

Allegra Hyde

Shark Fishing

THERE WAS A STORM, A SHIPWRECK. THERE WERE PURITANS LOOKING for a place to pray. A reef—serrated and rising from the sea—named the Devil’s Backbone by those who out-swam the drowning tug of hosiery and buckled boots, the swift darkness in a throatful of brine, who felt the soft footing of a sandy shore.

The island they named *Eleuthera*, a Greek word for freedom.

Then there was a cave like a yawning mouth: a home, high-ceilinged, acoustics of the finest church. A rocky pulpit—too perfect for coincidence—a sign to the Eleutherans: a gift from God. The island knelt before them, a blank surface of sea and sky, waiting to be given a past and a future.

This is that future: the locals call the island “Lutra,” as if sun and salt could erode letters too. They fish from docks staggering rotten-legged into the sea, their bodies black against the horizon—like human hieroglyphics—and yet, how hard it is to read the meaning in their poses. To separate defiance from defeat. These children of children of children of slaves, shackled and shipped to an island named Freedom.

The locals, they speak too quick for me to understand sometimes, their voices like chiming bells. “Dats da ting,” they tell me, dark arms lifting slack fishing lines. “Groupa gettin smalla an smalla.”

Before long, the Eleutherans feared they’d failed their maker. The rye they’d planted hadn’t come. Their few spades cracked and split. They sweated, starved, dug graves for their companions. Gripped scripture with cracked and bleeding hands.

AFFLICTION IS A BITTER ROOT, BUT IT BEARS THE SWEETEST FRUIT.

“Got `em,” says Nehemiah, reeling in a dripping fish, scales silver. He knifes the belly open, shows me a final rubied pulse. He looks relieved. Remorseful. “Only da old men do da dirty work now,” he says, tossing fish guts off the dock. “Da kids, dey all gone.”

The sun hangs low, hammocked by the afternoon.

The sea swallows a little more of the coast.

BUT IT BEARS THE SWEETEST FRUIT

The Eleutherans begged for help from northern churches, praised God when it arrived—bundled and blessed—on a charitably chartered vessel. They unpacked crates of sugar and salted pork; axes, hoes, and saws; they unpacked munitions and pewter spoons; beeswax candles, starched white linens, and silver sewing needles; they unpacked the makings, or so it seemed, of a bold new civilization.

To proffer thanks? The Eleutherans shipped ten tons of Braziletto timber back to Boston. The wood became precious anywhere but on the island. Red-grained, good for dyes and violin bows, its sale endowed Harvard University.

I am at the same university hundreds of years later, in a room packed tight with students. I am here to speak of Eleuthera—an island fragment in the spill of the Bahamas—to speak of Camp Hope, our work there, a new era of environmental innovation.

I have become like Braziletto: valuable elsewhere.

The students shift in their seats. Stare with cautious piety.

I shift too, hands braced against the podium, waiting for my words to settle into order, the ones that have ballooned and thickened, made me a new kind of evangelist.

“Thank you, I—”

But my words, I feel them crowded out.

“I—”

The Eleutherans. They wander through my mind as if they’d colonized that too.

Things disappeared on the island. The Eleutherans never met the Lucayans, a boat-building people who walked its beaches before them, who canoed between coves, gold-checked and sable-haired. Who disappeared, some years earlier, when the Spanish dropped anchor and enslaved them all.

The Lucayans: the golddest thing Cristóbal Colón could find.

The Eleutherans roamed their new home, discovering mounds of picked-out mussel shells, shards of palmetto ware. They found Lucayan axe heads, arrowheads, skulls—eye sockets spilling sand—in the place they’d come to call Preacher’s Cave.

The Eleutherans discarded these scraps of the past.

Seated in front of my podium, a bone pale girl peers into me as if through water.

You’re imagining it.

Down, down, down through all the strata of civilization.

You’re just nervous.

I’ve made this speech dozens of times—variations on an environmental

homily, an ode to conservation—I've spoken without pause or hitch, without grasping for words, but now: time dilates, my head throbs with the longings of ghosts.

