

SAINT

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Alexis Schaitkin



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INDIGO BAY

BEGIN WITH AN AERIAL VIEW. Slip beneath the clouds and there it is, that first glimpse of the archipelago—a moment, a vista, a spectacle of color so sudden and intense it delivers a feeling like plunging a cube of ice in warm water and watching it shatter: the azure sea, the emerald islands ringed with snow-white sand; perhaps, on this day, a crimson tanker at the edge of the tableau.

Come down a bit lower and the islands reveal their topographies, valleys and flatlands and the conic peaks of volcanoes, some of them still active. There is Mount Scenery on Saba, Mount Liamugia on Saint Kitts, Mount Pelée on Martinique, the Quill on Saint Eustatius, La Soufrière on Saint Lucia and also on Saint Vincent, La Grande Soufrière on Guadeloupe's Basse-Terre, Soufrière Hills on Montserrat, and Grande Soufrière Hills on tiny Dominica, which is beset by no fewer than nine volcanoes. The volcanoes yield an uneasy sense of juxtaposition—the dailiness of island life abutting the looming threat of eruption. (On some islands, on some days, flakes of ash fall softly through the air, pale and fine, before settling on grassy hillsides and the eaves of rooftops.)

Roughly in the middle of the archipelago lies an island some forty kilometers long by twelve wide. It is a flat, buff, dusty place, its soil thin and arid, the terrain dotted with shallow salt ponds and the native vegetation consisting primarily of tropical scrub: sea grape, cacti, wild frangipani. (There is a volcano here, too, Devil Hill, though it is so small, and the magma rises to its surface so infrequently, that it is useless as both a threat and an attraction.) The island is home to eighteen thousand residents and receives some ninety thousand tourists annually. From above, it resembles a fist with a single long finger pointing west.

The north side of the island faces the Atlantic. Here, the coast is narrow and rocky, the water seasonally variable and sometimes rough. Nearly all

of the residents live on this side, most of them in the tiny capital town, the Basin, where cinder-block schools, food marts, and churches mingle with faded colonial buildings in pastel hues: the governor-general's petal-pink Georgian mansion; the mint-green national bank; Her Majesty's Prison, eggshell-blue. (A prison next to a bank—a favorite local joke.) On this coast, the beaches' names bespeak their shortcomings: Salty Cove. Rocky Shoal. Manchineel Bay. Little Beach.

On the south side of the island, the gentle waves of the Caribbean Sea lap against sand fine as powder. Here, resorts punctuate the coast. The Oasis, Salvation Point, the Grand Caribbee, and the island's crown jewel, Indigo Bay, all of them festooned with bougainvillea, hibiscus, and flamboyant, beautiful deceptions meant to suggest that this island is a lush, fertile place.

Scattered in the sea around the island are a dozen or so uninhabited cays, the most notable of which are Carnival Cay, Tamarind Island, and Fitzjohn (famous, at least locally, as the home of the Fitzjohn lizard). The cays are popular spots for excursions—snorkeling, romantic picnics, guided expeditions through their limestone caverns. The closest of the cays to the main island is the ironically named Faraway Cay, which sits not five hundred meters off the coast at Indigo Bay and which, owing to its nacreous beach, its wild landscapes, and the pristine waterfall at its center, would be a popular destination like the other cays, were it not overrun by feral goats, which survive on sea purslane and prickly pear.

The island's visitors have little sense of its geography. If asked, most would be unable to sketch its basic shape. They cannot locate it on a map, cannot distinguish it from the other small landmasses that dot the sea between Florida and Venezuela. When a taxi brings them from the airport to their hotel, or from their hotel to a Caribbean fusion restaurant on Mayfair Road, or when they take a sunset cruise aboard the catamaran *Faustina*, or disembark their cruise ship at Hibiscus Harbour, or when a speedboat whisks them to Britannia Bay to tour the old sugar estate, they do not know if they are traveling north or south, east or west. The island is a lovely nowhere suspended in gin-clear water.

When they return home, they quickly forget the names of things. They do not remember the name of the beach on which their resort was situated, or of the cay where they went for their snorkeling excursion. (The beach there was littered with sand dollars, as if they were entirely unprec-

ious.) They forget the name of the restaurant they liked best, remembering only that it was some exotic flower. They even forget the name of the island itself.

ZOOM IN closer on Indigo Bay and the resort's features come into view. There is the long drive lined with perfectly vertical palm trees, the marble lobby with its soaring domed roof, the open-air pavilion where breakfast is served until ten each morning, the spa, the swimming pool in the shape of a lima bean, the fitness and business centers ("CENTRE," on the engraved placard outside of each; the American guests are charmed by this Britishness, which strikes them as quaint and earnest on this island so distant from England). There is the beach where lounge chairs are arranged in a parabola that follows the curve of the bay, the local woman set up on a milk crate beneath a sun-bleached blue umbrella at the beach's edge, braiding young girls' hair. The fragrance is tropic classic, frangipani and coconut sunscreen and the mild saline of equatorial ocean.

On the beach are families, the sand around their chairs littered with plastic shovels, swimmies, impossibly small aqua socks; honeymooners pressed closely together beneath cabanas; retirees reading fat thrillers in the shade. They have no notion of the events about to unfold here, on Saint X, in 1995.

The time is late morning. Look. A girl is walking down the sand. Her gait is idle, as if it is of no consequence to her when she arrives where she is going. As she walks, heads turn—young men, openly; older men, more subtly; older women, longingly. (They were eighteen once.) She wears a long, billowy tunic over her bikini, but she has a teenage knack for carrying it with a whiff of provocation. A raffia beach bag is slung casually over her shoulder. Apricot freckles crowd the milky skin of her face and arms. She wears a silver anklet with a charm in the shape of a star, and rubber thongs on her long, archless feet. Her russet hair, thick and sleek as a horse's, is tossed into a bun of precise messiness with a yellow elastic band. This is Alison, never Ali.

"Good morning, sleepyhead," her father says when she reaches her family's lounge chairs.

"Morning," she yawns.

"You missed a cruise ship go by right out there. You wouldn't believe how big that thing was," her mother says.

(Though the guests at Indigo Bay are apt to complain when these hulking

ships lumber into the vista, they also derive a certain satisfaction from these moments, when the bad taste of others reaffirms their own quality—*they* have not chosen to spend their vacations in the vulgar opulence of a ship with all the beauty of an office park.)

“Sounds riveting.” Alison drags a chair out of the shade of an umbrella and into the sun. From her beach bag she removes a yellow Walkman. She lies down, puts on her headphones, and pulls her sunglasses over her eyes.

“How about a family swim?” her father says.

Alison does not respond. Not pretending she doesn’t hear him over whatever she’s listening to, her father decides, just ignoring him.

“Maybe in a little while everyone will be more in the mood,” her mother says with prodding cheerfulness.

“Hey, Clairey,” Alison says. “I’m going on a treasure hunt and I’m bringing a starfish.”

She is speaking to the little girl sitting in the sand between her mother’s and father’s chairs, who until this moment had been piling sand into small mounds with intense focus.

“I’m going on a treasure hunt and I’m bringing a starfish and a dog,” the little girl says.

She is as peculiar in appearance as her older sister is appealing. Her hair is nearly white, her skin extremely pale. Eyes gray, lips blanched. These features combine to create an impression that manages to be at once arresting and plain. This is Claire, age seven. Clairey, to her family.

“I’m going on a treasure hunt and I’m bringing a starfish, a dog, and a piccolo.”

“A piccolo,” Claire whispers. Her eyes widen with wonder.

The father flags down one of the men who work on the beach. There are two of them, both dark-skinned, in white slacks and white polos with the resort insignia embroidered on the breast pocket in gold thread. The skinny one and the fat one, in most of the guests’ mental shorthand. The man who approaches the family now is the skinny one, Edwin.

