

THE KING CONCH HOTEL

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

The King Conch Hotel

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This thesis explores episodic plot structure and its use in modern fiction novels through a combination of research and creative artifact. The artifact is comprised of the first six chapters of a novel entitled *The King Conch Hotel*, in which I implement the literary techniques discovered during the literature review section of this research.

The King Conch Hotel is the story of Marco, a teenage bellhop who works at the five-star King Conch Hotel on the island of Key West, Florida. As a bellhop, Marco knows everything that happens in the hotel and everyone who stays there. From teenage runaways to the famous millionaire owner of the hotel himself, each chapter details Marco's adventures following a different guest, exploring themes of American material excess and the over commercialization of the island in the decade known as the "affluent eighties".

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe a great thanks to my faculty advisor, Dr. Lowell White, for guiding me through the research and publication process of this thesis. Dr. White's writing experience helped me frame my ideas about being a writer and what it means to be a literary citizen, and his advice has been instrumental in the completion of this project.

Additionally, I would like to thank my high school English teacher Micah Rhodes. Despite reading many of my earliest stories, she encouraged me anyway. Without her feedback I would never have pursued writing this far, and so I am forever indebted to her for using her own free time to foster my freshman hobby. Not many teachers are willing to look the other way when students are writing short stories instead of essays in class like they're supposed to be, so I consider myself very lucky to have had such a great literary educator in my life.

SECTION I

RESEARCH QUESTION/MOTIVATION/ARTIFACT

The episodic plot structure is a growing phenomenon among modern fiction novels. While in the past most novels have used overarching plot narratives to structure their story telling in the traditional progression of plot points such as exposition, inciting incident, rising action, and climax over the entirety of a work, the advancement of plot theory has promulgated an drastic increase of novelists willing to use these experimental plot methodologies. Many writers are now beginning to see that the episodic plot structure has advantages over the long form narrative due to its ability to take those same traditional plot points and condense them down into every individual chapter or section. With the plot points condensed down into more “short story” type groupings, either by chapter or section, novels structured in this way demonstrate that one size fits all plot points are not necessarily the end all be all of creative fiction, and that writing is advancing like every other subject.

Much like a breakthrough in medical science, this exploratory and experimental stage of tinkering with what works in order to find something that works better can only happen thanks to those previous efforts that established the basic concepts of the field. The episodic plot structure takes the bones of the traditional overarching plot structure and uses them to create several stories within one story, not subtracting from the formula but multiplying its elements in hopes of magnifying the result. The goal of any written piece, from political literature to children’s literature, is to fully explore the themes of the subject, and so by using each traditional plot point multiple times this structure keeps the writer from having to decide which inciting incident or change of fortune best captures his theme. Instead, the writer can simply move that plot point to

another chapter or sub story, and at the end of the work have told the same message in different parts of the book in different ways. Because of this technique, a novel can be more about the moral or theme the writer is trying to convey by showing a broader context of not just one incident but several, which, when they are all put together, have significantly more literary and thematic meaning than they would if told in an overarching plot structure.

The majority of my research will be done through literary analysis of novels that have used the episodic plot structure before, more specifically *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien and *Music of the Swamp* by Lewis Nordan. Both works have had significant critical success and are perfect examples of the episodic plot structure being perfectly employed in a novel. The majority of the research is going to be focused on the differences between novels that use this technique and novels that use traditional overarching plot structure, in both reception and the actual texts. While it may not seem significant, the differences caused by the way the texts are organized via plot directly affects the way the texts are received, and thus these examples of novels that have had critical reception using these methodologies are evidence that this emergence of newer plot structures might change fiction for the better.

In order to get a more applicable understanding of the research I am conducting, I have used the episodic plot structure in writing my own novel, *The King Conch Hotel*. The artifact is the culmination of my research and personal understanding of the episodic plot structure, being implemented into my own novel idea. While it would be an exercise in futility to believe one could replicate the critical success of other writers simply by understanding their plot structures, a close examination of their methods could certainly lead to the betterment of new creative works that are based in similar plot concepts, if not to the same level of literary excellence then certainly somewhat improved from what they would have been without earlier examples.

My research is primarily focused around the discovery of the various factors that lead to the successful implementation of episodic plot structure in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and Lewis Nordan's *Music of the Swamp*. What literary elements did O'Brien and Nordan have to make adjustments for because they used this kind of plot? Why are most plot theorists concerned with height of tension over the timing of the major plot points? What is the general reader's response to novels that utilize episodic plots? Ultimately, are there advantages and disadvantages of writing a novel in episodic form? If so, what are they?

The importance of the subject of overarching plots vs episodic plots is shown in comparison to other aspects of rhetorical devices and their effects on creative works. Most discussions in book clubs and literary circles begin with conversations about plot before they continue on to more abstract devices like style, tone, themes and morals, and for good reason. The plot of a novel is the lens with which all other facets of the novel are viewed through, and as such is vital to writers as the foundation on which the rest of the novel is built. Writers know that if their plot is not set up perfectly in line with all the other facets of writing to be stacked on top of it, then the entire rest of the novel could collapse, and thus a theoretical understanding of plot is something that all writers show serious concern for.

There are many prolific theories that examine different aspects of plot such as Blake Snyder's "15 Beat Plot Structure", Kurt Vonnegut's "The Shape of Stories" and Christopher Booker's "The Seven Basic Plots", but common among all of these theories is that they all measure height of conflict in some way. While height of conflict is an important measurement when trying to analyze the tension present in a certain plot point, what all of these theories assume is that all novels utilize an overarching plot structure. Certainly, this is the most common type of plot structure used in modern fiction, however, for those writers which wish to use

episodic plot structure there is significantly less theoretical research on how this is best accomplished, if anything in such an objective realm as literature can be claimed as “best.”

The research done in this study examines the ways writers change their style, tone, themes and morals to match episodic plots, not by measuring height of conflict, but by analyzing the stylistic changes they make to fit episodic plots. If we divide novels into two categories, those that use episodic plot structure and those that use overarching plot structure, the difference in the way these types of novels use rhetorical categories are significant. Novels using episodic plots require these techniques be used in very specific ways, and as such this research into the specifics of how to effectively use them is pertinent to writers who want to get off the beaten path and use this kind of plot.

Most of the research being done has been conducted by the close reading of highly successful novels that utilize episodic plot structure. While there must certainly be more examples of this kind of plot being combined with other rhetorical strategies in successful novels, the two works I have chosen for my research share many of the same literary techniques even though they are from different authors and about very different subjects. This makes me confident that the shared traits between these novels are the best way to execute episodic plots structure and that they represent other works in the same vein. Ultimately, my motivation for this research is a desire to bring a theoretical framework to episodic plot structure using those previous works as guides and implementing the lessons learned from them into the creation of my own creative work.

The King Conch Hotel is the story of Marco, a teenage bellhop who works at the five-star King Conch Hotel on the island of Key West, Florida. Marco knows everything about the guests of the King Conch Hotel. He knows what they do on the island, where they go, when they plan to

leave, even why they came to the island in the first place. Marco knows everything about the guests that stay at the King Conch Hotel, but what he can't figure out is why the manager, Mr. Cero, wants to know so much about the people who stay in his hotel?

Set in 1980, *The King Conch Hotel* details the change of Key West from a shipping port to a vacation destination whose natural beaches and jungles have been replaced by resorts, shops and restaurants. From two teenage runaways that stay at the hotel to the famous millionaire owner of the hotel himself, each chapter details Marco's adventures following a different guest around the island, exploring themes of American material excess and the over commercialization of an island in the decade known as the "affluent eighties".

SECTION II

LITERATURE REVIEW/BACKGROUND/HISTORY/SOURCES

There are many prolific theories of plot that examine different aspects of fiction novels such as Blake Snyder's "15 Beat Plot Structure", Kurt Vonnegut's "The Shape of Stories" and Christopher Booker's "The Seven Basic Plots", but common among all of them is the use of one metric height of conflict. However, in recent years a new plot theory has emerged among some modern writers which focuses on the breakdown of the individual chapters more than the overall rising tension. These classifications of plot theories can be divided into two categories, novels that use overarching plot structure and novels whose chapters contain their own structures within each chapter, known as episodic plot structure. The difference between the two is often obvious to readers, even upon a first reading, as stories that use episodic plot structure can read somewhat like short story collections that have a very tight adherence to a subject, character or location, while a story that uses an overarching plot structure will have a much more gradual height of conflict gradient and are often organized into three or four acts.

My research centered upon the newer method of episodic plot structure and its advantages over the classical overarching plot structure. By assessing the structure of the story in this way, my research was unique because it does not measure height of conflict in regards to the point of view character but rather the sheer number of highs and lows over the course of the novel. More simply put, in theory each chapter has its own exposition, inciting incident, rising action, climax and resolution, and because the plot points are covered in a much shorter time frame than a conventional plot, the story is theoretically more entertaining due to its comparatively fast paced nature.

In my research of novel structure methodologies, I reviewed the mechanics of novels that have used episodic plot structures before, such as Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and Lewis Nordan's *Music of the Swamp*.

Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* is made up of several short stories that are all connected in via theme. While most of them share a setting, Vietnam during the 1970's, there are a few chapters that go beyond that setting which are only included because of the episodic structure used by O'Brien. It is clear that these chapters only serve to highlight main themes in *The Things They Carried*, physical loss and loss of innocence, upon return from Vietnam. Because the book is well respected by both the public and literary scholars and it uses an episodic plot structure, each chapter having its own inciting incident all the way through resolution, I find that it is a perfect case study into how the structure can successfully be used in storytelling, particularly related to fictional novels.

In Lewis Nordan's *Music of the Swamp*, a much more obscure novel but still one of critical success, he also uses an episodic plot structure to tell multiple stories that seem unrelated but come together to create a cohesive narrative at the end. *Music of the Swap* details the misadventures of a young boy growing up in rural Mississippi, and in doing so dedicates individual chapters to everything such a character would care about, from his family to his schooling, each one starting with some kind of inciting incident on the subject. Separately they read like short stories but together they paint a lifelike, detailed picture of what growing up in the Mississippi Delta in the nineteen fifties. It too is a perfect example of the utilization of episodic plot, putting together individual stories that are linked by character and setting so that the end of the novel paints a holistic view of the morals and themes trying to be conveyed.

Using these two excellent works as guides for the implementation of episodic plots, I have created my own work which follows a similar structure. The aspects I'm taking from these two novels are how they create the rapid progression through the traditional plot points in a single chapter as well as the reasoning for the specific order of the episodes. An example of this is that when ordering their episodes, both O'Brien and Nordan consider when to introduce specific characters. Many times characters will come in and out of stories, but in order to characterize them properly, these characters must first be introduced to the reader. What this ends up looking like in both O'Brien's *The Thing's They Carried* and Nordan's *Music of the Swamp* is important side characters being featured in early chapters so they are known to the reader for later appearances. Both O'Brien and Nordan seem to value the ordering of character introductions when using episodic plot structure, as well as a few other techniques that they share because they are using the same unique plot structure.

For the historical aspect of my research I used the Texas A&M library. My theoretical framework was mainly concerned with capturing the historical setting of my own work properly as well the culture of the period of the 1980's, in which my work is set. I was concerned with correctly capturing the historical setting of my work, and believe that while my research was done thoroughly, I could have included more cultural references to the 1980's.

In addition to using the Texas A&M library, I also used literary research papers found online. Some of these included Arnold Weinstein's *Structural Analysis of Narrative: A Forum on Fiction*, David Jauses *What We See: Redefining Plot* and Barbara Smith's *Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories*, all of which helped guide my research by demonstrating different facets which literary scholars focus on when they analyzing plot. The research papers ensured I had taken in a multitude of plot theories and understood varying ideas of how plot worked in tandem

with other literary techniques. Many of them talked of different kinds of plots, how they varied, and how these variations could be measured, and much of it helped me frame my ideas surrounding the concept that certain stories favor certain types of plot structures.

As for the definition of episodic plot structure used in my research, to that I owe one specific source, David Miall's *Episodic Structures in Literary Narratives*. Miall's 2004 research paper is a deep dive into the characteristics of what makes a plot "episodic", identifying the passage of time in the narrative as a significant tool for the writer to use when trying to fast forward from plot point to plot point within each chapter or individual section. Miall uses Kate Chopin's *The Story of an Hour* as his primary example of episodic plot structure, breaking down each page and marking different literary techniques or routes Chopin could have used but didn't. While I am using two different examples of episodic plot structure, my research had been modeled after his in this way. Using the same literary analysis technique, I am going to break down modern fictional works that utilize this plot structure, Tim O'Brien's *The Thing's They Carried* and Lewis Nordan's *Music of the Swamp*, to find out what kind of stories excel in being told in episodic plots.

SECTION III

EXPLANATION OF EXHIBIT

For the exhibition of my research I have presented the first chapter of *The King Conch Hotel* twice, once at Texas A&M University as a part of the Aggie Creative Collective Presentation on July 25th, 2019 and once at the University of Texas for the Capital of Texas Undergraduate Research Conference in November 16th, 2019.

The presentation given at Texas A&M University was a part of a final exercise for the Aggie Creative Collective Program, for which my artifact was originally written. The presentation was held in the Evans Library on the A&M campus at the end of our summer long writing session. All members of the Creative Collective Program read parts of their artifacts and answered questions from audience's members, who numbered around thirty, about different aspects of our works, ranging from the themes we chose to write about to more technical questions about our texts. What I took away from the presentation was that I need to practice long readings, because while I was able to read my entire work, my reading was more monotone than I would have liked it to be. Public speaking does not make me nervous, but my lack of experience reading my writing out loud made me hesitant to add any gratuitous inflection, as I was fearful it would undermine what I had to say. This, of course, was not the case, and learning from the mistake my second reading went significantly better.

The second exhibition of my research was done at the Capital of Texas Undergraduate Research Conference in November of that same year. I applied to present at this conference with some of the other writers from the Aggie Creative Collective program, Kyrie Garlic and Zoe Sherman, and meet up with them in Austin. The conference started with the presentation of a

letter from the governor of our great state, Greg Abbott, and then all the undergraduate researchers broke off into our separate rooms based on the subject matter of our presentations. My presentation at this conference was significantly better than my earlier presentation because I had learned I needed to inflect when reading aloud, as one does when reading on their own, and thus it was received much more favorably by my audience than my first. After my reading several of the audience members and other presenters told me they were interested in reading the entirety of the work, which was very gratifying and encouraging. The experience affirmed that learning from past failures is always a function of making a change, and I am glad that I was able to make the appropriate correction on my second presentation.

Overall, the presentations I gave were excellent experiences, especially when put together. I learned a lot doing the research for *The King Conch Hotel* but I believe the presentations were the most enlightening part of my experience in the Undergraduate Research Scholar Program. My interest in the program was entirely predicated on making me a better writer, and while I could have written without the program, I could not have gained this valuable experience presenting my own works without it.

SECTION IV

REFLECTION

Working on *The King Conch Hotel* as a part of the Undergraduate Research Scholars program at Texas A&M University has been one of the great learning opportunities of my life. While the original concept of this project predates the program, I know it would not be where it is today without the guidance of the research scholars team and my thesis advisor, Dr. Lowell White, whose professional writing advice has contributed so much.

Episodic plot structure is something I have been interested in ever since I read *The Things They Carried* in high school. Tim O'Brien's Pulitzer Prize finalist book was the first one I had ever read that didn't use the traditional overarching plot structure but still told a single story, just in a fast paced more episodic structure. After reading it, I began noticing when other novels used that kind of plot structure, and ever since I have been trying to utilize that kind of plot in my own novel writing. The Undergraduate Research Scholar program gave me a reason to really do a deep dive into the complicated mechanics that make up episodic plot structure, and has certainly furthered my understanding of the subject.

My research was done primarily through text analysis of novels, something I am no stranger to as an English major. Text analysis is simply reading a text and then thinking through why the author wrote the work that way from a technical level. For my particular research, something I found I had to pay particular attention to was the literary techniques being employed in the text and their tactile purposes.

Often times, I found myself scrutinizing over why the author began or ended a story where they did. What I found was they would cut the introductions as close to the main story of

the chapter as they could, cutting out excessive exposition and characterization in order to get right into the plot of that particular chapter.

Additionally, I found that novels which utilize episodic plot structure seemed to all commonly use “quick cut techniques” to transition between scenes. One of the main problems of using episodic plot structure is that in order to go through all the traditional plot points in a single chapter they must be progressed through quickly, and a common solution found in both *The Things They Carried* and *Music of the Swamp* was to use more scene jumps than normally found in a novel in order to skip to the next plot point of the chapter.

After analyzing how novelists adjust their writing to use faster paced episodic plot structure, I came to a better understanding of the purpose of that kind of plot. Novels written in that way feel like their plots advance faster than traditional plots, and thus hold reader’s attention better, which is becoming increasingly more and more important considering the ever shortening attention span of most readers. Today, one of the biggest compliments a novel can get is that it is “fast paced” or a “page turner”. These terms are a window into the mind of what the average reader sees as valuable attributes for an entertaining story to have, and writers who are listening to those readers will take notice of this different kind of plot structure and use it to their advantage as a way to distinguish their works from traditional novels.

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The King Conch Hotel



I like to prowl ordinary places and taste people from a distance.

– Charles Bukowski

CHAPTER ONE

THE CHAMELEON

The neon green sign outside the King Conch Hotel – “Stay at the King Conch Hotel! We know what you need!” – was a warning, not an advertisement.

The sign was a big bright thing, even among all the other neon signs on Duval street, that buzzed its low neon buzz in the gravel garden in front of the hotel to bring attention to it, as if being the tallest building on the island wasn't enough. Mr. Cero had put it up after the Pink Palm Hotel across the street had put up their sign, an obnoxious neon pink thing in the shape and likeness of a radioactive palm tree. The sign made everything within fifty feet of it glow a light ruby, even during the day, and at night washed the whole block in a cotton candy hue. The Pink Palm's sign was meant to attract tourists who were leaving the bars on Duval street late at night, a beacon promising safety and comfort to those who found themselves in desperate need of both. Every night at closing time the drunks who didn't have a place to stay would wander their way to the Pink Palm Hotel willing to pay any amount of money for a soft bed to collapse into.

It was a very different clientele than most hotels tried to attract, but even so, Mr. Cero didn't like it. He didn't like the fact that the Pink Palm across the street was getting attention, even from the drunks, so he put up a sign of his own. He knew we didn't need the sign, but he didn't care. Anything that was good for the Pink Palm was bad for us, he said, so it didn't matter that we didn't need the sign. They had one, so we had to have one.

It didn't matter that the King Conch was better than the Pink Palm.

Everyone had to know it, too.

The funny part was that everyone did. The King Conch had everything a guest could want, a shady center courtyard with a large pool, a private four-star dining room that served only fresh seafood and a rooftop bar that was known as the best place in the world to watch ocean sunsets. Tourists came from all around the island to watch the sunset on our roof, so much so that it was a common occurrence for couples to come to the island just to get engaged on our rooftop. We saw a ton of proposals at the King Conch, and they all went the same way.

The couple would come in off the street with the rest of the late afternoon crowd, holding hands as though if they let go of the other they might float off into the sky. They always stood so close to one another that it looked like they wanted to meld together into one person, kissing every few minutes seemingly in hopes that when they finally tried to break away they would find the separation impossible. The two would walk into the lobby holding hands and then the guy would stop dead in his tracks when he saw the line for the elevators going to the roof. You could see his panic when he realized how long it might take to get to the roof, trying to calculate how long the sun had left in the sky and if they'd make it there in time.

Once, in a true act of desperation, I saw a man suggest they take the stairs to the roof. No lie, he asked her if she wanted to take a quick jaunt up the stairs after coming in out of the ninety-two-degree heat. He was so enthusiastic about it too, that's exactly what they did. They walked up all eight flights of stairs to the roof and when they got there, all sweaty and exhausted, he proposed to her.

But that only happened the one time.

All the other times the couples waited in the elevator line, the man no longer interested in melding with her but preoccupied with the fear of having messed the whole thing up. You could see it in the way he stood in line, shaking his leg impatiently each time the elevator filled up in

front of them. He'd pretend everything was fine and that he didn't care while in his head urging the line to go faster, until finally their turn came. When they got to the roof the guy would always make a beeline toward one of the sides, trying to get her a perfect unobstructed view of the ocean spread out in front of them. He wanted her to be so close to the low parapet that surrounded the roof that she wouldn't even see it. All she would see would be the sun sinking into the Atlantic, looking like it was melting into its own golden reflection. They would watch the sight together until the sun finally disappeared, and in that moment, when it finally looked as though the sun had been swallowed by the sea, that's when the man would propose.

He would back up behind her, drop to a knee, and wait.

