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Reverie Isle: PILOT EPISODE

When I saw F Huntington on the caller ID, I backed out of the line for sushi. Cell reception in the underground food court was better the closer you got to the center of the hall, and the blister of glass in the ceiling that let in a few rays of light during lunch hour. I hadn't spoken to Fred in years. A smiling woman wearing white latex gloves pushed a tray of fried calamari samples at me. The breading wasn't thick enough to conceal the shape of the little creatures, the bulbous bodies and tentacles. I pointed to my phone, adjacent to my ear. I shook my head.

"Fred," I said, loudly. The woman with the white latex gloves retreated.

"Hold, please, for Mr. Huntington," a voice said. Female. Unfamiliar. I tried not to feel annoyed or jealous that Fred had a personal assistant making his calls and I spent fifty hours a week managing application development projects for clients who hated making decisions or taking responsibility for their decisions and who couldn't tell the difference between cleanly-written code and macaroni art.

Fred Huntington was the richest person I knew. We met in college, freshman year, first week in the dorms. For a long time, none of us had a clue about Fred's net worth. He wore jeans and t-shirts and in winter a heavy jacket he bought in an Army-Navy surplus store. He didn't own a car. He did own a Fender Telecaster, though, with a double humbucker to sweeten the sound, which was a fancy guitar for a guy who struggled to make a G chord. But his laptop wasn't any better than mine. His phone was two or three generations behind. Only thing that gave him away was how much he hated the food in the cafeteria. He wanted to eat out every night, which nobody else could afford. Fred started picking up the tab for all of us. I didn't like

him paying and I told him so. He said I was being stupid, and I told him he was a privileged white guy who didn't understand the concept of self-reliance. That's when he told me about the Huntington Trust. How he could afford to pick up the tab, and if I didn't accept his generosity I was only hurting myself. I told him he was missing the point. The conversation continued. We roomed together in the dorms freshman and sophomore year, and continued to hang out a bunch junior year, when we both went off-campus for housing.

We drank beer together. We tried to find brands from every corner of the world, so Red Stripe from Jamaica, Tsingtao from China, and all points between. We saw great live music, too, like Arcade Fire, Bruce Springsteen (Fred's idea) and the Roots (mine.) When Fred started dating Brianna, my ex, our senior year in college, I didn't feel jealous, because as a couple they just made sense. He was bright blonde, fit, with honey white skin. She was tall, with big green eyes, wavy brown hair and the kind of curves strippers pay plastic surgeons to imitate.

Brianna was the first girl to dump me.

Freshman year, I liked to think I was a decent guy, but in Philosophy 101, the only class B. and I shared, I was like an animal. I obsessed over her long brown body, from her ankles and hips, to her tits, neck and lips. I challenged myself to make regular and friendly eye contact with the (very dull) professor. In my head, a picture played of me pulling down Brianna's panties and slipping my finger in the well between her thighs. I trained myself to look away from B.'s body after a single glance of less than (the dignified part of me insisted) a half-second in duration. I made a point of paying equal attention to the other cute girls in the room. Nobody made me crazy horny like Brianna, but I felt like cruising the others was the right thing to do. I worried my crush was too obvious. I started jacking off before class, in a desperate quest for chill.

In advance of midterms, we made plans to study together. Brianna let me into her room, and the first thing I noticed was soft lighting and the scent of vanilla candles. She disappeared into the bathroom. I sat down on her bed, fished in my backpack for my notebook. I caught Brianna's silhouette in the bathroom door. My heart beat like crazy. B. was naked, except for a little thong thing, that she tugged down and stepped over while I watched her tits jiggle.

"Come shower with me," she said.

I spent a lot of time that night and in the days that followed telling Brianna how hot I thought she was. She laughed, at first. She wanted me to meet her friends who didn't live in our dorm; I wanted to blow off class so we could have sex all day in my room. She wanted to attend a friend's art exhibit. I agreed, but on the night of event I disabled her phone's alarm so our sex wasn't interrupted. When she told me she needed to study, I told her we could study together, then took it as a challenge to get her clothes off as quickly as possible.

When she dumped me, she explained to me carefully how hurt and frustrated she felt that I wasn't treating her like a person. How much she hated being reduced to a sexually-explicit cartoon. I felt about 1/8th actual size. I blustered off, but after a couple weeks and a couple visits with my therapist, I was able to apologize to Brianna. She told me she wanted to be friends, real friends. We started doing weekly coffee dates, and... they weren't bad. I liked Brianna, turned

out. As a person. She knew the NBA better than most beat writers, she taught me more about philosophy than our professor, and she took the most amazing photographs. When she and Fred started dating, I saw the two of them a bunch. Then less frequently. Then we graduated, and four years passed, somehow, with only a handful of emails and phone calls exchanged. A chance meeting at a restaurant, two years before the call. Cards at the holidays.

My phone booped. A familiar face peered down into mine. Pink dots in his cheeks and a wide smile made me wonder if he was drunk.

"Kevin!" Fred said. "You there, my friend?"

"Fred," I said. I smiled into my phone's camera. "Great to see you. This is a surprise! I'm actually at work right now..."

"Same one you bitched about the last time we talked? It is, isn't it? You should quit, man," Fred said. I laughed.

"Yeah. I wish," I said.

"It's the season for momentous decisions," Fred said. "Amazing news, Kev. I asked B. to marry me and... she agreed."

"That's amazing!" I said, automatically. I tried to sound as hearty and sincere as I could. I wasn't sure how I felt. "Congratulations!"

"Thank you. Anyway, I promised Brianna we'd get everybody together for the wedding..."

"Cool. Cool. When's the date?" I said.

"That's the thing, man. This weekend."

"Well," I said. I felt a mix of relief and disappointment. "I can't make it," I said. "I've got job stuff. Student loans. I can't bolt on the spur of the moment..."

"What do you need, man?" Fred named a figure, a serious amount of cash. "That's as much as I can give you without tax stuff kicking in, but if you need more... look, Kevin, I'm gonna have Sofia - my assistant - she's gonna get you a first-class ticket down here. Well, tickets, since we're pretty remote, you gotta do some hops. If you want to bring a guest, that's cool. Just tell Sofia what you need. Whatever we have to do to get you down here."

All around me, the usual indifferent symphony of a cafeteria played on. Burgers crackled on a grill. Porcelain plates clacked against one another. Blenders whirred. Spoons crashed against the sides of steel bowls.

"Is this a prank, dude?" I asked. Fred frowned. My view jerked. A new face came into focus. Brianna's face.

"Hey handsome! Oh my God, it's been way too long. But listen. Freddy and I really are getting married," Brianna said. "And I want you to be here. This is all spur of the moment. We

know this is a crazy request, but we've got the resources, and we want to help all our friends out."

"First off, congratulations, Brianna. Seriously, I'm so happy for you. Just, this trip thing and the money, I don't know what to say," I said.

Of course, I wanted to shout YES! I hated every moment of my work day. The unofficial but universal mantra of my corporate employer was 'cover your ass,' which didn't foster a very friendly or familial workplace. The money he offered might be nothing from Fred's perspective, but that was a safety net for me. A very big deal. Yes, I wanted to say yes, please, help me out!

"Say you'll get on the next flight down here," Brianna said. "It'd mean a lot to me, Kevin." She looked at me with those big green eyes and just like always with her, I halfway melted.

"Okay," I said. "I'll take the tickets. And you two can pay for my expenses while I'm down there. But that's it. I won't take a check."

I felt better for having spoken. A small part of me wanted Brianna to argue, but she just smiled.

"I'm so glad you're coming," she said. The view in my phone bobbed and blurred again.

When the camera settled, Fred nodded at me.

"It's going to be awesome, dude," he said.

"You're a lucky man," I said.

"Right?" Fred said. "Hang on, I'm patching in Sofia. She'll take care of you."

In the elevator, I alternated between panic at the idea of losing my job and my secure, orderly, safe life and childish delight at the idea of an all-expenses paid vacation on some tropical island. Sofia seemed nice, sane, well-organized, and I hoped she got paid a fortune to cater to Fred's wishes.