You're—

Inside the airplane, inside the sky, window ovals opening into aquamarine—an ocean spread blank and blissful below—except for a few dark patches I realize later are the shadows of clouds. The plane hovers there too: toy-sized and skimming the surface. And then, closer to land, sandbars swoop up white and dreamy, like spilt milk. There, Eleuthera. That skinny spit. That fishhook bathing. The toy plane glides over pink-pebbled beaches and acres of palm trees, above the square stamp of rooftops and swimming pools resigned to a viridescent shimmer. It dips to pineapple fields, bent and overgrown, to backhoes abandoned mid-push in the thick coppice that jostles cinderblock settlements, right up to the tiny airport in Rock Sound—the only one left after Pan Am disappeared—and it feels as though I might disappear as well.

I wound up at Camp Hope by luck.

Or fate.

In those days I didn't bother with distinctions: one minute I was in a single-bulb basement in Brooklyn, printing pamphlets on "Climate Justice in an Age of Corporate Terrorism." The next, I was stepping onto the parched tarmac of the Eleutheran airport, on my way to work for a man I'd never met, wishing I still felt the reckless confidence I'd flaunted to friends back home.

Waiting on the tarmac: Mr. Roy Adams. My new boss and Camp Hope's founder, he was also—at least according to the rumors on the activist circuit—a former Navy SEAL turned born-again tree hugger, baptized in the warm waters of the Caribbean.

He wore aviators, a crew cut, and steel-toed boots.

Not my usual company. Not by a long shot.

"Your stuff?" Adams grabbed my duffel bag and chucked it in the back of a bug-smearing Jeep. Then, swinging himself into the driver's side, he called, "Let's go."

For a moment I considered refusing: catching the next plane back to New York. How could I work for a man who didn't even bother shaking hands? Having spent the last decade volunteering for Fieldcore—a loose collective of urban eco-activists, occasionally anarchic, always up in arms—I was used to group-think sessions that began with hugs and ended in drum circles, not two-syllable commands.

"Dawn?" Adams was watching me through the Jeep's windshield, the way one might admire an animal they'd corralled. His posture relaxed. His gaze steady.

My body begged to bolt, and yet I thought of the offer Adams had made on the phone, four weeks earlier. "Dawn," he'd said, "your work on that BP

protest—impressive stuff—but don't you ever think of taking things further? Actually living the solution?"

Living the solution. Sure I'd imagined it—we all did at Fieldcore—we'd talk about getting a "chunk of land," starting an "eco-centered society," proving one could exist beyond the American SOP of morning commutes and disposable Starbucks cups.

But the talk had always remained abstract. A hash-fumed fantasy.

That is, until Adams called and offered me a job.

"Camp Hope," he'd said, "will be part school, part eco-basecamp. We're aiming to be a hundred percent self-sufficient within five months, with wind turbines, aquaculture, the whole deal. And we've already got a roster of students—or more specifically, their tuition—now we just need teachers. People who believe in sustainability. People like you."

People like you. Who was I except someone who'd always been willing to dream? Willing, rather pointedly, to make a fool of her own fear?

"Hot here," I said, sliding into the Jeep's passenger side. The vinyl seat burned the back of my thighs, but I bit my tongue, adding, "Barely fifty when I left New York."

Adams grunted, then rummaged in his pockets for keys.

It occurred to me, then, that he might have his own reservations. On the phone he'd said I came "highly recommended," but he'd also repeated the need for "full-on commitment." That he needed "doers, not just dreamers. No wishy-washy hippie stuff." Apparently several recruits for his eco-dream team had already dropped out.

With my rumpled T-shirt and Medusa hair, I could hardly look inspiring.

Perhaps my ex-girlfriend—a lipsticked NYU professor with a penchant for "soft bohemian women"—had been right to smirk as she watched me pack; perhaps she'd been right to remind me, in her creamy voice, that I'd never held a real job for more than a month.

I felt nauseous. Heat shimmered off the tarmac, blearing the tangle of trees and blossoms beyond. Adams revved the Jeep's engine. Unexpectedly, I smelled French fries.

"That biodiesel?" I asked, out of habit.

Adams turned to me, sunshine gilding his aviators, so that for a moment he appeared both blinding and holy. Then he answered: "They said you were good," and stomped on the accelerator, sending us careening towards Camp Hope.

So full of conviction, the Eleutherans had sold nearly everything before leaving England. Then they packed their remaining possessions—a few embroidered linens, the family's Geneva Bible—and sailed blind across an ocean as vast as an idea.

