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THE TEQUILA SUNRISE

Most days if I'm late coming down for breakfast, Cheyenne will make a bit of a fuss, but nothing I can't handle. He showed up here, pretty much out of the blue, about two months ago, looking for work, and Dr. Bonner hired him on the spot to be the new cook. The last cook, Marilyn, was raped and shot but these days no one thinks any of us did it. We're not the violent type, you know. Just people who have had a bit too much and need to relax for a few months. I think they call him Cheyenne because he sort of looks like an Indian - either that or he's from Arizona, I can never remember.

There's an English couple here, the Stewarts, and they're quite nice, but I really don't know what to make of them. They seem perfectly normal and I can't imagine why they're here, but Cheyenne told me once that Mr. Stewart was a very wealthy schizophrenic who could afford to be here easily, and that his wife was just here to be with him.

My shrink sent me here after my girlfriend in Ventura killed herself. I was in Chico and he paged me and told me over the phone. Anyway, my psychiatrist told me I could relax here, that it would be good for me to get away. That's fine. People just tell me what to do and I do it.

"Morning, Paul," says Deborah, coming into the dining room. It's hot today and the ceiling fans are going full speed, making a rhythmic whup-whup-whup over the table. Deborah is a startlingly beautiful blonde girl from Connecticut who just got here. I think she was an alcoholic.

"Hi," I say. They let us have bloody marys with breakfast here, as long as you're not an alcoholic. I'm done with mine and Cheyenne is obligingly mixing another.

I light a cigarette. "Where are you off to today?" I ask Deborah. She's got her backpack with her.

"We're going on a hike, down by Las Cruces." Las Cruces is a big rock formation on the bay, and you can see Puerto Rico from the top of it if it's not too cloudy.

I nod and finish breakfast.

I have an encounter group meeting scheduled for noon, but

instead I go to help Mr. Stewart launch his boat. He's been working on the damn thing since he got here, building it with a bamboo frame and thatch, and as soon as it hits the water it starts sinking.

"Damn it!" Mr. Stewart screams. "Damn the boat to hell!" He's running around it, sloshing through the warm shallow water, trying to hold the damn thing up but it just keeps sinking. I wade back to the beach and watch him for a minute. I brought a canteen full of scotch and soda and pour him one when he comes out of the water. I can't escape the feeling we're being watched

"You know, Mr. Stewart," I say, "you don't have to build a boat to leave. Why are you doing it?"

He's sipping the drink out of a collapsible cup and squinting into the sun, his furry eyebrows crunched together over a brown face.

"Yes, of course you're right, I needn't build it," he says pleasantly enough, but he obviously doesn't believe me. Maybe they won't let him leave, I don't know. I drink quietly and watch the setting sun behind us play off the mountains across the bay. You can barely see them at dusk.

Mr. Stewart knocks on my door that night and slips in. "Come on, come on," he says, "get dressed."

I start to get out of bed, realize I'm naked, lay back down. "Where are we going?" I ask him groggily, fumbling for a cigarette.

"The boat," he hisses. "We've got to rebuild the boat. You're the only other one I can trust."

"Sit down, Michael," not even sure if that's his first name. He sits in a rattan chair and I puff on the Marlboro.

"Look, you know you can check out of here any time, right? This isn't prison." He isn't listening. I go with him finally.

The moonlight is fantastic on the water, rippling and shimmering on the gentle waves. I can see the water from where we are, on a hill behind Las Cruces. This is where we build the boat.

"Frame's very important, you know," says Mr. Stewart, grunting and sweating under a sheaf of bamboo poles. I nod eagerly, smoke from my cigarette stinging my eye.

"Late again," Cheyenne notes the next morning. Why do you stay up so late at night?"

"Reading," I say. "Reading a book." The bloody mary has too much tobasco. Deborah looks radiant this morning. She's hiking again, this time to the other side of the island. Mr. Stewart looks at me with relief.

