

ISLA

by

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She dozed on the beach chair, the waves of Isla Mujeres gently competing with the Mexican beat behind her head in the bar. In the wet heat, time didn't seem to have any edges to it; it flowed around her like water. It was August, and it was so hot, the sun moving up her legs under the umbrella, ripples of sweat running down the inside of her swimsuit.

She opened one eye. The water was dotted with boats and Mexicans up to their necks bathing in the turquoise sea. The man next to her in the beach chair dropped one leg over the side into the sand a few shades lighter than his fine brown foot, nails trimmed. His arm followed. Pretty soon all of him would be at her side, but for now, she studied the half of him nearly touching her chair. He was sleeping, his mouth open, his thin nylon swimsuit skimming his camote, his thick black hair swept off his forehead. She wanted to touch that hair. It would be greasy but smooth and warm like a blackbird wing to the touch. "Don't ever touch a bird," her mother said, somewhere behind her eyes in the back of her brain, from heaven. "Birds carry disease and they are not a good thing to handle," she had said—many years ago in a green front yard outside of Chicago. Her mother was gone; Loretta had never listened to her anyway. She had picked up as many birds as she could down through the years.

She moved her fingers. What if she just touched his hair lightly? What would happen? Would the Mexican police come and arrest her for hair touching? There was most likely an obscure law for that as well as the one that forbade tying a horse up in front of the bank or.....

Her fingers moved slightly, and she dared herself. In the air that separated them, she was already there, close to his head drawn in black and brown against the white towel. His face was typical of Mexican men, attractive in constant desperation, and open, asleep or awake, often lined with worry, intense, laughing readily, hardly ever angry in public that she could see. They were men. Men got angry. They killed each other. Loretta didn't see that, not for the whole year she worked there in the middle of Mexico teaching English. She steadfastly wanted to believe in the goodness. Every Mexican looked at her skeptically when she said this.

A woman walked up on the other side of him, her large thighs sticking out of a short chiffon floral beach dress. Wherever she had come from she knew she was supposed to be there. She stared at Loretta with a steady mean gaze, so rare in Mexico. He was, after all, probably hers and Loretta had taken possession of him with her thoughts and her moving fingers, stretched out next to him, looking him up and down. Loretta thought, I'd be pissed, too.

He slept on. He raised one leg in a V, then the other, and shifted. He opened his eyes and looked directly at Loretta. He smiled. Loretta sat up, and still she felt the woman's gaze burning at her hotter than the sun on her skin. She got up and walked to the sea, its coolness instantly turning to warmth, the rippled sand soft under her feet. She sank and teetered sideways in the shallow glassy green water. The boats were roped off, the wave-runners skimming away at a safe distance. Small glittery fishes scurried around her feet, seaweed wrapped at an ankle. She lay back and let the sea take her down the beach, the burning all gone and forgotten.

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