The roof always went quiet when that happened. Other guests would slowly notice the man down on one knee and in a few seconds time the whole place would go from the clamor of a small party to absolute silence. During the sunsets the other guests had talked and ordered drinks, even shouted for one another to stop what they were doing and to move over so that everyone could fit into the all-important family photo. But when someone proposed, no one said a word. People talked through sunsets because they knew there was nothing that could go wrong. There was nothing on the line. Sunsets were certain. Sunsets were inevitable. Sunsets didn't have a sound, and even if they did, it would be the most common sound in the world. There hadn't yet been a day that hadn't started with a sunrise and ended with a sunset.

But a proposal, that was different.

The seconds after he proposed felt like the moments after you flip a coin, when it's still wavering there on the table and hasn't yet decided which reality you're living in. Uncertainty hangs in the air so heavily that you can hear the tension like it's music. It inspires silence in the form of prayers on one shoulder and devilish secret hopes on the other, the part of you that deep

down wants to see something go wrong. Guests watched proposals like they watched the sun setting, certain of the outcome but not quite certain enough to stop the budding idea of what might happen if things went wrong. What if the sun didn't come back? What if she said no?

But the sun always came back, and the woman always said yes.

She always cried out that she loved him and took the ring from his hand while all the other guests cheered and went up in celebration, relieved that the sun would indeed rise the next morning. The couple would celebrate with the people on the roof long after the sunset into the night, and when they were good and drunk they'd leave their new friends. They'd wave goodbye and stumble into the elevator, giggling and happy, and when they finally opened the door to their room they'd see it had been transformed since they last saw it. The bed would no longer be the standard queen but a heart shaped king, the towels and lights in the bathroom now colored pink and in the hallway between the bed and the door would be a walk of rose petals so vibrant and red they looked like they had grown right there on the floor. When they saw the whole thing their eyes always lit up, hers of love and his of confusion. He knew it hadn't been his doing, but with the way she gasped and ran around with such joy he would be a fool to deny it. He'd claim to have known about it the whole time and that the rest of their lives would be surprises like that. Spontaneous trips to Paris and big expensive gifts that came out of the blue, surprise after surprise, till death did they part.

In the morning, they would awake to find another surprise, a platter of eggs and bacon and fruits sitting neatly on top of dresser– “Compliments of the King Conch, congratulations on the engagement!” They'd attribute it to a staffer that had maybe just so happened to be on the roof at the time of the proposal, or that perhaps one of the strangers they had celebrated with had told the hotel what happened. Either way, they wouldn't think about it for long. They didn't care.

All they knew was that they loved the attention. It made them feel special. It made them feel just like the woman had felt when she got proposed to, wanted, cared for, the center of the whole world, and thanks to that feeling they would come back to the King Conch time after time.

No one ever questioned how the hotel knew so much about them.

No one ever cared.

All the guests ever paid attention to were the bottles that were on the house if they were alcoholics, how their room got cleaned twice a day if they were germophobic or how if they were from the mountains on the mainland their room somehow smelled of pine, just like home.

No one ever questioned it.

I guess in a way it was good for us that they never did. Snooping around and learning about people was the only thing my brother Renan and I were any good at, and it paid good money, too. If we screwed it up we'd have to go back to being just regular bellhops, and Mr. Cero didn't pay them nearly the same. We got paid twenty dollars a day, and being barely sixteen, it was more money than we had ever made at the time, so we took the job seriously. Whenever we followed someone around we made sure we kept on task, waiting, watching, listening, noting, reporting. We knew all the tricks. There were a million ways to learn about people, listening to them talk at the bar, waiting on them in the hotel dining room, even examining their room when they left, if you knew they were going to be gone for a long time.

But the key to it all – don't get caught.

People don't like being watched. They'll give you all the tools to do it, moving slowly, talking loudly, being obvious about where they're going, but the idea of someone actually taking the short leap to follow them freaks people out. It really does. Everyone acts so all important like they want to stand out, right until they find out that people are actually paying attention to them

and then they get all shy and secretive, offended by the creepy idea that someone might actually be paying them more attention than they wanted.

We never got caught though.

We looked like all the other native islanders with our dark, wet-sand colored skin and straw-like black hair that always looked shiny, and since half the island had some sort of native heritage in their blood we were almost invisible. Tourists could tell we were from the island, so they didn't bat an eye when we passed by. They always figured we were running drinks to another guest or taking someone's luggage to their room, that our constant presence never had anything to do with them. If we had to, we could walk through the King Conch dining room by the same table a hundred times in a single hour and not a single guest would notice.

Not a single one.

It was rare for a guest to notice us, and even when they did, all we had to do was split up. Once Renan dropped off, they never noticed me. Renan just didn't have the same ability to disappear like I did. It just wasn't his nature. He couldn't just sit and watch things as they happened, he always felt like he had to get involved.

Like the time we were walking down Coraline street and saw some guys fighting. I stopped when I saw what was going on, frozen like a chameleon trying to fit in with all the other onlookers, but Renan had just pushed right through the crowd to get right up on them. He couldn't stop himself. He wanted to be a part of the action. It was the same reason why if we overheard a couple arguing over something trivial he'd jump in and tell them who was right, that the restaurant they were trying to find was indeed on Coraline street and not off Pauline street, like the husband had insisted it was. Renan just had to do that kind of stuff. He couldn't help it.

On the outside we looked the same, but the truth was he didn't have a sly bone in his body, just a big mouth that seemed to have a mind of its own.

But to be honest, real honest, I was always glad he wasn't all that cagey.

It was the only thing I did better than him.

I always liked standing in a room all quiet, just listening to people and seeing what I could see. It's funny what people will tell you about themselves if you just watch them for long enough. They'll tell you everything you need to know about them just by what they wear and how they talk to people, sometimes even just by the way they stand. You watch someone for long enough and you can see things about them that they can't see about themselves. You can tell how highly they think of themselves by how fit they are or how smart they are by the kinds of movies they go to and the kinds of books they read. Every action is a reflection on their personality, who they are and what they want, it all means something and the more people we watched, the better we got at reading all the little specifics. You really had to be able to pick people over with your eyes to notice the right things, but over the years we got pretty good at it, until we even came to have preferences in when and where we watched people.

The best places to be cagey were public places.

For some reason people thought crowded places like stores and restaurants were kind of intimate, like the sheer size of a room somehow diluted other people's ability to see or hear them.

But of course, it was the opposite.

In crowds it was easy to blend in with people and get real close to them. You could stand right behind someone in line at a movie theatre or sit a few seats away from them in a restaurant and they wouldn't see you, not as long as you didn't talk to them. Not one bit. The only time it's impossible to disappear is when there isn't anyone around, because you can't blend into a crowd

that isn't there. Bright, empty settings are the worst places for anonymity, so when we found ourselves on an empty beach or in an empty restaurant all we could do was keep our heads down and hope the guest didn't take an interest in us.

In those cases, we acted invisible even though we knew we weren't. We pretended to be busy by looking like we were trying to fix a nearby light fixture or cleaning the hallway right outside their rooms, that way if they wondered what we were doing, we had an alibi. Even if they did talk to us, asking us for directions or room service, we always tried to answer them without speaking. Talking to someone made us present. It made us real. But if we just nodded and then came back with a fresh towel or whatever they asked for, we were just an image. Just a pair of faces, one pair out of the hundred they had seen that day. We figured that it was kind of like how some people claim to have seen ghosts, but you can always tell they don't exactly believe the whole of what they saw because they never interacted with the thing. Interaction is the only way people can confirm what they're seeing to be true, the only way to prove their perception was real on both ends. Speaking broke the illusion of anonymity, so we tried to only ever speak when spoken too, and we always did what we were told the first time we were told to do it. It made us look like good bellhops, but really, it was all for our own benefit. We did what people expected us to do so we didn't stick out to them and really that was the key to the whole thing, perfectly anonymous by being perfectly obvious.

In a way, we were a lot like the big green neon sign outside the King Conch.

If guests were paying attention we were obvious, right in front of their faces in plain sight. We both told the truth of what went on at the King Conch to anyone who would notice us, but because we were so obvious, no one ever did. Guests assumed the statement on the big green

sign in front of the hotel was hyperbolic, and they assumed that even though we acted polite when we carried their bags to their rooms we didn't actually take an interest in them.

But they were wrong.

When we asked them where they were from and what they did and how long they'd be staying at the hotel they'd tell us everything, so I didn't feel bad about working for the King Conch. We told the guests exactly what was going on, they just never believed us. You see, most people hear so many lies they just assume everything is a lie, even when you tell them the flat out, God's honest truth.

"Stay at the King Conch Hotel" the sign said, "we know what you need."

It was the truth alright.

CHAPTER TWO

THE UNHAPPY

This happened the third summer I worked at the King Conch, at the very beginning when we weren't really all that busy. No one had come in to the King Conch for a couple of hours that night, and since you can't get tipped for carrying bags that don't exist I was getting ready to go home when Mr. Bennett, the assistant manager of the King Conch, told me that Mr. Cero wanted to see me in his office. I knew something was wrong when he said it, too. At the time I had only ever seen the manager once or twice, and I had never once talked to him, so I figured if he wanted to see me it couldn't be anything good.

When I opened the door to his office I saw Mr. Cero sitting behind his desk across from Renan, and my first thought when I saw the two of them sitting across from each other was that Renan was getting fired. Renan was always getting fired from jobs for doing stupid things. I thought maybe he'd stolen a sandwich from the dining room kitchen, or made some rude comment to a guest. Renan was always getting fired for stupid stuff like that. He just couldn't help himself from doing the first thing that came to his mind. The only reason he had lasted as long as he had at the King Conch was that our mother worked in housekeeping and had gotten us our jobs there, and even Renan knew how mad she would be if one of his flippant comments got him fired. Somehow in the three summers we'd worked at the King Conch he'd managed to keep himself in check, but it seemed like Renan's streak of good behavior had come to an end, just like his employment at the King Conch.

"Marco, good to see you," Mr. Cero said to me.

I nodded and took a seat next to Renan.

Mr. Cero was wearing his usual worn out tan suit with one too many buttons unbuttoned, little grey chest hairs peeking out from beneath the middle of his shirt. He had a receding hairline in the shape of a horseshoe that made him look a little funny, like he was always wearing a crown of brown hair, but what little hair he had on his head was thick. Whenever he got stressed he would run his hand over his head and stop where the horseshoe began, as if feeling his hair to remind himself that he had once been young.

“Your brother and I were just talking about the kitchen, Marco,” Mr. Cero said to me. “We were thinking the menu needs more things on it. Renan thinks more seafood. Clams, shrimp, lobster, that kind of stuff. Now, I’m telling him we got all that stuff. Lots of seafood on the menu. We don’t really need to add more. I was thinking about adding more pasta. You see, pasta is cheap to buy and easy to prepare. Can’t get sued if you cook pasta wrong because you can’t cook pasta wrong. But Renan has a good point. He says we should keep with the seafood because that’s what the island is known for. Guests don’t come all the way down from Chicago or wherever to eat pasta. What do you think?”

I stayed silent, looking back and forth between Mr. Cero and Renan. Mr. Cero must have been able to see my confusion. Before I could say anything he held his hand up. “Where do you get your lunch? You bring it?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “We bring our lunches.”

“Don’t bring ‘em tomorrow,” he said. “I’m gonna get some swordfish, we’ll try that out for the menu. Swordfish and Paccheri al Forno. See which one we like better.”

I was still confused, but Mr. Cero didn’t say anything after that. He just sat there for a second and nodded to himself like he had solved a problem. He reached into his desk and pulled

out a pen and wrote something down on a piece of paper, a note to remind himself to have the kitchen make some test meals we could try.

“Thank you,” I said, glad that it seemed we still had jobs. “That sounds good.”

Mr. Cero kept nodding. He moved papers around his desk, looking for a specific one.

“Now, I have another assignment for you boys, an important one,” Mr. Cero said. He got up and walked over to a framed newspaper on the wall, the front page of the Key West Citizen.

In the center of the front page was a picture of a man in an all-white suit. He was standing on a pier, smiling at the camera and giving a thumbs up with one hand and pointing behind himself with the other. He was pointing to a building, half finished, in the distance that rose above all the other buildings in the picture. You could see the scaffolding hanging around the building and all the wiring that was still exposed, some colossal project whose various states must have been captured in hundreds of photos during its construction. I recognized it was the King Conch, right in the middle of being built. From the angle of the photo I could tell the man in the white suit must have been on the Front Street Pier on the west side of the island. I could tell because right behind him, below the head of the unfinished King Conch peaking over them, were the same buildings that were still there, only the businesses in them had changed. Instead of the Sunny’s Lenses that sold sunglasses there was a shop with a sign that said Sea Sponge Market and instead of the Key-Lime Pie Shop on the corner there was an open fish market, with big carts filled with red snapper and marlin and mahi-mahi alongside wet barrels of sea salt, still wet because they had only been trawled in hours before.

Mr. Cero took the frame off the wall and walked back over to us. “You boys know who this is? On the left? The man in the white suit?”

I shook my head.

“No,” Renan said.

“That there is Mr. Flagler. You recognize that name?”

We nodded.

We had never seen him, but we knew the name well.

Mr. Flagler was famous on the island. He was the owner of the King Conch Hotel, that and just about everything else in the tourist district. He had bought up all the land on the southern half of the island in the fifties, right after the end of the war, when it was the center of commerce because the island’s economy ran on trade goods coming from the Bahamas. Over the years Mr. Flagler invested in hotels and restaurants and bars on the southern half and slowly he built up the place, until it wasn’t just a naval base with a few small towns full of natives but a whole American city, complete with shopping centers and parking lots and everything else that made all the mainlanders feel at home when they came down on vacation. It was all because of Mr. Flagler, and as such, his name was everywhere. Flagler Avenue. Flagler Marina. Even our high school, Flagler high, was named after him.

Everyone on the island knew who Mr. Flagler was.

“Oh, yeah, I’ve heard of him,” Renan said. “He’s the guy who used to own the island?”

“Well, he didn’t own the island,” Mr. Cero corrected. “He owned a lot of land, but not the whole island. In fact, he still owns quite a bit of the island, including the King Conch. You know how Mr. Vogel’s your boss and I’m his boss? Well, Mr. Flagler, he’s my boss.”

“He owns the hotel?” Renan said.

“That’s right. From the tiles at the bottom of the pool to the seagulls on the roof.”

“Does he get to stay for free?” Renan asked. “I always wondered if people like that get to go to their own places for free. Like if you owned a restaurant, can you eat there for free?”

Mr. Cero raised his hand to stop Renan but then moved to scratch the hair on the side of his head, as if to stifle himself. “Yes, Mr. Flagler gets to stay for free. Everything is... free.”

Renan was looking at the picture so closely, he didn't notice. “Neat,” he said.

Mr. Cero nodded. “Not that it matters to him. As you can imagine, Mr. Flagler's pretty well off. Once a man gets rich enough to build his own hotels, he's usually rich enough he doesn't have to stay at them. Mr. Flagler can stay in any hotel he wants to. It's probably why he doesn't visit much, he's always off somewhere else.”

“I've never seen 'em,” Renan said.

Mr. Cero nodded. “Hasn't been here in the states for the last few months. Overseas vacations. He knows the hotel is well taken care of, so he doesn't check on us much. But he does come by occasionally, and actually, he's coming this week, tomorrow, in fact, and seeing how he hasn't been here in a long time I want to make sure that he has.... has a pleasant stay.”

Mr. Cero stayed silent for a minute, trying to pick his words carefully.

“Of course, in order to make sure he has a good time I'll need to know what he's doing.... where he's going.... do you understand?”

“You want us to follow Mr. Flagler?” Renan finally asked, sounding unsure of himself. Usually Renan talked like he was an expert in whatever it was he was talking about, but not that time. He knew the weight of what he was saying.

But he wasn't wrong.

“I think we ought to know where he goes and what he does,” Mr. Cero said slowly. “You know, to make sure he thinks this place is being run right. But don't think there'll be any trouble. He'll just check out the pool and maybe order room service once or twice just to see how long it takes to get to his room. I just need you boys to make sure everything goes well for him.”

Renan shrugged. "We can do that," he said.

Mr. Cero waved dismissively to one side of his desk and leaned forward.

"Now this is important. I don't want you boys doing anything else while he's here. If anything goes wrong, if anything odd happens, you come get me right away," Mr. Cero said.

Renan nodded. "Can do. But, what about work? Do we still have to take peoples bags? And if we don't, I mean, how are we gonna get paid? Can't get tipped for bags we don't carry."

Mr. Cero nodded. He opened a desk drawer and pulled out a bundle of cash. It was a stack of twenty dollar bills wrapped in a rubber band, from which he thumbed two bills out of. He handed one to each of us. "Here's an advance," Mr. Cero said. "How about that?"

"That works," Renan said.

"Good. And there's more where that came from. When Mr. Flagler comes in, come get me. Tell me what you see. I'll pay you again."

"That sounds good."

Mr. Cero looked at Renan like he wanted to stress one more time how important it was that we follow Mr. Flagler closely, but he didn't say anything. Instead he picked up the framed newspaper page and walked it back over to the wall where he had gotten it. He hung it up and then adjusted it a few times to make sure it was square. It had to be just perfect, like everything else in his hotel. "Mr. Flagler's coming tomorrow with his wife, sometime in the morning," Mr. Cero said. "Make sure you're here early. And make sure you can stay late, too."

"Yes sir," Renan said. "Can do."

Mr. Cero slapped his hand down on his desk in the same way a judge bangs a gavel, making it clear the meeting was over. Renan and I stood up and left his office, making sure to

close his door on our way out. We walked out the front door of the King Conch and headed toward the bus stop across the street, the way we always went home.

“I thought you had gotten us fired,” I said to Renan.

Renan laughed. “So did I.”

* * *

When Mr. Flagler, the owner of the King Conch, famed patron of the island and master of the universe finally arrived, he was arguing with his wife.

They came through the front door of the King Conch during the last week of May, riding in like surfers in front of the big wave of tourists who would come to the island starting the first of June. Mr. Flagler must have known June was the start of the island's tourist season, the clear, calendar-date demarcation of when every mainlander who was obsessed with sand and sun and surf would come down and blow their winter savings on week-long binges of eating, drinking and snorting, seemingly in order to make up for their last few months of being frigidly dormant, and decided it was a good idea to vacation ahead of the rush.

He was right.

The best week of the year was the week before all the tourists came down. You could feel the island take a collective deep breath the week before all the tourists arrived as everyone battened down the hatches and prepared their bars and hotels and restaurants for the coming monsoon of people that would take over their lives for the next three months. All the shops and attractions would be fully staffed and open for business, but since the tourists hadn't arrived yet, there was never any work to be done. With nothing to do, everyone who lived on the island always found funny, random things to do to pass the time, and it always felt like the universe's

way of giving us our own miniature summer vacation, even if only for a week. You never knew what you were going to see, horse races on the beach between different equestrian outfits, tour guides arguing sincerely about which buildings on a certain street were haunted or a charter fishing boat captain driving down main street in a bulldozer with a six-hundred-pound blue marlin in its bucket, shouting at the top of his lungs that he was going to hang the thing on his private dock and steal every single fishing client that came to the island.

It was the best week of the year on the island, which is probably why the Flaglers came during it. Maybe they hoped if they showed up before we were expecting them they'd be able to capture some of our happiness. Maybe they hoped after their stay, they would be happy.

As the Flaglers argued in the lobby, I noticed Mr. Flagler was dressed in a white suit, the same white suit he was wearing in the picture Mr. Cero had shown us. He didn't look any older, either, with the same pale, thin kind of face that looked like a politician but only slightly worn, as though he'd just fought a long hard campaign for some decidedly important office. His wife standing next to him was the perfect image of a first lady, wearing light washed blue jeans and a sweater, the kind of thing I imagined a woman from the Midwest would wear. He said something to her and she waved him off, like she knew what he had said was true but wanted to pretend it wasn't. She headed towards the front desk, and Mr. Flagler followed her, leaving whatever they were arguing about behind them.

"Hi," Renan said to her. "Do you have a reservation?"

The woman smiled at Renan like he had complimented her.

"Flagler," she said, still smiling.

Renan looked down at the clip board and ran over the names for a second, pretending that he didn't know the Flagler name wasn't on there. Mr. Cero had told us exactly what room to give

Mr. Flagler when they arrived, along with two copies of the room keys, one for them and one for us. “Ah, right here,” Renan said, pretending to read the name. “Flagler, suite six-ten.” He handed her one of the keys, which we’d planted among all the other room keys on the back wall. “If you have any bags, he’ll take those up to your room,” he said, pointing at me.

I took the Flagler’s bags and led them to their room.