To Every Shareholder: liberty of conscious

To Every Shareholder: liberty of worship

To Every Shareholder: three hundred acres of land

My first eyeful of Camp Hope felt like a fever dream, a sight so gorgeous it hurt. Strung along a sugary beach were dormitories and classrooms, the dining hall and library—low breezy buildings, all freshly whitewashed—and beside them garden plots already flush with melon leaves, carrot tops, pole beans. Solar panels bowed to the sun. Wind turbines pirouetted in the breeze.

A citadel to sustainability.

“You weren’t kidding,” I breathed, standing beside Adams. “This *is* something.”

Adams thrust his hands into his pockets, like an oversized boy trying to be modest. “It’s getting there,” he said. “I’d wanted to have the hydroponic facility up—” He paused, having caught sight of his builders. They were sitting in the shade of some leafy bananas.

“Are they local—?”

Adams ignored me, instead calling, “Finished already?” as the men scrambled upright. “Don’t strain yourself, Devall.” Adams strode in among them, thumping the sweaty back of the slowest. “I’m in the market for more shark bait.”

Devall—or the man who’d been called Devall—stiffened.

Adams released a gunshot laugh. “I’m just messing with you,” he said, grinning until the others grinned with him.

Again I felt doubt, its nauseous blossom—but there was little time to dwell. Adams had me meet the other faculty: in addition to a small platoon of biologists, he had recruited a trio of women fresh from liberal arts colleges, who looked competent and overeducated, and who—perhaps noting my cropped hair and cargo shorts—promptly informed me that they “loved Judith Butler.” Then there was a gangly ex-Mormon named Charlie, who knew astronomy, trigonometry, and CPR. A busty scuba instructor named Jacqueline. Two silent Norwegian cooks, who vanished as soon as they were introduced. And me, presented as “a veteran environmental activist,” a title that made me blush.

I didn’t argue with it, though.

“In six days our students arrive,” said Adams, as we gathered under palm trees for our inaugural faculty meeting. “Camp Hope, though, should be more than a school. It’s our headquarters. The nerve center of an eco-revolution—not just here, but everywhere. If we can end overfishing on Eleuthera, end the island’s dependence on fossil fuels, the coastal rape of mega resorts, we can be a model for the world to change.”

With toes scrunched in sand, trade winds teasing our hair, all of us nodded—nearly *amened*—but Adams waved us quiet.

“And change is possible,” he said, his voice tightening. “Look at me—at who I was.” He folded his big arms across his chest, again the Navy SEAL. “In Panama they asked me to blow up reefs, just to make extra harbor space. And I did. I blew them up.”

He paused, gazing out at the perfumed colors of a postcard sunset, as if

waiting for admonishment, some censure.

Only the delicate lap of waves answered. The shy susurrations of palm fronds. “Now, though—” Adams’s voice softened, “now, I protect them.”

A week later, our first students tiptoed from a small metal plane, looking for someone to tell them what to do.

Nehemiah remembers when she came smiling off that plane: Princess Diana, on her honeymoon. There were resorts on the island then, clinging to Eleuthera’s coasts like barnacles. Coves full of yachts. Billy Jean King swatting balls across tennis courts. Music drifting from the bars.

Then there was a storm; resorts wrecked. Hurricane Andrew pummeled the island flat. After the storm, investors looked away. The big airport closed. No more tourists. No more jobs. Just empty afternoons, the bark of stray dogs.

“Mamma, she worked in a office,” Nehemiah says, spitting off the dock. “And Papa, he worked in one nexta hers.”

I wasn’t sure what to make of Camp Hope’s students at first. There were thirty in total, each about fifteen years old, well-nourished, athletic—taking a semester sojourn from New England prep schools—the beautiful sons and daughters of bankers and doctors and politicians. Children of wealth. Adams needed their tuition, I knew, to keep Camp Hope afloat, but it disturbed me: serving the already privileged. Before classes began, I imagined myself being stern with them, yanking the silver spoons from their mouths. Giving them a bitter dose of reality.

I suppose I was jealous, too. Or embarrassed. The students brought to mind my own scattershot upbringing—angsty and ugly—my mother’s sigh of relief when I told her, at seventeen, that I was leaving for New York and never coming back.

And my father? Who knows what he thought.

The students, though, were a bright cheery bunch. Hardworking. Despite my best efforts, I liked them. Still, when Adams asked for suggestions during a faculty meeting, I brought up the possibility of a scholarship fund. “For, you know, some *diversity*.”