I told myself my boss was an awful person. I was perfectly justified, making up an excuse for the necessary unscheduled time off.

"I'm sorry," I said, to the side of her face, as she scanned her monitor. "I'm... I got a call, at lunch. My sister... my sister died. Last night." My boss forgot her screen. She rushed in with her sympathies. I stumbled through my script.

"There's some complications," I said, "Her husband, my nephew's dad, isn't... around. I might... it's possible I might need some extra time, to help sort through these things."

"Of course," my boss said. "God, that's terrible. Just keep me updated. I can cover for a week, but if it turns out it's going to be longer, that might be a problem. But let me know."

"Okay," I said. "Thanks. I guess... I'll get out of here."

"Safe travels. My sympathy to your whole family, Kevin."

"Thanks," I said. Her concern seemed genuine, which made me feel like a complete asshole. When my boss noticed my distress, her eyes got even wider and I left as fast as I could without breaking into a run. I felt the first stab of guilt for lying before my finger even hit the "L" button in the elevator.

Back in college, when Brianna and I dated, she told me once I would make the world's worst criminal. Because I made the mistake of telling her I still felt guilty about shoplifting a dinosaur eraser from a museum gift shop when I was ten.

I grew up the opposite of gangster. Stable home, with a Mom and Dad who got mad and fought but stayed together, in love. We lived in a red brick house, with white shutters, in a suburb where in the summertime middle-aged men spent the weekend riding lawn mowers and grilling steaks rubbed according to Bobby Flay's instructions. I attended a school with working air-conditioning and computers and sports teams that never won anything. I got called some predictable names by the other kids, but grown-ups who overheard always acted fast to shut them up. That didn't reassure me much or address the painful awareness I had of being different than other kids in the neighborhood. Maybe it put the consciences of the grown-ups at ease.

I felt nervous about going to school in Boston. The city has a reputation. But I got lucky. Quality of life in college, especially freshmen year, turned out to depend more on what dorm you got assigned than anything else. Sheffield, my building, was the nicest on campus. Eight stories of converted luxury housing, with the ninth floor reserved for a glass-walled lounge that provided spectacular views of the Charles River. In the dorm rooms you didn't find any cinderblock walls or stacked bunk beds. Our common area had an exposed brick wall. Blew my parents away when we showed up on move-in day for freshmen. I didn't care that my bedroom was big enough for a twin bed, a bedside table and nothing else. I had a room, a door, and honest-to-God, Mom-and-Dad-can't-walk-in-anymore privacy!

After my parents dropped me off, they didn't linger. My dad got nervous driving in the city, and the city in question having one of the screwiest layouts you can imagine, I didn't blame him. My mom worked up some tears, but she knew better than to argue with Dad. My little sister, the Brat, needed to get home for soccer practice or jazz band or some other application-enhancing activity.

Peter showed up just a few minutes after my folks left. I didn't know what to make of him. He looked young, with a pale oval face and curly brown hair and boy band good looks.

"Hi," he said to me. He stuck out his hand. "I'm Peter." His grip was stronger than I would have guessed. "Are you Fred or..."

"I'm the other one," I said. "Kevin."

"Pleasure meeting you," he said. He spoke formally, but with a self-deprecating air. Family swarmed into the room after him. When they realized I was 'Little Pete's' new roommate,

they started offering handshakes and hugs. Mom, Dad, two brothers, three sisters, an uncle, aunt and a cousin oohed and ahed our fancy common area.

His family hung around for an hour, laughing and joking like they enjoyed each other's company. For me, this was all very strange. In my family, we're a little bashful. We measure out our hugs; we release at the first possible moment. Kisses are dry, administered with caution. We love each other. We just don't go around making a big show. My cousins always made fun of us, but that was my family.

"Okay," Peter said, after he kissed the last cheek, slapped the last back and laughed generously at the last joke attempted by his uncle. "Sorry about my family." I didn't know why he apologized. His family seemed nice. I wondered if I missed something.

"No," I said. "You don't have to apologize. They were-"

"Crazy," Peter said, smiling. "That's the clinical term. Crazy. Oh my God, you have no idea. We've got your bipolar and mood disorders, schizophrenia, manias, and assorted quirks and peccadilloes," Peter grinned, and his eyes twinkled. They literally twinkled, which I thought prior to meeting Peter was just a special effect used in movies.

"I'm sorry?" I said.

"You want to smoke a joint?"

I was straight edge in high school, which is a cool way of saying that I was a nerd. My personal experience with intoxicants prior to that afternoon consisted of liquor siphoned from the family bar and beer bought from indifferent package store clerks. Weed represented previously unseen depths of depravity, and my opinion of Peter rose accordingly. But I didn't get a chance to answer before the door to our unit swung open, and Fred Huntington made his entrance. Fred came alone.

I remember thinking Fred was very blonde, with shoulder-length feathered hair that would have made a member of Lynyrd Skynyrd proud.

"Peter, Kevin," he said. "Dudes. A pleasure. I'm Fred. You guys picked rooms already?"

"We did," I said. "But if there's a problem..."

"Nah, man," Fred said. "Just point me to the empty one." We obliged. Fred chucked his back pack onto the mattress. He took a lot more care with his hard-shell guitar case, the one designed to be thrown around by roadies high on bath salts.

"We've got an hour before the dining hall opens," Peter said. "And I've got a joint I'm dying to smoke."

"I'm more of a beer guy, but I won't say no to a little weed," Fred said. "Peter, right? I'm horrible with names. We should probably put a wet towel under the door. Stop anybody smelling anything." Peter nodded, disappeared into the bathroom. My heart beat faster. "You ever smoked up before?" Fred asked me.

"Once or twice," I lied. Fred smiled at me. Peter reappeared with a damp towel. He knelt and wedged the rolled-up mass against the bottom of the door. "Once," I corrected myself. "Didn't really affect me much."

"Okay, boys," Peter said. He produced a lumpy white cigarette, and a plastic orange lighter. "Smell," he said, holding out the unlit joint. I sniffed. The weed smelled like cheese. Fred inhaled, nodded.

"Nice funk," Fred said.

"Right?" Peter said. He sparked the lighter, holding the joint with a grace that only comes after hours of practice, inhaled. Peter passed to Fred, who applied himself. Smoke curled around Fred's lips. He passed the joint to me. I took a breath, sucked on the hand-rolled cigarette.

"Doesn't look you're getting anything," Peter said. "You have to inhale, you know."

"I am inhaling," I said, indignantly. I was not! But I did the next time I took a hit. I felt nervous, but excited, too, as I passed the joint along. I wasn't accustomed to doing stuff against the rules. My Mom and Dad always said that if you're black, you need to work twice as hard to get half as much. That if you do something wrong, you'll get ten times the punishment as the white folks doing the same thing. Didn't help my nerves that a Resident Assistant was walking the halls outside, helping all the first-year students get situated. I didn't trust that a wet towel was going to keep the smell from getting out. But I was tired of being Kevin, the nerdy black kid who wasn't good at sports and grew up in the suburbs. I felt exhilarated at the idea of leaving that dude behind.

Peter offered me the joint a third time. I felt a rush of affection for the guy.

"For sure," I said. I reached out.

Fast forward eight years.

Flying first class was a trip. Airline employees made an effort to be nice, I got to skip lines, and even the security screeners seemed more polite than usual. I tried calling my parents. Not often, though. I knew my folks would be upset with me for taking time off work, never mind under false pretenses. They never liked Fred. They couldn't separate him from the causes the Huntington Trust supported. They disapproved of Brianna even before she broke up with me. Mom and Dad guessed Peter was gay, and they were not down. Even Ming! They thought she was cold and shallow. I didn't tell them I had a crush on Ming, the first night we met. That night I smoked my first joint.

Brianna, Ming and Deidre lived just a few doors down the hall freshmen year. Ming smelled the weed on us. I liked her cat glasses, her fuzzy slippers that looked like monster feet, and the slim lines of the body beneath her t-shirt and sweats. In the line for dinner (one of the few Fred ever attended) Ming asked him if he knew anybody who could hook her up.