All the rooms on the sixth floor of the King Conch were suites, three times the size of our regular rooms and four times as expensive. There were only four suites and each of them had their own side of the building to themselves, north, south, east, and west. The suite that faced north, toward Caroline Street and all shops in the tourist district, was the most expensive suite in the whole place, a suite we called “The Rainbow Suite”. If you were standing in the Rainbow Suite at night and you looked down on the tourist district it looked like what a fireworks show must look like from the sky, every color in the rainbow represented in a collage of light so bright and solid it looked like if you stepped out into the air you could walk across it. It was the best view on the island, and it was priced like it, too. During the normal tourist season the Rainbow Suite was usually booked by celebrities and musicians whose managers had booked it for them, calling in and asking for the most expensive suite in the place because it wasn’t their own money they were spending. It was so large and extravagant that even when people weren’t staying in it Mr. Cero would rent it out on nights it was empty to some of the local yacht clubs for them to throw parties in. He never let the room go to waste, but not because he didn’t want to miss out on the money. He liked the reputation it gave the King Conch. He liked people to talk about the hotel, even if they didn’t stay at it, and since the Rainbow Suite was so exorbitant that’s how he showed the hotel to everyone who he wanted to think highly of it.

Including the Flaglers.

I followed the Flaglers into the Rainbow Suite and began to off load their many multicolored suitcases in the living room. Mr. Flagler walked over to the phone on the wall and began dialing and Mrs. Flagler continued past him. She walked right to the big window and looked out over the tourist district, putting her hand to the glass.

“Oh look, you can see the docked cruise ships,” she said to Mr. Flagler. “One day we should go on a cruise.”

Mr. Flagler lowered the phone down to his shoulder, still waiting for the call to go through, and nodded to his wife. “Why go on a cruise when we could just fly to wherever the cruise is going?”

Mrs. Flagler shrugged and looked back out the window. “We’ve never been on a cruise before, it would be something new you know? Something different?”

“You wouldn’t like a cruise,” Mr. Flagler said. “There’s nothing to do.”

“Oh, how would you know? You’ve never been on a cruise.”

“You don’t want to spend a week on a boat, you’ll get bored. Nothing but shuffleboard and magic shows and sunbathing for hours on end.”

Mrs. Flagler took her hand off the window and turned to Mr. Flagler.

“I like sunbathing, and you like sports,” she said.

Mr. Flagler started to say something but then a voice came through the phone. He raised the phone to his ear and turned away from her. She just shrugged and turned back to the window.

I set the last suitcase down and pushed the luggage cart toward the door of the suite. On my way past Mr. Flagler, he stopped me and handed me five dollars. It was a good tip. I thanked him for it with a silent nod and walked away.

When I got back down to the hotel lobby Renan was still standing behind the front desk reading the Key West Citizen's comic strip pages. "What'd he give you?" Renan asked.

I held up the five-dollar bill Mr. Flagler gave me. "Five bucks."

Two dollars was a standard tip for taking someone's bag to their room. If they were wearing a nice watch we could usually get three dollars out of them, and four if they really chatted us up and asked us all sorts of questions about where they should go or what they should do on the island. Fives were pretty rare, something only regular guests gave us because they were afraid if they didn't they might find grains of sand hidden in their bed on their next visit. Renan once told me he got a ten-dollar tip, but I was pretty sure he just made it up. He never showed me the ten, and even if he had, I probably would have attributed it more to how much the guy had drank that day than Renan's level of customer service. Fives were the most we ever saw. No one tipped with tens.

"Pretty good," Renan said. "Could've been a ten though."

"No one tips with tens," I said.

"No one tips *you* with tens," he said.

We stayed at the front desk for the rest of the morning, waiting for the Flaglers to emerge from the elevators and show us what they were going to do for the day. There was nothing to do because the tourist season hadn't yet started and so there wasn't anyone to check in or out except for a few travel journalists who had come to the island to write articles about it, hoping to publish them when they got back to the mainland just in time to encourage a few hundred more people to plan last minute, end of summer vacations. We checked the journalists out of their rooms and then stood there in the lobby for the rest of the morning, until we were so bored we

began thinking of going back up to the eighth floor and cleaning the suite next to the Flagler's to see if we could hear them talking about anything.

We were walking out from behind the desk when Renan stopped.

"We forgot to tell Mr. Cero that Mr. Flagler was here," he realized.

"Oh, damn," I said.

"I'll go tell him," he said.

"One of us better."

Renan went off across the lobby and disappeared into the hotel dining room, and just when he did the Flagler's emerged from the elevator. They walked across the lobby toward the front door. I stayed perfectly still, pretending to read the comic strips that Renan had put down until they left through the revolving door and disappeared down Duval Street.

I moved around the front desk toward the hotel dining room to get Renan but stopped. There wasn't time to get Renan, not if I wanted to be sure of where the Flagler's were going. I knew that Mr. Cero was already going to be upset that we had taken so long to tell him that the Flagler's had arrived, and I didn't want to have to tell him that we had lost them, too. I gave one last glance at the King Conch dining room, and followed after the Flaglers.

When I caught up to them, the Flaglers were walking down Duval Street at an arm's length apart. Duval Street was the main drag of the tourist district, a street that ran diagonally from the west side of the island to the south and held the vast majority of the reasons why people came to the island in the first place. It was lined with bars and restaurants and every kind of souvenir shop that could be imagined, everything from surf boards to fashion boutiques. As the Flaglers walked down Duval Street every few feet Mrs. Flagler would stop and stare in a gift shop window at a dress or handbag hanging off a mannequin and say something like "Oh that's

colorful,” or “I wonder if that’s handmade?”. Every time she did Mr. Flagler would have to turn around and walk back to the window because he hadn’t realized she had stopped, and look the item up and down before agreeing with her or saying he didn’t know.

“You wanna go in and ask about it?” he asked her, pointing to a supposed handwoven tote bag hanging off a window mannequin.

“No,” Mrs. Flagler shook her head. “Maybe later.”

“We’re here now....” Mr. Flagler pointed out.

“No,” Mrs. Flagler said again. “I don’t know if I want it yet. I have to think about it.”

“Just get it, then we don’t have to walk back here, if you decide you want it.”

“But what if I decide I don’t want it?”

“Then it can be my purse,” Mr. Flagler joked.

Mrs. Flagler rolled her eyes. “It wouldn’t match any of your outfits.”

“Then don’t buy it for me,” Mr. Flagler continued.

Mrs. Flagler rolled her eyes. ““It’s not for you, it’s for me.”

“So you *are* buying it?”

“No, I’m still deciding. Never mind, just come on.” She stepped away from the window and waved for him to follow her down the street, leaving the bag behind.

As they walked down Duval Street this happened multiple times, her stopping to window shop while he commented in a disinterested voice, either encouraging her to buy whatever it was or that she didn’t need the thing. Whatever way he pushed her she went the other way, and after the fourth store he quit suggesting things. When she stopped in front of a store he just nodded and inspected the saltwater rusted cars parked along the street.

In the early afternoon they stopped at Kelly's Cafe for lunch.

I stayed outside, sitting at a bus stop across the street from the cafe. I would've followed them in, but because it was so early in the season, I knew if it was hard to stay hidden on the street it would be even harder to remain unseen inside a small, empty cafe.

The bus stop was in front of the Walk-in Theatre, which was this real crummy movie theatre Renan and I weren't allowed to go to. Our mother told us to stay away from the Walk-in because the only people that ever went in were guys who had been drinking on Caroline Street late at night and were looking for something to do. From the name of the place, I figured the Walk-in's whole thing was that they didn't have any proper showtimes, you just bought a ticket and went into the theatre and watched the movie at whatever point it was at. But that was only a guess. The only thing I knew for sure was that it was run by a bunch of girls who walked around in bikinis. I knew because sometimes the girls stood outside the Walk-in, smoking cigarettes and talking to the guys coming from bars, calling them names like Hey-baby and Mr. Man, anything to get their attention, though most of the time it didn't seem like the name calling was needed. Guys never looked like they needed much convincing to go in, but mother never let us go to movies there. She said it was dirty, so we always went to the theatre on Trinity Drive.

When I sat down at the bench to wait for the Flaglers, there were no girls smoking or calling me names outside the Walk-in Theatre. The street was empty and they stayed that way until finally the Flagler's eventually came back out.

They continued up Duval Street, past the souvenir shops and restaurants in the interior and toward the very western tip of the island. The western end of Duval Street ended in Mallory Square, a huge cobblestone courtyard with a few low stone buildings that were built on a rocky peninsula that shot out toward the Gulf of Mexico. It was originally built by the Spanish as a naval base for collecting trade goods coming from the Bahamas, and had somehow managed to

stay that way over the last two hundred years, unlike the rest of the island. Mallory square hadn't changed since Spain sold the island to the U.S, and for some reason that was a point of pride for everyone on Key West. Every other rock on the island had been kicked a hundred times and then paved over with four or five layers of concrete, but for some reason the square had never been touched. Vendors still sold their goods on the square, the same imports from Cuban and Dominican plantations that had been sold way back when, but now, in addition to huge hundred pound boxes of coconuts they also sold individually sized portions to tourists who wanted to sample the tropical goods.

The Flaglers walked around Mallory Square all afternoon, across the weathered cobblestones and in between low stone buildings that had once been Spanish naval barracks. They looked out at the Gulf of Mexico for a while, her taking pictures with a polaroid while he wandered around her, occasionally stopping to talk to islanders who recognized him.

The Flaglers stood by the water taking pictures until they heard a commotion on the other side of the square. Over near the stalls of goods a crowd had gathered, and hearing people yelling and shouting the Flaglers made their way across the empty square towards the commotion. In the center of the crowd stood two dark skinned vendors with a cart of baseball sized brown spheres, key limes, that had rotten. The key lime vendors were making a show for all the other vendors that had surrounded them, holding up some of the key limes and throwing them across the square. When the key limes landed they exploded, the peels separating from the brown pulp filled internals on impact.

“What are you doing?” one of the other vendors in the crowd asked.

“The whole cart's gone bad. Especially the ones on the top. Just didn't move them in time, no one to sell them to.”

“Well, what are you chucking them for?”

“We can’t very well send them back to the plantation, so unless you wanna buy ‘em, why not? Might as well get them to fly out of the cart in one way or another.”

Some of the vendors in the crowd laughed.

“My stuff is going bad too,” one of the other vendors said.

“What are you selling?”

“Pineapples.”

“Might as well toss ‘em now, save yourself the trouble of trying to sell them all week.”

The other key lime vendor nodded behind his coworker and reared back with another lime in his hand. The crowd watched as he launched it across the square in a high arc, a small explosion of mist jetting outward when it impacted the cobblestones in the center of the square. The crowd of vendors laughed, and one by one they began joining in. They threw key limes and pineapples and tomatoes out into the middle of the square, laughing and pushing one another and talking about how right the key lime vendors were in saying that they might as well toss the produce now and spend the rest of the week in the bars on Caroline Street. They could just tell their bosses that the tropical goods hadn’t sold well, and of course, their bosses would believe them. Without tourists it made sense they wouldn’t sell anything, and there was no reason to stand out on the cobblestones breathing salty air all day if they didn’t have to.

The crowd of vendors threw their goods across the square until a pile of spoiled fruit had accumulated. The rotten goods attracted a parcel of small yellow-billed cuckoos who swooped in and pecked at the pile between impacts, always coming right back to the pile as soon as a fruit impacted the cobblestones and rolled away. The vendors tried to hit the birds with their goods, and that’s when the Flagler’s left the square, Mrs. Flagler shaking her head.

They headed back down Duval Street back towards the King Conch, and when I caught up to them I could hear Mrs. Flagler lamenting about the vendors.

“It’s gross,” she said to Mr. Flagler, who was laughing.

“It’s just fruit, what’s so bad about it?”

“Rotten fruit,” Mrs. Flagler said.

“I thought it was funny. You’ve never wanted to just toss out the merchandise and get a week off work when you were a teenager? Did you ever work retail?”

“I worked retail,” Mrs. Flagler said sullenly, “I just didn’t think it was funny. I mean, all that fruit just in a big brown rotten pile. They could have just thrown them away!”

“They did,” Mr. Flagler said laughing.

“You know what I mean. They didn’t have to be all gross.”

“I guess they figured there wasn’t anyone around so it didn’t matter.”

“Well, we were there, and I didn’t like it.”

Behind the Flaglers, back in Mallory Square on the west end of Duval Street, the sun had finally hit the horizon, so low and bright that it’s orange rays made long shadows out of every little thing on the street, coke cans and street signs alike casting long dark streaks down the sidewalk. I was following them close enough to hear what they were saying until I noticed I was also casting a shadow, one that intermingled with theirs and told them that someone was behind them. I slowed down to let the Flagler’s move farther ahead of me so they wouldn’t spot me.

I followed them back down Duval Street until we were back among the shops where Mrs. Flagler had done her window shopping. She stopped again in front of a shop window to look at a mannequin with a blue leather handbag, but instead of thinking about it on the street this time went inside. The Flagler’s were inside for only a minute or two before they came back out. She

didn't have a box or bag with her, and they continued on down the street until they came to another one of the stores that she had stopped at earlier that afternoon. They went into that one too, and once again they came out with nothing.

I thought it was odd, Mrs. Flagler doing that. I mean, her husband owned the King Conch, she was rich. It didn't make sense that she would be so careful with money, stopping and thinking about what to buy before actually buying it. It just wasn't what I expected. I could tell that it confused Mr. Flagler, too. You could see it in how he waited for her when she disappeared into the shops, shifting his weight impatiently, that he didn't understand why she didn't just buy them all and just toss out whatever she didn't want to keep. Once or twice I thought I saw Mr. Flagler say something like that to his wife, but she just kept going on into stores, until eventually Mr. Flagler didn't wait for her to come out anymore.

They were back in front of Kelly's Cafe, where they had lunch, when Mrs. Flagler disappeared into a dress shop. Mr. Flagler said something to her as she walked in, pointing to something across the street behind him. She waved him off like she didn't care and then disappeared into the shop. Mr. Flagler crossed the street and went into the Walk-in Theatre, the place I had sat in front of when they had been in the restaurant.

I didn't know which one I should follow, Mr. Flagler or his wife, so I stayed on the side of the street waiting for them to come back out. I watched the front door of the Walk-in Theatre as men went in and out, sometimes leaving with the girls in bikinis. At one point the back door to the Walk-in was thrown open and a guy got thrown out into the alley behind the place. He landed in a pile of trash bags, probably full of half-empty popcorn bags and sticky milk-duds, real gross stuff like that, with a squishing thud that reminded me of the rotten limes hitting the concrete. Behind him I could hear what was playing, some loud party scene with people shouting over

rhythmic music, and as the guys who threw him out went back inside he shouted something at them. With how much he slurred, I didn't have to wonder why he got kicked out of the movie.

I waited for the Flaglers on the street for a long time, past the sunset and into the last cool night of spring. I could feel it in the air, a kind of buzzing entropy on the breeze that had a tinge of warmth to it like the earth was practicing for the coming summer. I wondered if maybe the earth was saving its full scorching force for when the tourist season started out of deference to us islanders, to give us just a little longer to be happy, and then I thought that maybe it wasn't as a favor to us at all. Maybe, the earth was saving up its heat so that when the tourists came they would really get it. That if they wanted to overdose on sand and surf and sun to feel happy then they'd have all the sun they needed to do the job. I didn't know which one was true or if neither of them were, but to be honest, I liked both ideas. They both sounded fine to me.

Eventually Mrs. Flagler came out of the dress store, and this time she had a bag in her hand. When she came out she looked around the street for Mr. Flagler. It was clear she hadn't heard him say where he was going. She walked up and down the shops across the street from the Walk-in, looking in their darkened windows. They had closed early, on account of it still being so early in the tourist season, and I watched as it became obvious to her that the only place her husband could be was at the Walk-in.

It must not have taken her very long to find Mr. Flagler in the Walk-in, because she came out with him very quickly.

When they came out, the same rhythmic party music was still playing. I wondered if it was still the same scene as before, when I saw the drunk get tossed into the alley. She held up her hands, as if to ask him why, then pointed at the door of the Walk-in. Somehow she'd lost the bag she'd come out of the store with. It was nowhere in sight, and as she kept pointing to the door of

the Walk-in I started thinking that maybe someone inside had taken it. Looking Mr. Flagler up and down he did look like he'd been in a fight or something, as the white suit he was wearing had a dark stain across the chest like someone had spilled a coke on him and his cheek was red like someone had hit him.

Whatever had happened, the Flaglers didn't stand outside the Walk-in Theatre and wait for it to happen again. Mrs. Flagler pointed down Duval Street, towards the King Conch, and they headed off, the sound of the Walk-in's music fading as the doors finally shut.

I waited for the Flagler's to get pretty far down Duval street before I continued after them. I knew where they were headed so I wasn't all that worried about losing them. When I caught up to them they were entering the King Conch, and as I walked into the lobby they were stepping into an elevator, her arms crossed and his face still bright red.

* * *

The next morning, the Flagler's ate breakfast in silence, both of them reading newspapers even though neither cared what the newspapers said, because they were both still unhappy, and there was no reason to talk about it.

They sat at a shady table in the courtyard by the pool eating breakfast, her a simple bowl of mixed berries, him a custom omelet with tomatoes, onions and red peppers from the dining room. They read their newspapers and ate their simple breakfast without saying a word to one another, and when she finished eating she went back to their room. We could see her from down in the courtyard, out on the balcony of the rainbow room tanning. She had sunglasses on, and even though I couldn't see her eyes I could tell she was looking down at Mr. Flagler, observing him from above. I couldn't tell if he saw her, but I don't think he ever did. He just sat there

reading his newspaper until it got too hot to sit outside, and then he would move into the air conditioned lobby and sent for Mr. Cero, who came out to meet him right away. They sat in the lobby for hours talking about the hotel, until eventually Mr. Flagler sighed and walked over to the elevators, reluctantly returning to his suite.

It was like that the rest of the week, until finally, six days later, the Flagler's left.

Mr. Cero checked them out, smiling and telling them to come back whenever they wanted, pretending like their visitation had just been another normal week to him. Mr. Flagler just nodded and told him not to burn his hotel down, while Mrs. Flagler didn't even fake a smile. Renan and I carried their bags out to the town car that would take them to the airport, and when they drove off they still weren't talking to one another.

They were just as silent as they had been all week, and they were just as unhappy.

CHAPTER THREE

THE ANIMALS

Sometimes at night, when I was leaving the King Conch, I liked to look up at all the little orange windows and think about all the strangers living in rooms right next to one another. The idea always struck me as just a little wrong. It seemed chaotic. It seemed dangerous. We had all kinds of guests stay at the King Conch, and sometimes I couldn't help but think about what would happen if the walls between their rooms disappeared and suddenly complete strangers were face to face. Unexpected. Unprepared. Unsettled.

Whenever I thought about the King Conch like that it always reminded me of a zoo, how all sorts of animals, from rabbits to tigers, could live right next to one another and get along just fine, just so long as they were separated by a single wall.

Some guests were complete rabbits, big families of soft bodied tourists who hopped around the island all day from one activity to the next, trying to cram all the island experience they possibly could into a single day before going back to their room and collapsing on top of one another. Their rooms were always left a mess, mainly because of the kids who liked to throw pillows and get room service crumbs everywhere, but it was always a mess coded in love, not beer bottles or cigarette buds dotting the floor but soda cans and goldfish.

The rabbits were wholesome in nature.

They always came in numbers of six and seven yet somehow were always able to act in tandem as one big family-oriented colony. Traipsing through the lobby they were loud and chaotic, yelling to each other about their plans for the next day while their kids ran in circles around their feet. They always seemed to have energy and never asked for anything complicated. When they went to the hotel restaurant instead of raising hell over how we were missing a

particular species of fish from our cavernous menu, rabbits let it go unnoticed. They preferred to order something familiar over something exotic, things like ribeye steaks and huge garden salads that not only could they get in their hometowns, but had mostly likely come from there, too.

And then there were the tigers.

Tigers always walked into the hotel alone, with no one and nothing but a single bag, usually a black, bomb-proof suitcase that had nothing in it except some suits. Though they almost never left their rooms, they always kept them clean. They didn't order room service and they didn't throw pillows around the room or jump on the bed. Tigers used their hotel rooms as bases of operation, not moving into the space but simply inhabiting it, mostly interacting with the desk to work and the mini fridge to drink, if that's what they were into. They came to the island on business and that's exactly what they got done. You'd see them moving all sly through the lobby to go meet with someone and whenever they came back they never stopped off at the pool or the bar to interact with their fellow guests. They always went right back to their rooms and got right back to work. No trips to the beach. No fishing expeditions. No late night concerts on Green Street. Tigers came in, killed, and got out.

If you imagined people as animals, working for Mr. Cero was just like going to the zoo. We'd watch them from a distance as they ate and went about their day, unseen spectators taking notes on subjects who didn't know they were being observed, and most likely wouldn't even care if they did. That was the job, and so that's what we did. We watched the animals.

