

Author's note: The San Blas Inn does not exist. The only accommodations for tourists are thatched huts.

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My baby was seven months old, and it was time, Richard said, for me to stop nursing. This trip was all his idea. We were supposed to be on our second honeymoon, or rather, “starting over” is how he put it. So here we were on this remote island in the San Blas archipelago, away from the world except for a handful of tourists and natives, while my baby boy and my six-year-old daughter were with my sister, Adele, back in New Hampshire.

I sat on the edge of my twin bed, groggy from my nap, wondering how late it was. My hair was damp, matted with perspiration. By the looks of the sunlight streaming through the only window in our room, I had slept through the heat of the afternoon. Thank god. The San Blas Inn had no air-conditioning. The brochure said: “Built in the 1880’s, this lovely tropical haven retains the graceful Victorian atmosphere that made it such a popular retreat for the nobility of that era.” The same atmosphere, I thought, looking at the austerity of our room, because they still had the same furniture, the same carpet, and probably the same linens.

A mirrored dresser stood between our beds. We each had a nightstand and lamp, and in the corner beyond the window was a gate-leg table. Perched sentinel beside it was one straight-backed chair, and next to that, an armoire. That was all. No closet, of course.

The San Blas archipelago was populated solely by the Kuna Indians, except for this island where they allowed the Panamanians to operate the inn and a few other businesses. Tourists weren't allowed to stay overnight on the outer islands, only to visit. The Kuna transported them in dugout canoes to see their thatched huts and buy their hand-stitched mola clothing, then paddled them back here. I had watched a few canoes return late yesterday when we arrived and wondered if I would want to go on an excursion.

The management warned you well in advance that the technological age hadn't arrived here. Aside from one laptop computer for guests and one for the manager in his office, there was no connection to the outside world. No television, no cell phone access . . . In a dire emergency, you were flown back to Panama City.

The real reason we were here, however, was because Richard thought he had found such a deal. I should have known it wouldn't be the idyllic place he had described, and without AC, I was miserable. At least there was modern plumbing in the adjoining bath. Still, I didn't understand why, when they wired the place for electricity, powered by huge generators, they hadn't put in window units for air-conditioning. But as my mother used to tell my

younger sister and me: There's no accounting for taste and stupidity.

I fanned my face with my hand and studied the orange streaks the dying sun was casting on the palm fronds outside the window.

"Well, we missed dinner, Estelle," Richard said, slamming the door as he came in. "You slept too long." He combed his modishly long black hair away from his forehead with his fingers and stared at me, his mouth pursed into that circle of annoyance it always wore for me. His brown eyes were as cold as the frozen soil back in New Hampshire.

"Why didn't you eat without me?"

"Eat without you!" he said. "What would that look like? Me down there alone? You know, dinner isn't the casual affair that lunch and breakfast are. They use place cards and move you around to different tables every night so you can meet the other guests. And we're supposed to be on our second honeymoon, in case you've forgotten."

I sighed. It was only Tuesday, our first full day. Thirteen to go. But in just one or two more, I told myself, Richard would make friends and be off hiking somewhere or fishing and wouldn't care what I did. I couldn't wait.

"Well?"

"Well what?" I turned back to the palm fronds waving in the waning light.

"What do you want to do about getting something to eat?"

"I don't want to do anything, Richard. I'm not hungry. What do you want to do?" I looked up at him again. He wouldn't answer,

but the anger—no, distaste—apparent in the way he glared at me spoke volumes. But this didn't disturb me anymore; I was inured to his dislike. Or at least I pretended to be. "I'm going for a walk," I said. "Do you want to come?"

"I might as well. You know, once dinner is served, the kitchen is closed for the night. Maybe I can find a bite of food to buy somewhere."

Sliding into a pair of sandals I said, "Yes, a restaurant where you can get a sandwich or something."

He snorted. "Or something is right. Like dysentery. You know, one of the reasons people stay in this place is so they'll get food that's properly prepared, food that's . . ."

I tuned him out and left the room.

The expansive wooden stairway that led to the lobby was made of imported cypress pine, the manager had told us, as was the entire inn. Cypress pine was resistant to termites.

"You could have waited," Richard panted, catching up with me outside. "I just wanted to take a leak."

I stared out at the ocean as we strolled along the path above the beach. It wound past touristy-looking clapboard stores bearing quaint signs, like Ruby's Trading Post. Interspersed between the few buildings we passed were palm trees and vacant land, so we could observe the progress of the sun as we walked. The sunset was breathtaking and made me think beyond myself for the first time in years. An evening breeze wafted through my hair, cooling my scalp. At moments like these, when the beauty of nature displayed itself so vibrantly, well . . . this is what made people

believe in God. But it had been so long since I'd felt in communion with anyone or anything other than my children and my own suffocating despair. In my world, God didn't exist.