"I might," Peter said, to Ming. "If you're discreet. Are you discreet... what's your name?"

"Ming," she said. "And I can be discreet. Are you from around here?"

"Born and raised," Peter said. "You?"

"New York City," Ming said.

"Ah," Fred said, leaning into Ming's space. She drifted back. He noticed, pulled back, smiled. "A cosmopolitan sort, then. We're in 404," Fred said. "You should come over after dinner. Bring your roommates. We'll mingle."

Ming hesitated. Maybe it was the weed, or first day adrenaline, but new, college-age Kevin found a way to be flirtatious.

"Come on," I said. "No classes until Monday. Come hang." She and I made eye contact and man, I felt like there was sparks between us like an industrial belt sander grinding high-carbon steel. But Ming looked away.

"404?" Brianna asked Peter.

"Yep," he said.

"We're 409," Brianna said, making a gesture that included all three of the girls. The line surged.

"Pleasure to meet you, 409," Peter said. "Come by a couple hours after dinner."

The night I met Ming and Brianna, I actually spent most of my time talking with Deidre, the third occupant of their suite. She was tiny, with a haircut that made her look like a boy, but she had more opinions about popular music than anybody I'd ever met. She liked contemporary stuff, but she preferred old rock and roll, bands like the Clash, the Buzzcocks and (especially) Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers.

I didn't listen to any of that stuff. My Dad liked jazz, mostly. Reggae in the summer, Toots and the Maytals, Peter Tosh. He owned a bunch of early rap stuff on CD, but I never heard him play any tracks off them. Mom was more generous. She liked Motown, Aretha Franklin and Nina Simone but she liked Prince, and Jay-Z, too. My cousins all listened to hip hop. I never got into rock growing up. I thought it was kind of amazing to meet smart people still interested in people bashing away at skins and wires in 4/4 time. When I said that to her, Deidre flew into action. She got her speakers connected to her laptop she and played DJ for me. We got loud. Every knock at the door, I figured the RA wanted to bust us, but it was just people wondering if they could introduce themselves. Someone brought rum, someone else a case of beer.

Deidre's Skins & Wires

- 1) "Roadrunner" – Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers
- 2) "Brand New Cadillac" – the Clash
- 3) "Orgasm Addict" – the Buzzcocks
- 4) "Dirty Water" – the Standells
- 5) "Roxanne" – the Police
- 6) "Friday on my Mind" – the Easybeats
- 7) "Oh, Pretty Woman" – Roy Orbison

- 8) *"96 Tears" – ? and the Mysterions*
- 9) *"Strange" – Wire*
- 10) *"Baby's on Fire" – Brian Eno*
- 11) *"Digital" – Joy Division*
- 12) *"Not Fade Away" – Buddy Holly*

I got drunk. Not black out and puke drunk, just buzzed and stupid happy. Peter's eyes got bloodshot, but otherwise I could detect no changes. No staggering, shouting or slurring. Peter maintained a perfect air of innocence.

Not Fred. He got loud. He told Deidre her taste in music 'demonstrated a limited, provincial aesthetic.' She told him to Google ? and the Mysterions. After I did, I told Deidre she was the shit. Fred told me I was too easily impressed. Then someone brought up love and monogamy, and that was Fred's cue to launch into the first of his monologues I ever heard.

"Monogamy is a fine choice for some people. You get reliability, and company, and comfort. You don't have to get tested for STDs. You don't have to eat alone," he said. A few people nodded. "But for most guys," Fred went on, "Monogamy gets boring. We like variety. First times. Experimenting. I mean, we've all got the same Internet. We all know how much variety is out there. Why not taste all the forbidden fruit?" Fred made a face, and when he spoke he sounded worried. "But what about disease?" He relaxed. "And that's a good, pragmatic question. But if you're strict about testing, prophylaxis and safe sex practices, that doesn't have to be an issue." Fred got big-eyed and his tone turned tragic. "But Fred, what ever happened to old fashioned love?" Fred smiled. "Love does not have to mean possession. Love can mean wanting the best for another person. I think you should want someone you love to experience fulfillment in all aspects of life, including sexual." He held up a hand. "But what about jealousy, right? Guess what? Jealousy is bullshit." He paused, went on with perfect certainty. "Jealousy is complete bullshit. It's a feeling of unhappiness because you believe your property rights are being violated. Except, breaking news, people aren't fucking property. No one owns anybody. If everybody involved is playing safe, why should I freak out if my girlfriend is getting something extra on Saturday mornings, when I like to sleep in?"

Freshman year, I thought Fred was crazy. I just wanted to get laid. I was willing to sign up for any form of bond or commitment if it meant sex. I didn't see holding out for females comfortable exploring a polyamorous set-up.

But I thought Fred was brilliant, too. He was the perfect cynic, always ready to educate the happiness right out of you. He heard me tell Deidre I liked H.P. Lovecraft's stuff. He jumped into the conversation.

"You know he was a racist?" Fred asked me. Deidre's eyes got wide.

"I guess," I said. "But I assume pretty much all the dead white guys I read were racist, you know?" Fred shook his head.

"Not like Lovecraft. He wrote a poem with lines that go..." Fred scrunched up his face. "Trying to remember. Okay. 'A beast they wrought, in semi-human figure,' is the first half of the

couplet. ‘Filled it with vice, and called the thing a...’” He started to shape the letter ‘n’ with his mouth. Opposite me on the couch, Deidre cringed.

“I can guess what he rhymed with ‘figure’,” I said.

“Yeah,” Fred said, slapping me on the back and getting up. “Doesn’t mean you shouldn’t enjoy his stuff. But everybody should put the guy’s work in context, right?”

Years later, sitting in a first-class seat purchased with Fred’s money, I still had reservations. But seeing a lush green island with bony white beaches growing large beneath the wings of the plane, I felt pretty good about my decision to take him up on this offer and go on this crazy ass tropical island adventure.

I didn't know what to expect after disembarking from the plane. The walls and clothes of the people around me followed an unfamiliar palette: different shades of red, yellow, lime green, orange, peach and purple all sat alongside one another. The familiar logos of corporate concerns hung from banners and glowed over food kiosks. I tried speaking French to the customs guys, but they laughed and talked to me in English.

Ming and Peter waited just past the security gates.

When I was sixteen, people told me I looked like grown. I don't think I've changed much since then. Four years after college graduation, Ming looked older around the eyes, but pretty much the same as I remembered. Peter looked puffy. Pale. But his eyes still twinkled and his black Joy Division “Unknown Pleasures” t-shirt was cool as hell. His hair was perfect.

We did handshakes, hugs and hellos, and then Ming and Peter escorted me out of the airport. While we waited for my luggage I tried not to stare at the uniformed men patrolling the airport, or the automatic rifles I’d never seen outside video games.

"The rebels are on the other side of the island," Peter said. Loudly. "Miles away. Nothing to worry about."

"Shut up," Ming said to Peter. He smirked. I wasn't amused. Peter liked to push. He didn't always think things through. I was sweating, starting to worry about the consequences of taking the trip in the first place. I felt guilty about lying to my boss. My job wasn't great, but I wasn't working outdoors, behind a cash register or busing tables. I took a risk, making the trip, and I didn't want to start off being questioned by the local police.

"Freddy and Brianna rented out an old plantation that’s been converted into a bed and breakfast," Ming said. A yellow light flashed. A bell rang. The conveyor belt lurched forward. Luggage tumbled through black rubber flaps. Sleek, wheeled, titanium cases sat next to cardboard boxes sealed with duct tape and kids' backpacks illustrated with cartoon heroes I didn't recognize.

"And it's amazing," Peter said. "Huge dining room, three different sitting rooms, even a goddamn library."

I nodded, eyes on the conveyor belt. My garment bag was leather, sturdy, and barely used. When my dad bought it for me, he made me promise not to tell my mom how much he paid. I guess his first business trip, he was too poor to afford anything other than a gym bag for luggage. My Dad wanted me to be treated better than he was. I felt guilty about not getting in touch with him or my Mom, before I left the States, but I told myself they'd just worry. I'd call when I got home.