Mrs. Stewart is a woman with an immense head of bright red hair and a lingering British accent. "Oh Michael," she says, "what are you doing today?"

"Nothing, dearest," Mr. Stewart says, sipping coffee.

"Well, I'm taking the day trip to San Juan. Don't forget to water the posies in the bungalow!" she advises shrilly.

"Of course," Mr. Stewart says.

The boat looks much less impressive in the daylight. Most of the day I sit under a tree and watch Mr. Stewart thatch palm fronds onto the frame.

"Don't you remember," I say, lighting a cigarette, "that the boat you built before, the same way, sank?"

Mr. Stewart wipes his red face with a rag and looks at me as if I just told him that the sky is blue. "Of course I realize that. But I'm doing something different this time." He starts back at his work.

There's a little seed in my drink and I spit it out.

That night, Mr. Stewart doesn't come into my room. I mix a drink, pour it in my canteen, and go looking for him.

The trail is a little rough when you get close and, just behind the actual clearing, goes over a pile of large boulders. I start up these rocks and almost fall right over Deborah. She squeals a little mouse sound.

"What are you doing here?" she hisses.

I put out my cigarette. "I could ask you that."

She looks down nervously, runs her finger in the dust on the rock, leaving a little trail. "I think he's marvelous," she says quietly.

"What?"

"I think he's marvelous. Don't you?"

I take a long drink, the tequila biting a little. "I guess," I shrug. I'm starting to realize that I'm practically lying on top of a very attractive girl, maybe twenty, twenty-two. She scribbles

in a notebook.

"You take notes?" I ask. Nothing surprises me anymore.

"Yeah, I do," she says. "I want to get it all down."

The next day Cheyenne gets me stoned behind the kitchen.

"I ever tell you about my mother?" he says.

No, God, no. "Yeah, I think." I laugh a little.

"Do you know about Mar – about Mrs. Stewart?"

"What do you mean?"

He runs a bony hand through long black hair. "She's great."

"I guess."

"No, man, I mean in bed. She's outrageous. Sexually, I mean."

I laugh uncontrollably. Cheyenne is concentrating on rolling another doobie.

"Really?" I say at last.

He looks at me, his eyes burning. "Hell, yeah. She can do things I never thought possible." He lights the joint, sucks in a long hit.

I go to the clearing again that night. Mr. Stewart is ready to reveal the secret to me.

"Tar!" he says dramatically, his hands dripping with great globs of the stuff. "Tar!"

"Tar," I repeat quietly.

That night we cover the palm fronds with tar. Mr. Stewart assures me it'll dry in the sunlight and make the boat waterproof. I agree, but still have the feeling we're being watched. I take a drink and decide not to tell him about his wife's affair with the cook.

"There!" Mr. Stewart says, smearing the tar on his shorts in long black smudges. The stuff is dripping off the boat and splashing the sand softly.

"Let's go," he says at last.

About a week later, the director, Dr. Bonner, catches up with me. I'm walking along the hot cement pathway to the beach, struggling with a beach chair, a portable radio, and a jug full of martinis.

"Paul, we missed you at this morning's session."

"Yeah, well, I'm feeling much better," I manage. He laughs.

"Well, it's not like getting over the flu, you know."

"Right, well, I'll, uh, be sure to make the next one."

He smiles, fairly beaming from this good news. We look at each other for a minute in a strange silence. Jesus, I think. What does he want now?

"OK, Dr. Bonner, well, I'm just going to go down to the beach now," I say, waving the chair a little. The jug of martinis weighs forty pounds in this sun.

"Oh, yes, I almost forgot. I got a telegram for you today." He hands me a crumpled piece of thin yellow paper, dug from his coat pocket. I surrender at last and deposit my gear on the walk.

"Thanks." He smiles again and stands as though waiting for a tip. I look up nervously. "Anything else I can do for you?"

"No, I suppose not. Well, I'll see you tomorrow morning. By the way," he says, scratching his chin and considering seriously the radio on the pathway, "have you ever thought about art therapy?"

