

## **Perdita, the Lost One**

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, 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'd 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’d watched a few canoes return late yesterday when we arrived and wondered if I’d want to go on an excursion.

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

The real reason we were here, however, was because Richard thought he’d found such a deal. I should have known it wouldn’t be the idyllic place he’d 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 perturbation 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, my dear.”

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’d 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.

“Oh look, Estelle,” Richard said, pointing to a mangy-looking dog wandering along the road. “Poor thing.”

I shivered. The dog looked diseased.

When we reached a fork that led inland toward a cluster of buildings—the downtown of the island—I continued along the path that went down to the beach.

“Where are you going?” Richard said. “I thought we were looking for a place to eat.”

“You’re looking for a place to eat,” I replied. “I’m going for a walk on the beach.” His silence registered his shock, so I stopped and turned. “Get yourself a bite of something,” I said. “I’ll be right down there.” I pointed to where the path ended in wide-open beach, except for one small, weathered shack.

My tragic flaw was my pity for Richard, my insane need to forgive him. It was not his fault he didn’t love me; he was raised by parents who didn’t love him. Ironically, their last name was Loving. So when Richard’s insecurity flared beneath the surface like this, I saw the boy in him rather than the defensive, self-righteous man, and I remembered what he was like when we met, so vulnerable. He cried at movies back then, which I found touching. When nervous, he’d stutter sometimes. Occasionally, like now, I’d see glimpses of that man, but this was his private face. In public, he covered it all up with a lot of bluster and braggadocio.

“It’s getting dark,” he said. “You shouldn’t be out here alone.”

He meant himself, of course. What was he afraid of? The natives? Probably. Most of them were dark-skinned and spoke only Spanish, along with the Kuna language, and just one of these traits was enough to cause Richard discomfort, regardless of his professed concern for the Third World and his desire to travel to remote, “uncivilized” lands.

“Well, stay in sight,” he said. “Don’t go past that shack.”

I waved him off impatiently and started down the path.

“Okay?” he shouted after me. “Not past the shack!” The hint of panic in his voice caused me to turn and wave, smiling, but my reaction made me angry. Why did I always respond so quickly when he needed me? Was it because I, too, still needed him? Oh god, would I never grow up? Since the third month of our marriage, I knew I had made a mistake, but by then I was pregnant with our first child. For the sake of your child, I would tell myself, stay with him, Estelle. And I

convinced myself that I could change him, that we would change him, the baby and me. I prayed that when it was born, some miraculous transformation would occur, that the sight of our tiny, helpless infant would somehow extract a warmth and tenderness from Richard that I hadn't been able to inspire or reach myself.

That's not how it happened, of course. Richard remained the cold, unyielding head of the household he'd been from the beginning.

I stumbled on a root and chided myself to be more careful. Pay attention or you're going to get hurt.

Recently, I realized that with only one child I could have survived on my own, but I was too naïve to see that back then. And when my diaphragm failed to keep me from becoming pregnant a second time, I knew it was too late. I'd waited much too long, five years, and time simply ran out on me.

So with the birth of this second child, the boy he wanted from the beginning, I felt the vague dream of escape I'd been harboring vanish into the air like a waft of smoke. Eventually, I grew beyond caring as I fell into a depression so deep I sensed it would be eternal, or at the least, terminal.

At some point, my despondency aroused a reaction from Richard, not kindled by concern, of course, but inspired by fright, by sheer terror at the prospect that something really might be wrong with me and he could conceivably end up not only with the burden of two young children to raise, but also with an invalid wife to watch over, one who could no longer care for herself, let alone for him and the children.

Richard knew my mother's history, so he was deeply worried.

A displaced shell, transported somehow from the beach, caught my attention. I stooped to pick it up and rubbed the sand and dust away, carrying it with me, my new good luck talisman.

Richard also hated the fact that I was still nursing. He resented the bond that it created between the baby and me, his baby boy. So he began to plan this trip, a vacation “away from it all,” that in two short weeks was supposed to snap me out of it, whatever “it” was. Naturally, this meant the end of my nursing. I used a breast pump to assuage the pain.

What this trip had accomplished so far, however, was simply to make me aware, painfully so, that my only solace in life was my children. Right now, with this island paradise surrounding me, replete with a staggeringly gorgeous sunset, all I wanted to do was to get back home to them. Time alone with Richard is not what I needed. Not what I needed at all.