And all kinds of animals stayed at the King Conch.

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There was once a man standing in the lobby of the King Conch with four boys racing around his legs, looking like he wanted to kill them. They were using him as a shield, a barrier in their game of chase which could only end in one way, knock it off, knock it off, knock it off, until eventually he would just knock one of them in the head.

The oldest of the boys couldn't have been older than eight and the youngest no younger than four, though he didn't seem to know it. He was brave for his size, too brave, too brave to know that it didn't matter how fast he ran or how hard he hit that the game wouldn't end well for him. No matter what happened, he was going to lose. There were only two aspects to the game of chase, and his older brothers outperformed him in both.

First there was the chase itself. The juking, the dodging, the darting and weaving, quick movements between the people and furniture in the lobby occasionally supplemented with bursts of dead-on sprints, smiles on the faces of the speeding participants as they flashed around the lobby. The youngest lost here because he was smaller than all his brothers. His legs didn't carry him nearly as fast as the legs of the others carried them, so he was always getting caught. Then there was the second part of the game, the result of the first. Two objects in unequal motion, a consequence for the slower one when they finally met. A punch on the shoulder. Not hard, but aggressive. A swing, a connection, a loud slapping sound, like someone punching a pillow as hard as they could. But the youngest one didn't cry when one of his brothers caught him. He just took off again, and the chase continued.

They went right back hurtling through the lobby, vaulting over the couch like Olympic gymnasts propelled by pleasurable fear and not gold metals or glory. They were all wearing colorful T-shirts, red, purple orange and yellow, and as they raced around they looked like a group of mangrove-cuckoo's, swarming in and out of mango trees after one another as though

one of them had plucked a chunk of mango off the vine and was trying desperately to keep it all to them self. The youngest looked like tweety-bird in his yellow shirt darting around the lobby. He couldn't keep up with the rest of the flock because he was smaller, but whenever the covey would swarm back his way he would fly right back into it. He knew the others would punch him just as hard as they did one another, and even if he did manage to catch up to them his own punches would hurt nothing more than little pecks, but he kept playing anyway. It was all fun and games. Fun and games and violence.

At least, until the cat came out.

"Knock it off... knock it off..." the dad warned. The boys tried to slow down, but there was too much momentum. Too much energy. They stopped just long enough to get him to look away, and then they took flight once more. They flocked and dispersed and flew around the lobby until the little yellow tweety-bird, the slowest and smallest of them all, preoccupied by all the fun, flew right by his dad. That time, there was no warning.

Little tweety-bird was pulled right out of the air.

The dad caught him by the arm and yanked him toward the front desk. "What'd I tell you?" he asked. "Ellis! Thomas! Get over here!" Two of the other birds reluctantly came toward the desk. "Now just stand there," he said. "Don't go anywhere." The boys stood there perfectly still, shyly inspecting their shoes until father finished speaking with the receptionist and pushed them toward the elevators where their mother, a portly woman who hadn't seemed to notice the chaotic scene, had been reading a magazine.

Mr. Bennett, the assistant manager, shook his head. "Animals," he said.

Mr. Bennett was a tall, lanky gentleman who always wore three-piece suits even though the temperature on the island was almost always over ninety. He looked like his whole life had

led up to working in a hotel or a bank, anywhere you had to look obnoxiously professional even though all you did was talk to customers all day. We could always hear him coming when he walked across the lobby because he wore these really fancy dress shoes with hard soles that clicked on the marble floors when he walked across them. Behind his back we liked to joke that his shoes were like a tracking system he had put on himself, a warning bell that cautioned the hotel staff that he was coming to inspect them. “Little animals,” he said, watching the family disappear into the elevator, “running around and getting everything dirty.”

“Animals?” Renan asked.

“Animals,” Mr. Bennett said, “little, filthy, animals.”

“That’s kinda harsh,” Renan said.

“Not really,” Mr. Bennett said. “They got dirt all over the place like animals. Made everything sticky. Made everything wet and gross. Look what they did to the couch!” he said, pointing across the lobby. He walked out from behind the front desk over to the couch. It had small sandy footprints on the cushions and was missing pillows, which had been thrown over the side. He brushed the foot prints with his hand and picked the pillows back up. “Animals.”

“They’re just kids,” Renan said.

“So are you, but you stay off the furniture,” Mr. Bennett said.

“You know what I mean. They’re little. They don’t know any different.”

“Of course they do. You heard the father. Knock it off, he said. Did they? No. There’s so many footprints on the couch it looks like an Irish river dancer came in from the beach and went to town!” Mr. Bennett brushed the couch with his hand until he realized it wasn’t doing anything. The sandy footprints remained. He came back over to the front desk and picked up the desk

phone and dialed for housekeeping. But even with the phone in his ear, Renan didn't give Mr. Bennett a break.

"They're just having fun is all. You do understand fun, don't you?"

Mr. Bennett shook his head.

"This is a hotel. Not a gymnasium. Not a playground. Not the beach."

"Well, it is a hotel, but not really to them, you know?" Renan asked. "To them it's some faraway land, you know? They've probably never even been this far from home before. Of course they're gonna be all energetic."

"Let them be all energetic somewhere else," Mr. Bennett said, the phone still to his ear. "Not in my lobby.... Oh, hello, yes I need you to send someone right away to clean the couch in the lobby, it has sand all over it." He put the phone back on the wall and shook his head. "Next time they come through the lobby they had better keep their feet on the ground."

"Oh come on, you never ran around when you were a kid?" Renan asked.

"Never destroyed a hotel lobby," Mr. Bennett said, "that's for sure."

"They didn't destroy the lobby, just misplaced a few pillows is all."

"This time they displaced some pillows. This time all they did was get the couch dirty. But what about next time, huh? When they come in off the beach soaking wet, pockets full of seaweed and hermit crabs and God knows what else. How about that mess? How does that look to all the other guests? Low class. That's how it looks. Now, speaking of misplacing things, misplace yourselves. Go clean something."

"What?"

"Go clean the rooftop bar, before it fills up with the afternoon crowd. Sweep the roof, wipe down the bar, the whole thing."

“Sweep the roof? Wipe the bar down? What about housekeeping?” Renan asked.

Mr. Bennett pointed to the center of the lobby where two maids were inspecting the sand covered couch cushions. They sprayed one of the cushions with some kind of cleaning solution and rubbed it with a rag, but the sandy brown color only smudged.

Mr. Bennet shook his head.

“They look a little busy.”

* * *

The day after the lobby incident, Renan and I found ourselves watching little tweety-bird and his brothers swimming in the King Conch pool, following Mr. Cero’s orders. He picked them like he seemed to pick all the guests we followed, seemingly at random. It was whoever he thought looked suspicious. Whatever guest didn’t seem right to him, though what crime Mr. Cero suspected them of committing, he never said.

Little tweety-bird’s parents were sitting in tanning chairs away from the pool, letting their flock dive and swoop as much as they wanted, though they occasionally warned them not to run and to keep their squawking down.

We were watching them from behind the poolside bar, pretending to be bar backs while we observed a family vacation that looked like any other. There was nothing about the family that stuck out, other than the lobby incident, and for the first few hours I sat there wondering what Mr. Cero’s suspicion was. But it was pointless. Nothing happened. All the boys did was play in the pool while their parents drank and tanned poolside. Like every family we’d followed before them, that was all that was going to happen. It was all that would’ve happened, too, if little tweety-bird hadn’t been there.

He was playing with the sand in the bushes that surrounded the pool when suddenly he stopped in his tracks. “You guys, look here!” he called to his brothers who were busy pushing one another in the pool. “Lookie here! Lookie here!” he called. His brothers came over one by one as they got out of the pool, curious to see what their smallest sibling had found. Perhaps something valuable? Maybe something worth pushing each other for? I could see the thoughts cross their minds as they gathered around the bush, but instead of laying their eyes on something shiny they found two eyes staring back at them.

“What is it?” one of them asked.

“It looks like a dragon,” another said.

“Yeah,” said the third, “like a little dragon.”

“But what is it?” the first asked again. He leaned closer to get a better view. The bush shook in reaction to his closeness and the boys all jumped back. Little tweety-bird jumped back the farthest, but before he even landed his brothers were bellied right back up to the bush.

“What’d you think it is?” One of them said again.

“Oh, I know!” another said. “It’s an ig-ana! We learned about them in science class.”

“Ig-ana? It looks like a lizard.”

“Yeah, yeah. Ig-ana’s are kinds of lizards.”

“Big ones.”

“Yeah, yeah, they get really big. This one’s not even that big! They get a lot bigger!”

“How much bigger?”

“A lot bigger, like alligators, some of them.”

“Alligators? No way!”

“Some of ‘em!” the other one nodded. “Some of them get that big.”

They all looked back at the bush. They circled around it, leaning close to get a better look at the exotic animal. Then the expert among them got brave. He reached into the bush. There was a shaking, a scraping sound, and the bush shook with signs of a struggle until suddenly the boy lifted the iguana by the tail into the air. The iguana peddled it's arms wildly, trying to gain traction to escape the grips of the little foreign monster. The boy held it high over his head and the others leered closer, bringing their hands up to touch it.

“Hey! Put that down!” their father suddenly called to them. Get over here!” The expert dropped the iguana, his father's warning bringing him back to reality. The iguana disappeared back into the bushes and the boys fled back toward the pool, pushing and shoving one another as they hit the edge and dove in. The father watched them in the pool for a moment, deciding between chastising them about the iguana or simply returning to his beer.

He went back to the beer.

Renan and I watched the family as the boys continued to play in the pool and parents sat by the poolside drinking. Every once in a while the father would get up and come over to the bar to order another beer, always a Corona with a lime wedged in it. Whenever he'd get back to his wife sitting poolside he'd squeeze the lime between his fingers over the bottle opening and then toss the juiced wedge toward a trashcan in the corner of the courtyard, but never into it. An afternoon of drinking had created a pile of discarded limes sitting at the base of the trash can, growing larger and larger in diameter as his accuracy decreased with each beer. The pile didn't discourage the father though, who's trips to the bar hadn't slowed all afternoon. He'd been killing limes at a steady pace with seemingly no effect, until on his eighth trip coming back from the bar he made his worst shot of the day. The lime wedge bounced off the side of the trash toward the bushes near the pool, where it settled in the middle of the concrete far away from the

intended target. That didn't matter to the father, though. He settled right back into the tanning chair right next to his wife, either hoping his drunken blunder would go unnoticed or too lazy to go and see where his discarded garnish had gone.

But someone had noticed, and they knew where the lime had gone.

An iguana emerged from the bushes.

It was probably the same one his boys had been handling before, as it came out of the same bush they'd been near earlier, only this time it didn't seem to care at all about concealing itself from the loud, rowdy boys in the pool. It sniffed at the lime for a second, as if checking to make sure it was indeed what it seemed to be, and when it was satisfied took the wedge up with its mouth and began throwing its head back and forth, choking it down like it couldn't eat the lime fast enough. Iguanas loved limes. Something about the sugar in citrus fruits just made them go crazy. They invaded orange and lime tree farms on the island by the hundreds. Sometimes farmers on the island would hire some of us local boys to kill them, send us out with cheap .22 rifles and orders to take out as many as we could find. A dollar a lizard, no bag limit. It sounds easy, but the things were never as dumb as they looked. The first one was always easy to find, but once you took that first shot the rest would scatter, and the remainder of the afternoon would become a game of eye-spy, trying to discern if the light green spot high up in the tree above was an iguana or a pale palm leaf, occasionally moving in the wind. But the iguana didn't seem to be all that worried about being seen.

At least, not by people.

As it ate, another iguana appeared from the bush, skittering out onto the sidewalk right up to the side of the first iguana. It looked at the ground around the first iguana, as if wondering where the lime had gone, and then started nipping at it, trying to coerce it to give up the sour

treat. The first iguana just ignored the second, and retreated into the bushes like nothing had happened, like there was never a lime, like no one had seen.

But someone had seen.

Little tweety-bird had seen.

He was sitting at the edge of the pool, watching his brothers as they splashed and wrestled and half drowned each other, just beyond their chaos enough to have observed the whole thing. I could see the wheels turning in his head, staring at the iguanas and then looking back at the pile of limes. He walked over to the trash can, picked up one of the limes and tossed it over to the second iguana, still sitting there on the sidewalk disappointed about losing the first. The iguana startled when the lime hit the concrete, tensing its legs as if getting ready to run off, but when the fruit settled and it realized what it was the iguana crept up to the thing. It sniffed the crushed green wedge, making sure it was indeed what it appeared to be just like the first iguana had, and then ate it.

Little tweety-bird smiled. He tossed another lime over to the iguana, and again, the iguana ate it. He tossed a third, and then a fourth. The iguana didn't hesitate. Each time a new lime thudded on the concrete in front of it, it would start working faster, afraid that at any minute another iguana might come and claim the food being laid out for it. Which is exactly what happened. Two more iguanas, then three, then four, came charging out of the nearby bushes. They shoved and pulled and hissed at one another, each collision knocking the prize from the mouth of the current winner and sending it into a fumbling across the hot concrete. The swarm would race after it until one of them caught it again, and then the shoving and pulling and hissing would start all over again.

Little tweety-bird seemed fascinated by the sight.

He was transfixed. A sight completely foreign, filled with tropical fruits and exotic animals and yet somehow familiar. Something he had witnessed before, but just couldn't place.

When he did finally look up from the scene, little tweety-bird's eyes fixed on a housekeeping maid. She was making her way around the pool, through the covered cabana and around the side of the bar checking the trash cans, pulling the old full bags out and replacing them with fresh empty ones. He looked to the trash can beside him and all the limes around the bottom of it, and began to panic. He grabbed a towel and began shoving the limes on the ground into it, trying to go as quick as possible while also being careful to keep the towel half folded so that no one could see what he was doing. By the time the maid got around to him, he was just sitting by the pool with a folded towel next to him. She lifted the trash bag out of the can and went off with the few limes his father had actually made into the can. After she returned and re-bagged the can, little tweety-bird began unfolding the towel, preparing to bring about another reptilian battle royal when his father shouted out to him – and the rest of the pool – that they were heading back up to the room.

Little tweety-bird just folded the towel back up and tucked it under his arm. He joined his brothers stampeding out of the pool and when they got to their parents acted like he'd been with them the whole time. No one noticed how he wasn't using his towel to dry off, or the fact that he was already bone dry. They'd taken in too much sun, drank too many beers and played too hard in the pool to care. The family packed up and headed off to their room, little tweety-bird following just behind the rest of the group, his towel held carefully in his hands.

Their room was a small cheap one on the first floor. It's only appealing trait was a small porch overlooking the pool, a cramped slab of concrete with two rocking chairs and a railing that went around it to make it seem more like a private backyard of sorts and not just a pedestal from

which the rest of the courtyard could view you from, though that's what it really was. We could see the family from the other side of the sliding glass door when they entered their room from our spot behind the pool-side bar. We didn't even have to move. One by one they disappeared into the bathroom and changed out of their bathing suits into dry clothes, wrinkled shorts and t-shirts *just* clean enough not to raise any eyebrows in the dining room.

The only one who didn't change was little tweety-bird.

He had never gotten in the pool, and so instead of changing he went and rocked in the rocking chairs on the porch, killing time by making rocket ship and race car noises as he swung his legs back and forth propelling himself through space and the finish line all at the same time. It must have been quite an experience, because somewhere between his victory lap and re-entry his father knocked on the glass behind him to signal they were leaving, but he didn't hear. Little tweety bird kept swinging, until finally his father opened the sliding glass door behind him and dragged him in.

The disruption didn't faze him.

Little tweety-bird just used the momentum to run across the hotel room. He ran around the room still imagining that he was hurtling through space, only three feet from finishing the race in first place, bouncing off every surface like they'd been put there for him to use to maneuver until suddenly it all came to a screeching halt at the coffee table. He bumped into it and then spun out into his mother in the doorway. She took a hold of him and pointed at all the things he'd knocked off the table: his towel, an empty beer can, a bottle of sunscreen.

"Careful! What if that'd been open, huh? Be careful!" she seemed to say to him.

Little tweety-bird started his rebuttal, but he was interrupted by his father, shoving past them eager to go wherever they were going. His mother rolled her eyes, then pulled little tweety-

bird along with her as she followed her husband. She turned the room light off and locked the door behind them, leaving Renan and I looking at our own reflections in the dark glass.

When we found them again, the family was sitting in the King Conch dining room. The boys were all holding up the steak knives they had found wrapped in their napkins like medieval blacksmiths inspecting their work, turning the blades over in their hands while their mother motioned for all of them to hand them over. They did so reluctantly, and then took up their forks with unsatisfactory reluctance. Not as dangerous. Not as adventurous. Not as much fun.

When they ordered drinks, it was wine for the parents and Roy Rodgers for the boys. They all seemed to like them, except for little tweety-bird, who picked the cherry out of his and dropped it on the ground. This inspired his brothers to pick theirs out of their drinks as well, though they didn't let the opportunity of their unarmed brother go to waste. When their parents weren't looking the other three tossed their cherries at their youngest brother, who didn't see the impact of the first one but felt it on his head, saw the second land in his lap but didn't know where it came from, and finally witnessed the third assault against him, prompting an reciprocal offensive. "Mom!" he shouted at his mother across the table. She ignored him, hoping whatever the problem was would go away. But he persisted.

"Mom! Mom! Mom!" he said.

"What? What is it?" she finally gave in.

Little tweety-bird pointed to his brothers, who had already moved on to sieging the second youngest with straw wrappers, blowing them at one another like blow darts. Their mother just sighed. "Quit it," she said, taking the straw from the oldest. She immediately returned to her menu, having given up on mediating the chaos.

The rest of the dinner was like that, complete mayhem between the boys while the parents talked over on the side, sipping drinks and pretending they didn't hear a thing. Every once in a while some other table would look over at them, but the boys didn't care and the parents didn't notice. It was just like in the lobby when they first arrived. The boys had too much energy, too much chaos to be permanently quelled by a shush or even a stern "knock it off." They just kept playing right through dinner, and even on their way back to their room, chasing one another down the hallway.

Renan and I stopped following them in the lobby, figuring the family would most likely be in for the night. There was no reason to keep watching them. They hadn't done anything "suspicious" all day, and that wasn't going to change. They were just like all the other guests Mr. Cero had us follow around. Just normal guests.

We stopped at the front desk on our way out to let Mr. Bennett know we were leaving. He was doing paperwork, and when he looked up he set the pen down all mad, like he was going to chew us out. "Where have you two been?" he asked. "Luis and Wilmer have been running ragged carrying bags for all the guests checking in."

"We've been off on an assignment for Mr. Cero," Renan said.

"Assignment?" Mr. Bennett said, scrunching his face. "What assignment?"

I nudged Renan on the shoulder. There was something about the way Mr. Cero always acted whenever he told us to follow a guest that hinted it was probably a secret. The problem was Renan didn't pick up on stuff like that. He wasn't good with secrets. He liked to talk, and with Mr. Bennett staring at him I thought there was no way he wouldn't say something. In the end though, Renan's dislike for Mr. Bennett beat out his talkative tendency.

“We were waiting on a special guest,” Renan said, trying to be as vague as possible. He picked up the paperwork Mr. Bennett had been reading, acting like he was looking over room reservations. “Mr. Cero wanted us to make sure they got everything they needed,” Renan said, flipping through the pages.

“A special guest?” Mr. Bennett asked.

“Yeah.”

“Who is it? I haven’t heard of any special guest coming in,” Mr. Bennett said, snatching his paperwork from Renan and flipping through it.

“I don’t know,” Renan sighed. “Mr. Cero told us to keep it to ourselves. Big secret, you know, if people find out who it is they’ll freak out. Really, he doesn’t want the staff to get all worked up.”

Mr. Bennett flipped through the papers until there weren’t any more to flip. He glared at Renan with a look that told how much he didn’t like the fact that an employee beneath him knew something he didn’t. “Who is it?” he said again.

Renan put his hand on the back of his head, feigning pains over whether or not to tell Mr. Bennett like he was actually thinking about it. “I don’t know,” Renan said. “Mr. Cero made us promise not to tell anyone, but I guess if you really want to know.... you should go ask him.”

Mr. Bennett threw the papers down on the counter. He opened his mouth to let Renan have it, but before he could the phone on the desk began to ring. He paused, explicatives on his tongue, and then picked up the phone while staring at Renan. “What?” he said into the phone. He listened for a second, then shook his head. “Okay, yes, we’ll send someone right away.” He set the phone back on the receiver and looked at Renan like he had found a club to beat him with. “A guest needs help in room one-ten,” he said, “immediately.”