"Correction. The plantation would be amazing if wasn't swarming with members of both families, old and young," Ming said.

I spotted my bag, swooped.

"Just one?" Ming asked. "I brought four. Peter, I know you brought at least three."

"Thank God for Kevin's meticulously efficient packing," Peter said. "I need a drink. We want to go through the double doors down there. There's a limo waiting."

"Lots of family here?" I said, as we waited in yet another line, this one to have the tag on my bag checked against my ticket.

"Fucking hordes," Peter said. "Who is going to say no to a free vacation? Not any of us, right?"

"I smoked a joint with Brianna's parents," Ming said. Peter's eyebrows went up. Ming nodded 'yes' at him.

"What?" I said. Ming laughed.

"Arturo and Diana offered," she said. "I thought it would be rude to refuse."

"But aren't they, like... old?" I said.

"Old people party," Peter said, still smiling. "Trust me on this, Kevin." Ming snorted.

"The kids are the ones I can't stand," she said. "There's like a half-dozen, grade school age, and they're running around just being spoiled shits." She shook her head.

"Sounds exciting," I said, trying to be diplomatic. "What's up with Fred's parents?"

"They're bigots," Peter said. "Like, right out in the open bigots. Totally confirmed. Homophobic, racist, anti-Semitic... what do they call hating people with slanty eyes like yours, Ming?"

"Stupidity," Ming said, with dignity.

"Can't wait to meet them," I said.

"Right?" Peter said. "No wonder Fred never invited us over to his folks' house. How did Fred turn out okay?"

"You think Fred turned out okay?" Ming asked.

The three of us walked into sunlight. Sweat trickled down my sides. The sky was bright blue. I smelled exhaust. Ming grabbed my arm and pulled me past a long line of idling cars, vans, and shuttle buses. We skipped through a concrete cross walk, then boarded a stretch limousine, dedicated to the three of us. Ming and Peter waved to the driver, a heavy-set man in a neat black suit.

Ming played with the air-conditioning controls until freezing air blasted from the vents. The driver didn't wait for directions or lower the divider. The limo zoomed off into a blazing, brilliant afternoon.

Peter, meanwhile, fiddled with his phone.

"I made a playlist," he said. "Just for the trip. There's a song for everybody. Nina Simone for you, Kevin. Some music that bops. Bunch of stuff Deidre would appreciate. And, of course, 'I Got You, Babe' for Fred and Brianna."

"You put in stuff Deidre would have liked? Deidre, who was never going to come to this wedding? But nothing for me?" Ming said.

"I didn't think you gave a shit about music," Peter said.

"I don't," Ming said. "Violin lessons at an early age ruined the fun for me."

"Then hush," Peter said. "Beer?" Ming nodded. Peter passed over a bottle, who cracked open the cap and took a judicious gulp. The limo's suspension was okay, and the road was smooth, but every now and then we came to sudden stops. I took a beer, promising myself I'd pay attention and not chip a tooth or anything. The brand was unfamiliar to me, and the lettering on the label indecipherable. Very acceptable lager, though.

"Is Deidre not coming?" I asked.

"Nope," Ming said. "Fred and Brianna invited her, but she said no."

"Did she say why?" Peter asked. Ming shrugged.

I knew bits and pieces about what went on between Fred and Deidre, but not the real story. Nobody but the two of them knew the real story; neither one seemed inclined to talk. I didn't want to get into it with Peter because he was incapable of staying quiet about a scandal once he caught a whiff. Also, I felt a little freaked out about what waited at the end of our limousine ride.

"How much are we going to have to hang out with the family?" I said. "Because I'm starting to get a real 'Get Out' vibe going on here." Peter and Ming looked at each other and laughed.

"We should have said earlier," Peter said. "We're not actually bunking with the family. Fred rented all of us a yacht, and we've got cabins. Since we're not in the wedding party, the reception is the only time we'll be forced to mingle."

"Seriously?" I said. "I don't have to deal with any old racist white people?" My mood soared.

"No, but you'll be on a boat. Isn't that a little scary for one of... your people?" Peter said.

"You know you're not funny?" I said. Peter tilted back his beer, looking pleased with himself.

"The yacht is pretty sweet," Ming said. "Freddy and Brianna come and visit after they've put the family to bed. Just them, no kids."

"You better still party," Peter said.

I did not party. Not like in college. Molly, acid, weed... none of that stuff seemed like a fun adventure anymore. Just an expensive way to do stupid shit and wake up with a headache. I chucked my bong and grinder last time I moved. Just beer for me these days.

But I wasn't about to admit to any of that to Peter. Stupid guy thing.

"Pffft," I said. "You know you've never been able to keep up with me."

"Oh," Peter said. "It's on."

I didn't grow up gangster, but I didn't grow up in yacht country, either. I'm not saying my family was poor. Mom drove a Volvo station wagon. We ate out a couple times a week at sit-down places. We poured real maple syrup on our pancakes and at Christmas I did fine. If anything, I thought my parents went overboard.

I never once thought to ask Santa for a yacht with sleeping accommodations for twelve, flat-screen TVs in every cabin, and a stainless-steel refrigerator, microwave, oven and grill in the galley. I wouldn't have hit up ol' Saint Nick for not one but two spacious lounges, one above decks and one below. Where the hull was exposed, the surface gleamed white. Otherwise, for the walls and furniture, the designer chose natural wood, oak and cherry, stained dark. Peter had me throw my stuff in a cabin with a pair of bunk beds.

"Come on," Peter said. "Ming's got a double to herself."

Sitting on the bunk reserved for Deidre, destined to remain empty, I felt myself relax. The yacht was big enough that small sways didn't move the boat much. The view of the ocean out the room's window was spectacular and the air cool and breezy.

"I feel like I should be going to the main house and thanking Fred and Brianna," I said, folding my legs underneath me. Peter carefully measured out three vodka shots from a bottle he 'liberated' from the ship's stores. Ming shook her head at me.

"They'll come over tonight," Ming said. "Honestly, they're so swamped with family you're doing them a favor not going over. Think of all the introductions they don't have to make. I know your parents raised you to be a good boy, but seriously, dude. Chill."

"Yeah," Peter said. "Be chill. Did you take the money?"

"Me?" I said. I felt startled.

"Yes, you," Peter said. "When Fred and Brianna offered, what did you say?"

"How did you know they offered?" I said. I was stalling, trying to figure out what to say.

"Because they offered us money, too," Ming said.

"What did you do?" I asked Peter. He laughed. He passed Ming and I shot glasses, full to the quivering lip. The three of us raised our glasses carefully, threw the drinks back. I got it down, but the booze burned.

"Are you kidding?" Peter said. He smacked his lips. "I said yes."

"How about you?" I asked Ming.

"After Brianna and I talked? I took the money. Didn't you?"

"No," I said. "I let them buy my ticket but..."

"You really are a dumb ass," Peter said. He gestured at the empty glass in my hand. I passed it back. "You know how much money Fred Huntington is worth? You don't know. And he doesn't, either. As long as Fred doesn't do something reckless like start collecting castles or Picassos, he won't ever touch the principal."

"Must be nice," I said.

"I know, right?" Peter said. He poured out another generous shot, held out my glass. I took the drink. Reluctantly.

"Brianna says he's happy to help out his friends," Ming said. "And she wants him to start giving away lots more."

"That's cool," I said. I sipped at the shot, stuck out my tongue, gulped the rest down. I made a face. Warmth radiated from my stomach.

"But you're still not going to take his money," Peter said. "That's crazy, kid."

"Look, I don't care what anybody else does," I said. "You make your own decisions. I just... I don't feel comfortable. Fred and I never had that kind of relationship, and... I'm fine. I don't judge you guys for making a different decision." Ming and Peter shared a look, and this time she joined him in the laughter in my direction.

"Shut up and finish your shot," Peter said. "Dumb ass."