"That's all right. I can't draw water from a well."

He laughs enthusiastically. "All right, all right, Paul, I'll be seeing you."

I read the telegram. It's from my lawyer. "Dear Paul," it says, "stop. I'm coming to pick you up on the 27th stop. Dr. Snodgrass informs me you have enjoyed complete recovery stop. We've got big deals stop."

Great, I think.

Late that afternoon, at the beach, Mr. Stewart approaches me. He's wearing dark sunglasses and a big floppy hat that covers his face in shadow. He sits down about five yards from me, never looking at me. "Pssst," he hisses loudly.

"What?" I say, looking at him. He grinds his teeth in mute rage.

"Don't-look-at-me," he whispers loudly, his voice almost cracking in anger. I quickly look at the breakers.

After a minute, he whispers again. "Don't look at me. Say nothing. Tonight we go."

"What do you mean, 'we'?" I whisper, always looking forward. I take another sip of martini.

"I have been today to see the Sea Lion," he says.

"What the hell is Sea Lion, your fucking raft?" I start laughing. "Jesus Christ, Mr. Stewart."

"Don't use my name," he says out loud, looking at me. He quickly averts his head and bites his finger, cursing himself.

"Don't say anything else. Meet me there tonight at midnight." He waits a few minutes in silence. Just as I am about to offer him a martini, he rises and walks away.

There is a rustling in the trees behind me. I turn around just in time to see a hint of white and a flash of long blonde hair.

Inevitably, I am drawn, as I knew I would be, to the clearing, where the boat sits, the tar on its sides hardened to a thick black seal. I can't believe it worked.

Mr. Stewart appears from behind a palm tree and quickly walks over to me, extending his hand.

"Excellent, excellent, Paul, glad you could make it.." I give him my hand and he pumps it with vigor, grinning broadly.

"One thing, Michael," I say. "I'm not going."

"I know that," he says as though it's obvious. "I just said that on the beach in case she was listening."

"Who?"

"You know. Her. Deborah. She's been spying on me." I'm impressed. He knows. "I looked into her room one day and found sophisticated listening gear. Bugs, high-impedance microphones, cassette recorders. She's up to something."

"Possibly communist," I note, biting my lip to keep from giggling.

He nods knowingly.

"Very well then," he says. "Let's get it going, shall we?" We stand on opposite sides of the boat and slowly push it through the trees until we break the treeline and are on the beach. We stand there for a second, heaving and sweating. The humid night is bearing down heavily. I've got to quit smoking, I think. A little more effort and we're at the waterline. I can see Puerto Rico across the water, dimly shining. Mr. Stewart is surveying it.

"There it is," he says quietly. "Freedom." We stand in silence for a second.

"Well then old chap, I'm off. Give us a push, will you? Jolly good show." He climbs into the boat and I lean into it with

all my might, finally sliding the behemoth into the lapping waves. Mr. Stewart brandishes a paddle and begins slapping it into the water.

"Tally-ho, old boy!" he yells into the night. "Until we meet again!"

Deborah leaps from the trees and begins filming his departure with an impressive videotape camera.

"Debo-"

"Shut up! He's still talking!" she says. Mr. Stewart's wild laughter and unintelligible praise to the sea gods is drifting across the phosphorescent sea to us. I start to laugh.

"Will you be quiet?"

I shake my head, laughing harder. Dr. Bonner appears from the trees too, now, as if by magic. I'm rolling in the sand, almost in tears.

"See?" Deborah shrieks. "I told you he would! But you didn't listen, you prick!"

Dr. Bonner is shaking his head in disbelief. I just cannot stop laughing. Out there on the open blue dark sea, Mr. Stewart has finally made good his escape, leaving on a trail maniacal laughter and hymns and sailing off into the tequila sunrise of his golden years.

Ben Vance

**Winner of the Margaret Owen Finck Prize for
Creative Writing**