When he reaches them, Alison sits up and smooths her hair.

“How are you all doing this morning?” he asks.

“Excellent,” the mother says with a bright display of enthusiasm.

“First time to our island?”

“Yes,” the father confirms. “Just flew in last night.”

The family vacations at a different resort on a different island every winter, weeklong respites from their snowbound suburb that steel them for the remaining months of darkness and cold. They have seen palm trees bent to kiss the sand. They have seen water as pale as glaciers and walked on sand as soft as cream. They have watched the sun transform, at the end of the day, into a giant orange yolk that breaks and spills itself across the sea. They have seen the night sky overcome with fine blue stars.

“Look at our island pulling out she most beautiful day for you.” He gestures generally with his skinny arm at the sky, the sea. “What can I be getting you this morning?”

“Two rum punches and two fruit punches,” the father says.

Alison emits a small sigh.

The skinny one returns some time later. (Too long, the father thinks, as fathers all along this stretch of sand think; the skinny one is a chatterbox, and a dawdler.) He bears a tray of drinks garnished with maraschino cherries and hibiscus blossoms.

“We have a volleyball match this afternoon,” he says. “We hope you will join us.”

“Oh, honey, you would love that!” the mother says to Alison.

The girl turns to face her. Though she wears sunglasses, the mother has no doubt that behind them her daughter’s gaze is withering.

The skinny one claps his hands together. “Excellent! May we count you in, miss?”

The girl adjusts her sunglasses. “Maybe.” (She has developed a talent lately for delivering even the most innocuous words as thinly veiled innuendo. The mother has noticed this.)

“More of a sunbather, are we?” the man says.

Alison’s face turns crimson.

The father reaches into his wallet and pulls a few singles from the thick stack he took out yesterday at the bank. (Was that really just yesterday? Already he can feel the island beginning to work its rejuvenating magic on him.)

“Thank you, sir.” The skinny one tucks the money in his pocket and continues down the beach.

“Nice guy,” the father says.

“Friendly,” the mother agrees.

“Well?” the father says, and raises his glass.

The mother smiles. Clairey stares intently at her cherry. Alison swirls her fruit punch with practiced boredom.

“To paradise,” the father says.

IN THE hot afternoon sun, the fat one makes his way down the beach, pausing at each cluster of chairs. “The volleyball match will begin in five minutes,” he says softly. He nods uncomfortably, tugs at the collar of his shirt, and walks on. The guests watch as he passes. He is big, the kind of big that draws attention. This is Clive. Gogo, to those who know him.

“You best sell my game hard, man! We still four players short!” the skinny one shouts from the volleyball court, hands cupped around his mouth. “Volleyball of champions! Last call!”

People who were sleeping or reading shake their heads at his shouting and smile indulgently. They understand that the skinny one is an essential element of this place, granting the beach its energy, its sense of fun, its luscious, gummy vowels.

Alison takes off her headphones and stands. “Want to come watch me play, Clairey?” She reaches her hand out to her sister.

As the sisters cross the sand to the volleyball court, young men rise from their chairs and stroll casually in their wake. They are in the mood for some volleyball after all.

THE SKINNY one counts off the players, one, two, one, two. Claire takes a seat on the sideline.

“You’re my extra pair of eyes, little miss,” he says to her with a grin. He tousles her hair and she stiffens at his touch.

Just before the game begins, Alison slips her tunic up over her head and drops it in the sand beside her sister. The eyes of the other players land on her, noticing while trying to appear as if they have not noticed the large conch-pink scar on her stomach. For a moment she stands perfectly still as they take in her secret spectacle. Then she snatches the ball from the sand and tosses it into the air.

IT IS not much of a game. A few high schoolers and college kids, a couple of young dads with some lingering fitness, a woman who ducks whenever

the ball comes near her, a husband and wife in their mid-thirties—a slight paunch spilling over the waistband of the husband’s pink dolphin-print swim trunks, the wife’s immaculate body casting off the aura of frantic hours at the gym—and one genuinely skilled guy whose overinvestment in the game (unnecessarily aggressive spikes, the frequent utterance of the phrase “a little advice” as he attempts to whip his team into shape) quickly begins to grate on everyone.

As the game progresses, the players converse about the usual things. It is established that two couples are from New York, one is from Boston, and another from Miami. The woman who ducks is from Minneapolis. A Chicagoan on his honeymoon has left his brand-new wife, whose langoustine last night must have been off, holed up in their room.

“She made me leave,” he adds quickly. “She said there was no point in both of us missing the day if I couldn’t be useful anyway.” Having repeated his wife’s words, he furrows his brow; it occurs to him that he may have misunderstood her and failed one of the first tests of his marriage.

“Welcome to the next forty years of your life,” says the overinvested man. He and his wife have been at Indigo Bay for two days. Don’t get him wrong, it’s fine, but they prefer Malliouhana on Antigua, or was it Anguilla?, where they stayed last year. The couple from Miami has friends who swear by Malliouhana.

“Are we the only ones who find the food here pretty subpar?” the overinvested man asks.

The woman from Minneapolis finds the food delicious but outrageously overpriced.

“It’s because they have to bring everything in on boats,” says the man in the dolphin swim trunks.

“That’s just what they say. It’s because we’re a captive audience,” corrects his wife.

“And the service charge is killer.”

“When the bill comes, I don’t look. I just sign.”

“Smart man.”

“Almost, honey!” the wife of the man in the dolphin swim trunks says when he serves the ball into the net. The trunks embarrass him, but they were a gift from his wife, and she was so excited about them he didn’t want to offend her by returning them, though he suspects she was excited not

because she thought these trunks would make him happy, but because they made her happy, because on some level she wants a husband she doesn't have to take seriously. He noted this but said nothing, figuring it would be cruel and pointless to call her attention to the ugliness in intentions she believed to be pure. When they separate three years from now, he will become aware of how many things he noted silently, of how much time he spent smiling at her while rebuking her in his mind.

A discussion is had about the pros and cons of the various excursions offered by the resort. Somebody wonders whether the snorkeling trip to Carnival Cay is decent.

"We went yesterday. You'll see so many fish you'll be sick of them," says a husband from New York.

Someone has heard that the scuba excursion, to the site where a ship called the *Lady Ann* was wrecked in a hurricane fifty years ago, is not to be missed. Somebody else spent the morning golfing and can report that the course is top-notch. The wife of the man in the dolphin swim trunks has decided against the tour of the old sugar estate and rum distillery. Another husband from New York highly recommends the romantic picnic on Tamarind Island. The beach is exquisite. He and his wife had it all to themselves. He does not mention the fake rose petals he kept finding on the beach, half buried in the sand, remnants of other people's romantic picnic excursions on Tamarind Island, and how they have burrowed into his mind, souring his memory of an experience he knows was very nice.

The boys who followed Alison down the beach include a short, muscle-bound kid with a frayed braid of hemp around his neck; a boy who wears a T-shirt emblazoned with the Greek letters of his fraternity; and a tall blond boy who, when pressed, admits to attending Yale. There's a girl, too, a communications major. For a few minutes they run through the people they know at each other's schools, looking for connections. The ex-girlfriend of the boy with the hemp necklace is in Developmental Psych with the fraternity brother. The sleepaway camp bunkmate of the communications major is in orchestra with the blond boy from Yale. The blond boy plays the cello. He is going to Saint Petersburg on tour in March.

"Small world," the blond boy says when he puts together that a teammate from his high school soccer team is in Alison's dorm at Princeton.

"In the sense that our worlds are small," she retorts.

He laughs. “Good point, Ali.”

“Alison.”

“Good point, *Alison*.”