Renan started to protest, but I dragged him away before he could get us in any more trouble. We went across the lobby, feeling Mr. Bennett's stare of disdain as we went.

"Why do you always have to make him mad?" I asked Renan.

"I don't make him mad, he just gets mad," Renan said.

When we got to the room, I realized where we were immediately. The family, the one we'd been following all day, was standing at the end of the hallway, the little flock of birds running around while the parents stood there with their arms crossed.

"We got a problem," the father said.

Renan and I looked at one another, unsure what to do. We didn't want to interact with them, as they'd start recognizing us if we did. But it was too late. They were looking at us in our King Conch uniforms and we knew it would be weird for us to turn away.

"Um, what's the problem?" Renan asked.

"There are lizards in our room. They're all over!" he said, motioning to the open door.

Renan and I looked at one another, then went into the room.

There were iguanas everywhere. A dozen or so little green monsters stalking awkwardly along the carpeted floor and up on the couch, glowing an odd orange in the artificial light. One of them was even on the desk in the corner of the room, sunning himself beneath the warm glow of the desk lamp like it was his own private sun. Most of them were calm, but there was a cluster of them near the coffee table in the center of the room moving quickly. They were wrestling, shoving one another and scraping each other with their claws over some small, green objects. I realized what they were fighting over. What had brought them in. A blue King Conch towel laid out on the floor, the same one little tweety-bird had brought in from the pool.

The one he carried the limes in with.

Scattered around the floor among the scrapping iguanas were a dozen lime wedges, all crushed in the same way. Some of them had little nibbles taken out of them, bitten by the iguanas, and others were completely reduced to pulp, piles of little green shavings.

I wondered how they had gotten inside and looked around the room. The sliding porch door was completely open, having been left that way when little tweety-bird was called in by his father. His father hadn't shut it, and when he knocked into the coffee table racing around on his way out he had knocked his towel over, spilling the limes.

“What happened?” Renan asked.

“Dunno, went to dinner and came back to this. Bunch of lizards in our room.”

“Huh,” Renan said, unsure of what to say. We knew what had happened. We knew more than they did, but we couldn't let on.

Renan turned away from the father and took a step forward into the chaos. The iguanas away from the coffee table who weren't fighting saw him immediately. They all tensed up their legs and turned back toward the porch door, preparing to flee. He took another step and the one on the couch slinked off of it, heading toward the door. Renan took another few steps and suddenly the iguanas under the coffee table stopped fighting. They noticed him. They moved their fight toward the open back door slowly, keeping an eye on both Renan and who among them held the lime wedges, not completely finished fighting. As they got to the door Renan picked up speed. He walked faster and faster until the iguanas were at a trot, a full-fledged exodus from the haven they had found the limes in. When he got to the back door the last of the iguanas fled through the thin wooden bars that surrounded the porch, all except the iguana who had been sunning itself under the desk lamp with its eyes closed. Renan grabbed it and tossed it out into the bushes on the other side of the porch with the rest of the bunch. He gave the room

one last glance and then slid the porch door shut behind them all, leaving the only noise in the room a slight rustling coming from the bushes on the other side of the glass.

The boys stepped past the parents.

They ran into the room looking high and low for the little green invaders that had come and commandeered their quarters for the weekend. The parents didn't let their exploration last long though. They shoved their kids to the side and made their way to the center of the room where Renan was standing.

"I think we got them all," Renan said. It was one of the only times I saw Renan at a loss for words. He didn't know what to say. He was surprised by the whole thing.

"What are those things?" The mother asked, scrunching her face like she was disgusted.

"They're Ig-anas!" one of her boys shouted.

"We saw some at the pool!" another shouted.

"Yeah! Yeah, they get really big!" said another, not wanting to be left out.

"Quiet!" She shushed them. She turned back to Renan. "Are they poisonous?"

"No," Renan shook his head. "They're just big lizards. They eat fruit."

"What if there's still one in here?" She said, looking around.

Everyone followed her lead, taking long wandering looks around the room. That was when I noticed the damage. The iguana's spiky backs had torn up the carpet wrestling around with one another over the limes, leaving behind a mess of bloody scales and frayed sections of carpet that wandered in zig zag, reptilian patterns.

"How about we move you to a new room," Renan said, "we could do that."

“Yes,” the mother said, holding her hands out in front of her as if to push the grotesque mess away from her. “Let’s get a new room. Boys, go get your stuff. We’re leaving,” she said, pointing them toward one of the bedrooms.

“Okay, okay, we can do that,” Renan said. He turned to the father. “Sir, if you could follow Marco to the front desk, he can help get you checked into a new room.”

The father nodded.

I lead the father to the front desk. When we got there Mr. Bennett was looking over the reservations list again, flipping through it madly to find the mysterious reservation Renan’s “special guest” was supposedly under. He scowled when he saw me, but changed his expression when he noticed the father in tow.

“Good evening, sir. What can I help you with?” Mr. Bennett said to the father.

“I called earlier – about the Iguanas,” the father said.

“Ah, yes, I remember. Did they take care of that for you?” Mr. Bennett motioned to me.

“Yeah, they got them all out,” the father said.

Mr. Bennett paused. “Them all? How many were there?” he asked.

“I don’t know, a dozen or so.”

“A dozen!” Mr. Bennet said, raising his eyebrows. “How did they get inside?”

“I don’t know. One of my kids must’ve left the porch door open, I guess.”

“Oh my,” Mr. Bennett said. “And they just came right in?”

“Must’ve.”

“Oh my. We’ll, I’m sure it won’t happen again,” Mr. Bennett said. He looked at the father not knowing what to say. Not knowing what else he wanted.

“They want to move to another room,” I said. “One that’s clean.”

“Oh, well yes, we can do that. They’re gross little creatures. I apologize if they damaged anything of yours,” Mr. Bennett said, shuffling through paperwork to find an open room.

“Didn’t look like anything was damaged. Just the couch and the floor.”

Mr. Bennett paused again. “What happened to the couch and the floor?”

“Those lizards crawled all over ‘em. Tore ‘em up with their claws. Tore each other up with their claws. They even got blood on the floor.”

“Blood on the floor? My God. How bad is it?” Mr. Bennett asked, now looking at me.

“It’s, uh, it’s pretty torn up,” I said.

“Do you think it’ll need replacing?” he asked. “The couch? The carpet?”

“Uh, I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Where are they torn up?”

“Well, the couch is torn up on the arms. That’s where they were sitting. And the carpet’s torn up in the center of the room, kinda under the coffee table.”

Mr. Bennett pressed his hand against his eyes. “Oh God,” he said. “We can’t just replace the arms of the couch. We can replace the cushions if they get torn up, but not the arms. And we can’t just patch the center of the carpet, either. Gotta replace the whole room.” He picked up a key to another room and handed it to the father. “Here’s a new room key. Room one-twenty-four. Go ahead and move rooms,” he sighed, “we’ll get the damages settled when you checkout.”

“Damages?” the father asked.

“Yes sir, the damages to the room.”

“You can’t have me pay for this! I don’t control the lizards!”

“I’m sorry, but you did leave the door to the room open. It’s in your reservation agreement. Any damages to the room are your responsibility.” Mr. Bennett handed the new room

key to the father, who snatched it out of his hand. He headed off across the lobby back toward the wrecked room his family was in.

“What a mess,” Mr. Bennett said, shaking his head. He picked the phone up off the front desk and dialed for housekeeping, telling them there was disaster in room one-ten and that he’d be there in a minute to supervise. He went off across the lobby in the same direction the father had gone, his loud oxford shoes clicking on the marble floors as he went. Renan passed him as he turned down the hallway to go to the room. Neither one of them said a word.

“What a mess,” I said to Renan.

“Yeah, you’re telling me. The father looks furious.”

“What’d he say?” I asked.

“Nothing, but he’s angry. Knocked one of the boys in the head.”

“And the mother?” I asked.

Renan waved his hand dismissively. “Ah, she’s grossed out by the whole thing. Keeps yelling at them to hurry up and get their stuff so she doesn’t have to keep looking at the blood.”

I nodded.

I told Renan about how Mr. Bennett wanted them to pay for the damages to the room, and how mad he was about it. Eventually we saw Mr. Bennett leading the family to their new room, the mother behind him eager to speed away from the mess while the boys all walked behind her near the father, heads down while he motioned wildly around them.

“I bet they’re in for the night,” Renan said.

I nodded. “Yeah, I bet they are,” I said.

“I bet they’re in trouble,” Renan said.

“Yeah, they are,” I said.

We found out how right we were the next morning.

We found the family eating breakfast in the dining room. They weren't at all like they had been the night before at dinner. The boys sat flatly in their seats, not leaning over to poke or prod at one another but just being perfectly and quiet, talking in low voices amongst one another. Their parents sat at the table across from them, drinking Bloody Marys, and talking about the plans for the day. They'd rented a boat to take them parasailing.

When they got up to go to their room they walked past us, and I could see what had changed. Bruises, ugly purple and yellow discolorations dotting their faces. Some of the boys had them on their cheeks, others on their foreheads, and little tweety-bird, being so small, had them on both, one big blue one that looked like he'd painted the left side of his face. They traipsed through the lobby back towards their room, turning right, not left, at the elevators to head to their new one that hadn't been destroyed by the iguanas.

An hour later they came back through the lobby to leave for parasailing. The boys had gained some energy since breakfast, and ran hurriedly out the lobby door onto Duval Street ahead of their parents, who took their time behind them.

Renan and I were standing behind the front desk watching them leave when Mr. Bennett walked out of the back room. He followed our gaze at the family and shook his head.

"Do you know what he did?" Mr. Bennett asked us. "The father? He threatened me. He told me there was no way he was paying for the room damage. I told him it was going on his card anyway, and do you know what he did? He told me he was going to come find me, whatever that means. You believe that? What an animal."

Renan looked over at Mr. Bennett, but that time, he didn't argue.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE ROMANS

Every few years, a rumor went around the island saying that it was sinking.

The first time I heard it, I was in the second grade. We were learning about geography for the first time, archipelagos and atolls, badlands and basins, canyons and coasts, and when we got to islands someone in my class shouted out that their mother had told them our island was sinking. Our teacher quickly told us that it was impossible, that the island couldn't sink, attempting to quell the mounting panic that was rising in her second grade classroom. She was right of course, in both not wanting to scare a group of eight-year olds, and also in saying that our island couldn't sink, because, as we later learned that day, it was physically impossible for an island to sink. The sand could be washed away, displaced by strong ocean currents and storms that whipped up big waves, but not sank.

But that didn't stop the rumor from spreading outside of school.

Every once in a while I would hear a snippet of conversation about it, old men at bars in restaurants debating if it was even possible, the teenagers skateboarding up and down our street guessing if they would be able to graduate high school before it was gone, and tour guides telling big groups of pale mainlanders about it like it was an absolute fact while they lead them through historic sites. I heard it everywhere.

Every once in a while, someone I barely knew would come and tell that was the case, that the clock was ticking, the island's final days finally upon us. "I always thought it would be a hurricane," they liked to say. "I always thought it would be some big 'ol class four or five that came through and did us in." They were convinced it was all going down, that we had only days left until, like Atlantis, our great beacon of civilization sank beneath the waves, and that the

souvenirs sold in the surf shops would one day be valuable Pompeiian artifacts of a great place that once was.

At least, that's how people acted whenever the rumor reared back up.

The urban legend came in and out of focus as people found they needed something to talk about. In slow years it could re-emerge so much as two or three times, manifesting itself in merchandise on surf shop shelves, t-shirts with sayings like "Going Under" printed on them sitting next to "survival boards" – paddle boards with brown paper bags attached to them filled with Bahama themed rations like mangos, fishing hooks and mini bottles of rum. The rumor would take over Duval street for a month or two, changing the motif from a relaxed vacation destination to a boisterous scene from the last days of Rome. The end of days rhetoric inspired fatalistic fantasy actions in tourists who stayed longer a single weekend, and soon the island would no longer be searching for subjects of conversation. Drunk and drugged up tourists partying like it was the end of the world caused so much chaos that it only ever took a few weeks before the talk of the islands sinking completely vanished from sight. All the themed merchandise would disappear, the tour guides would pull it from their memorized speeches and even the old men at the bars would find the urban legend had lost its conversational appeal in the wake of so many funny stories about tourists and what they had done when they believed they had been in a fantastical, impermanent place, a sinking Atlantis.

The rumor would be gone, just as fast as it had appeared.

At least, until the next slow patch when there was nothing else to talk about.

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Around the fourth of July, this band stayed at the King Conch.

None of the members could've been more than twenty-five, as all four of them looked very young and had thick heads of messy hair with perfectly clear skin. There wasn't a single wrinkle or blemish on any of their faces – though the same couldn't be said for their bags they came in with. Each of them had a duffle bag that reminded me of the equipment bags our high school football teams carried all their equipment around in, stained with all kinds of discolorations and wear marks. They had clearly been used and abused for years, and it was obvious that they were going to keep being used and abused until they finally fell apart.

They came in carrying guitar cases with hundreds of scratches on them, amplifiers covered in graphic stickers and big black cases filled with audio equipment. When they got to the check-in counter they dropped their bags with loud thuds and asked for a room.

Mr. Bennett looked them up and down. I could see in his eyes that he didn't like them. They were polar opposites, them in their ratty t-shirts and jeans and him in his perfectly pressed suit and tie. He flipped through his clipboard for a long time, as though he was trying to outlast their attention spans in hopes they would leave.

They didn't move, but that didn't dissuade Mr. Bennett though.

"I'm sorry, but the only room available is a suite," Mr. Bennett told them, assuming they couldn't afford it.

The band members looked at one another.

"You guys wanna get a suite?" One of them asked.

The others smiled.

"Hell yeah," one of them said.

Mr. Bennett sighed.

“I’m going to need a credit card,” he said, one last attempt at sending them out the door.

They handed him a credit card.

Mr. Bennett swiped the card and handed a room key to the guy who seemed to be the leader, the one who had handed him the credit card. He was taller than the others, with bleach blonde hair and a nose ring. Mr. Bennett faked a half smile and then disappeared into the back room, probably to wash his hands.

We helped the band carry their stuff to their suite, all their guitar cases and amplifiers and boxes of audio equipment. When we got there they threw their bags down and wandered around the suite, amazed by the size of it, moving across the living space toward the window that faced south toward the ocean. The sun was just setting, and the sight really struck them.

“Woah, look at that,” one of them said.

“Oh that’s cool,” another said.

“This was worth it,” said another.

The leader dropped a box of audio equipment and then joined them at the window. They stayed at the window for a moment, until it was clear they had forgotten us, so we headed back downstairs to the lobby, no tip. I didn’t care all that much, but Renan complained about them all the way back to the front desk. He said wasn’t right, especially since we had both carried multiple bags for each of them. The way he figured it, not tipping on just one bag was forgetful, not tipping on two bags was rude, and not tipping on three was taboo.

“They broke the code,” he said, cursing them. “They broke the damn code.”

“What are you cursing for?” Mr. Bennett asked him when we got back down to the lobby.

“They didn’t tip,” Renan said.

“Of course they didn’t, look at them,” Mr. Bennett pointed. “They look like they woke up in a ditch. They smelled like it, too. I’m surprised they’re not staying in a van.”

“Still, they should’ve tipped,” Renan said.

“Well, if their rash decision to get a suite is any indication of how they usually handle money, it wouldn’t surprise me if that Amex line of credit was all the money they had. I mean, who ever heard of The Romans? You ever heard of them?”

“The Romans?” Renan asked.

“Yeah, it was written on the side of one of their guitar cases. The Romans.”

“Huh. No, never heard of them,” Renan admitted.

“Next time, pretend you have. Maybe you’ll get a buck out of it.”

* * *

The next day, Mr. Cero called us into his office and told us to follow The Romans.

He had started by telling us to follow this family that had come in, but when we told him about the band and all their audio equipment he became interested immediately. He told us to forget the family and to follow The Romans, who he said were suspicious. He said he didn’t trust them. Not with all the bags they had brought into his hotel.

“Audio equipment, huh?” He asked us.

“Yeah,” Renan and I nodded. “That’s what they told us was in the boxes.”

“Did they say what kind?” He asked.

“Not really. Like microphones and stuff for concerts, I think,” Renan said.

“They said that?”

“Well, no. But I did see a microphone.”

Mr. Cero took a deep breath and then lowered his voice. He ushered for us to lean forward toward his desk even though the door to his office was closed. “Yeah, I want you boys to make sure they’re not doing anything stupid my hotel. No microphones. No concerts. If they play a note, I want to know.”

“We can do that,” Renan nodded.

Mr. Cero opened his drawer and pulled out the roll of twenty dollar bills he usually paid us with. He handed us each a twenty and motioned toward the door, eager for us to locate the Romans who were somewhere in his hotel.

We didn’t have to go far to find The Romans though.

They were in the dining room eating lunch when we walked out of Mr. Cero’s office. His door closed before he could see them, which was probably a good thing. He was all worked up, and I think if he had looked up and seen them right after talking about microphones and recording equipment he would have lost it. I don’t know why, but I really think he would have.

Renan and I decided it made the most sense to wait for them at the front desk, since we could see the entrance to the dining room from there. We waited for the Romans to finish lunch and when they did we waited for a few extra minutes before heading up to the sixth floor after them. We didn’t want to be too eager and then get caught in the same elevator with them, but apparently, waiting wasn’t necessary.

The phone on the check-in desk rang, and when Renan picked it up it was the Romans.

“It’s the Romans,” he whispered to me, holding the phone to his chest. He put the phone back to his ear. “Yes, I can send someone to do that,” he said. “No problem.”

“What did they want?”

“They wanted help moving their gear from their room down to their van,” Renan said.

“You’re kidding.”

“No.”

We went up to the Romans suite and knocked on the door. When it opened, the leader, the one with the nose ring, was standing there. “Hey, thanks, we just need some help carrying the amplifiers down to our van.”

“Must be a pretty large van”

“We actually had to take two down here. One for us and one for our stuff.”

“That’s gotta be expensive,” Renan said, still somewhat angry about not getting tipped.

The leader brushed it off. “Gotta spend money to make money.”

“You got a gig tonight?” Renan asked.

The leader nodded. “Fourth of July concert, put on by WKEY 95.5. Gonna be a bunch of rock bands playing.”

“Sounds like a good time.”

“Oh yeah. Gonna be great.”

The leader bent over and picked up one side of the amplifier while Renan grabbed the other. I grabbed another amplifier with a guy who had a spider web tattooed down his arm, and we followed them down the hallway to the elevators. We took the elevators down to the lobby and then carried the amplifiers outside, placing them in the back of a silver van that wasn’t painted silver but was actually just missing all its paint.

“Why not just leave the amps in the van?” Renan asked the leader.

“Too risky. This stuff is expensive. If we lost any of this, that’d be it.”

“Oh,” Renan nodded. “Makes sense.”

We made another trip up to their room, helping them carry down boxes of electrical equipment, and then they left. They loaded the last of their drum kit onto the base layer of amplifiers, keyboards, guitars and vocals equipment and took off south down Duval Street, leaving us in the doorway of the King Conch empty handed. No tip.

* * *

Out of the four radio stations we got in the keys, WKEY 95.5 was the only one that played rock and roll, which meant really, it was the only station we had. Every year WKEY 95.5 sponsored a concert at South Beach on the southern tip of Duval Street for the Fourth of July, a kind of spectacle where they brought in every rock band willing to play in the island humidity and showed off their connections with big stars. The event was hosted every year by Sandy Castle and Johnny Ray, the two morning radio hosts whose ridiculous radio names somehow fit their ridiculous real life personalities.

Sandy Castle was known on the island for frequenting the bars on Green Street with her old college sorority even though she had graduated four years earlier, refusing to give up the party life. If you listened in on her remote broadcasts from island institutions like the Hog's Breath Saloon and Sloppy Joes you were likely to hear a slurred word or two as she interviewed bar owners and patrons alike, whichever was nearest to her when she hit her third drink. Some people complained that whenever she got that way she would accidentally play the same some two or three times in a row, or even forget she was broadcasting all together, but I never really minded her all that much. She was funny to listen to, and occasionally listening to The Steve Miller Band's "Double Trouble" on repeat was a small price to pay for the comedic apology that usually followed once she realized what she had done.

In my opinion, her partner in crime at WKEY 95.5 was way worse.

Johnny Ray had been working at the station for ten years, which in radio was forever. He was a staple on the island, a figure that everyone knew, though not because we all loved him. His years of unchallenged supremacy on the radio waves had given him a huge ego that only kept inflating more and more every year he stayed on. He was one of those people you could tell only lived to further their own fame, even if only on our small island. Of course, being a radio star meant that really it was only his voice that was famous, so after his third year at the station he went out and bought a Pontiac Firebird convertible in torch red, that way when he went out in public he didn't need to open his mouth to be recognized. He loved that car. Talked about it every chance he got. Sometimes he'd have guests come on his morning show who were experts in cars and antique Americana just so he'd have an excuse. He liked to make sure everyone knew it was his car, that way when people saw it driving around they would know it was him. That's what it was all about. Fame and fortune and Firebirds.