My proposal made Adams stand up and sigh. He paced the small office, then paced and pounded the table. A potted ficus jumped.

“Hell!” he said. “I’d love to elevate all humanity. But some ghetto baby isn’t going to knock Exxon off its throne.”

At *ghetto baby*, the liberal arts girls looked as though they’d been Tasered. Charlie cupped his chin in his hand, brow furrowed. The biologists blinked. I leaned back in my chair, arms crossed, but Adams continued unperturbed.

“These kids, though—our kids—you get these kids hugging trees now, they’ll be writing the laws later.” His voice shifted, dropped lower. “You know

what I mean?” He leaned against the table, looked right at me. “You ever change any laws, Dawn?”

The question made my face hot. I’d lain in front of bulldozers, graffitied the cars of CEOs, made hundreds of phone calls—all things that had felt meaningful at the time—but my answer to Adams’s question? No.

“We get these kids on our side,” he continued, “we’ll have people with power on our side. We get them fighting our fight, we’ll actually see some progress.”

I didn’t like the argument—its coldness and calculation—and yet in the days that followed, I found the logic tough to dance around. How much good had I really done as an activist, buzzing like a fly in the ear of corporate interests and government officials until I was swatted away? Had I done anything beyond delay the inevitable?

There was a ruthlessness about Adams, certainly. But maybe that’s what the environmental movement needed: a little edge. Just look at what we were up against.

And Adams had other qualities as well: an unabashed nature enthusiast, he spent several hours a week teaching me to scuba dive, pointing out stingrays and iridescent octopuses, as we hovered in bath-warm seas. He was a leader who let lizards sprint across his hands. A man who, when I criticized my lack of formal scientific training, told me I was better than science: “you believe in things without proving them.”

Harder to look past was the fact that Adams ran Camp Hope like basic training: an operation designed to break a person down, then build them back up. Everyone rose before dawn, students and faculty alike, for pushups and five-mile runs, endurance swims off the coast. Then there was breakfast. Lessons. More pushups for every missed homework assignment or unmade bed. Then excursions to local communities to promote campaigns like SAVE THE SEA TURTLES or FISH ARE FRIENDS. Every hour rattled so full with purpose that by the time I collapsed into my bunk—exhausted, sunburnt, bug-bitten—there was little time to question anything before doing it again.

But what was there to question, really? Were a few pushups so bad? After all, I liked Eleuthera. Camp Hope. I liked how the turbines flexed in the wind and the solar panels gazed into the sky. I liked showering in rainwater that tasted dark and mossy from cisterns stored under buildings. I liked the biodiesel vans and the simple communal meals of rice and beans, hydroponic salad, and sugar apples from the orchard. I liked our mealtime conversations: the liberal arts girls comparing permaculture to Russian literature; ex-Mormon Charlie rambling on Ursa Major; the biologists trilling about the deep sea sharks they were hoping to catch off the coastal shelf with long-lined hooks.

“We find them,” said the biologists, gripping their forks, “who knows what kind of funding we’ll pull.” They were a sun-bleached bunch, hair shaggy, eyes bright. “Who knows,” they said, with the trembling faith of the already-convinced. “Who knows . . .”

I liked the compost piles and the collective dishwashing and explaining

veganism to students like dogma. Adams defined my teaching role vaguely. “Just talk,” he said, “don’t think about it.” So I gave students the ideas I’d been kicking around for years. I spoke about interconnectedness. Diversity as resilience. The webbed limbs of a banyan tree, dolphin pods, ant colonies: they were my infrastructure, my demographics, my guides. “It’s all tied together,” I told them, “ecology in all dimensions. Past and present. Reality and imagination.”

My old life, I realized, had been filled with so much negativity. Printing pamphlets that no one would read—protesting Monsanto, BP, or Peabody Energy—it had been more of a penance, a kind of martyrdom, than an honest effort at change. But now:

I liked the way the students nodded.

I liked the way the palm trees nodded in the breeze, as if they agreed, too.

The Eleutherans tried to till the soil with plows gifted from Boston charities. They fought the sweat on their brows, fought back questions of worthwhileness.

IDLE HANDS ARE THE DEVIL’S WORKSHOP

Hoping for answers, they looked to the sun, blazing hot and bored. Their linen shirts, their petticoats, they wore them stained and tattered.