The players serve and spike against a dichromatic backdrop of sand and sky. They clutch their knees and say, “Whew,” after a particularly aerobic play. They watch Alison. She leaps and dives, flinging herself after the ball with abandon. Her body is lithe and athletic. Even when she’s still, an energy simmers about her. When the wife of the man in the dolphin swim trunks catches him staring, he pretends to be extremely absorbed in the view of the ocean.

From her spot in the sand, Claire watches and wonders whether the sluicing beauty of her sister’s movements will be hers, too, someday, when she grows up. She doubts it, but this doesn’t really make her sad. It is enough to bask in the warmth of her sister’s light.

When the game ends (defeat for the team of the overinvested man, who now declares the game to have been “all in good fun”), the blond boy approaches Alison. They talk a bit. The other boys eye him with annoyance and self-recrimination, then turn their attention to the communications major, reassessing. The blond boy touches Alison’s shoulder, then trots off down the sand. When he’s gone, she brings her hand to the spot he touched and brushes her fingertips against her own soft skin.

AS AFTERNOON slips into evening, the guests drift away from the beach. They spend the hours before dinner recovering from the day—the sun, the heat, the booze, beauty so vivid their eyes crave a rest from it. They shower. They check in with the office. (Their expertise is needed to resolve some particularly thorny issue, and they provide the solution with relief; or they are told to enjoy their vacation, things are chugging along just fine without them, and for the rest of the evening they are cranky and short-tempered.) They have sex in the fluffy white hotel beds. Afterward, they eat the mangoes from the welcome baskets, letting the creamy juice run down their hands. They investigate the small bottles in the minibars. They flip on televisions by force of habit, watch a few minutes of a news program from Saint Kitts, a *Miami Vice* rerun, a documentary about a reggae singer who is neither Bob Marley nor Jimmy Cliff. They sit on the balconies, smoke loose joints rolled with the mediocre grass they’ve managed to

procure on the island, and watch the night begin: the sun go down, moths bloom from the darkness, the palms turn to shadowy windmills, the first faint stars pierce the sky.

The sisters lay side by side on Claire's bed and let the air conditioner blitz their bodies. One day on the beach and already Alison has turned nut-brown. Her freckles, faint apricot this morning, are auburn sparks. Claire's skin, meanwhile, is angry pink.

"You poor thing," Alison says.

She fetches the bottle of aloe vera from the kit in the bathroom and squeezes some into her palm. She soothes her sister inch by inch. Claire closes her eyes and slips into the blind dream of her sister's touch.

Alison has been away at college for four months. Sometimes at home Claire goes into her sister's room and sits on her bed. The room looks as if Alison went out just a minute ago. On the desk there are messy piles of snapshots and, mixed in with the pens and pencils in a blue ceramic mug, a tube of sparkly strawberry lip gloss. (Once, she opened the tube, slicked some on, and inhaled her sister's smell on her own lips. She has not dared to do this again.) There are band posters on the walls. The clothes her sister didn't take to college are sloppily folded in the dresser. But the room no longer feels inhabited. Sometimes, when she closes her eyes, she cannot picture her sister's face. She cannot hear her voice, and when this happens a wave of panic washes over her.

Now the hotel room they share is humid with Alison's presence, and everything Claire has missed comes rushing back. Her sister's savage nail biting. Her habit of stroking her scar through her clothes when she's thinking. The way she dances a little, small private movements, when she moves around a room. Her sister is a secret whispered in her ear.

WHAT DOES a father think about when he wakes at dawn on the second morning of vacation? The damned birds. The roosters crowing away, from somewhere behind the resort. Some incessant yellow-breasted bird making a high-pitched racket on the balcony. (This is the bananaquit, an infamous island nuisance.) He throws on a robe, goes out to the balcony, shoos the bird away, and returns to bed. But it is back a minute later. He does this three times, thinking with increasing agitation of some prior guest in this suite who must have offered the bird scraps from his room service *pain*

au chocolat. He tells himself to relax. He's awake anyway now, might as well get his day started. He kisses his wife, who is still sleeping soundly, and steps onto the balcony to appraise the morning. It is a clear day. A few squat clouds move slow as cruise ships across a pure blue sky. Faraway Cay appears so near he half believes he could reach out and touch it. He can make out individual palm trees on the shore. He can see the cay's black rock faces, mossed with growth, and the shadows of its ravines. The cay's intense greens simply do not exist at home. A father reflects momentarily that most people will live their whole lives without getting to see a place this beautiful. He reiterates to himself, as he tries to do often, that he is fortunate. He paused to allow a similar reflection on the shuttle ride from the airport to the resort, a journey whose features—children playing in dusty yards; women sitting somnolently behind dented tin pots at roadside stands; concrete houses that must once have been turquoise, yellow, pink, but whose paint had nearly all peeled away; strays—summoned the equivalent features of his own life: his beautiful daughters, wife, house (the eaves tufted now with shimmering snow), Fluffernutter the dog.

His thoughts are interrupted by a mechanical noise. A tractor is making its way along the beach. He notices now that the sand, which was immaculate yesterday, is strewn with mats of brown seaweed. Two men in overalls are raking the seaweed into piles. The tractor follows after them, scooping up the piles. Behind the tractor, a fourth man uses a push broom to smooth away the tread marks.

A father stands on the balcony and watches this procedure for some time. He understands now that the beach is not naturally pristine, which, he admits, should have been obvious, and this knowledge taints his enjoyment of it. His reaction bothers him. Why should these men's labor make him appreciate the beach less instead of more?

As his second day at Indigo Bay unfolds and he grows accustomed to the resort's beauty, to the bushes everywhere weeping pink blooms and the brazen teal water, he begins to perceive a new set of information. He notices, for instance, that the milk at the breakfast buffet in the open-air pavilion is ever so slightly sour, leaving an unpleasant aftertaste on his tongue. He does not say anything about this. He does not ask the woman who greeted his family so warmly at the pavilion's entrance to rectify the situation. He simply registers it. He also registers that in a few places at the

resort he routinely catches the whiff of certain unmistakable odors. At the far side of the swimming pool, warm garbage. At the turn in the gravel path that leads from their room to the beach, sewage. He would never dream of complaining about such things, as other guests might. He likes to think he wears his affluence tastefully. He does not move through the world expecting things to be perfect. He tries to like everything and everybody as much as he can. Even this orientation toward the world he recognizes as a benefit of the position he occupies. It is easy to make allowances when you live a fortunate life.

Only now it is all a bit spoiled, isn't it? This same disappointment every year; childish, he concedes, but there it is: he still hasn't found paradise, not quite. Because, like everywhere else, when you get down to it, it is all just bodies and their manifold wastes and where to put it all, it is all just disorder two days from taking over. The week before he flew down here, a blizzard had prevented trash pickup in Manhattan for a few days. On his walk from Grand Central to the office, the sidewalks were piled five feet high with black trash bags. At street corners, the garbage pails were overflowing, the pavement around them littered with chicken bones, half-eaten hot dogs, diapers, frozen rivers of old coffee. He saw a little terrier in a red sweater urinate at the base of a pile of trash bags; he saw a thick beige puddle beside another pile, and stared at it curiously for a moment before the smell hit him and he realized it was vomit. As he walked past all of this he had fixed an image of a tropical beach in his mind and thought, *Thank god I'm getting out of here.* But now that he is out, now that he is here, he cannot help but wonder whether the only damned difference is the bougainvillea, whether this place is nothing but the same old ugliness, spackled with an unconvincing veneer of beauty.

A YELLOW rubber ball rises high in the air. A dozen children dash across the sand to catch it. It is ten in the morning, the start of the resort's daily hour of children's games and relays. While the children play, their parents use the free time. At the moment the yellow ball reaches its apex, a mother shudders with the force of her first orgasm in a month. Another mother is getting close and hoping ferociously that her husband lasts. A husband and wife who fully intended on sex snore in bed. Couples drink tequila sunrises in the hot tub, read on the beach, pound away side by side on tread-

mills in the fitness center. A wife poses for her husband in front of the ocean, trying her best to hide her soft thighs. For a moment their children slip from view. Briefly, they seem not to exist at all.