Johnny Ray never went anywhere without that car.

Including the WKEY 95.5 Fourth of July concert.

When Renan and I got down to South Beach, the first thing I noticed was that bright red Firebird sitting in the parking lot, three or four people standing next to it taking pictures. It was around six or seven and the sun was just starting its fading ritual, white dots sparkling on the ocean's surface as it's angle got shallower, trying to compete with the glow of Johnny Ray's Firebird. We passed the car and headed into the crowd of the concert.

There were three hundred or so people there, plenty enough that Renan and I could be sure The Romans wouldn't see us in the crowd. Lots of people were sitting on towels and in

lawn chairs, and just as we started to join them on sitting down in the sand everyone jumped to their feet and started clapping.

On the stage Sandy Castles and Johnny Ray had taken the stage.

“Happy fourth of July!” Sandy said, waving back at the crowd.

“How’s everyone doing?” Johnny asked.

Another roar went up from the crowd.

“That’s great,” Johnny said. “But before we get things started with our first band, we need to thank our sponsors for helping us put this event on. This concert could not happen without the great generosity of the South Beach Surf Shop, who’s generously split the cost of putting this on with us, as well as donated free “Were All Going Under” T-shirts to all the bands. If you’re looking for some island merchandise, make sure you go to South Beach Surf Shop before it’s too late! Island’s sinking people!” he laughed. Johnny gave shout outs to a few other businesses, all of which spun the rumor of the island’s sinking in their favor, and then he introduced the first band.

When the first band got up on stage, I noticed immediately they were all dressed in the same shirts, the exact same shirts Johnny had been holding up a second ago, the “Were All Going Under” one from the South Beach Surf Shop. No one else seemed to notice. The band came on, introduced themselves, and when right into playing. To be honest, I half expected the first words out of the vocalist's mouth to be something about “buying now while you can”, or “you could own an artifact from the next Atlantis” or some other kind of sell out, cash grab garbage slogan.

“They’re all wearing the same shirt,” I said to Renan.

“Yeah,” Renan said, though it was obvious he didn’t know what I meant by it.

Every band that went up wore the shirt. I knew they didn't really care what it said, that WKEY radio had made them agree to wear it, but I still didn't like it. The rumor spread around the island every year, and yet somehow no one remembered it was a rumor, like it wiped everyone's minds clean the last time it had come through. The fact that the bands hadn't even questioned it was worse. They were like the tourists that came through who all just took the rumor as the empirical truth. Every new band got on stage wearing the exact same thing until, suddenly, there was a disruption.

The Romans.

When they were finally announced, The Romans came on stage dressed in exactly what they had been wearing at the King Conch, ratty t-shirts and jeans covered in holes and stains. They took the stage and for a moment I could see something in Johnny Ray's face, something of confusion, before he relented the stage to them.

The Romans played three songs, two that were upbeat and one that was a slower, groovier song, the kind where the bass player really came through and stole the show. The sun had finally set but there was still light in the sky, and the jazz influenced groovy song seemed to be a perfect transition into night. By the time the Romans had finished their set the crowd was ten degrees cooler, and it showed in their demeanor. They gave the Romans a standing ovation as they left the stage. It was clearly the best performance of the night, certainly as good as any of the others before it, at least.

Two more bands went on after the Romans, and then Johnny Ray came back on stage to announce the concert was over. "Thank you all so much for coming," he said in his overly smooth radio voice. "WKEY 95.5 loves putting this thing on every year. Hopefully we'll all be around to do it again next year! In the meantime, stick around for fireworks when it gets dark,

and if you need a drink or any island merchandise please visit our friends up at South beach Surf Shop. They helped put on this thing, so help them out! Thank you, and good night Key West!”

Johnny Ray threw up a peace signal and left the stage to a roar of applause and cheers.

After the concert concluded, about half the crowd left the beach. It was mostly the families that stayed, single groups of adults preferring to head off to bars and nightclubs rather than watch a fireworks show. Renan and I stayed though, watching the Romans.

The Romans were making the trek between the stage on the beach and their van which was parked up on the road, carrying guitar cases and parts of drum kits, all of them except for the leader. The leader, with one with the nose ring, was over on the side of the stage, arguing Johnny Ray. The conversation carried across the sand, so we could snippets of what they were saying.

“It's in the contract,” Johnny said.

The leader of the Romans threw his hands toward the sky.

“I don't know about any contract.... two grand though, that was the deal.”

“Yeah, the deal in the contract,” Johnny Ray said, “which you didn't abide by.” He walked away from the leader toward the parking lot, forcing the leader to follow behind as he continued arguing.

“We played, man, we played!” he said.

Johnny didn't look back at him. “You were supposed to wear the merchandise like all the other bands,” Johnny said. “It was a part of the deal.”

“No, the deal was we play the gig. And we played man. We killed. So pay up.”

Johnny finally got to his car, his famous bright red Firebird convertible. He turned around, eager to put an end to the argument. “Look here. There's no money in free concerts. None. The only thing we get out of it is advertising. That's it. That's why we have sponsors who

pay for it all. They like the advertising, and in exchange we get some of their profit for the rest of the Fourth of July weekend. But if they don't get their advertising, then we don't get any profit. Wear the T-shirt, get the check. Get it? You didn't wear the T-shirt. You didn't give shout outs to at least three of our sponsors. So no check. If I don't make money, neither do you. It's in the contract. Wear the T-shirt, get the check."

Johnny threw his Firebird door open and then slammed it shut as the leader started to rebuttal. "Wear the T-shirt," Johnny said again, "get the check." He threw his Firebird into gear and then gunned it down South Street, WKEY 95.5 blasting out of his radio.

"He's not going to pay us," The leader said, walking over to the rest of the band. "Something about not doing marketing for them during our set."

"That's not right," one of them said.

"He's a Goddamn thief," another one said.

"Call Manningham," said a third.

"Yeah," the leader said. "I'll call him when we get to a phone."

"Do it now," the other member replied, "so he can get on it. You know how slow he is."

The leader sighed.

The Romans loaded up in their vans and drove off a hundred yards down the road. They pulled into the parking lot of South Beach Surf Shop and went inside, undoubtedly to call up some manager and tell him he wasn't going to get his ten percent because there was nothing to split. Renan and I walked down the beach towards the South Beach Surf Shop, the ocean on our left South Street on our right, and then waited in the sand for the Romans to come back out to their van.

They didn't though.

The Romans were gone for half an hour. Then a whole hour. Then Two. The sun, which had once been clinging to the horizon, had disappeared entirely from view. But they were nowhere to be seen.

“We should go find them,” Renan said, drawing figures in the sand with a stick. “Who knows, maybe they left. Maybe we didn’t see them.”

“No,” I said, “Their van’s still there in the parking lot.”

“Maybe they left it.”

“They wouldn’t leave it.”

“Still, we should go find them.”

“Yeah.”

We went into the South Beach Surf Shop. The place wasn’t very big, but there were quite a few people inside, trying on t-shirts and hats and all sorts of souvenirs. But no Romans. We exited out the back door of the South Beach Surf Shop, onto the outdoor patio they used to serve drinks to beach patrons. When we stepped out onto the porch, the Romans were there, sitting at a table filled with beer bottles and shot glasses. Renan was in front of me, but he was smooth about it. He acted like he didn’t see them and just continued right down the steps of the back porch onto the beach. “So that’s where they’ve been,” Renan said when we got away from the back porch of the South Beach Surf Shop, “getting drunk.”

“Looks like it,” I said.

“You’d think if they have money to buy drinks, they’d have money to tip.”

“You’d think,” I said.

“Well that’s not right. Those amps are heavy. They’re out of their minds if they think they can get my help again. With no tip? Forget it.”

“You’re gonna get fired.”

“Fine, Mr. Bennett can fire me. I’m not carrying anything for those guys though.”

“Maybe they really don’t have any money. Maybe they’re just charging everything on their manager's credit card,” I said.

“He’s not gonna like that,” Renan said.

“Probably going to like it even less when he finds out they didn’t get paid.”

“Probably,” Renan admitted, looking up at the surf shop.

We watched them drink for another half hour so, a two more rounds of beer and one more round of shots. For a while they seemed grim, but eventually the alcohol took a hold of them and their table livened up. Something in the air seemed to catch hold of them. Something in the night. An ethos, a phrase, an idea, a ticking clock in the back of their heads that reminded them their time as a band was limited. Their time on the island was limited. The Romans suddenly jumped up from their table and headed back into the surf shop, toward the parking lot. No time to sit around feeling sorry themselves. No time at all.

Renan and I walked toward the parking lot, figuring we’d watch the Romans come out and get into their van and then follow them back to the King Conch, but instead stopped when we saw a red Pontiac Firebird pulling up.

Johnny Ray got out of his convertible. He must’ve been coming back for the radio stations portion of the money their sponsor had made, just a quick business transaction before hitting the town for the rest of the night, as he didn’t turn the car off. He just threw the door open and jogged toward the door of the South Beach Surf Shop, right into the Romans.

They recognized each other at the same time.

“Well, how’s it going?” The leader of the Romans said. “You bringing us our money?”

Johnny could tell there was something different about the man with the nose ring. The leader of the band seemed to have lost something. He'd lost his consideration for the future, and suddenly the gimmick of the sinking island seemed like a dangerous thing to play with.

"If you got a problem, take it up with the station," Johnny said, not changing course. He continued straight toward the door of the South Beach Surf Shop, forcing the Romans to move out of his way.

"What an ass," one of them said, heading toward their van.

"We should kill him," another one said.

"Yeah," the third agreed. "Slam 'em in the head with a kick drum."

The leader didn't say anything.

They must have noticed his silence, because the rest of the band turned to see what he was doing. When they located their leader he was standing next to the driver's seat of the Firebird, a devil may care to look in his eyes.

He looked at them, and then jumped behind the wheel.

The others glanced around their group, and then piled in. There were only two seats but they crammed in anyway, two of them sitting up on the back rests and holding on for dear life as their leader gunned it down South Street, leaving the South Beach Surf Shop in the dust. They sped off like they were late for a meeting, as though they didn't ever plan on stopping. Johnny Ray must have heard his car leave without him, as they hadn't even made it off South Street before he had run out into the parking lot, paperwork still in his hand.

"My car! They're stealing my car!" he screamed.

Overhead, the first volley of fireworks went off. They lit up the world in a red hue, and the sound of his cursing was washed out by the crackling of gunpowder. He realized he was

alone, that everyone else was fixated on the fireworks above, and ran back inside. We could hear him shouting at the owner of the South Beach Surf Shop, the man he'd been doing business with.

“They stole my car! Someone just stole my car! Call the police!”

But the Romans were long gone.

* * *

When the police found the car, it was in pretty bad shape.

It was found the next morning parked on a rocky peninsula near Smathers Beach, though just from looking at it you could tell it had been many other places that night. There were hundreds of scratches down it, everything from sticky green imprints that looked like it had been driven through thick jungle foliage to ashy craters that looked like they had come from being crashed into cinder block buildings. The windshield looked like it had somehow stayed perfectly pristine, but upon closer inspection was only an optical illusion, as the windshield was actually gone. Every tire was flat, and along the left side of the car the shiny red paint had been replaced with a crude, electric blue rattle can paint job.

But compared to the inside of the car, the body revealed nothing.

In the passenger seat they found a half a bottle of tequila, a gram of cocaine, two different pairs of women's undergarments and a stingray, which though dead, was almost certainly not found that way. The fuzzy dice that hung from the rearview mirror, which Johnny Ray liked to quip brought good luck to all who rubbed them, had been replaced by a long strand of seaweed with two Rubik's cubes hanging on either side, one of them solved and the other almost there, just two squared out of place.

This was all in the newspaper, with pictures and everything.

Apparently a contributor for the Key West Citizen had found the scene on their early morning run, and instead of calling the police had first dialed Johnny Ray, knowing it was his car. The photos were priceless. Normally, the Citizen wouldn't have released them, but apparently Johnny Ray didn't react too well to the media presence. They asked him all sorts of questions about his crazy night, the drunk driving, the girls, the dead stingray, all of it, and instead of explaining what had happened he had exploded, threatening to sue the paper if they even printed a single word of the story.

So of course, they printed every photo they took.

My favorite was the first one, the one where he was just seeing his car for the first since it was stolen. Shock. Horror. Like his own fame had just been found washed up dead on the shore. Of course, the next day the paper had to put out a retraction saying that Johnny Ray's car had indeed been stolen the night before, and that it wasn't his fault, as they had claimed, that the fine automobile had come to meet such a tragic end.

After that, no one talked about how the island was sinking for the rest of the summer. Instead, they talked about Jimmy Ray and his bright red Pontiac Firebird, and how it was liberated by the Romans in the late hours of July Fourth, a joy ride for the ages which no record could be found or even conceived. The remnants of the car and its random contents were the only clues to the absolute world of debauchery entered by the Romans, that fateful night they lived as though the islands were really sinking.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE SPOOKS

Urban legends make fools out of everyone.

You look like a fool if you believe them, going around looking like you're dumb and gullible, but if you don't believe them you look like a different kind of fool, the kind who thinks you're so damn smart that anything you haven't seen must not exist. That's the problem with urban legends, everyone's a fool. You can never just be in the middle lane. When anybody ever asks if you believe in something, you can't just say that you don't know, or that you don't care.

It doesn't fly.

It just doesn't.

When someone asks you that, they don't wanna hear any of that middle of the road nonsense, they want you to make a bold claim on one side or another, even if you don't have a strong opinion one way or the other. That's the worst, too, when you don't tell them what they want to hear so they call you a bore like you're taking all the fun out of some game they've been dying to play, when really, they don't even care what you think. Really, all they want to do is tell you what *they* think. Anytime someone asks you if you believe in something it's only just so they can tell you whether or not *they* believe in it, and even if you do agree with them they'll just go down the line of all those kinds of things people can believe in, aliens and bigfoot and the lochness monster, until they hit something you disagree on.

The worst part is when someone tells you about something they saw. They tell you the story like it's supposed to be evidence or something. And it never really matters what they say, either, because they already know what they're saying is crazy so they don't even try to make it

make sense. They always use the wrong words in the wrong order and the whole thing comes off like rambling. I guess in the end; all you can do is watch their eyes. If you watch a person's eyes when they're telling that kind of story, sometimes, you'll be able to see something in them. I don't mean they glow green if the guy's telling the truth or red if the guy's lying, nothing that concrete, but if you watch their eyes when they're telling that kind of story sometimes you can just see something in them. A kind of shifting, I guess. If they're talking about the thing in just the right way, all slow with a hushed tone like they're telling a ghost story, sometimes you can find yourself thinking you can see the thing in their irises, the thing they're trying to describe. I don't know if that means that it's real or that they just think it's real, but you can tell they're not just trying to make a fool out of you. For whatever it's worth, you can tell that they believe in what they're saying.

You can learn a lot about a person that way.

Even if you know all sorts of stuff about them, their favorite candy bar, their favorite band, where they like to go on a first date, all that kind of newlywed game stuff, if you ask someone about an urban legend and they start giving you one of those "one time I saw stories", you can learn a lot. All you have to do is watch their eyes.

* * *

One night, Renan and I were getting ready to leave the King Conch when Mr. Cero told us he wanted us to check on a guest.

I remember it clearly because I was crushed when he said it. It was late that night and I was exhausted. We'd been working all day and I hadn't eaten anything, either, so I was tired and

starving and not at all excited to follow around another guest for Mr. Cero. Of course, I didn't say anything to him. I just stayed quiet.

He came by the front desk and told us about some couple that had come in a few nights earlier, talking about how he hadn't seen them since they checked in. Most guests came in and out of the lobby all the time, usually leaving in the morning for the day's activities, returning in the mid-afternoon and then going back out after dark for late night adventures, walking through the lobby at least three times a day. But the couple, Mr. Cero said, hadn't come through at all. He didn't know if they had left the King Conch without checking out or if they had just been masterfully avoiding him. Either way, he didn't like it. He thought it was suspicious. After they'd been missing for another day he went up to their room and knocked on the door. He said no one came to the door and there wasn't a sound from the room. Nothing. He knocked again, and when no one answered again he went down to his desk to get the master keys.

But that's when things got really weird.

When he got back to the room he could unlock the door, but not open it.

The room had been barricaded.

Mr. Cero told us this in a quiet voice in a corner of the lobby, making sure none of the guests walking by heard him. Usually when he told us to go check something out he would call us into his office, but that night, when he came to us, I knew something was different. He seemed to think it was urgent, that whatever was going on with that room was more nefarious than someone having accidentally dropped a towel behind the door or that perhaps having left without checking out. "They're spooks," he said, "from the three letter agencies."

"Spooks?" Renan asked.

“Spooks,” Mr. Cero whispered. “The kinds of people that can be invisible if they want to be invisible. They follow me around sometimes. Watching me like I’m doing something wrong.”

“Why?” Renan asked, wide eyed.

“I don’t know. But we’re not going to let them. Follow them around. That’s what I need you boys to do. If you follow them, then we’ll know when they’re following me. Do that for me boys. Before I need you to follow them. Find out about them. Where they’re going, what they’re doing here. Everything.”

Renan started to say something, but Mr. Cero turned away from us. He headed toward his office looking all around the hotel like there were eyes in the walls. Paranoid. Terrified.

Renan and I looked at one another, neither of us really knowing what to think, and then headed off across the lobby towards the elevators.

The King Conch had three elevators, two that were for guests and one really slow one that the staff was allowed to take. There was a rumor that went around the staff about a guest in the sixties who, if you believed the story, had rang the elevator from the roof and stepped in without looking, only to find out the elevator hadn’t yet made it past the third floor. They say the guy died, but I never believed it. I just didn’t see how falling only three floors could kill a guy. I mean it was all six I would have believed it, I probably would have. But just three stories? It didn’t seem like that would kill a guy.

Maybe break his leg, but not kill him.

We took the worlds slowest elevator to the second floor and when we got there it was empty, like hotel hallways should be. Whenever you see guests hanging out in a hotel hallway it’s never a good thing. They’re either lost, drunk, fighting, or some combination of the three, none of which were good for us.

We went down the hallway and found the room, two-eleven.

The door was closed, and confident in his dead body theory Renan walked right up to it and tried the handle. It turned, like Mr. Cero said, but the door wouldn't open. I wondered what Renan would have done if the door had opened and revealed some horrible scene, what he would have done there had suddenly been a body just right there in front of him, but instead Renan just tried to look through the crack between the door and frame and backed off it when he couldn't see anything.

We looked around the hallway and there was nothing to use to get inside, nothing but a painting on the wall and an air duct above it.

Renan pointed toward the air duct.

A trick of our trade was to use the air vents to see what was going on in the hotel rooms. It was really the only way we could see what was going on inside apart from video cameras, which Mr. Cero didn't like at all. He said video cameras were too easy to spot and they ran out of film. Instead, he relied on us.

Well, not exactly us.

I was the only one who could fit in the small space of the vents. Whenever we had to spy on someone like that it was only ever me that went in, as there was barely room for one of us and I was smaller than Renan. Instead of going in, Renan would stand at the base of the air vent with a maintenance cart filled with tools. He'd pretend to be working on the vent, that way people wouldn't think it was suspicious if they walked by and saw it was open. It gave us a good cover, and made sense, since we had to have the maintenance tools to get the grates off the air vents anyway. It was an efficient plan, and that night I remember being thankful for it. The sooner we reported back to Mr. Cero, the sooner we could go home.

Renan and I left the room and came back with the cart full of maintenance tools. We took one of the chairs that were always in that little alcove by the elevators and set it up under the vent. I stood on top of it and used a Philips head to undo the screws at the vents four corners, and when I had it off handed it behind me to Renan.

“Try to be quiet,” Renan said.

I knew he was just trying to help, but my exhaustion had worn me down.

“How do you crawl quietly?” I asked.

Renan shrugged. “I don’t know, just try.”

“And what are you gonna do?”

“I don’t know, make it look like we’re cleaning the vents or something.”

“Cleaning the vents?”

“Or something.”

I lifted myself into the vent and laid on my stomach, my legs sticking out into the hallway. Though the space in front of me was dark, the little bit of vent I could see from the hallway light was speckled with grey clumps of dust that I knew would only grow in quantity the farther I went. There was nothing I could do but hold my breath and start forward, hoping I was the sole living creature crawling around in it.