“Curry soil,” the locals call it nowadays.

So full of rocks. Hard work. Dirty work.

A farmer feeds his cow two mangoes, eats the third himself.

Camp Hope’s wind turbine broke first; its small rotor corroded.

“We’ll hook back up to the grid,” said Adams, knowing Camp Hope’s solar panels couldn’t handle the load alone. “But it’s just temporary.”

And it was temporary, except a week later we had nine days of rain—including a real tropical slasher that tore the roof off the bike shed and flooded both dormitories.

Adams, though, almost seemed pleased by the destruction. “Lock and load,” he called to the students, as they carried sacks of rice from the storeroom to soak up excess water. Hefting a sack on each shoulder, he strode through the swill of flooded books and papers, splashing the sacks down before vaulting back for more.

That was the first time I really noticed Fitz Oberman—or noticed his behavior. While the other students followed Adams with soldierly enthusiasm, happy to be under his bark, Fitz stood under a dripping tangle of passion fruit vines, sulking.

“Buck up,” I said, slapping him on the back, so that he stumbled forward a few paces. Camp Hope’s daily exercise regime had made me stronger than I realized.

Fitz stared at me from under the brim of a large floppy hat. A pale kid, his

blond curls almost albino, the hat was a necessity—one he doubtlessly resented—its goofiness at odds with what, under other circumstances, might have been a rather regal face.

“I want to make a phone call,” he said. “I want to go home. I hate it here.”

I said nothing. The righteous blaze in Fitz’s eyes cooled to trepidation. By policy, Camp Hope restricted student communication back home. “For complete immersion and focus,” according to Adams. Faculty sent frequent progress reports to parents, but within Camp Hope itself, homesickness was considered an affront to the community.

“I’d like—”

“I understood you the first time,” I interrupted, checking that none of the other students had overheard. It would be bad for morale, that kind of talk, and “morale maintenance” was one area where Adams and I had a consistent ideological overlap.

The other students, though, were still cheerfully transporting sacks of rice. Adams lifted four sacks onto his shoulders at once, much to their fawning astonishment.

“How about we focus on helping out here?” I smiled at Fitz—I’d always been able to get along with most people—but something about him had me on edge. I watched him lick his lips, draw in a breath. He seemed to be gathering strength for more arguments, perhaps a more conspicuous tantrum, so I added, “I’ll call your parents right away and discuss the matter.”

The lie slipped out so easily, I barely noticed.

Telephone poles march down the coast, the orange caress of love-vines winding between wires. Even from the windows of a moving van I can see the giant roadside spider webs; their fist-sized makers braced against the breeze.

I pull into a settlement. Locals sit on stoops in threes and twos. One woman sells tamarind juice frozen in plastic cups—sweet brown Popsicles.

Chickens flutter past ankles. “Call me Rosenie,” she tells me, without a smile.

There are no jobs. The people leak away, like freshwater through the ground: Lutra’s limestone like a sieve. The kids all go to Nassau. They go to Miami. On Sundays, people gather in sweaty churches to praise God and pray the resorts will return.

But there is still food in the sea. At least there is food in the sea.

Our students hand out flyers. THE IMPACTS OF OVERFISHING. I ask her not to eat the grouper, the conch, to leave the mangrove swamps unsprayed.

KEEP THIS PLACE PRISTINE. KEEP IT BEAUTIFUL.

Rosenie looks at me, fanning her face with a straw hat. She leans against her cooler of tamarind cups. She pours her eyes all over me; she pours what I assume is a silent form of fury.

Only later do I realize it’s pity.

The heavy rains did not return, but in their wake the sandfly population exploded. Everyone's legs and arms became spotted with bites, itchy red welts like chicken pox that lasted days at a time. Most students handled them well; they made an effort not to scratch; they made a game of it. But Fitz—I pulled him aside one day after class, having noticed his welts were clawed at and oozy.

"Scratching just makes it worse," I said, as the classroom emptied to only us. Fitz bent over and began scratching in front of me.

I drew in a breath, knowing I needed to approach Fitz with "positive alternatives," as Adams had suggested in our most recent faculty meeting. "Take him spear fishing, crab hunting, free-diving," he'd said. "Let him know he matters." In the growing humidity, Adams had taken to conducting the meetings shirtless, so that while the rest of us sweated and swatted flies, he looked like Rambo, at ease in a desk chair, a shark tooth necklace slung around his throat.