CLAIRE IS no good at games. She falls during the crab walk. “Come *onnn*,” her partner urges during the three-legged race. Two strides into the egg-and-spoon relay the egg rolls off her spoon and cracks on her foot. But most of all she is no good at the mysterious process by which children sift out into pairs and clusters, securing their buddies for the week. Even Axel from Belgium, who doesn’t speak English, slips right in with another rowdy boy. They kindle friendship so quickly it leaves her dizzy, as if she’s been spinning; when she stops, the world tilts back into place and the business of making friends is done, settled, without her.

THE FAT one brings the family’s lunch. They watch him come up the beach, the heavy tray balanced on his shoulder. He stumbles. French fries rain onto the sand.

“I apologize,” he says when he reaches them. “I’ll bring you more chips.”

“Oh, don’t bother. There’s still plenty,” the mother says encouragingly. “Clairey, sweetheart, no writing.”

The little girl freezes, caught with her index finger in midair. The word she had been writing was *chips*. She was up to *p*. She shoves her hand down at her side. She can feel her finger itching with the half-finished *p* and the *s*. She will have to finish later.

“Leave her alone,” Alison snaps at her mother. She takes Claire’s hand, raises it to her lips, and gives it a peck.

The mother sighs. This habit of her younger daughter’s emerged a few months ago, her index finger wiggling and looping through the air. “I’m writing,” Claire had mumbled when the mother asked what was going on. They’d met with the school psychologist, a mistake—after that Claire got furtive about it, sneaky, only doing it when she thought no one was paying attention. It is a constant struggle for the mothers: How do you know what is merely odd and what is worrisome? How much damage can you inflict upon your child if you treat something like it is one when it is really the other?

After Clive sets out their food on the low tables between their chairs, he takes a small towel from his pocket and wipes the sweat from his brow.

“Must be hot out here in long pants,” the father says.

Alison shoots him a disapproving look, which he ignores. If fathers only said things their teenage daughters approved of, they would never speak at all. The mother and father exchange glances. A change has come over their daughter. Lately, her teenage moodiness carries a whiff of moral judgment. Newer still is this sighing dismissiveness, as if they are hardly even worth the effort of her judgment. Make no mistake, she’s a college girl now.

“It’s not so bad,” the fat one mumbles. “Are you having a cold winter at home?”

“Brutal,” the father says. “It’s been snowing nonstop. I envy you, waking up to this every day.”

“We do have our hurricanes,” the fat one says.

“You had a bad one this season, right? José?”

“Luis.”

The father claps his hands together. “Luis! That’s the one.”

“We had six hundred homes and many of our schools destroyed.”

“How awful,” the mother says.

The father cannot comprehend how people can be willing to live in a place where something like this can happen. He decides that a sense of the perpetual potential for destruction, for incurring a total loss, must be baked into people’s temperaments here from birth, so that living like this is easier for them than it would be for him. Which is not a deficit in his character, for presumably if he had been born here he, too, would be such a person, able to bear unpredictability with stoic equanimity. He pauses to imagine himself as such a person—a pleasurable leaving-behind of himself as he enters a self more connected to and at peace with the planetary vicissitudes.

“Tell me something,” the father says. “Where do you recommend for some local food? You know, something authentic.”

The fat one gives him the name of a restaurant in town. His friend works there; his friend gives tours of the island and the cays, too, “At a good price.” The mother and father smile and thank him, but something silent is exchanged between them: they enjoy receiving local knowledge, but they are also on guard for local slipperiness.

Up and down the beach, fathers sign bills for lunches and drinks. They try not to think about the numbers. Five bucks for their kid’s Orangina,

eighteen for their wife's goat cheese salad. They do not want to linger on the ways they are being nickel-and-dimed in paradise. Besides, what price can one put on such moments? Here is the sea, the blue water and the milky froth. Here is the soft, sun-warmed sand. The grains of sand on earth, a father read somewhere, are fewer than the stars in the universe. How unlikely, then, what an unbelievable stroke of luck, his family on this beach.

SOME TIME later, the skinny one comes to clear the family's plates.

"What are the sisters planning the rest of the day?" he asks.

"We're going to build a castle, right, Clairey?" Alison says.

"Did you know I was this year's Carnival Sandcastle Competition champion?"

"Is that so?" Alison sweeps her hair off her neck and gathers it into a ponytail.

"For true. Well, honorable mention." He grins. "If you girls need any consultation on your design, just let me know."

"We like to build our sandcastles solo, thank you very much," Alison says with a fetching smirk.

Edwin squats in front of Claire. "And you, little miss? Do you, too, prefer to build your sandcastle *solo*?" He smiles at her.

Claire nods rigidly.

He laughs. "Okay, little miss." He tousles her hair. "See you later, sisters."

As he heads off down the beach, the mother notices that her daughter has her eyes on him, watching him go.

THE SKINNY one is the prince of the sand. The social hierarchy of the guests flows through him. Those he anoints with his gregarious approval seem to possess an invisible status. It is true he takes a lot of breaks and his tendency to stop and chat slows down service on the beach, but this is forgiven, even embraced. What's the rush? They're on island time. He is adored, too, by the young children, who follow him around like a fan club.

Then there is the fat one, Gogo, clumsy in the sand, clumsy with a tray of cocktails on his shoulder, clumsy adjusting the umbrellas to keep up with the movement of the sun, his voice rarely rising above a mumble. But he is Edwin's friend. The closeness between the skinny one and the fat one is clear. When they pass each other on the sand they exchange high fives and

chummy insults. Often, Edwin returns from his break with a grease-spotted paper bag in hand—lunch for Gogo.

When a guest asks Clive about their friendship, he says simply, “We’re best mates.”

“Me and the Goges?” Edwin says, asked the same question. “We come up together from small. Me and he go back to primary. Who you think it was named he Gogo? I’d tell you why but he’d kill me.”

One sundown, the man with the dolphin swim trunks is jogging down the beach when he sees Edwin struggling to drag a stack of chairs across the sand. Clive hurries over and, without a word, lifts the load from him. The man feels something crack in him. He loves his wife, don’t get him wrong, but somehow he had forgotten until this moment—maybe he has forced himself to forget—the sweetness of friendship.

THE SISTERS do many things together. They collect seashells. They trade underwater messages in the pool: “Mayonnaise is gross.” “Fluffernutter is the world’s best dog.” In the ocean, Alison scoops Claire into her arms and Claire wraps her arms around her sister’s neck.

“Our ship sank and Mom and Dad and everybody else is dead,” Claire says. “We’re in the middle of the ocean.”

“See that island out there?” Alison says, pointing to Faraway Cay. “We’re going to have to swim for it. It’s our only chance. Can you make it?”

Claire nods, sober and brave.

They build castles, Claire happily submitting to her sister’s vision and management. She fetches buckets of water and collects twigs and pebbles, while Alison carves bridges and archways and spiral staircases to the sky.

Edwin comes by and appraises their progress. “Look at your bridge there caved in. Guess you girls aren’t having much luck building *solo* after all.” He grins.

“It’s a ruin,” Alison replies. “We’re building something ancient.”

A ruin, Claire whispers to herself as she fetches more water. *A ruin*. *A ruin*.

A CELEBRITY has arrived at Indigo Bay. He is an actor, a man in late middle age known for playing offbeat characters, mostly sidekicks, with a

signature misanthropy. He has brought with him a supple young girlfriend, black-haired and splayfooted.