I continued forward until eventually I hit a bend in the duct. I rounded it but told myself I wouldn’t go much further. I didn’t want to get lost, though the quiet darkness of the air duct did seem like a cozy place to sleep. Around the corner I saw another light, this time on the wall of the air duct. It was another grate, the vent that lead into the room. I crawled up to the vent and looked inside, figuring I would see whatever had happened, a towel that had been accidentally

dropped right behind the door in such a way that it wouldn't open or a suitcase stacked against the door, but it wasn't any of those things.

It wasn't any of those at all.

The first thing I noticed was that the television was on the floor, flashing the constant static of being between channels and casting everything in the room a grey hue.

In the grey light, I saw the bed had been dragged away from the wall into the middle of the room and turned upside down. I had to stare at it for a long time before I could tell what it was, as the only thing that told me it was the bed were the legs sticking up near the ceiling fan, looking like the horns of some other-worldly African game. One side of the upturned bed was supported by the dresser and the other side held up by the two night stands, with the solid headboard looking acting as a wall between the two. The amalgamation of furniture was covered by the bed sheets and the comforter the King Conch put on all of its beds, a field of blue with a giant golden Conch emblem in the center of it that ran all the way to the ground, except in one corner, where I could make out the mattress laying under it all.

Next to the structure there were two open trunks, big wooden boxes with clothing spilling out of them, everything black. There was an ashtray on the floor next to one of the trunks, a little golden rimmed thing that seemed oddly vibrant among the cool hues, and as I fixed on it a hand came out of the fortress and tapped the end of a lit cigarette in it.

I could tell it was a woman's hand from the shape and size of fingers, slender with tiny perfectly rounded nails at the end. The nails, painted black, tapped the end of the cigarette politely, preferring to coax the ashes to leave instead of evicting them forcefully, and after a moment of tapping slid backward into the structure in one fluid motion without even looking, as though they didn't really care at all if the ashes had fallen or not.

With two trunks I knew the other guest must have still been in the room, but I couldn't hear any talking. The only sound was the light hiss of the television, the static volume turned to one. Other than that the room was quiet, like no one was in it all.

The woman stayed under the sheets of the structure for a long time, her hand only emerging to tap her cigarette clean. Eventually she dropped the cigarette into the golden ashtray, and her boney black fingertips felt around for one of the trunks. She grabbed a fistful of clothing and pulled it into the fortress, and for a few minutes there was struggling behind the sheets, hands and feet brushing up against them and pushing them outward as she dressed in the small space, until finally, she emerged.

Her face was pale and thin like her hands, and her hair, long down the center of her back, would have been invisible against the black of her hoodie if not for its sheen flashing in the light of the television. She stood between me and the fortress and stretching, and behind her a man emerged from the structure too, dressed in the same dark clothing. He was just as thin and white as she was, and together they appeared in the flickering light of the television like pairs of floating heads in the dark, contorting their faces in haunting positions as they stretched.

I backed up in the vent, worried the woman might see me, but it wasn't needed. She turned away to look at the man.

She signaling something to him, gesturing with her hands, and then he gestured back, nodding. Perhaps it was my own exhaustion or maybe it was the darkness of the scene, but I couldn't tell if he was looking at her or me. I backed up even further in the vent. They continued to signal to one another, clearly unwilling or unable to speak, and I thought surely I'd been seen. They had to know I was there, or maybe just that something was wrong, that someone had witnessed the odd word that they had made.

But if they knew I was there, they didn't let on.

The two walked to the door where they had wedged a large armchair under the handle. The chair usually sat under the floor lamp in the corner of the room, but they had moved it behind the door to block it. They moved the chair and opened the door, the light from the hallway blinding me. I wondered if Renan was still outside, if they would see him standing right next to the open air duct and connect him with whatever suspicions they had about hearing me in the duct. But they didn't talk to anyone in the hallway, and the door swung closed.

When I backed my way out of the vent, Renan was there.

"What'd you do?" he asked. "Did they see you?"

"I don't know," I said. "Where did they go?"

"I don't know; they took the elevators."

We put the grate back on the vent and took the elevators down to the lobby, figuring if they were going anywhere they would have to leave through the lobby, but we couldn't find them. They had disappeared out the front door, and without having seen them leave there was no way of knowing where they went. All we could do was wait for them to return, so that's what we did. We watched as the late night shift turned into the graveyard shift from behind the front desk. There was nothing we could really do, nothing but wait and hope the couple in black had left the King Conch and wasn't just creeping around somewhere in the hotel. Around five in the morning, we got our answer.

Renan and I were sitting behind the front desk, him asleep and me almost so, when the couple walked in. They floated on in like it was nothing to be returning at five in the morning, like it was the middle of the afternoon. They weren't drunk, I'd seen enough guests come in that way to be able to tell, or even tired. I must have stared for too long, trying to get my eyes to open

for longer than ten seconds, because the woman looked over at me and nodded as they made their way across the lobby. I nodded back, and the two disappeared into the elevators.

When we went to tell Mr. Cero what we had seen, he wasn't in his office. It was locked, and so we waited for him to return in one of the dining room booths. Renan ended up falling asleep again, but I couldn't. I couldn't stop thinking about the spooks.

I worked the rest of the day in a kind of trance, my mind never straying from room two eleven for more than a few minutes at a time. I just couldn't get the image of them out of my head. It kind of felt like whenever you see something crazy and look away from it, how you instinctively look right back at it. It felt like that, only I couldn't look at it because I was busy taking bags to rooms.

Around two in the after-noon, I walked a family's bags up to a room on the second floor down the hallway from two-eleven. I must have seemed odd to the family because I just kept staring at the door down the hallway, trying to will it to open and disprove all the weird images going around in my mind from the night before, the cigarettes and the boney fingers and the strange outline of the furniture tomb in the grey light of the television. I hoped the door would open, I prayed it would open and dispel everything I was thinking as some combination of circumstance that simply made something innocent appear evil.

But the door didn't open, and I didn't get a tip.

Around ten o'clock that night the last of the dinner crowd was just beginning to filter out of the King Conch dining room when the spooks came out of the elevator. They were dressed in their same black t-shirts and black jeans, and they moved through the crowd of people headed toward the elevator like they couldn't be seen.

Renan and I waited a few moments after they left and then followed after them.

It took us a few minutes to find them on the street because it was so dark and their black clothing blended into the night, but eventually we spotted them. They were headed east toward Bahama Village. Bahama Village was the historic part of the city, an area that had once been slave quarters when the island was a Spanish naval base, most of the slaves having been captured from other islands in the Bahamas. The district was made up of colorful but neglected two story wood board houses, most of which had shops on the first floor while the owners lived on the second, a practical if not uncomfortable way to minimize the costs of owning a store in such an old, rundown district.

But that was really the only appeal of the place.

Most tourists who visited Bahama Village did so because so much of its original structures and landmarks remained. The allure of it was in how everything was still standing despite how the years of salt water in the air had rusted every metal surface and the flecks of paint at the base of every wood slat building no matter how often they repainted it. Even the original church from the nineteen-hundreds slave quarters was still standing, settled in a key lime grove with chickens walking around freely in the dirt yard out in front, just like they would have a century before. It was a world removed from Duval street with its concrete buildings and neon lights everywhere, like it hadn't quite yet given up on the old island ways of life. We followed the spooks through the dirt lot streets between colorful houses toward the center of the neighborhood, until suddenly, I knew where they were going.

The Bahama Village cemetery.

Bahama Village had its own cemetery, separate from the main one in the center of the island, on account of how the slaves hadn't been allowed to be buried there back in the day. Instead, they had dug their own plots in the center of their district, which was lower in elevation

because it was closer to the beach, meaning it was more susceptible to flooding. The result of that fact was a cemetery entirely comprised of mausoleums, shed sized tombs for the dead to reside in above the soggy ground in the shape and likeness of houses, some of them so ornate in design and decoration you couldn't help but feel something lived inside them. The cemetery was the main attraction of Bahama Village, the most famous stop on the walking tours that came through because the tour guides, always embellishing the tales of the local legends, loved to end their tours right where those local legends now lived.

When the spooks got to the cemetery gate it was locked. For a second I thought they would stop and begin signaling to one another with their hands again, but they didn't pause at all. They floated right on through the bars like they were nothing. Just floated right on through.

We waited in the doorway of a yellow wood-slat house until they disappeared into the graveyard, and then we headed after them. Neither of us could fit through the fence like they had, so we jumped it, hoping the sound of our landings wouldn't give us away. If they heard us, they didn't let on. We followed after them cautiously, keeping low to the ground and making sure to pause every time we reached a new mausoleum or headstone, at least long enough to read what was written on them. They mostly had general nostalgic sentiments for the deceased on them, things like – *“Gone but not forgotten”* and *“Made the world a better place”* although my favorite was a tongue-in-cheek remark probably written by the wife of a less than faithful husband – *“At least I'll know where he is tonight.”*

We stalked through the cemetery looking for them until suddenly we heard laughing. The laughing was coming from behind a large white mausoleum. When we worked our way around the tomb we saw them standing on the other side of it, holding a bouquet of flowers. It was one of the bouquets the tour guides sometimes placed down during the day when they brought their

tours into the cemetery. The tour guides would cite it was bad luck to visit the cemetery and not bring an offering of some kind, making sure to point out that they had brought plenty of flowers to cover themselves and how, for the right price, the tourists could purchase some of their luck saving petal covered pendants. The spooks held the flowers in their hands and laughed about them, like they knew how dumb the reason for their presence was.

With the flowers in their hands they floated off away from the white mausoleum, headed further into the cemetery. We started to follow them, but just as we stood up a light beam cut across the tombstones from the other side of the lot. "I told you!" A voice shouted. "The cemetery's closed!"

The spooks took off. They went faster than I thought was possible for bodies made of nothing more than skin and bones. Their skinny figures darted away from the light like there was nothing in their way, no tombstones or bushes or concrete tombs to block their way. They floated through it all just like they had floated through the cemetery gate, like they were made of air. They went behind a low wall and then they were gone. Like they were never there. The flashlight walked around the perimeter of the fence towards where the spooks had gone, bobbing up and down in the hands of some old security guard, but I knew he wouldn't find them. They were a part of the darkness. Part of the night. Maybe even part of the dead. If they didn't want to be found, they wouldn't be.

Not by him.

Renan and I crept out of the cemetery and headed back to the King Conch. We had lost them, but we knew they would have to return to the King Conch before dawn, just like the night before. It was a test of sorts. If they came back before the sun was up they were spooks, no doubt about it, and if they didn't then I'd dismiss it all as one big, exhaustion fueled dream.

At five in the morning, the spooks became my reality.

They walked in just like they had the day before, like they were returning from getting the morning newspaper. They came in, smiled at us, and just kept on going to the elevators.

Just a little smile.

Just a little nod.

Just a little “I know you know”.

And then they were gone.

When we got home, I didn't sleep at all. Not in that way that some people say they “didn't get any sleep” when they only got three hours. Not like that. I didn't sleep a wink. I laid in bed and watched as the sun slowly rose in the sky. We weren't scheduled to work at the King Conch until six in the afternoon, and I just laid there next to Renan – as we shared a room, the entire day, staring at the ceiling. I stared at the ceiling for so long the figurations in the wood paneling of the ceiling began to look like things, shapes of elephants and the statue of liberty and mountain ranges, all things I had never actually seen with my own eyes.

When I thought about why I could only see things in the wood that I had never seen I came to the idea that imagination only really works on things that you haven't really seen. Once you see something in real life, it doesn't have the same vague outline it once had. You don't see elephants or the statue of liberty or mountain ranges in the figurations of the wood on the ceiling because you notice that the elephant's head is too small and the statue of liberty is missing a torch and that the mountains are more rounded on the top than they are pointed, looking more like upside down ice-cream cones than the Rockies. Two columns in every head, one for everything they can imagine and one for everything they must forever recall, images permanently transferring to the other column once they've been witnessed, never again to take

the vague shape of a cloud or tree or figuration in a plank of wood. I stared at the ceiling all day, and not once did I see a vampire or a ghost or a spook of any sort.

I just couldn't imagine them in vague outlines anymore.

"You look terrible," Renan said when he woke up.

I just nodded.

When we got to the King Conch that night, Mr. Cero was still nowhere to be found.

We waited in one of the booths of the dining room right outside his office for an hour or two, but when the dinner rush hit a waiter told us we had to leave. Renan was all worked up about it, wondering where Mr. Cero had gone, but I wasn't really concerned about it. I wasn't really paying attention.

Where had the spooks gone? What had they done with the flowers? Why did they only come out at night? And the guard, what had he said? To quit coming back? Had they been there the night before? Is that where they went every night? I couldn't think of anything else. It all felt so ritualistic, like some magic trick that I just had to see how it ended.

Renan and I were standing at the front desk that night when the spooks emerged once again. They came out of the elevator in their ceremonial black hoodies and jeans, and headed out the front door and south on Duval. Toward Bahama Village.

I didn't lose them on the street this time. Even though they were still dressed in all black I knew where they were headed and it was much easier to spot their dark outlines in the shadows. When they got to South Beach they turned east again and headed toward Bahama Village, right along the same route they had taken the night before. Every once in a while they would stop and stare at something, and I would think that maybe it wasn't all connected and that they would go off and do something else that night, anything that would give me reason to think it wasn't some

haunted ritual. But they always continued right back on track, until they were once again in Bahama Village.

When they got to the cemetery gate, they floated right through it just like they had before. They moved right on through and disappeared into the small city of mausoleums behind the rusted iron fence, but this time, we knew where they were going. We didn't follow them in, and instead crept along the outside of the fence around the cemetery. We went along the side they had fled towards when they had been caught by the security guard the night before and set up around the corner of a building, looking toward the cemetery.

Just an idea.

Just a chance.

"They're not going to come this way," Renan whispered. He looked grey in the dim light. No one wants to see the dead, especially at night, so there weren't any street lamps near the cemetery. Nothing but the ambient light in the air.

"Yes they will," I said.

"Why?" he asked.

"They did last night."

"Doesn't mean they will tonight."

I just shook my head.

The ceremony of it all was lost on Renan. He didn't get it. In the same way a baptism isn't significant to a baby because they don't understand what's happening, the sacrament of the nocturnal escapades was lost on Renan. Renan had been with me the night before, but he hadn't seen the tomb they had built in their room. I had.

I was baptized.

A part of the congregation.

A witness to the worship.

The spooks followed their ceremony to the letter, the robes of black, the construction of their own temple, even the strict adherence to living in the night. It was all so rigid, so practiced. Wherever they had gone the night before they would go again, and this time we would see it. We would see the mass all the way through. The end of the magic trick. The closing ceremony.

“They’ll come,” I said.

We waited for twenty minutes or so, watching from the corner of the building, when finally, a light appeared on the other side of the cemetery, the same side it had before. We didn’t see the spooks for a minute or two, but eventually they appeared. They passed through the wrought iron fence and headed back east where they had come from, each of them holding a bouquet of flowers close to their chests as they fled into the night, eastward back toward the King Conch.

But when they hit Duval Street, they didn’t go north toward the hotel.

They followed Duval Street south until they hit South Beach, disappearing down into the rolling sand hills. Instead of traveling through the sand dunes toward the surf they walked parallel with the ocean, never leaving the midst of the bluffs which seemed to hide them even more than just the night. They traveled along the bottom of the sandy valleys, using their peaks and wispy patches of beach grass to hide themselves as they trickled their way a few hundred yards down the empty beach. Eventually they crossed over the top of one of the sand dunes, silhouetted by the full moon, and walked down onto the beach, where there was a small wooden tower. It was the size and shape of a lifeguard stand, twenty feet high with half its height made up of long legs, only there were no stairs that led up to the body of the structure, a large box with

hundreds of holes bored into it on stilts. The spooks approached the tower with flowers in hand, holding them out from their bodies as if they were offers.

Then I noticed the moon.

Everything that was visible was only so because of its contrast to other things, the worlds hues set in a filter of monochrome. The faces of the spooks, white and pock-marked, were only visible in contrast to the whiter and severely more marred moon above. A particularly dark spot in the nearby water only visible because of the consistent ink black around it, a shark of some kind circling in the inkwell. Even the silver shine of a fishhook laying in the sand was only detectable by its unique luster that contrasted the beach's dark blue hue. Nothing was visible by itself. Only the variations between the images made any of them visible at all.

The spooks looked at one another, then rustled the bouquets of flowers in their hands. For a second there was chirping, and then suddenly a stream of black dots poured out of the tower. At first it was a thin stream, but it grew quickly, a hive of something awakened by their call. The dots poured out of the tower and took the sky, black dots on a black background looking like the odd shifts in coloration that happen when you rub your eyes too hard. The sky grew heavy with black dots, fluttering around and chirping, little screees so quiet and almost imperceptible that they wouldn't have been heard if they hadn't broken up the rhythmic sound of waves washing themselves thin on the shore. The black dots fluttered outward from the tower but didn't stray far from it. They darted back and forth in front of the moon going to and from the tower, where the two spooks still stood right below holding the flowers. The spooks held the flowers height above their heads, offerings to the winged dots who, one by one, took notice of the offer. Against the background of the moon the winged things landed on the flowers and buried their heads into the center of the bouquets, rolling and covering themselves as much as they could. Tiny hands

pulling pollen and pedals from the bouquet, consuming them hastily, greedily, like they were afraid they might be taken away. The longer the spooks held the flowers up in the air the more dots came down on the bouquets, until it was a swarm of black dots descending on them. But like in the cemetery, the spooks just laughed. They giggled, trying to signal to one another with one hand and hold up the bouquets with the other. The dots, so hungry and frenzied, threatened to knock the flowers right out of their hands if they let go for more than a few seconds. But they didn't drop the flowers. The dots swarmed around them, silhouetted by the moon behind them, and the spooks just laughed.

When the frenzy finally died down, the spooks threw what was left of the flowers into the air. The sudden motion caused another wave of dots to burst from the tower, but the spooks didn't stick around. They ran through the bluffs toward Duval Street, signaling to one another rapidly, just as excited as the dots who still flew above their heads, scree, scree, screeing, as though everything good that could occur under the monochrome of the moon had just happened right there in the dark of the beach, a secret only perceptible to those who could make out the contrasts between the colors.

When the spooks got back to the King Conch, I followed them up to their room.

Renan tried to stop me. I don't know what he said, but I remember that he tried to stop me. I pushed him away and went up to the second floor anyway.

I wanted to see the end of the magic trick.

The end of the ceremony.

The closing of the nocturnal ritual.

I crawled into the vent outside their room. The room looked just like the last time I had seen it, dark, quiet, cluttered, like the recesses of a damp cave. It took my eyes a second to adjust

to the darkness but I didn't see either of them, just the outline of the fortress they had constructed in the middle of the room still standing there. When my eyes did get used to the light, I finally made out a shape. The woman's hand snaked its way out from beneath the sheets that draped the tomb, a lit cigarette in its grasp, wiggling gently as she tapped it with her finger, like a mouse struggling in the jaws of a python.

It was hypnotizing.

There was something about the rhythm of it, the slow motion of her tapping her finger against the little white cylinder, that was impossible to look away from. Perhaps it was the late hour or maybe it was my own exhaustion, but watching her I felt a distortion of my senses. A kind of trance, a kind of blur. The tapping of the cigarette went rhythmically back and forth like the ticking of a clock, the ashes at the end a bright red metronome waving in the dark. The burning tip bobbed inches off the floor, each tap threatening to send the ashes into the tray waiting below. Whenever the ashes did finally fall, she somehow always knew without looking, and the cigarette would retreat back into the fortress for another few minutes before returning and repeating the process all over again. Their night had begun with cigarettes and it would end with cigarettes, the bookend to the spook's nocturnal ritual which only stayed alive as long as the darkness in the window held out.

But of course, the night didn't last forever.

Eventually, the first hints of daylight began to silhouette the window curtains. No light came into the room, but just the tint of day surrounding the drapes was enough to scare her away. She dropped the last cigarette into the ashtray and her hand disappeared, leaving no hint that there was anyone at all in the room other than the still smoking cigarette butt and the television

tuned to static, flashes of black and white dulled by the ever increasing glow of day coming from the window. The night was over. The ritual was completed.

When I got out of the vent Renan was there. He said something, but I couldn't understand him. The fluorescent lights in the hallway seemed to overpower his voice. His words were lost in the brightness of the light coming in off the window at the end of the hall and the neon colors in the pattern on the floor screaming for attention, a deafening chorus of light stimulus that overloaded my senses until something deep in the back of my mind snapped, a trance state of hypnotic blackness calling me away from reality. Renan kept talking, but I couldn't understand anything. I swayed back and forth on my feet for a moment, trying to keep my balance, but eventually it was all just too much.

I fell over, and when my head hit the ground, retreated into quiet darkness.

* * *

When I woke up, I was in Mr. Cero's office.