The booze kicked in fast. We got louder, moved to the below-decks lounge, made friends. Sofia, Fred's assistant, was younger than the rest of us, a mere kid at twenty-one. She wore bright red lipstick and went from a detached, professional air to jokes with Peter about tentacle porn in four drinks. She called her laptop Ada, after Ada Lovelace. Sofia admitted to the room that, in the midst of this tropical paradise, she hated the fact she couldn't get a sufficiently stable connection to play Eve Online. I thought she was adorable.

Something about Sofia reminded me of Deidre. Physically, not so much; Deidre was a loud tiny pixie and Sofia concealed a curvy body beneath modest clothes, but there was something about the confident way they carried themselves. I wondered if anybody else saw the resemblance. I hoped not.

When Mike Gannon stepped on-board everybody (except me) shouted “Mikey!” Five years out of college and he still hadn't outgrown the nickname. He was a clumsy guy, and painfully self-aware of his own awkwardness. Mike was nice, too, if your definition of nice was standing still and grinning while the people you called friends made fun of you. Fred abused Mike more than anybody, and plenty of times I found myself wishing Mike would push back. But he never did. I shook his hand and headed to the kitchen. I made myself a drink from peach juice, orange juice and enough vodka to ruin both flavors.

My memory gets spotty thereafter. Cyndia Phipps came on board. She was a stranger to me, a friend of Brianna. I wasn't sure, but I wondered if the others expected Cyndia and I would hit it off just because she and I were both black. Thing was, I grew up in a well-off suburb of Rhode Island. She was from the south side of Chicago. She was a devout Christian. I was agnostic. I thought she was cute? But when we shook hands I got nothing but a big sister vibe. Which was fine.

Fred and Brianna showed up around 8 or so. Fred's gut looked bigger than I remembered, and he'd grown a thin, patchy beard, maybe to accommodate for a buzzcut up top. He shouted my name when he saw me. We swapped a briefly, manly hug.

“So good to see you,” Fred said. “Hope the trip was okay?”

“First class was fantastic,” I said. “Never done it before. So yeah. Very cool. Thank you!”

“Our pleasure,” Brianna said. When we hugged, she smelled sweet, but the scent wasn't overpowering. The bangles on her wrist clattered, her skin was warm, and I pulled away before everybody got a pointed reminder I thought Brianna was still hot as hell.

Fred didn't notice. Cyndia Phipps made the mistake of telling Fred she prayed to God for the success of his upcoming marriage. Fred still liked to talk.

"I'm grateful for the good wishes," he said. "I mean, I really am. You're clearly making an effort here to, I guess, be accepting and supportive? And that's cool. So thank you, Cyndia." He took a slug off his beer.

"Well, you're certainly welcome," Cyndia said. "I know Brianna said you aren't very religious-" Fred didn't let her finish.

"Did she say that?" he asked. I swapped looks with Ming and Peter. Brianna kept her eyes on Fred.

"Something like that," Cyndia said. "Maybe not those words exactly?" She sounded defensive.

"I'm an atheist, Cyndia," Fred said. "I don't think we go someplace else after we die. No heaven. No hell. And I don't believe there's some old man up there, pulling strings and rigging the game for people who suck up to Him. If Brianna and I want to make our marriage work, we're the ones who have to figure shit out. God's got nothing to do with it."

Cyndia started smiling halfway through Fred's speech.

"The Lord helps those who help themselves," she observed. I saw Fred's eyebrows bounce and knew another salvo was forthcoming.

"Shouldn't He be helping those who are the most needful?"

I envied Fred his ability to be oblivious to what other people felt and thought. I wished I felt his confidence when the spotlight was on me. But I didn't always enjoy listening to the rants. I got up and went wandering. Up on deck, I ranged as far fore and then aft as I could. I sank down on a bench, let my head tilt back and stared up a night sky alive with stars I'd never seen, or maybe just never appreciated properly before. In sleepless cities, the light drowns out the night sky. All you see are the very brightest celestial objects. On the yacht, with only the soft yellow lights of the main house to distract my eye, I saw a living, shimmering world overhead. I tried to pick out constellations, failed and decided to make constellations of my own. My eyes may have shut for a while. When I got up and ventured back into the occupied area of the yacht, the noise level was considerably lower. I wondered where I could find Ming.

Ming was with me when I suffered my first anxiety attack. This was freshman year, the first day of finals week. I needed to do well on my exams; I had two academic scholarships that required I maintain an A- or above average. In three of my four courses, I was fine, but in Astronomy 101 I was in trouble. Mostly, that was due to a night-time lab requirement that I forget about until after the deadline. Except I didn't forget, I blew the lab off, because night was when the party got going in the dorm, at least in our suite and the one Ming, Brianna and Deidre shared. I was stupid, basically.

Three hours before the start of the proctored Astronomy exam, I started to sweat, hard. My heart got going, too. I was at a table in the cafeteria surrounded by my notes, textbook and backpack. Ming sat across from me, dressed in sweats and her slippers that looked like monster feet. She shook out a last few drops from a can of sugar free Red Bull.

"Scheduling a calculus exam in the morning slot of the first day of finals is such bullshit," she said.

"Yeah," I said. My mouth felt dry. I tried to swallow.

"Some of us just naturally do better at night. From an evolutionary perspective, that just makes... Jesus, Kevin. You okay?"

"I..." I was not.

There are ten or eleven classic symptoms of anxiety attacks, depending on who you read. I did not experience any cramping. Otherwise... I was afraid of everything, including standing

upright. My school books sneered at me. I felt ashamed by the sloppiness of my handwriting. I felt certain the heavy-set women in hair nets who refilled the breakfast bar hated me. I couldn't breathe. The thought of the exam ahead was a pair of claws dragged slowly down a blackboard. The shade of sea foam green painted on the dining room walls filled me with dread. My heart did funny things in my chest, and I knew, all at once and with no doubt whatsoever, that I was about to die.

"Kevin," Ming said. She tried to look in my eyes, but I wouldn't meet her eyes. "What's going on?"

"I'm just..." 'Dying' was what I thought.

"Hey," Ming said. She reached out a hand to touch me. I jumped. "You look pretty freaked out," she said. "When I get stressed, I try to focus on my breathing." I shook my head. Advice wasn't going to help me. Words failed.

"I'm freaking," I said. My voice sounded faint, drowned in a sea of chatter.

"Kevin," Ming said, "I think you're having a panic attack."

"I gotta get out of here," I said. Ming slapped her notes shut, scooped up her books.

"Okay," she said. I shoved my stuff into my backpack, walked through the cafeteria doors and then kept going, until I was outside. The air was hovering just above freezing, which meant the stuff coming down from the sky was more sleet than rain. I skipped through the people hanging by the doors. I jogged down the sidewalk, took a left, and accelerated. I ran harder than I ever had in my life, and even as the anxiety eased, a little, I felt people staring at me, a young black man running down Comm Ave. My heart raced. I ran harder than before. I didn't stop until I got to the Commons, when I bent over double, hands on my knees, chest heaving.

Ming trotted up behind me. The fur of her monster feet was dark with rain and her cheeks were flushed. She was otherwise unfussed.

"You feel better?" Ming said.

"A little?" I said. Cautiously.

"Exercise helps me control my anxiety, too," Ming said.

"I think I just had too much caffeine," I said.

"Okay," Ming said. "I'm not a doctor, I don't know shit. Just what my experience has been."

"You can't tell anybody about this, Ming," I said. I shivered, the cold cutting through the crazy running sweat.

"I'll get us a cab," Ming said.

Behind bulletproof glass, in a warm backseat, Ming grabbed my hand.

"I don't think people are going to judge you because exam stress got to you? But I won't tell anyone," she said. "Still. Bro. Nothing wrong with talking to a doctor if you're flipping out."

"Too much caffeine," I said.

"Okay," Ming said.

"Thanks," I said. Our hands fell apart. "You ran that whole way with me," I said.