News of his arrival spreads quickly among the guests, who go intensively about the business of pretending not to recognize him. The chairs to either side of the actor and his girlfriend at the pool remain unoccupied. When the newlyweds (the wife by now recovered from her bad langoustine) find themselves in the hot tub with the actor, the husband goes so far as to ask him what he does for a living.

In the actor's vicinity, the guests laugh more loudly. The men stand straighter and touch their wives more. The women sway their hips. (They tell themselves, though, a bit smugly, that they would not go to bed with him. He was handsome once, but he has let himself go and turned flabby and dissipated. They've heard rumors for years that he is in and out of various rehab facilities in the California desert.)

Though he has been a public figure for more than three decades, the actor has never grown accustomed to the way people adjust themselves in his presence. He can feel it, a shrill solicitousness like a current in the air. While his girlfriend gets a massage, he takes a seat at the poolside bar and orders a vodka with a twist. The couple at the barstools next to him hush. Then the man says loudly to the woman that he wishes there were bigger waves here; he would love to go surfing. He begins to recount a story from long ago. Hawaii, a big wave seized at the perfect moment and how he rode the white curl of it to shore. The actor understands that this is one of the man's moments of personal greatness. One of the unusual features of his life is how often such stories are offered up for him to overhear.

This man could not know that the actor himself possesses a paralyzing fear of the ocean. This trip is his girlfriend's idea. (Whose idea his girlfriend is, is anyone's guess. He has a way of finding problems and holding tight to them. Always has.) If it were up to him, he would vacation in the comfort of his own house, just take a week away from people. After all, it is people, not work, from which he craves respite.

When they arrived here, his girlfriend flung open the curtains in their room and urged him out onto the balcony. Beyond the sand, the ocean arranged itself in bands of deepening blue. The sun blinked on the water like infinite strobe lights.

“See? Not so scary, right?” She patted his arm as if comforting a twitchy dog.

Then it happened as it always did. The sea rose into a wall, higher and higher, until there was no end to it. He opened his mouth and the water flooded him.

EVERY FAMILY has its documentarian. Say it is the father. He squats in the sand, a position his sorry knees can barely handle these days, and captures his girls at work on their castle. At dinner, he nabs an action shot of Alison cracking a lobster claw with her hands. He snaps Clairey marveling at the whorls of a seashell. This task falls to him because his wife never takes pictures; she says she will but she forgets, or doesn't bother, he's not sure which. Anyway, it has worked out. He has found an avocation and become, if he says so himself, a pretty decent amateur photographer. What a relief to find, in middle age, that there are still interests waiting inside you to be discovered, that you just might have more artistic heft than you long ago made your peace with having.

At home a family's walls are decorated with photographs from their travels. The father and mother went on an African safari last year to celebrate their twentieth anniversary. A black chain of elephants against an orange sunset. A flock of birds like a vast swath of silk in the sky. A gathering of local children craning their faces up at the camera. Their guide, Buyu, kicking at the embers of their campfire with his black rubber boots.

And what a disappointment it is to see, on the walls of their friends' homes, *their* fauna silhouetted against the sunset, *their* gathering of enthralled local children, *their* diminutive guide in black rubber boots. (All over the world, it seems, in Tanzania and Vietnam and Peru, short, wiry men lead tourists across savannas and through jungles and up mountains in these same black rubber boots.) For fleeting moments, he bore witness to something beautiful; to see these moments of personal sanctity duplicated—a father knows it shouldn't matter so much.

It's a relief to be on a straightforward beach vacation. No endangered species or ancient city walls to capture. Clairey at play. His wife, modest and lovely in the whisper of early evening. After many days of disinterest and outright refusal, he prevails upon Alison to let him take some pictures of her. She takes her hair out of its ponytail and lets it fall around her shoul-

ders; she leans against a palm and looks at the camera with a pensive expression, her lips slightly parted. He is so touched by her effort to style herself that for a moment he pulls the camera away from his face and simply looks at her.

In the distance he sees the fat one and the skinny one coming up the beach. He catches the skinny one's eyes on his daughter. If the father is honest, if all the fathers of teenage daughters here are honest, they do not like the way this man looks at their daughters. He is so informal. There is an unconcerned quality in his gaze, as if the father's daughter, while appealing, is not special.

They can acknowledge that their concern has at least partly to do with the color of this man's skin. But they aren't even *concerned*, really; they are merely entertaining the possibility of concern. It is nothing. The people here are simply very friendly. It is their culture, the warm and open way of people on a small island. You know you've gone too long without a vacation when you start seeing friendliness as some kind of problem.

ONE AFTERNOON, the blond boy from the volleyball game stops by the family's chairs on the beach. The mother watches Alison wave at him as he approaches, a gesture she executes with delicious casualness.

"What happened to your leg?" he asks when he is standing beside Alison's chair.

The mother looks over and sees that her daughter's calf is scraped and bloody.

"Tripped," Alison says, and shrugs.

The mother wants to tell her daughter to get bacitracin and a Band-Aid at the front desk and clean out the cut; she wants to get the bacitracin herself and patch up her daughter's scrape, but she holds her tongue.

"I'm going to hit some golf balls into the lagoon. Thought you might want to come," the boy says.

The mother watches him. His hair falls shaggily around his face—he wears it long and a bit disheveled. His skin is golden, like the outside of a perfectly baked vanilla cake. He wears his swim trunks slung low on his waist. On his chest, she sees a few strawberry blond hairs.

"Sure," Alison says. "Why not?"

The mother watches her stand. She walks beside the boy down the

beach with an aloof strut, just right. This age, this moment. A woman flares in ultraviolet bursts on the hot surface of her child.

BY THEIR fourth day at Indigo Bay, the mother and father doze on the beach with ease. Sometimes they nod off with their books still in their hands. The longer they are on the island, the more easily and frequently they slip into sleep. All around them, other guests experience this same psychic loosening. In their regular lives, they make choices with high stakes every day: forty million dollars, the life of a patient, a thousand manufacturing jobs in the Midwest. If you catch her in a vulnerable moment at the bar, the wife of the man in the dolphin swim trunks will confess that by the time she leaves the office at night, sometimes the choice of where to order takeout is enough to crumple her. At Indigo Bay, they unwind into a world of choice without consequence. Beach or pool? Beer or margarita? They submit to the tonic regiment of such days gratefully. They begin to fantasize about saying goodbye to their lives back home. They could quit their jobs, buy a little villa down here, and never look back. They could spend every day on the beach and never tire of it. They could remain here forever.

“**DON’T LET** them get into any trouble while I’m gone,” Alison tells Claire, nodding at their dozing parents. Claire watches her sister until she disappears down the beach, then she turns her attention to the bucket of seashells she and Alison collected earlier in the day. She spreads them out in the sand and sorts them into rows according to size, then piles them together and sorts them according to shape, color, favorite to least favorite. She goes down to the shore and spells her sister’s name in the sand. She watches a wave wash the letters away. She returns to her seashells. She holds her favorite tightly in her fist and closes her eyes.

The mother opens her eyes and yawns.

“Where’s your sister?”

“Bathroom?” Claire says, though her sister has by now been gone a long time. When she finally returns, their mother asks her where she has been.

“Just went for a walk. It’s really beautiful down at that end.” She points to where Indigo Bay ends at a barrier of black rocks. “Hey, Clairey, I’m going on a treasure hunt and I’m bringing a lime.”

Her sister has told a lie. On her breath, as she says *lime*, Claire smells smoke. It's her turn, but she can't think of a word.

"I'LL BE back," Alison says the next day. It's the in-between time after the beach and before dinner, and Claire is coloring at the coffee table in their room. After her sister leaves, Claire counts to ten, then follows.