My head hurt, probably from the fall, and I wondered how I had gotten from the second floor to Mr. Cero's office on the first. Renan was sitting over in a corner talking to Mr. Cero, arguing about something. When I sat up, Renan turned to me.

"Hey," Renan said. "He's up."

Mr. Cero turned around. He didn't look at all like the last time I had seen him, with his crazy hair and stained dress shirt. His hair was combed neatly and his shirt was wrinkle free, clearly ironed, with even his shirt collar perfectly right. Even his eyes seemed more focused. They weren't blood shot and didn't dart back and forth as he talked, instead neatly scanning me up and down, orderly, analytically, like he was refreshed, woken up from some kind of dream.

“Hey, you okay?” he asked, “Renan said you fainted.” For the first time in three summers of working for Mr. Cero I saw a look of concern on his face. It scared me more than it comforted me, as I had never seen him look so professional. He reminded me of the vacation dads that came in with their families. Clean cut. Wholesome. “Here, drink some water.” He handed me a bottle of water. “What happened?”

“I don’t know.”

“Were you dehydrated? You hadn’t eaten all day?”

“No, no,” I said, shaking them off. “I, I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” He asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Marco, you’re smart. I wouldn’t have you two working for me if you weren’t smart. You don’t know what happened?”

I took a drink of the water, which tasted metallic, and looked to Renan. He shrugged his shoulder, looking a little angry at Mr. Cero.

“I don’t know what it was,” I finally said. “I think they just got to me.”

“They got to you?”

I nodded. “The spooks. I don’t know, I guess they just got to me.”

Mr. Cero started shaking his head.

“I don’t know what you and your brother thought I told you,” he said, “but they aren’t spooks. Just some weird couple. There aren’t any vampires or spooks or anything like that. What are you, fourteen? Come on. I’m sure you thought you saw something. Bahama Village can be pretty rough at night,” Mr. Cero conceded. “But whatever you saw, it wasn’t supernatural.”

“In their room,” I started to say, but Mr. Cero held his hand up to stop me.

“You’ve been up for too long. You two worked the day shift and the night shift for the last three days, you’re exhausted. Especially you, Marco. You need a break. You need sleep. Take the next two days off,” he said.

He opened his desk drawer and pulled out the stack of cash he always paid us with and gave each of us three ten dollar bills, one for each night we’d followed the spooks around the island. “Now I don’t want to hear about vampires or ghosts or anything like that in my hotel again,” he said, “it’s bad for business. Besides, that’s not what I pay you two for anyway. I need real information about guests, not make believe stories. Now go home, get some rest.”

Renan stood up and walked to the door, but I didn’t follow.

“I saw them with my own eyes,” I said. In my sleep deprived state, I just blurted it out, but once I said it I didn’t even want to take it back. I rambled off all the things I had seen the spooks do, their phasing through the fence like it was nothing, commanding of the bats on the beach and deafness caused by the overstimulation of light. I rambled all of it off before Mr. Cero could say anything. I don’t know if he believed what I was saying, but he could tell I believed what I was saying. He could see it in my eyes that had bags under them, in my pupils that had shrunk down from even the small amount of light coming from the lamp in his office. Even if he didn’t believe what I was saying, he knew I believed it.

“Thank you Marco,” he said. “Get some rest.”

* * *

Two days later, the spooks left.

Mr. Cero had ordered me to stay home all week and rest, so I wasn’t there to see it, but Renan told me about it the next morning at breakfast. He said he was standing at the front desk

when the spooks came down, dressed in black like they always were, only this time they had their trunks. He was talking to Mr. Cero about something when they walked up, and Mr. Cero had paused when he realized it was them. It was nine o'clock at night or so, just after the last few rays of day had left the sky, and Mr. Cero said something to them about how it was pretty late to start traveling, or something like that. Renan said they didn't say anything, they just nodded.

"You should have seen Mr. Cero," Renan said to me. "He looked at them like they were snakes. You should've seen his eyes."

"You think he believed us?" I asked.

"We went up to their room after they checked out," Renan said. "I think Mr. Cero wanted to see for himself what they had done. I kind of did, too. It was all put back. Everything. The bed, the dresser, the night stands, everything. The room was perfect, like it hadn't been touched. We even asked housekeeping about it, thinking maybe cleaned it all up. Nothing."

"I didn't make it up," I said. "I saw it; I saw it with my own two eyes."

"I know; I saw everything else. I believe you."

"But did Mr. Cero believe us?" I asked.

"I don't know," Renan said. "But when they were checking out, you should've seen his eyes, man. Who travels at night? He kept saying. No flights leave the island after eight o'clock and it takes four hours to get to the mainland up Route One. Six to get out of the everglades and seven get to some kind of hotel. Who does that? He kept saying. Who travels at night?"

"You think he believed us? I asked again.

"You should've seen his eyes, man," Renan said. "You should've seen his eyes."

CHAPTER SIX

THE BLONDE

If you grew up on the island, you knew it would always be green, in one way, or another.

It used to be green in the nature sense of the word, with all the different palm, coconut and key lime trees that used to be everywhere. The trees grew in clusters that made for easy food, and so lots of the original settlements on the island had been built near the groves, proximity to food being critical to the survival of the indigenous peoples. They grew in yards outside of houses and along main walking paths where just anyone walking by could take what they wanted, as it was their right to eat exotic fruits for living in an exotic place. But that was back before the island was all concrete and glass buildings, in the days when it was just a naval base with a few hundred people on it who all worked the same kind of jobs, salvaging wrecked ships and exporting tropical goods back to the old world, salt and sugarcane, turtles and timber, cocoa and coffee, whatever exotic tastes the monarchs of Europe had suddenly acquired.

We still had mangrove trees, the low wiry kind with roots that spidered in every direction in the mud banks, but with all the other vegetation gone, the island wasn't the same. Occasionally, I would find spots on the island that were still thick with vegetation, small creeks and rivers on the edges near the ocean in areas too swampy to develop, but they were only ever in places that no one wanted. All the good land in the interior was bought up and covered in hotels and restaurants and bars and that were obsessed with their own kinds of green, just as thin and leafy as the natural kind except it didn't grow on trees.

My mother hated the new kind of green on the island.

She'd tell us about how it used to be, how it was beautiful when she was a little girl, not just a floating city but a real island, just like the pictures on the postcards showed with their big empty beaches and Sandhill cranes stalking through tide pools. She wished we had seen what it was like back then, when it was actually what people came from all around to see. The irony of it, she liked to point out, was how they cut down the key lime trees to make postcards showing how beautiful the key lime trees were. To get all the tourists to the island they had to change it from what they advertised, still a beautiful paradise, but no longer the same kind of green. Green with industry. Green with money.

“Yes,” she liked to say, “One way, or another, the island will always be green.”

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Halfway through the summer, Mr. Flager returned.

Mr. Cero called us into his office in the back of the dining room and told us Mr. Flager would be coming back, and that once again he wanted us to make sure everything was perfect. I was surprised when he told us Mr. Flagler was visiting again, given that the millionaire had already visited that summer and he hadn't left all that happy. I couldn't imagine why he and his wife would want to do it again. Renan must have been thinking the same thing because he squinted at Mr. Cero in confusion when he said it.

“How long are they staying?” Renan asked him.

Mr. Cero shook his head. “I don't know,” he sighed. “He didn't say. Just told me that he'd be coming in tomorrow and that he wanted the Rainbow Suite to be available.”

“Was it available/?”

Mr. Cero sighed. “No,” he said. “Some band was already in it. I had to move them to another suite. You wouldn’t believe how long it took, either. They had all sorts of amps and guitars and huge crates filled with God knows what. It took them an hour to move their stuff forty feet down the hall.”

“We’ll watch for Mr. Flagler when he arrives,” Renan assured Mr. Cero.

“Good,” Mr. Cero said.

When Mr. Flagler arrived, it took a moment for Renan and I to recognize him. He wasn’t in his white suit like he had been wearing the last time we had seen him, instead wearing jeans, a button down shirt and a panama hat that hid most of his face. Still, when he got to the front desk we recognized him. A man as famous as Mr. Flagler isn’t easily forgotten, especially when you spend a week following him. Even Mr. Bennett recognized him.

“Oh,” Mr. Bennett startled when he realized who was in front of him. A social climber, I could see him wish he had known Mr. Flagler was coming. He wished he would have worn his nicer suit, or at least his nicer tie. He strained up and broadened his smile. “Oh! Mr. Flagler! What a nice surprise! How was your flight in? What can I do for you?”

Mr. Flagler didn’t respond to Mr. Bennett’s niceties. “I have a reservation, the rainbow suite,” he said, keeping his head down.

“Oh, well I believe the rainbow suite has been.... oh! No, here it is. My mistake. I thought it had been booked by someone else, but, thankfully not.” He handed the key to Mr. Flagler, who took it with a polite nod. I moved around the counter to take Mr. Flagler’s bags but he held out a hand to stop me. “No, no, no, I’ll get them.”

“Oh, please,” Mr. Bennett said to Mr. Flagler. “It’s his job.” Mr. Bennett motioned me forward quickly, as if each second I hesitated someone made him look bad.

But Mr. Flagler stopped me again.

“I’ve got it,” said, picking up the bags. He went off across the lobby toward the elevators, keeping his head down as he went, and when the elevator doors closed behind him disappeared. Though I was sure it was Mr. Flagler, I never saw his eyes.

“You should’ve been faster on the bags,” Mr. Bennett said to me. It was clear his insistence during the exchange had embarrassed him. “He just doesn’t want to look self-important, having you carry his bags. He can’t do that because he’s rich. You have to insist,” he said to me. “Next time be faster on the bags.”

I opened my mouth to rebut him, but just nodded.

After Mr. Flager checked in, Renan and I staked out his room, pretending to do maintenance on a hallway light fixture. We figured eventually he’d go down to Mr. Cero’s office or go on a walk around the property, but he never came out. He stayed inside all day, until I could see the sun setting on the other side of the window at the end of the hallway. We packed up our prop cart filled with tools we didn’t know how to use and went off toward the elevators. When the employee elevator opened a woman stepped out who was clearly not an employee.

She had long white legs that were tucked into a colorful floral sundress and blonde hair tucked into a ponytail like she was heading to the beach, so much so that I half expected her to look confused when she stepped out and didn’t see any surf or sun. Instead, she picked up a bright red suitcase and smiled her way past us. She headed down the hallway, flip flops smacking off the bottom of her feet as she went.

“Damn,” Renan said. “I wish I worked with her.”

I nodded, listening to her go. Two doors down, three doors down, until she stopped and there was a faint knocking on a door. I looked at Renan and left the elevator, peaking around the

corner of the alcove. I caught the back end of her red suitcase disappearing into the room at the end of the hallway. The Rainbow Suite.

“She went into the Rainbow Suite,” I said to Renan.

“Mr. Flagler’s room?” Renan asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “Just went in there.”

“That wasn’t Mrs. Flagler,” He said.

“I know.”

“Well then, I think we have something to tell Mr. Cero.”

“I guess.”

It was quiet for a second, then Renan looked back at me.

“Don’t you think we should tell him?” He asked me.

“Yeah,” I said. “I think. Isn’t this the kind of stuff he wants to know?”

“Well, who knows what he wants to know? But this is something, right?”

“Right.”

“So we should tell him. That’s what he pays us for, right? It’s our job?”

I shrugged. “Yeah, I think.”

When we got to Mr. Cero’s office we told him that Mr. Flagler had arrived, and we told him about the blonde who had gone to his room. He looked confused for a second, not disoriented by what we told him, but contemplative, thinking over what he should tell us. “Boys, she was probably just his assistant. Men like Mr. Flagler, they’re busy. So busy, sometimes they need other people to help them organize their day.”

“She was dressed pretty casually for work.”

“Well, there’s no harm in being comfortable.”

“I guess not. But why is he here with his assistant? Not his wife?”

“Well, that’s why I pay you, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Listen boys. All I need to know where Mr. Flagler goes. Alright? If he’s inspecting the dining room kitchen or the rooftop bar, I want to make sure he doesn't have any surprises. I want to make sure he’s happy. If his assistant is there, you can tell me about that, too. But his personal life isn’t really our concern. You just keep me in the loop when it comes to my hotel.”

“Okay.”

“Great.” Mr. Cero opened up his desk drawer and pulled out the wrapped stack of twenty dollar bills he usually paid us with. He paid us, and then we took the bus home, Renan cursing the whole way there.

“Personal assistant, “he scoffed. “She’s one personal assistant alright.”

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The next day Renan and I followed Mr. Flagler and the blonde around the island. Renan made sure that we got to the King Conch before they got to the dining room for breakfast. If they came in together, he theorized, she was no assistant.

It was around nine when they walked into the dining room. They sat at a table in the back of the dining room and ate a small breakfast, him an omelet and her just coffee and toast. None pens or pads of paper. No charts or models. No phone calls or faxes. Just the two of them having breakfast, her in another floral sundress and him still wearing that oversized panama hat that seemed to shade his face.

After breakfast they left the King Conch and headed west down Duval street, toward Mallory square, the same place he had gone with his wife. But before they got there they turned north on Eaton Street. Eaton Street was just like Duval Street, with lots of souvenir, apparel and nick-knack shops that drew crowds coming from the hotels on Duval Street. About halfway down Eaton Street the blonde assistant stopped to look in a shop window, a surf shop with all kinds of oceanic curios from bathing suits to boogie boards. She pointed at a mannequin wearing a purple wrapped-sundress and ran up into the store, followed by Mr. Flagler. I was reminded of when he went shopping with his wife and assumed that this would be no different, that they would come out of the store empty handed, her having seen the price tag. But moments later, they came back out onto Eaton Street, bag in hand. She set the bag down and then lifted the purple sash out of it, holding it in front of her as if sizing it up once again. Mr. Flagler nodded and said something to her that made her hit in the arm playfully, not hard enough to drive him away but just to stave him off, at least for a few minutes.

“New work uniform,” Renan commented sarcastically.

I nodded.

They continued down Eaton Street, ducking in and out of shops, each time appearing with another bag. They bought a bikini at another surf shop, a set of pearl earrings in a jewelry shop and then another sundress. Every time she stopped and went into a store they went in and he bought her whatever had caught her eye. And she let him. She wasn't like his wife who had stopped and thought each purchase over. She was impressed by Mr. Flagler's money, not having had access to it for the last twenty years, and so each time they came out of another boutique with a bag she looked at him like he himself was a diamond.

At lunch the pair stopped at a food cart.

The vendor said something as he reached into his cart. It must have been a warning, as both Mr. Flagler and the blonde stepped away from the cart. The vendor checked to see if they had given him some space, and when he was satisfied he pulled out a coconut and a machete, a wide rusted blade with electrical tape wrapped around its handle. He set the coconut down on the cart, and then brought the machete down as hard as he could. The cart jumped, and the coconut split in half. The vendor caught each piece before the milk inside could spill, and then filled the two halves with ice, adding cherries on top before handing them over.

Mr. Flagler and the blonde went and sat on a nearby bench, eating their snow cones as they watched other patrons come up to the stand.

Watching the pair, I thought of Mr. Flagler's wife after they visited Mallory Square. I remembered how disgusted she was by all the rotten fruit. I wondered if she would think this was dirty, too. The rusted machete the vendor was using looked like it saw daily use beheading fish on a dock, and I wondered how often, if ever, it was cleaned. The vendor himself didn't look too hygienic, either. He was wearing a sweat-stained white sleeveless shirt, and his shorts were covered in dirt stains, as though when snow cone sales were slow he slept on the beach.

But none of that threw off the blonde.

She smiled every time the vendor chopped another coconut in half, almost laughing at the wild craziness of it. Mr. Flagler smiled too, but he was smiling at her. She was adventurous. She was young. She was excited by it all, and what was more, she was excited by him.

The two took their time eating snow cones and laughing, and when they finished they headed back to the King Conch.

They went back to their room to drop off all the things Mr. Flagler had bought her, and then re-emerged at the rooftop bar for happy hour. A tequila sunrise for her, a Cuba libre for him.

The two sat and talked at a table that overlooked the west side of the island, the area where they had been walking. It was a Friday, and from Eaton Street to Front Street every inch of sidewalk was taken, hundreds of tourists milling around the shops.

“Where do you like?” the blonde suddenly asked Mr. Flagler. “If you were gonna do it?”

Mr. Flagler surveyed the western part of the island, and then shook his head. “It wouldn’t make sense to build anywhere near here. Already too crowded around here as it is. Besides, I already own a hotel here. It wouldn’t make sense.”

“So where then?”

Mr. Flagler thought for a second. “Maybe somewhere on the north side of the island. There’s nothing up there. Mostly just neighborhoods. And the airport.”

“Then why would anyone want to stay there?”

“It would be a different kind of place. More like a resort. Market it like the kind of place you go to get away, not the place you go to party. You know, more like a getaway.”

“A resort. I like it. It sounds relaxing.”

“That’s the idea. I want to start pricing land.”

“Well, we could do that tomorrow.”

“You really like this idea.”

“It’s a good idea. There’s too many hotels near the tourism district. I think a resort farther away from everything, more secluded, it would be nice. Romantic.” She turned away coyly, looking back toward the city.

Mr. Flagler just sipped his drink.

They talked about the idea of building a new hotel all through happy hour, each drink adding a new level of certainty that it was a good idea. By late afternoon the two were talking

about the plan with certainty. A new hotel. The north side of the island. Bigger and better than any structure in the keys.

When they began to feel the effects of their drinks they took the short elevator ride from the roof to the sixth floor and disappeared once again into the rainbow suite. We waited for them to come out, pretending to inspect the perpetually broken light fixture in the hall once again, but they never came out. Eight, nine, ten, until it became obvious the two were in for the night.

We headed to Mr. Cero's office.

The dining room was empty when we got it, just a few waiters carrying plates back toward the kitchen where the sound of rushing water and scrubbing meant the bussers in back were getting ready to clock out for the night. We wove our way past the hurried wait staff and went into Mr. Cero's office.

He was on the phone when we opened the door, and so we just sat in the chairs opposite his desk quietly, waiting for him to finish. "Hey, that's great," Mr. Cero said. He held up a hand to show us he'd only be a second. "Great, great. When can you get it to me? Okay. Alright. Yeah, you don't worry about that. Have I ever given you a reason to worry? Huh? That's right. So don't worry. Alright. Works for me." He hung up the phone. "What do you have, boys?"

"Well, Mr. Flagler didn't do all that much," Renan said. "Had breakfast with his assistant, took her shopping, had drinks at the rooftop bar. They certainly worked hard, but I don't think they got all that much done."

Mr. Cero sighed.

"What did he buy her?" he asked.

"Some clothes, pearl earrings, lunch," Renan said. "Things people buy their assistants."

“Well that’s nice,” Mr. Cero said. “I’m sure she appreciated it. What about around here? Where’d they go in the hotel?”

“Just to the rooftop bar,” Renan said. “They flirted with each other and talked about the new hotel Mr. Flagler is putting up.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The hotel Mr. Flagler is building. The one on the north side of the island.”

“He’s building another hotel?”

“Yeah, I think so. He said it was gonna be some kind of resort or something.”

“Interesting. Did he say anything else about it?”

Renan shook his head. “Not really. They only talked about it for a short time.”

“Hmm. Interesting.” Mr. Cero sat and thought for a moment and then pulled the roll of cash out of his drawer. He handed Renan and me each a twenty. “Do it again tomorrow. Wherever they go. Be here before breakfast, so you can find them in the dining room.”

“Okay,” Renan said. “We’ll be here for their morning meeting.”

Mr. Cero gave him a look that warned him not to push it.

We walked through the empty dining room toward the lobby of the hotel. The dining room was empty and dark, having closed at ten, and the only light was coming from the entrance to the kitchen behind us. With all the fake plants hung in every corner and vines wrapped around all the wooden columns the room looked like a jungle at night, the white light cast from the kitchen looking like moonlight shining through a tree canopy. We followed the fake vines along a path between tables, under trees and over the bridge that the waiters hated because of its uneven slope until we passed the chalk easel that told guests about the specials and emerged in the clearing of the lobby. The lobby wasn’t as dark as the dining room, with its giant chandelier

hanging overhead, but since all the light was cast toward the ceiling the whole room glowed a dark gold like there was a blood-moon overhead, a perfect mix of low ambient light that it seemed both night and day at the same time.

Renan and I walked out through the revolving doors of the lobby onto Duval Street. We headed toward the bus stop. There wasn't a soul in sight, and for a moment I could see what it must have been like before Flagler and the rest of them built hotels and restaurants and bars all over the island, when it was as natural looking as the dining room tried to be, all green and ambient, but really that way, not artificially so. Like how my mother described the island as when she was young. The kind of beauty that made people smile because it existed naturally.

It must have been a paradise, some kind of dream.

Back when the island was the right kind of green.