"Of course, I did," Ming said. She leaned into me, hard. "Hey!" Ming shouted, at the driver, "No short cuts! Just drive straight!"

Eight years later, I found Ming in the galley, nosing around the refrigerator. I'd thought about what to do when the two of us were alone. I'd been thinking about Ming for close to almost a decade. Plenty of time to come up with a good pick-up line, right?

"Hey, babe," I said to her. "You having a good time?"

Ming turned her head in super-slow motion and gave me a look.

"I'm drunk," I said. "Sorry." Ming turned back to her inventory of the pantry. I thought I caught a smile, but I wasn't sure.

"You shouldn't be challenging Peter to drinking contests," Ming said. "You're a good boy. Peter is not."

"You two stay in touch?" I said.

"We do," Ming said. "When I text him, he actually answers. Crazy, right?"

"My job," I said, "It gets pretty nuts." This wasn't a lie, exactly. My job could and did swallow fifty, sixty or even seventy hours in a single week. But of course, my job wasn't entirely to blame for me not staying in touch with everyone. Or even mostly to blame.

"Yeah," Ming said. "I let my career take over, for a while. My therapist wants me to live a more balanced life. I don't know what the fuck balanced means. I asked her, do you want me to start gardening or something? Doing yoga? Eating a certain brand of yoghurt?" I laughed.

"Whatever you're doing," I told her, "I think you should keep it up. You look fantastic."

"And you're drunk," Ming said. "Remember?"

"Yes," I conceded. "But I thought you looked amazing when I first got off the plane. Before Peter made me drink a single shot. Hell. First time I saw you, Ming." Ming looked at me and I took a cautious step forward. She didn't flinch, but she didn't float towards me, either.

"You're sweet," Ming said. I found her eyes impossible to read.

"But?" I said. I licked my lips.

Maybe if I moved faster, I landed a kiss. But in the fraction of an instant I hovered, indecisive, the situation changed. The yacht's engines revved up with a growl, and in the near

distance I heard clanking and splashing. Ming and I reached out to one another, but only to steady ourselves. The ship lurched under our feet.

"What the hell?" I said. The view outside the windows began to change.

"We're moving. We need to get to the bridge," Ming asked me. "Some asshole is screwing with us."

The door to the bridge was locked. We got there just in time for Brianna to go charging off in the opposite direction. Mike, apparently, had a copy of the master key.

Felt like we waited forever for Brianna to get back, Mike trailing after her.

On the bridge, Fred sat before the yacht's nav console, laughing like the drunk asshole he was. I saw the lights of the dock and the rented bed and breakfast getting smaller with alarming speed, and I didn't think anything about the situation was funny.

"You don't have a pilot's license," Brianna shouted at Fred.

"Ship's got an autopilot," Fred said. "Skies are clear. Just gonna take us on a little excursion." He squinted at a lever, pushed it forward a notch. The engines growled in response, and we surged ahead. We hit a rough patch, and everyone shut up for a second while he or she figured out where to hang on. Brianna's mouth got small, which I knew from experience was bad for whoever was in her sights.

"You're drunk," Brianna told Fred. "Like, blackout drunk. I love you, honey, but this is when you do really stupid shit."

"We also have insurance," Fred said. "The best insurance. You have to learn to unwind a little, Brianna. I knew carrying around those luscious boobies is, like, a literal pain in the back, but..."

"Fred," Brianna said. "Shut up and stop screwing around back there."

"I'm not screwing around," Fred said. "You wound me, woman."

"Do you have any pilot's training?" Brianna said, more patiently than Fred deserved. "Or experience with ship's navigation software?"

"She doubts me!" Fred yelled. "My wife to be, the foundation of my happiness, she thinks I'm an idiot!"

"That's because you're being an idiot," Peter said. He wore sweat pants and a white v-neck tee shirt. He did not look happy; his hair was mussed. "Some of us want to pass out without being worried about pirates having us for breakfast. Turn the boat around, head back to the dock."

"Please, darling," Brianna said. "Let's head back."

"Come on, man," Mike said, "Let me take the wheel."

Fred didn't answer. The engines kept growling beneath my feet, dragging the ship and everyone on board relentlessly into darkness.

"Don't tell me you don't enjoying taking risks, B," Fred said, finally. "Or going on adventures. Because I know my fiancée and-"

"I don't mind taking calculated risks," Brianna said. "But that doesn't mean I think driving blindly into darkness is a good idea either."

"Stop the fucking boat," Ming called out.

"I want to set eyes on an unfamiliar country," Fred said. "I want to fly free, my friends!" He grinned at us, and pushed the lever forward another notch, triggering another roar from the engines. Another burst of speed, in the wrong direction.

Maybe we could have wrestled Fred out of his seat? He was a big guy, and he was wedged into the seat pretty tightly. I didn't like the idea of confronting him physically, but I also didn't like how fast the lights of the island shrank as the yacht threw itself into the night. I wondered if Fred was still as vain as he was in college.

"Fred, did you bring your guitar?" I said. "Be cool if you could maybe give us a little show under the stars."

Fred frowned at me.

"My guitar is back in our room," he said, finally. I breathed, a little. Brianna cleared her throat.

"Then how about karaoke?" Brianna said. "You and I can be a team."

"Okay. Karaoke it is," Fred said. He did something at the board. The engines rumbled, coughed, stilled. He got up. Brianna intercepted him, and together, somehow, they made it back to the main lounge. Peter followed. He paused long enough to smack me on the back.

"Good work," he whispered.

Mike plopped down into the captain's seat Fred vacated. I didn't think he was drunk; I couldn't remember a time when Mike ever drank too much.

"Hey," I said, "Adventure time is over for the night, right?"

"Yeah," Mike said. "Relax, Kevin. I've got a pilot's license."

"Do you really?" I said.

"I do," he said. "Really. I've never piloted anything this big, or programmed an autopilot this nice, but... I can get us turned around and headed back to home."

"Can I help?" I said.

"Yeah," Mike said, "Keep Fred occupied until he passes out."

As I staggered on deck to the sound of Fred and Brianna doing a rousing version of ‘I Got You,’ I wondered if I misjudged Mike all those years ago. I remembered him as a clown, but that didn’t line up with Mike having a pilot’s license, or him keeping a cool head while all the rest of us got shit-faced and freaked out.

Peter had his arms around Ming. If there was a moment earlier when I might have kissed Ming? That moment was gone. At Brianna’s insistence, I took the mic and sang “Roadrunner” but halfway through I could see Fred getting restless. I asked him to join me on stage, he obliged, and somewhere in there the yacht began chugging at a quiet, reasonable pace back home.

Fred opened another bottle of champagne and shortly afterward I lost the ability to remain upright. I dreamed.

I was miles deep in a column of black and green water. Bioluminescent fish with bizarre, alien features darted past me. Something was coming behind them, something huge, with unblinking eyes, a beak, and tentacles capable of snatching and holding a full-grown man. A muffled klaxon sounded. I tried to swim, but my arms and legs felt wrapped in lead. I struggled, but I knew that I was lagging. Schools of fish flashed past. In the race to escape whatever was coming for us, I fell further and further behind.

When I woke, I was in a low bunk. Rain smashed against the cabin's porthole. Engines growled in the background. The klaxon from my dream continued, close and stubborn.

Across the cabin, Peter sat upright, tousled and bleary-eyed.

“What the hell, man?” he said. “Again?”

“I dunno,” I said. I swung my legs over the side of my bunk. I had to wait a moment, to let a wave of nausea pass. The sway of the ship beneath my feet felt stronger than before. “But I’m gonna go check it out.”

“Ugh,” Peter said. He sighed. “I’m right behind you,” he said.

I stepped into the hall just as the ship leaned to port, hard. I smacked into a wall face-first. I didn’t black out, but things got fuzzy. I wasn’t ready when the ship rolled again. The lights flickered. The hull of the ship groaned. I heard Peter stagger into the hallway behind me, just as the yacht rolled hard to port, then back. We fell. Cold water rushed past my face; I tasted blood, trickling from my nose.

