom.

How odd, that waking was the real nightmare.

Across from the ambassador on the half-lit wall, the shadow puppets were moving like the hand puppets he used to make when he was a child, by the small pink light left on all night in the nursery.

-- Rupert! cried Courtney again. Shall I have another talk with María tomorrow about the iodine?

-- Nonsense, said the ambassador as he struggled out of the chair. I'm perfectly all right.

-- So you went off the Playa Fonseca today, said the ambassador politely. How was it? I've never been there.

-- Oh, quite all right, said Blythe. Caverns starting at fifty feet. Angelfish and parrotfish and some scad. There weren't quite as many fish as I expected though.

They were sipping Scotch and sodas opposite each other on the two wicker couches. Dinner, Raphael had told them, would be ready shortly.

-- The reef temperature is higher now, isn't it? Blythe went on. I'm no oceanographer but even I could notice that some of the fish were sick.

-- Sick? said the ambassador, angry. What nonsense! The fish off this island are perfectly fine. How was the ride out? I hear it's choppy.

-- Oh, it was awful but I had some of that new sea-sickness stuff. You know, the little patches you put behind your ears.

-- Ay yes. I hear they work very well. Of course you took them off to dive.

-- Take them off? Why should I take them off?

-- Why, woman, cried the ambassador. Don't you know any dive medicine?

If you don't take them off when you dive, the pressure will multiply the effect in direct proportion to the number of atmospheres you go down. Why, you could have gotten nitrogen narcosis.

He had stood up and was hovering over her.

-- Why, she said slowly, it did cross my mind at one point that I should take the regulator out of my mouth. I thought it was just one of those odd thoughts that go through one's head that don't mean anything.

The ambassador sat down abruptly.

-- You did get a dive certification, didn't you? PADI? NAUI? Some other recognized dive school?

Blythe stiffened.

-- Of course, she said. I have an advanced C-card. Last winter I did search and rescue off the coast of Long Island.

In the silence an ice cube cracked, slipping further down Blythe's glass.

-- Well, said Courtney, coming in from the courtyard. And how are my two favorite people getting along?

-- Splendidly, said the ambassador, brightening. Just splendidly.

There was a smell of roasting meat. Someone had strung paper lanterns over the pool, and a small table had been set with linen and silver. Courtney put one hand on the ambassador's shoulder, bent down, and tied the ribbon of one espadrille into a bow.

-- More Scotch? Sherry? Something to pass the time?

It was Raphael, smiling.

Shaken, Blythe did not smile back.

His gold tooth gleamed in the half-dark like a warning, or a mystical sign.

The next afternoon, they all went to the private beach on the eastern end of the island and drank rum punch.

There was a long, red sunset. A few curlicues of clouds, back-lit by a fading sun the color of Courtney's espadrilles, drifted over the horizon. All three of them linked arms, Rupert in the middle. Calm, almost imperceptible wavelets approached over the cold, damp sand and then, with dignity, withdrew.

-- It's almost too perfect, isn't it? said Blythe, gazing at the palm trees.

-- Not at all, said Courtney.

And then it was Wednesday and Rupert still had not had time to dive and Blythe's plane--a tiny speck of silver--was disappearing into the vast, cloudless blue.

How miserable Blythe had looked as she hugged Courtney good-bye! How pale and pinched, as if the diving had shrunken her like a prune, her curly black hair knotted up all over her head! And it was all especially odd since Blythe had taken such a dislike to Rupert. No doubt she was glad to be going back to her tiny walk-up, her harried 14-hour days selling off--what was it? Repos? Reverse repos? Mortgage security tranches?

Poor boring New York scene! The last time she had visited Blythe they had gone for ice-cream at four in the morning--real New York ice-cream with sugar and chocolate, not the unpredictable concoctions of mangos, ice milk, and pistachios that passed for ice-cream on the island. Yet she had grown to like them: it was not even out of homesickness any more that she sought them out.

The plane circled back upon its path only at a higher altitude as the dog

began once more, loudly and hopelessly, to bark.

-- Stay, said Courtney, putting on her sunglasses with one hand while, with the other, she held Samantha's collar firm.

*The black guest book*, thought Courtney, letting the feeling of happiness unfold her. *The parrot over the pool. The children playing baci.*

She would ask Rupert to teach her. Yes, that would be the best thing. She would ask Rupert to teach her to dive.

And she made it to the black Mercedes just as the rain began to turn the streets into little seas.

Rupert came out onto the courtyard, Samantha loping along behind. Changed now into a sport shirt and a pair of dark trousers, he hummed to himself as he crossed the patio.