"But why can't we just let him go home?" one of the liberal arts girls had asked. Marjorie—an over-sunscreened thing—she'd also had an unfortunate run-in with poisonwood earlier that week, the rashy results of which she still stoically endured.

"Let him go home?" Adams's forehead puckered. "We give every person 110 percent."

In my old life—my New York life—I might have quipped, "why not 125 percent?" But Adams's methods were making more sense every day. I'd seen some real progress with many of our students: kids whose dads owned banks talking about getting solar panels for their schools, wind farms in their communities. And while everyone at Camp Hope had played a role in these transformations, I also knew that many of these changes were my doing—my teaching—and I wanted Adams to recognize that fact: to see that I was the change-maker he'd brought me onboard to be.

"I'll work with Fitz more," I said, attempting to sound confident. "He came to me first, so I'll see about getting him in more leadership roles, getting him engaged."

Adams nodded, that was all. There were other things to discuss—like the rumors of a new cruise ship development on the island—and yet, I'd sensed him studying me, reevaluating me, even as he said, "Great. Problem solved. Let's talk fundraising."

Actually dealing with Fitz, however, was another matter. Standing in the empty classroom, the kid continued scratching, fingers digging into his flesh in long slow pulls.

"Cut it out."

He stopped and straightened up. A smile wormed onto his lips. "You know," he said, as if our conversation were entirely casual, "the locals spray these things."

Of course I knew the locals sprayed. I'd taught a lesson on it: by killing these insects, we would kill the birds that ate them and thereby poison the food chain.

Fitz returned to scratching, this time with a thoughtful rhythm. I felt an itchiness rising in my own spotted limbs, then an urge to lash out, to scream into his smirking face.

Instead I took a breath, said: “You’re late for trigonometry.”

With that, I left the classroom and made a point of forgetting him.

I had plans to go scuba diving; the morning curled open, beaming and dewy.

In another century, on the same sun-soaked island, the Eleutherans wondered if they’d been abandoned by their God. They needed more than spades and pewter spoons, the well wishes of Massachusetts Bay. Their corn crop failed, then the pumpkins and the peas. What seeds that hadn’t already been devoured by rats, by land crabs, withered with a drought. To stave off hunger, the Eleutherans speared sea turtles and stubby-legged iguana. When insects became unbearable—chigoe fleas, sandflies, mosquitoes big as birds—they burned Caribbean pine, filled their homes with black smoke, for a few moments of reprieve. They looked at one another with red and weepy eyes. They searched their minds for proverbs, Bible verses that might provide a little comfort, but came up empty-handed.

They disbanded, rebanded, died.

At last, the few survivors held lanterns near reefs at night, so that Spanish galleons, merchant ships, would wreck just off the coast. Then the Eleutherans salvaged barrels of ambergris, rum: the provisions of dead men that floated onto shore.

The day I found Fitz lying on the beach, getting purposely burned, Adams got a call confirming the rumors of a cruise ship port slated for construction.

“Don’t even start,” I muttered, marching Fitz to the first aid station. What with the chaos of the morning—Adams bellowing at Bahamian officials over the phone, then rushing to catch a flight to Nassau—I had been craving some down time.

But here was Fitz: his skin seared red, his chapped lips groaning, “Just let me go home,” as he lay slumped on a medical bunk.

Rather than answering, I looked out the first aid station window. A few feathery clouds dallied over a cerulean sea. I thought about what Adams had asked before leaving. “Can I count on you, Dawn?” he’d said. “Can you keep this place in line?”

I could, I’d realized: my competence staring back like a woman I’d only just met.

“I’m not the only one.” Fitz pushed himself up onto his elbows. “There’s others who want to leave too.”

Annoyed, I returned to his bedside, gripping his shoulder to inspect the sunburn. He sank down wincing from the pressure. “You really expect me to believe you?” I tried to sound unfazed—and yet, it had never occurred to me that other students might harbor the same feelings as Fitz. They all seemed so diligent, so enthusiastic.

Or, perhaps: so well trained.

“It’s true, they—”

I slapped some salve onto Fitz's bare skin.

He cried out once, his eyes looking somewhere I couldn't see.