“Peter,” I shouted. “Are you okay?” I hauled myself up from the deck. The alarms made me worry the water streaming around our feet wasn’t coming from broken plumbing, but a hole in the hull.

“I’m okay,” he said. “I’m going to the bridge, see what the fuck is going on. If Fred is having some more fun at our expense, I swear to God...” I nodded, but not because I was impressed by Peter’s bluster. All of us complained about Fred, but nobody ever did anything about him. For some mysterious reason. The lights in the hall went off, came back on. The alarms kept sounding.

"I'm going to check on Ming," I said.

"Yeah," Peter said. "Good idea."

The lights went out again. I didn't freak, because I didn't have time before the ship rolled, and I smacked my head against something hard. I dropped into darkness.

Peter's Perfect Playlist for His Pals' Impromptu Nuptials

1. "I Got You, Babe (feat. Chrissie Hynde)" – UB40
2. "My Baby Just Cares for Me" – Nina Simone
3. "No One's Gonna Love You" – Band of Horses
4. "I Was Evil" – Darcy Clay
5. "Abducted" – Cults
6. "Step" – Vampire Weekend
7. "Back in Baby's Arms" – Patsy Cline
8. "Katchi (Ofenbach vs. Nick Waterhouse)" – Ofenbach
9. "Dancing in the Dark" – Hot Chip
10. "Red Lips (feat. Sam Bruno) [Skrillex Remix]" – GTA
11. "Show of Hands" – Kaskade (with LÖKii & Mr. Tape)
12. "Myth" – Beach House
13. "Can't Find My Way Back Home" – Blind Faith
14. "I Got You" – Sonny & Cher

I remember feeling cold. Panicky. Air escaped from my lungs in bubbles. I clawed to the surface, gulped air desperately. Something smacked me in the back of the head, and the world went back to black.

When I woke, a man I didn't recognize hovered over me. His face was full of lines and creases. His nose was a chunk of rose marble, his hair was long, gray, and (thanks to the rain) plastered to his scalp.

"Hola," the man shouted, over the wind. His tone was friendly. "You are alive, my friend. Give thanks to God."

I got to my knees, tried to stand, puked up salt water instead.

"There is a path up the hill," the old man said. "Stairs. And a house. I have sent some of your friends there already."

"Who? Is Ming..." I coughed up salt water while the old man waited. How was he supposed to know any of our names? "How many of my friends?"

"Five at the house," he said. "You make six. Two more to find, if your friends' count is correct. Go on up the path, when you are ready." The rain didn't seem to bother him.

"Where are you going?" I said.

"Further down the beach," he said. "For the others, you understand?"

"I'm coming with you," I said. I pushed myself to my feet. I felt sick. I puked again. Slimy foam splattered onto my bare feet.

I wanted to help. Also, I was twenty-five. I had an active gym membership. My ego wasn't going to let me limp off to shelter while this old man charged around like the hero in a Hollywood movie.

"I have no time to indulge you," the old man said. He waved. "Your friends are that way." He set off in the opposite direction. Didn't pay me any attention. I limped after him. I kept my mouth shut.

Fred's yacht burned beautifully in the distance. Oily black smoke threatened to drown out the moonlight. Rain fell, hard, and the surf pounded the rocky beach relentlessly. White sprays soaked us repeatedly, and thunder shook the sky.

I got mad. At Fred, for being a drunken fool. At Brianna, for not stopping Fred. At myself, for going on a trip that I knew in my gut was a mistake. My stomach hurt, but the old man and I pushed on, through the smooth wet stones on the shore.

An explosion from the direction of the yacht made me flinch and throw my hands up to protect my face. A fuel tank, I guessed, but what the hell did I know about yachts?

"There," the old man shouted, over the wind. I lowered my hands and looked where he pointed. I cut into a run. A figure, female, in a black one-piece bathing suit, huddled on the beach ahead. Ming? No. Fred's assistant, what was her name? Sofia! I called out Sofia's name. She looked at me, anyway, but she didn't move. Which didn't make sense to me until I got a little closer and saw Fred was sprawled alongside her. Motionless.

"Shit," I said. I moved as fast as I could, but the stones slipped beneath my feet. "Fred," I said. "Aw, no, man." The old man was there ahead of me, examining Fred with a careful eye.

The left side of Fred's face was all scrapes and bruises. His t-shirt was a web of scraps; two of the cuts on his chest looked nasty. He was wearing khakis, so I couldn't see his left leg clearly, but the ankle poking out looked swollen, the skin was bright red.

"He passed out from the pain," Sofia told us. "When he tried to stand up."

"Get his right side," the old man told me. "You will pull his arm over your shoulder, yes? And with your other hand heft him by his belt. I will be doing the same." I slid into position. Every time I brushed him, Fred moaned. The old man eyed me. "Okay, when we lift, he will likely scream. But you must focus on the task, you understand? We must get him to the house, it is not safe out here. Okay. On three. Three, two, one!" I heaved, Fred howled, and somehow the old man and I got him upright. We shuffled over the wet stones of the beach, Sofia flitting around us.

Fred got heavy fast. When we made it to the top of the stairs, and I saw the house for the first time, I felt a surge of relief.

The main building was three hulking stories, the first two wrapped in a porch with wrought-iron railings. The roof was covered with red tile that looked black in the wet moonlight. The place looked roomy enough to be an old hotel, or a rich man's vacation home. I noted, vaguely, a car-shaped tarp with wheels poking out from underneath. Yellow light poured from an open set of double doors on the ground level.

"Fred!" Brianna shouted, running towards us.

"Make way," the old man said. Brianna took in Fred's condition and she fell to the side, but she followed close behind. "There is a bedroom on the main floor. Down the back hallway."

Fred occupied most of my attention as we shuffled through the lobby, though I couldn't help but notice the threadbare rug, dilapidated furniture and the bookshelves lining the walls. I felt a huge sense of relief when we lowered Fred onto a sagging double bed in the room the old man showed us. I backed out as quickly as I could. Brianna and the old man stayed behind. I didn't shut the door on the bedroom, but I only left it open a crack.

Ming, in pajamas, hugged me hard when I got back to the main room. I felt a tiny bit better.

"There's towels over here," Mike called out to me, behind a long counter that might have been a reception desk, once. "Bathrobes and pajamas, too. Stacks of them."

"Anybody else think that's strange?" Cyndia asked. "Having all this out and waiting for us?"

"Yes," Peter said, coming down the stairs. He cinched the belt on his robe. "Now that you mention it, it's weird. But they're dry."

That was enough for me.

"I'll take a couple towels," I said. "Anybody see a set of large pajamas?"

On the second floor, I tried doors until I found one that opened. No light switch on the wall that I could find, so I left the door to the hall cracked open. I peeled off my wet t-shirt and boxers as fast as I could. The pajamas felt thin and stiff and smelled faintly of bleach. The bathrobe was terrycloth, and equally ancient. But dry was better than wet.

In the shadows, alone, I felt anxiety swarm up inside me. I did my breathing exercises. I focused on the feel of breath moving over my lips. I let my mind race, stagger, and swing from one crazy thought to the next. I stayed focused on the sensation of breath. Not describing the moment. Or pretending I'm in control of anything else besides my breathing.

When I walked back to join the others, I felt marginally better than I had since the old man saved me from drowning. Peter waved a bottle at me, and I accepted a glass from him without asking what the stuff was. I took a swallow, coughed. The booze burned. I drained my glass, made a face.

"Right?" Peter said, sympathetically. He took a pull from his own glass, smacked his lips appreciatively.

"Surprisingly smooth," he said. He poured himself more. "Hey, you helped bring in Fred?"

"Yeah," I said.

"He looked pretty fucked up when you came in," Peter said.

I hoped Fred would be okay. But I didn't see him getting around on that leg anytime soon.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm not a doctor, man. I don't know what to tell you."

I scanned the room. Ming sat with Sofia on a long rust colored couch. Mike Gannon slumped in an armchair across from them. Cyndia sat at a long table with more of the pajamas, bathrobes and towels. Her lips moved, silently, her eyes raised to the sky. I looked away quick. Just because I'm not religious doesn't mean I don't respect people who are.