She keeps her distance. Her sister walks back to the beach. She moves along the water's edge, skimming her toes in the froth. Claire takes big steps, planting her feet in her sister's melted footprints. Alison does not go to the pool, or to the bar. She walks past the water-sports cabana, the kayaks and Sunfish lined up tidily on the sand. She walks to the end of the beach and continues onto a narrow path, then disappears into the sea grape.

When Claire reaches the path, she hesitates. It is getting dark. What if their parents open the door that connects their rooms and find that they are gone? She takes a deep breath and steps onto the path. After a minute or so, it ends abruptly at an asphalt parking lot full of small shabby cars, their windshields covered with accordions of silver foil.

She hears laughter, a man's, and follows the sound. The asphalt burns her feet, but she stays quiet. There, next to an eggplant-colored car, her sister stands between the fat one and the skinny one. The skinny one digs into his pocket. He pulls out a small box and, from it, a cigarette. Her sister leans toward him and he slides it between her lips.

HUSBANDS AND wives have lost track of time. It is Tuesday or Wednesday, but perhaps it is only Monday. They have been on the island four days, no—five, possibly six. Within these lost days are lost moments, hours, mornings. Minutes diffuse like perfume into the air. The passage of time is of consequence only for the spectacles it reveals: The sea transforms to liquid silver as the day draws to a close. Sunset yields to the lavender fleece of twilight. Stars blink awake.

NIGHT. AT the hotel bar, couples drink elaborate cocktails as the lilting cadences of reggae float through the speakers. An elderly widow steps into the pool for her nightly swim. (She doesn't swim during the day. The pool is too busy then with the splashes and laughter of people together with their

people.) A security guard with a corona of white hair plucks an empty chip bag from a bed of portulaca and deposits it in the trash.

In their room, the sisters lie together on Claire's bed. Alison weaves her sister's hair into a loose braid, unspools it with her fingertips, then braids it again.

"I'm going on a treasure hunt and I'm bringing a pearl," Alison says.

"I'm going on a treasure hunt and I'm bringing a pearl and a pizza."

"I'm going on a treasure hunt and I'm bringing a pearl, a pizza, and the stars."

"You can't bring the stars."

"Why not?"

"You can't carry them."

"I'll bring whatever I want."

A RAINY day. Guests flip fruitlessly through the television channels. They sit on balconies and watch the rain. They order room service. They doze and make love, make love and doze. Some perceive the rain as a personal slight from the universe, a tax on their happiness. Others are secretly grateful. The rain absolves them from the burden of spending the day well; they hole up in their rooms with peculiar relief.

In the afternoon, Alison finds a cartoon for Clairey on TV.

"I'm going to the gift shop to poke around. Back soon," she says, not asking if her sister would like to come along.

Though she does not like cartoons, Claire watches dutifully. When the show ends, Alison is still not back. Claire walks out to the balcony. The rain falls in silver curtains. Palms toss in the wind. She looks out at the ocean. There is a person out there, swimming—she can see the head bobbing in the waves; it glints in and out of visibility in the surf, there and not there, back then gone again. Far out, the swimmer stops. The head bobs in place, facing away from shore, in the direction of the little island that is shrouded in mist, like a place in a fairy tale. As Claire looks at it, her heart flutters, and she remembers again the disappointment of mist—how you can never be *in* it; how as soon as you walk into it, it vanishes through your fingers, so that the little island as it appears from here is a place you can never, ever reach, no matter how you try.

The swimmer begins to stroke again. Claire watches as the figure moves

around the black rocks that jut out from shore at the edge of Indigo Bay and disappears.

“Got you something,” Alison says when she returns to the room later.

From a shopping bag she removes a puka shell necklace. Claire bends her head and her sister slips it over, twisting it into a double strand.

“Look at you, pretty,” Alison says.

Her hair is wet.

THAT NIGHT, Claire is awakened by the sound of a key rattling in the lock. As she surfaces from dreams, she watches the door to the hotel room open. Her sister tiptoes across the room and slides into bed. In the morning Claire wakes at dawn to find her sister’s bed empty. She is on the balcony, her eyes fixed on something in the distance. It seems her sister is hardly sleeping at all.

THE ACTOR cannot set himself at ease. The ocean is too near. His girlfriend tests him. She frolics in the waves, dives into the crests. Each time she disappears, fear grips him. She knows this and enjoys it, and the pleasure she derives from his fear makes him want to wring her.

She keeps pestering him about chartering a boat to Faraway Cay. The concierge has advised against this, on account of the goats, and recommended Tamarind Island instead, but she has decided this makes Faraway Cay off the beaten path and, therefore, more desirable. She says the beach is supposed to be even more beautiful than at Indigo Bay. (Is Indigo Bay not beautiful enough? Is there no such thing as enough beauty, as all of it you could possibly need?) In Faraway Cay’s interior there is a waterfall. They must see it. He must overcome this silly fear once and for all. She will help him. (How nice for her.)

At night he dreams of death by water. A whirlpool sucks him into its maw. The deep seas swell and swallow him. Dead, underwater, he feels his body bloat and stiffen. He hears the roving cries of gulls.

ON NEW Year’s Eve, Indigo Bay holds a dinner barbecue on the beach. There is a live calypso band—three men in matching tan fedoras and short-sleeved floral button-downs, the cheerful reverberations of a steel-pan. Tiki torches. A buffet of local specialties—roasted sea crayfish, conch creole,

mashed dasheen; chicken nuggets and spaghetti for the children. The guests drink piña coladas. They pick and suck the crayfish clean and lick the sweet ocean juice from their fingers. Small children toddle, woozy with happiness, before the torch-lit faces of the band.

When the band begins to play “Day-O,” Alison sings along.

“Come on, Clairey. You know the words,” she prods.

Claire is tentative at first, her voice barely a whisper, but as the song continues, it grows louder.

Six foot, seven foot, eight foot bunch.

The mother and father smile. Their shy little Clairey letting her voice be heard. Alison seeming finally to have unclenched. The mother and father join in. For a moment they are a family, singing.

Daylight come and me wan’ go home.

A father knows it already: this is a memory.

As the night deepens, people kick off their sandals. Husbands reach for wives. They dance and drink and feast beneath the star-crammed sky. All the while, though they don’t feel it, sand flies devour their flesh. The next morning at breakfast the guests scratch furiously at their limbs.

“I didn’t feel a thing.”

“Sneaky little suckers.”

Claire is bitten terribly. Her legs and feet are covered. A bite on her eyelid causes it to swell so that she can hardly open her eye. The mother purchases Benadryl at the resort shop and Claire spends the day in a groggy haze, scratching.

Alison takes her sister’s hand and pulls it away. “Don’t.” She presses her palm to her sister’s skin. For a brief moment Claire is soothed. “Poor Clairey. You’re just too sweet.”

DURING THE last days of vacation, adults begin to speak of their return.

“When we get home, remind me to take the car in.”

“Let’s be sure to call the Vitales about dinner.”

“Don’t let me forget to sign the boys up for Little League.”

The sisters’ parents are no different. Two days before their departure, as they lie on the beach, the mother remembers that she has unread library books, by now overdue, on her bedside table. When they get home she will return them and take out new ones, and this time she will actually read

them. This vacation has reminded her how much she loves to read. The father announces that when they get back he will start going to the gym in the morning before work like he used to, no excuses. They are energized. Excited, even, to be off this island and back home, where their plans can be implemented, this energy put to use. The vacation has served its purpose—it has made them eager to be home.

A few days ago, they imagined leaving their jobs, their houses, their lives behind and moving down here. Some of them even spent an afternoon viewing properties with a Realtor. Now they see that they were simply indulging a fantasy that, like most fantasies, is not something they actually want. They would grow bored here. The bright colors would grate on their eyes. The sound of the ocean would torment them.