How far away did the Eleutherans feel, watching the first ship splinter on a reef, the boat's wooden belly lacerated, drowning sailors crying out? Did England feel distant? Did the Eleutherans feel far away, as they stood knee deep in the sea, a salted breeze muffling the acrid burn of lantern resin?

Or was the Old World suddenly close?

At dinner, the students asked when Adams would be back.

"Soon," I told them.

"But when?" repeated a pony-tailed girl; the other students looked distraught.

I ignored them and scanned the dining hall, hands on my hips, projecting the fiercely competent woman I'd just realized I could be. No more wispy Brooklyn burnout. Two months of sun and exercise had turned my skin leathery, my muscles hard.

In a corner of the dining hall, I caught sight of Fitz talking intently to several wide-eyed boys. While I would have been pleased, a week ago, to see him making friends, now I worried he was trying to organize some kind of coup.

"Table seven," I called, as Fitz's jaw froze mid-sentence. "Fifteen pushups."

"But, we—"

"Fifteen. Or I'll raise it."

Without further protest, the boys dropped to the floor—even Fitz—their skinny elbows bending to ninety degrees. The other students, having noted my tone, began filing towards dishwashing duty or compost brigade.

Meanwhile, the biologists huddled together, chattering about their long-lined hooks. Recently, just off the coastal shelf—a two thousand-foot drop not far from shore—they'd hauled up the head of a tiger shark, its toothy jaw impaled on their bait. Just the head, though. The rest of the shark was chewed off.

"It's down there," I heard a biologist say, meaning an even bigger shark, more ancient. More impossible.

The liberal arts girls talked about eating ice cream.

As soon as I could get away, I went diving.

One hundred feet down your mind gets scrambled. Nitrogen narcosis it's called: a giddy phantasmagoria. To Cousteau: "the rapture of the deep." That far down, it's harder to draw air from a regulator. Harder to see. Colors go dim, red especially.

"Ain't good to be alone," Nehemiah had told me. "A man shouldn't be by his lone self. Or a fee-male, in your case."

Alone, underwater, I run my flashlight over the inflections of fan coral, the glint of eyes stowed in rocks. Sea grass quivering like souls before God. I see the open mouth of a crevasse—an underwater cave—slip inside, careful not to let my fins touch the polyps lining the walls. The crevasse turns into a tunnel that falls

away into darkness. I hover above the coastal shelf, an aquanaut, weightless in three dimensions.

My mask begins to fog. I have an urge to tear it off, as if that might help me see, perhaps even glimpse the deep-sea sharks the biologists believe are swimming below. I stare into the chasm, remind myself to breathe.

Only the air bubbles know where to go. They stream past me, towards the surface.

In a world even older than the Eleutherans', the Lucayan people told stories to explain themselves. Their ancestors lived in caves, they said, but only caves. They could not leave, because the sun would turn them into a rock or a tree. But one day a hero tricked the sun. The hero convinced the sun to stare at its own reflection: the image cast in the sea. The sun looked and was blinded. The people were set free.

Then, *La Niña, La Pinta, La Santa Maria*. Spanish galleons threading their way through the archipelago, black-prowed needles sewing up fate. Columbus must have known not to look at his reflection: the proud nose cast in Bahamian waters.

The Eleutherans saw theirs but years too late.

With Adams away, everyone was restless. The liberal arts girls, abandoning their usual shyness, appeared in my bedroom, twittering and effervescent. They wanted to go dancing.

"Please, Dawn," they said. "Please, please, please."

Down island there was a village bar. Rum and ginger beer. Lukewarm Kalik.

"It'll be fun. We won't be gone long . . ."

Adams expected the faculty to spend their nights at Camp Hope—and tired as we usually were, we had no reason to argue—but that evening the island beckoned, its beaches and blossoms swathed in shadows, like many dozen satin veils.

And anyway, Adams didn't have to know.

At the bar, Caribbean refrains trickled from a three-man band, one guy stroking a rusty saw. Some locals seemed amused by our presence, while others became tight-lipped and wary. Bat moths fluttered to the ceiling. Photos of celebrities lined the barroom walls. A bat moth landed on Madonna's face, like a big black moustache.

I got drunk easily. Maybe it was the heat: the small room warmed by so many bodies, by heavy breaths and sidelong glances. Soon enough my T-shirt was soaked with sweat, even though I barely danced, just stood swaying in a corner.