"Everybody else is okay, though?" I said. Peter shrugged.

"You have to ask them," he said. He poured himself another drink. He raised the bottle to refill mine, but I put my hand over my glass, shook my head.

"Thanks," I said. I went for the other armchair opposite the sofa. An antique marble-topped table sat between Mike and I, dominated by an old-fashioned hurricane oil lamp, half-full of some amber fluid. "How is everybody?" I said. I settled into my chair. The padding was lean, too lean for me to relax.

"Freaked out," Mike said.

"Freaked out and I want to know what the hell happened," Ming said. "How we got shipwrecked. Thank God nobody got killed!"

"It wasn't Fred," Sofia said. "I mean, yes, we all know, Fred screwed around that night. But once we got him off the bridge, he didn't go back. He passed out. Brianna said she kept an eye on him."

"That storm was pretty crazy," Mike said. "One minute we got light rain, and the next we're getting bounced around like sneakers on a spin cycle."

"I want to know how long it's going to take for a rescue team to find us," Sofia said.

"We shouldn't have too long to wait. The yacht had a GPS unit," Mike said. He sighed. "And the emergency distress signal was activated before the hull breached."

"And you know this because..." Ming asked, head tilted.

"I was the one who activated it. I was on the bridge trying to get us back home. Something messed up the nav software, GPS kept glitching out, but I managed to get the ship's

history up, and after that it was just backtracking. I remember going down into the galley for coffee, but then..." Mike shook his head. "I barely had anything to drink last night. I was sleepy, which is why I went for coffee, but I wasn't passing out from exhaustion or anything."

"Maybe the boat rolled," Cyndia said. "And you got knocked out."

"Maybe," Mike said. "Bugs me, though. I'm the one with the pilot license. I keep thinking, this is my fault. I'm the one responsible."

"Mikey, did you try to sink the yacht?" Peter asked. Eyebrow raised.

"Well, no," Mike began. "But-"

"You didn't deliberately put our lives at risk. You stayed sober. You got knocked out, and shit happened, but it's not on you, Mikey. Or, if it is on you, it's on the rest of us just as much."

Cyndia looked tempted to say something sharp to Peter. I didn't remember her drinking to excess. "What time did Fred take the boat out last night?" Cyndia asked, instead. She left her chair at the table and joined Ming and Sofia on the sofa. "Clocks here say it's quarter past three in the morning. If we crashed around one? We're only four or five hours away from the hotel. And civilization."

"Then we can expect help sometime tomorrow afternoon," Peter said.

A door creaked, and I heard voices. One was soft.

"You can't be serious," Brianna said to the old man. "Do you seriously expect me to believe that? No phone? Not even radio? No way to contact anyone?" He held his palms up, shrugged.

"Drink?" Peter inquired. The old man arched a snowbank of an eyebrow. His voice was measured, every syllable pronounced with loving care.

"I am glad to see you appreciate my distilled spirits. Perfecting the recipe was most painstaking, and production is both delicate and time-consuming, as I am sure you appreciate."

"Of course," Peter agreed. "Though I don't know if I'd say the recipe is perfected. I mean, it's very good..."

Brianna frowned at Peter, but when her eyes met mine, she brightened up. We hugged each other, tight, before stepping apart.

"Everyone," the old man said. He projected effortlessly. Small talk shrank. "The hour is very late. There are enough recently cleaned rooms on the first floor to accommodate everyone. I suggest you make yourself as comfortable as you can for the night. In the nights ahead, if you prefer a room on one of the upper floors, I encourage you to dust, change the bedding, and move in."

"We're not going to be here for days," Mike said. "Someone will be coming for us tomorrow. Even if you don't have a radio, which is kind of crazy."

"I tried telling him that," Brianna said. She rubbed at her eyes.

"Also? The plumbing in the hotel is not functional, I am afraid." The old man ambled towards the doors, gestured outside. "There is a row of latrines set up within a quick walk, there, you see? I would recommend taking one of the oil lamps with you? And checking for snakes and spiders before sitting down. And perhaps you are not tired," the old man said. "But I am quite exhausted." He kicked away the stops he'd used to prop open the front doors, and they both slowly swung shut. "We are safe enough inside," he said. "Unless you are visiting the latrine, I would urge everyone to stay indoors until morning. The island can be confusing to navigate, even under the best of conditions." He bowed his head to Brianna, then the rest of us. "I will prepare a late breakfast for us tomorrow," he said. "We will talk more then."

The old man left. We sat in silence for a couple minutes before Peter cleared his throat.

"Hey, guys?" Peter said. "Did anyone catch his name?"

"And what was that," Sofia asked, "About snakes and spiders in the latrine?"

Took me forever to fall asleep, and when I finally did, the sun in the morning wouldn't let me keep my eyes shut. I tried rolling onto my stomach, facing away from the window. The night before, I missed the gray mold splotching the lower third of the wall. The mattress was lumpy, the sheets scratchy, and my pillow felt like it was stuffed with coconuts and grass hula shirts. I knew I needed to get out of bed. Sleep wasn't coming back. Plus, I needed to pee.

I wondered how long I until withdrawal from missing my antidepressants hit. I quit once before, cold turkey, when I was out of work and my insurance lapsed. For a couple days, everything was fine. Then a persistent tic in my cheek arrived, followed by weeks of insomnia, diarrhea and self-loathing. I tried to convince my girlfriend she was a bad person if she didn't stay in step for my every mood swing. I was suspicious of everyone, including my parents. They volunteered to pay for the meds until I landed a new job with health insurance.

The tic was gone three days after I refilled my prescription for antidepressants. My girlfriend was gone long before then. I didn't blame her. If I could have run away from the person I'd become, I would have. I struggled to accept the idea I was mentally ill. I felt diminished. Neutered. Literally; the antidepressants dampened my sex drive, interfered with my ability to achieve an erection and made getting off impossible.

The bad voice in my head, the one powered by depression, whispered this was a good thing, that genes as defective as mine were best not passed to a new generation.

"Depression tells you lies," a therapist told me once. I think this is mostly true, except depression knows to mix a seed of truth in with the deceit. I was crazy, a little. And without my meds, three things were guaranteed to happen. Diarrhea first, followed by feelings of worthlessness, punctuated with anxiety attacks.

I sat up, swung my legs over the edge of the mattress, stood. I told myself not to worry. That we'd be rescued and back to civilization in no time. I forced a smile. It probably looked fake. It was the best I could do.

In the hall, I heard voices, followed the sounds to the main room on the first floor from the night before.

The front doors stood propped open. The sun was bright outside. On a table draped with a white cloth, a stack of porcelain bowls sat next to platters heaped with melons I couldn't identify.

Cyndia and Sofia sat together, close to the doors. Mike hovered nearby, hands stuffed in his robe's pockets, rocking from foot to foot. Ming was busy slicing the melon into orange chunks.

"Morning," I said, to the room. Mike glanced over, and he might have mumbled something in my direction. Cyndia smiled hello. Sofia scrunched up her face politely and nodded. Ming wordlessly offered me a bowl with chopped fruit.

"Any updates on Fred?" I asked, looking from face to face.

"Brianna is with him," Cyndia said. "Fred hasn't woken up. He feels like he's got a fever, but this place doesn't have a thermometer, so..." She shrugged.

"Did anybody catch the old man's name?" I asked. I settled into a chair facing the door, and the cheerful scene outside. I picked up a sticky chunk of melon with my fingers, took a bite. Juice dribbled down my chin.

"Good morning, my friends." I turned to take in the owner of the voice. The old man with the face chipped from granite looked even more impressive by daylight, dry and dressed in a pair of chinos, a white oxford shirt and leather sandals. Everything was worn, in some places even threadbare, but very clean. "Antonio Oliveros is my name," he said. "I imagine you have questions. But first, I suppose, I should say... welcome to Reverie Isle."

Continued in Reverie Isle: Episode 102: "The Feel of the Axe"