I shook myself free of my depressing ruminations and hurried on down the path so I’d be on the beach when the sun finally set. By now the sky was on fire with every possible shade of red as the horizon flamed. Where the footpath ended, fading into pillows of soft sand, the trunk of a dead pine lay like a bench. I sat down on it, aware of nothing else save the spectacular panorama before me. So magnificent, in fact, that my former doubt was called into question. How could anybody observe something like this and not believe?

But as the sun began to sink behind the horizon, pulling with it all the colors of life, my usual companion, despair, returned to mock me. Come back to the darkness, it said. God may be here on this remote island, but you won’t find Him in many other places. Like back home in New Hampshire, for one.

The sun completely disappeared then, along with the warmth of the day. A cool wind swept across the ocean, driving itself into my bones as the darkness increased.

Suddenly I sensed I was not alone. I turned and jumped at the closeness of the person I'd felt. But I wasn't frightened. It was only a small child, a girl, staring at me. She was so close that even in the twilight, I could see her bare feet and thin, *mola* smock, faded and torn under one arm. Her skinny body showed no signs of encroaching puberty, no budding breasts or hips, yet her pot belly was gone, giving her the thin, straight shape of a pencil, so I assumed she was about seven or eight. Just a year or two older than my daughter, Melissa. Her long, black hair was slightly matted but didn't appear dirty. Dark-skinned with dark eyes, she showed no emotion whatsoever.

"Hello," I said. "You surprised me. I didn't realize anyone else was here."

The girl didn't move or respond. She continued to stare. Something about her, her eyes, I guess, struck me as forlorn. Swinging my feet around to the side of the log where she stood, I tried to draw her out. "What's your name? Do you live around here?"

Still, she said nothing. But she didn't turn and run either.

"What's the matter?" I pursued. "Cat got your tongue?" Then a more probable reason for her muteness occurred to me, and I marveled at my stupidity. "*¿Hablo español, si? ¿No hablo ingles?*" Realizing then that I had said, "*I speak Spanish, yes? I don't speak English,*" I laughed.

Still, the girl didn't respond, and I became concerned. There was something so strange about her, something so withdrawn and out of touch. Was she disabled, I wondered, retarded in some way?

"What are you doing?" Richard's voice rang out as he approached. "Who's that?"

"That," I said coldly, "is a little girl. I don't know her name. Did you get something to eat, find some dinner?"

"You could hardly call it that." He lifted the sack he was holding in one hand. "Packaged stuff. Some nachos and junk. I sure hope the laws and regulations for packaging are more

stringent than the local health laws. They had the bread and desserts sitting right out for all the flies.” He looked at the sky. “It’s almost dark. Come on. Let’s get back to the Inn.”

I turned back to the child. “I have to go now,” I told her, “back to the Inn, the San Blas Inn. Do you know where that is?” I pointed in its direction. “Down the beach, that way.”

“Why are you telling her that?” Richard asked. “She can’t understand you, anyway.”

“You come see me, all right?” I asked. “Tomorrow.”

“Jesus,” said Richard, “I grant you she’s kind of cute, Estelle, but she’s dirty. Look at her hair. They wouldn’t let her in the front door.”

Ignoring him, I pointed again. “Right down there at the San Blas Inn. Tomorrow. *Mañana*. You come see me, and we’ll go swimming and have a picnic, okay?”

“I told you she can’t understand you. Why don’t you ever listen to me? Watch. I’ll prove it to you.” Then he bent down so his face was level with hers and smiled his solid-gold smile. “I’ll bet you hate chocolate candy, don’t you? Too bad. Because I have a whole bag of it right here. If you do like it, though, and just smile for me, I’ll give you all I’ve got.”

The girl watched him, but she remained immobile.

“See?” Richard said, straightening up. “I told you, my dear. Hey,” he said, and chuckled. “Hey, little girl, maybe you have a big sister who likes candy. Got a seester who’d like to meet a meester?” Chuckling again, he turned and started off up the path.

My emotions began to take on a dangerous patina. Was it possible to hate someone you once thought you loved?

But I waved goodbye to the girl and obediently followed him, like the sick dog that I was.