GUESTS DEPART daily. The resort shuttle takes them in reverse, up the palm-lined drive, onto the rutted public road, past concrete houses, roosters and goats, clothes on clotheslines fluttering over sandy yards. At Sir Randall Corwin International Airport, they walk back across the tarmac, up the stairs onto a plane, speed back down the runway, and lift into the sky. They touch down in Boston or New York or Chicago amid a papery snowfall and drive the dark roads home.

Inevitably, they leave things behind—in their rooms, by the pool, buried in the sand. The staff gathers these objects at the lost and found, but they are rarely claimed. Once a month, Gwendolyn from the spa drives the items to Bandy Harbour Baptist Church. A gold necklace with an amethyst pendant. A denim jacket. A red shawl. Infinite sunglasses. A camera (the roll of film inside never to be developed). A legal thriller. A wristwatch with a green face.

ON THE day before they return home, Alison, Clairey, and their father walk down the beach to where the local woman who braids hair sits beneath a faded blue umbrella. Their father hands the woman sixty dollars, takes a picture of the girls (the woman looking up briefly—humorlessly, the father thinks—from combing Claire's fine white hair), and returns to his lounge chair.

As the woman braids Claire's hair, the sisters sift through the basket of beads, picking out purple and white.

“I’ll come back to check on you,” Alison says. She pecks her sister on the forehead and is off.

The braiding takes nearly two hours. The woman does not try to get her to talk, which is a relief to Claire. She likes sitting here, the silence and the feeling of the woman’s hands working quickly yet gently through her hair. The sun is hot, the bites on her legs beg to be scratched, but she stays still, fortified by an image of herself returning to school with these braids, the beads tinkling as she walks, and how, for a rare, brief time, the other girls will envy her.

When the woman is finished, she hands Claire a clouded plastic mirror. It is better than she dared hope.

The woman looks at her. “My, you a patient child.”

THAT NIGHT, Claire claws through her sleep. No matter how she scratches at the bites, she can’t make the itching stop. All night she tosses in and out of dreams. When she wakes up it is dawn, barely light. The bites on her legs are crusted with dried, rust-colored blood. The blood has stained the crisp white sheets, too, blots so perfectly red it makes her dizzy. She looks around the room. Alison is gone.

WHAT DO a mother and father do when they are awakened by one child to the news that the other is missing? First, they tell themselves not to panic. Their daughter must have simply gone off somewhere on the resort grounds. It is a large property and there are any number of places she could be. Perhaps she has gone for a jog, or to smack tennis balls against the backboard at the courts. The small red blip of a kayak far out on the water might be her—maybe she decided to squeeze in one last water sport before their departure. Perhaps she got too drunk at the hotel bar last night and is sleeping off a hangover in the room of one of the other girls her age. (The parents are not naïve; they know that a teenager is apt to have one daiquiri too many after her parents have gone to bed on the last night of a Caribbean vacation.) Surely she will come groggily across the sand anytime now, and how furious they will be! And how pleasurable it will be to be furious with a daughter who is perfectly fine, and who will be snotty and dismissive when they tell her how worried they have been.

But she is in none of these places doing none of these things. By late

morning, a mother and father's faith that their child will turn up any moment has given way to terror. Everything but Alison is forgotten. Breakfast, lunch . . . Claire is starving but says nothing.

Word spreads quickly among the guests.

"Did you hear? That pretty girl with the auburn hair is missing."

"The one with the scar?"

"They're saying she never came home last night."

The police are summoned. The chief of police asks the mother and father a series of questions, and they tell him about their vacation in precise, beautiful detail. As guests sun themselves by the pool and climb the StairMaster to oblivion in the fitness center, the Royal Police Force of Saint X combs the property. The time for the family's flight home comes and goes.

ON THE first night after Alison's disappearance the sunset is the most beautiful yet, a flashy display of scarlet and violet that deepens, as the sun slips below the horizon, until it is the shade of a bruise. On the balcony, a mother watches the sun go down, then sinks to the floor. She crouches on hands and knees and dry-heaves over the cool terra-cotta tiles. A father goes to her, holds her. He tells her that everything could still be okay. She repeats this. Everything could still be okay. Hearing these words echoed back to him from his wife, a father breaks down. They remain on the balcony, intertwined, for some time. A sense of distance from the day's events comes over the mother and she wonders, with detached curiosity, whether she is becoming—whether she is already—the one thing none of the mothers ever want to be. A father is seized by the most unaccountable memory: Alison, one year old and bald as could be, blowing raspberries against his cheek.

From inside, where she has been set up in front of the television, Claire watches her parents. Later that night, they put her between them in their bed. In the middle of the night she wakes to the feeling of a hand on her back; for a moment, she thinks it is Alison. Then she remembers. It is her father's hand, checking for the rise and fall of her breath. Claire lies awake, eyes wide open in the dark.

ON THE second day, the chief of police asks the mother and father to take him through their time on the island once more. The father tells him again

about their arrival, ten days ago, on a TWA flight out of Kennedy. Alison slept late the next morning. She drank a fruit punch.

“He was after her all week,” the mother interrupts. Her body trembles. “That blond boy. He couldn’t leave her alone.” As she speaks, a film reel of horrible possibilities flickers through her mind. She’d liked this boy, found it sweet the way he lingered, at once cocky and unsure, around her daughter. What if she’d misjudged him? What a fool she’d been, thinking herself a good mom, a fun mom, for letting her daughter go off with him. How had she allowed herself to forget that in the end a mother has only one job? Suddenly she cannot breathe. The warm tropical air clogs in her throat. When she begins to hyperventilate, the chief of police calls for the hotel doctor, who arrives promptly, examines the mother swiftly, and writes a prescription for a sedative. A porter is sent to the local chemist’s to collect it. The doctor pulls the father aside. “I might suggest that you have a babysitter called for the little one,” he tells him quietly, gesturing at Claire, who is sitting in a wicker chair, eyes on her mother. “Give yourselves some time and space.”

“If you think we’re going to let our daughter out of our sight, if you think we’re going to leave her with some person who could be anyone, you’re out of your mind.”

“Of course. I apologize.”

“Everyone here could be anyone. *You* could be anyone.”

“I’ll go now, sir.”

THE COUPLE in the room next to the family’s asks Indigo Bay’s manager, very tactfully, if they can be relocated.

“It’s so awful, what’s happened. The thing is, we can hear them,” the husband says.

“Going through . . . what they’re going through,” the wife adds. She places a hand protectively over her stomach; she is four months pregnant, this trip a last hurrah before their lives change. She laces her other hand through her husband’s and squeezes, a gesture that means, *Something like this could happen to us*. Her husband squeezes her hand back, an assurance that it won’t and, more generally, that this thing that has occurred is not a bad omen, not some harbinger of terrible things on the horizon. (He will turn out to be right. Often, in the decades to come, as their son grows up

and their family's own small troubles reveal themselves, the wife will think that this ruined vacation was the darkest of blessings, because however her child struggles, however he tests her, hurts her, what does it matter when she carries within her the indelible sounds of another mother's undoing?)

The manager upgrades them to a private villa.

The rest of the guests do their best to balance concern with the pleasure of their days. They do not know the girl, after all. Their worry is tinged with excitement. There are rumors.

"They say the police are questioning that blond boy."

"Did you hear they're talking to the skinny one and the fat one?"

"I heard the police picked them up for something the night she went missing. People are saying they spent the night in jail."

"It's always the pretty ones, isn't it?"

THE ISLAND is turned upside down with searching. Members of the civil service are given days off to join the search. Prop planes loaned from a larger island nearby scan the shallow seas. The lagoon into which, mere days ago, Alison watched the blond boy hit golf balls is trawled to no avail.