It was almost dusk. There was only a little bit of wetness left on the blue tiles. In the barbecue a few coals were beginning to glow. On the white chaise nearest the pool, sunglasses half down her nose. Courtney finished untying one espadrille and began on the other. Foolish though it was, he hoped in this light she could not see the white strands he had found that morning in his hair. He did not want her to remember him as old.

Rupert pushed the already-foiled potatoes down among the coals with a pair of metal tongs.

-- Did Blythe get off all right?

-- Oh yes. Quite.

-- She seemed to have a good time, did you think? Blythe I mean.

Espadrilles unlaced, Courtney curled up on the chaise.

-- Oh yes. Very good.

-- We'll have to have her back one of these days.

-- I'm glad you feel that way, said Courtney.

Rupert opened the lighter fluid and poured some on. A flash of yellow-red light blazed up, then was gone.

-- Did you remember to ask her to sign the guest book?

-- Why no, said Courtney, stricken. I completely forgot.

She reached out to grab an espadrille from Samantha's mouth.

-- I could send her a page. I could send her a page and she could send it back. Then I could tape it back in the guest book.

-- Well, that's a thought, said Rupert, cheerful once more. Seems like a lot of trouble, though.

-- Rupert? said Courtney, looking down at her feet with distaste. Don't you think my feet are just too terminally ugly? I mean the way they go in different directions.

-- Don't be silly, Courtney. You have the most beautiful feet I have ever seen.

There was a sudden scent of Phalaenopsis--pale and cold and perfect in the evening breeze. The parrot cawed and flew off in a flash of yellow-green. There was a splash as Samantha jumped, or perhaps fell, into the pool. Inside the house, the shadow puppets glittered on the wall.

Courtney half-rose.

-- Why don't I get Raphael to do the steaks? You shouldn't have to be bothered.

-- Please don't, said Rupert, moving closer and reaching for her hand.

He had been imagining the two of them on a boat hovering over the reef.

Small silver fish he had never seen before were swimming excitedly this way and that. Don't worry, he was saying as Courtney finished putting on her mask. And then they were floating through the schools of blue tang, parrotfish, black angels. Without a reference point it was hard to say if they were going up or down.

Courtney sat up on the white chaise. An espadrille and its ribbon dangled slowly from one hand.

-- Rupert-- you know, I've been thinking maybe I should try diving again. Maybe with a new teacher. Blythe said I should. I do so hate being a coward.

-- Nonsense, he said, furious at how his voice was shaking. Cowardice has nothing to do with it. Some people just don't like it, that's all.

-- But Rupert, why not? You went diving with Adrian, didn't you?

-- Of course, but--

The ambassador went pale under his tan.

-- Oh Rupert, said Courtney. Explain yourself. *Please*.

A straggly whisp of cumulus cloud drifted overhead. It was now that time of day when the wind that bent the palm trees down on the Avenida de las Mariscones had gone back to the sea. Off the beach at Chemicibi, schools of blue tang, parrotfish, black angels were swimming toward the reef. A spotted drumfish, wavy and translucent, rotated about an invisible axis, then spiralled downwards to the sand.

The ambassador walked across the patio and sat down in the other chaise. In the inner courtyard he could see the shadow puppets glittering from far away.

With an old-fashioned politesse, he bent down and tied a bow first on one of Courtney's pink espadrilles, then on the other.

-- You have beautiful feet, darling, he said. Not at all large or ugly. The most beautiful feet in the world. Never forget that.

Raphael swayed back and forth in the truck as it went around a curve. He hated riding in trucks but he had been lucky to get this one as it left the city. A few electric lights could still be seen where the rich had generators, but the barrios ahead were dark. From where he was crowded in, Raphael could see the tin roofs under the moon, the dark shapes of people walking down the mud paths. There was a smell of cooking, and the familiar smell of human sweat.

Ordinarily he felt comforted by these smells, but not tonight. Since leaving the house he had not been able to stop coughing. He looked around, but the old man of the morning was nowhere to be seen. Still, it was the same cough, a cough hollow in the middle, and now it was his.

He had been thinking that perhaps María was right after all. Watching them out on the patio tonight--the pale old man speaking softly to his beautiful young wife hiding behind the dark sunglasses--he had to concede that there was something strange. Perhaps tomorrow he would look for another job. It might help the cough too. A change of scene could help many things. He would miss the ambassador. Still, it would be good to leave.

The truck lurched to one side. There was a motion in the darkness. Someone had a candle, or perhaps a torch.

-- Que hay? said Raphael.

-- Un muerto, said the young man next to him. Nada mas.

A dog barked, and then they were past it and there was only the noise of two voices quarrelling, sharp and loud and far away.