The search turns up answers to other, older mysteries. The body of a beloved family dog, who disappeared during a storm last season, surfaces in the thickets beside a salt pond. A wedding band is found in the dusty lot behind Paradise Karaoke. In a limestone cavern on Carnival Cay, a customs worker uncovers a small black notebook in which are recorded the debts of a local man who left the island in an unexplained hurry last year. But no sign is found of Alison.

When the chief of police arrives at the family's hotel room on the third day after her disappearance and delivers this update, the father looks around—at the marble floor, the scarlet orchid in the white vase, the canopy bed—his gaze darting and unfocused, as if the coherence of these things is beginning to come apart before his eyes. "I don't understand. What's taking so long? Where is she?"

"I assure you we are deploying every available resource. Our officers are working in fifteen-hour shifts. We are coordinating with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. We have search-and-rescue units from three islands and a patrol ship from the British navy devoted to finding your daughter."

“But this island is tiny.” The father squints at the chief of police. “Why the hell can’t you find her?”

THE ACTOR’S girlfriend finally persuades him, grudgingly, to charter a boat to Faraway Cay. As they slice through the water, he keeps his eyes shut tight and listens as his girlfriend chats up the two men who comprise the boat’s crew. (“I *love* reggae. That whole rasta spirituality, you know? I’ve always found that so interesting.” “I’m an L.A. girl. But he”—gesturing, he knows, at him—“grew up in a really small town in Kentucky.” He knew she’d tell these men this; she mentions Kentucky to anyone who will listen. It hurts him. His childhood was not a happy one. If he asked her to stop mentioning it he knows she would, but she wouldn’t understand why, so he doesn’t ask.) Each time the boat lofts over a swell, time becomes a glass cube he’s trapped in.

The cay is only a few hundred yards off the coast, so the ride must take only five minutes, though to him it feels much longer. They anchor offshore, so he has to climb the metal ladder down from the boat and wade through the shallows; he keeps his back to the open water, his eyes fixed on the land. She’s right—it is beautiful. The cliffs are covered in green growth, a color so vivid it seems to cast out vibrations. The beach is a crescent of sand so brilliant he has to shield his eyes. Palms curve outward in invitation.

While the men prepare a picnic for them on the beach, the actor and his girlfriend hike a path inland to the waterfall. When the ocean slips from view he feels like himself again. At first, they climb steeply uphill through humid green growth, the birdsong so thick you couldn’t sort through it if you tried. The understory is a sprawl of ferns and vines and the buttressed roots of trees that rise to form a nearly solid canopy high overhead. (The trees are silk-cotton, and have stood for centuries.) After half a mile or so, they summit abruptly onto an arid plateau, silver scrub and cacti and dust, a transition like leaving one dream and entering another. A few stark, knotty trees jut from the cracked earth, leafless and stunted. Lizards that seem made of nothing but dry air scuttle in and out of the scrub. A small white butterfly floats over the hot earth.

Not far from the path, a cluster of goats snort and chomp at the scrub. “Gross,” the actor says.

“I think they’re cute.”

“I think *you’re* cute.”

Whether he says it because he means it or because he doesn’t but wishes he did or simply because it’s the sort of thing he knows she wants him to say, he couldn’t tell you.

The path descends back into dense and steamy thickets. He smells growth, soil, sweet wet rock. He hears falling water. They are close.

Around a bend, and there it is. The water sluicing down the rocks is glitter and mist. The pool into which it tumbles is utterly circular and glassy. At the pool’s edge, mosses fur the stones in newborn green, and white flowers bloom, their perfume carried lightly on the vapor cast off by the waterfall. He has the feeling then that he is seeing something he shouldn’t be seeing, that maybe there really is such a thing as too much beauty, as so much you can never move on from it.

“You like it?” his girlfriend says. He notes the curl of triumph in her voice and a familiar urge rises in him to fuck her till she hurts for days. But then he looks at her and sees that there are tears in her eyes. She laughs at herself, wipes them away. “I know, I’m a sap.”

He has been unkind. All she wants is his happiness. Is that so terrible? He takes her in his arms, feeling the blunt realness of her. What the hell is wrong with him? Where is the problem here? He leads her to the water’s edge, holding her hand in case she should slip on the slick rocks, and they wade in. He surrenders to it. They swim together to the very center of the pool. The water is so crisp and clean you could understand how a baptism could change everything. He squeezes his hands together and squirts her.

“Hey,” she splashes back.

He wraps his arms around her. “You’re mine.”

She shrieks and kicks and protests with delight. “Let me go! Let me go!”

“Never.” He makes a silent vow. From now on when she asks for things he will do them, give them, say them.

They swim to the waterfall. They dunk their heads beneath the rushing water and let it pummel them. They slip behind the curtain of water. They kiss. She reaches for him but he shakes his head.

“Lie back,” he says. He cradles her head as she lies against the wet rocks. When she comes, her cries are lost in the roar of water.

After, they float, spent and open on the surface of the pool.

“They’ll be waiting for us,” he says finally.

“Do we have to?” she pouts.

Together, they stroke toward the edge.

Years from this moment, the girlfriend, who by then will have been the girlfriend of quite a few Hollywood men, will publish a memoir (the back cover promising to reveal “the juicy private details of the lives of some of America’s favorite leading men”). In the chapter about the actor, these details will include his thalassophobia and his various chemical dependencies, which the girlfriend will theorize stem from a loveless childhood. It goes without saying that the memoir will recount this day: the boat ride across the topaz shallows to the cay, the birdsong and the goats, the waterfall and how, just before leaving it, the girlfriend looked down and saw an arm, puffed and white, reaching up from the bottom, as if frozen in the act of beckoning.

“Why did the chicken cross the road?”

“To give Officer Roy the busiest day of his life.”

This is a popular joke here and I don't mind it. The things the police handle on this island are mostly small. Mr. So-and-So cut down Miss So-and-So's sugar-apple tree. A scuffle at Papa Mango's. Floyd Vanterpool operating an unlicensed taxi again. We do see a few cases of domestic trouble each year.

Much of my job involves helping our children here grow up safely and become upstanding citizens, and I like this work. Every year I visit the island primaries and teach a lesson on bicycle safety. For my demonstration I ride a small pink bike with streamers on the handlebars, and this always receives a good laugh. When children see me around they shout, “Officer Roy!” “Officer Roy!” just to say hello.

When the young folk have a late-night bacchanal on Little Beach I have no choice but to bust it up, but I try not to be too cross with them when I do so. I try to remember that I limed on Little Beach myself in my time. While they clean up their rubbish I make jokes. If I see a boy and girl coming out of the bushes together I say, “She out of your league, man!” If I see a boy who's small for his age I say, “Who invited this nursery child to the party?”

If I see some youths clustering outside Perry's in the Basin I pull up beside them and say, “This is loitering. I'm going to have to write you up.” You should see how some of the toughest ones look like they might soil themselves until I start laughing.

“Aw, man, don't do that shit to we!” they say, but they're not really mad.

“Do it up, Officer Roy!” they beg when I prepare to drive away. “*Please, Officer Roy?*” I turn on my lights and my siren and drive off to their cheers. I have a rapport with them, you could say. I watch these kids grow and I play my part.

Edwin and Gogo—I used to shoo them away from the radio tower when they were snot-nosed little boys. I came up with Gogo’s daddy, God rest his sweet soul. I pulled those two and their hooligan mates over for drunk driving all the time and took them in to sleep it off. I never saw it as punishment. I never wrote them up. I was protecting them from their young stupid selves, like pulling a baby back from the water’s edge. My wife and I couldn’t have children. The island children are my children.

I must have picked Edwin and Gogo up a hundred times before that night. That’s how I know something happened and they were part of it. Because the ninety-nine other times I pulled them over, on the drive to the station they joked with me and made chitchat. But that time, the night Alison Thomas died, neither one of them said a word.



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