Outside, a moon ripened.

I felt out-of-body. Displaced. I began wondering what had happened to that warmhearted woman from Brooklyn: the one who loved to love. When was the last time I'd even thought about sex? When had sex become just another word for compromise?

The liberal arts girls, having tugged one another in front of the band, were swooped up in the arms of local men. The skinny one, Angela, looked around for someone to laugh to, because she was dancing with the fisherman, because she was not racist. His rough hands slipped into the curve of her back, mouth moving to her neck. “You turn me on, baby,” he said, his lips spelling out every word. She ignored this, of course. She made him twirl her in the dress she had gotten from Macy’s.

Meanwhile, old folks studied us from benches along the room’s edge: considered our awkward dancing. We couldn’t move the way their daughters could.

“Those island women—” Charlie, the ex-Mormon, bumped against me, out of breath and whispering like a co-conspirator, “they got a lot of backside.”

I clutched my drink, trying to remember what I’d come here to do.

But already it was ending. The locals piled into old cars, into truck beds, and rumbled away into the night. I walked the two miles to Camp Hope, the liberal arts girls trailing behind, sandals held in their hands. Once back, I fell asleep quickly, drunk enough not to notice the sandflies. The stale air. My own starving heart.

In the morning, I would tell these people to leave the conch in the sea, to leave their crops unsprayed. I would tell them it was for their own good. For everyone’s good. I would tell them to forget the possibility of a cruise ship port. To forget the jobs they pray for like long-lost apostles. To forget, forget, forget.

I eat a passion fruit growing wild on a vine, its insides a cluster of wrinkly yellow green. Seeds like fish eggs slither down my throat. Does passion always taste this sour? Cape Hope’s classrooms are starting to smell like schools I remember: stale coffee, urine, mildewing books.

Test Question #1: When did the first slave ships arrive?

Stray dogs wander in and out through doors left open for the breeze. Some of the dogs have dingo in them, people say, mixed in when the boats came from Africa.

Test Question #2: When did the last slave ships leave?

It must mean something that Spanish vessels ferried bodies away from the island to work and die on foreign soil. And not so long after, other boats brought bodies back. The Eleutherans’ descendants: British loyalists. Plantation owners with new ideas of paradise.

Test Question #3: And what is it—your idea of paradise—what is it exactly?

- a) The red petals of hibiscus flowers pressed closed like the folds of a lady’s skirt.*
- b) A quivering Casuarina pine, shaking free a thousand threading needles.*
- c) Those many-footed mangroves, stooped and wading through their salty parlors.*

Or maybe:

- d) None of the above.*

It was still dark when I rattled the bunks of several students. They snapped to attention, shaking off drowsiness to ask, “Did we miss roll call? Are we in trouble?”

I told them no, but to get moving. To gather their notebooks and cameras. “We’re going on a field trip,” I announced, in spite of my head-clawing hangover. “I want you to see the site of the proposed cruise ship port—a pristine cove—I’ll be expecting an essay.”

Really, though, the trip wasn’t for them. I’d woken needing to see what Adams called “unspeakably important”: the beach that would otherwise be encrusted with tiki huts and rubber slides. I needed to remind myself what we were working to save.

Our van chugged down island, trailing French-fry fumes. Fitz sulked in the back, but the other students babbled, bright-eyed, which took the edge off my headache.

A MAN DIGS HIS GRAVE WITH HIS OWN TEETH, the Eleutherans once told one another—even with mouths full of gravel, their tongues coated in sand—AS YOU SOW SO YOU SHALL REAP.

*“Pole bean, mel’n, goat peppa.”
The air stings with ash from slash and burn.
“Cabbage, tomata, cassava”
But you can’t eat ethics, can you?
“Locusts, they chewed all them holes.”
Can you?”*

I pulled the van onto a sandy side road, spilled out with the students. Broken glass crunched underfoot. In the distance: the weathered cement shells of several buildings, water winking through the crooked legs of a stilted lifeguard chair.

“I thought we were going to a pristine beach?” said a student.

I checked my map again, just as bewildered.

This was definitely the place.

Further on, the ground was tiled, cracked stairs leading to a swimming pool filled with brackish water. A drowned golf cart.

“C-I-u—,” said a moon-eyed boy, peeling back a curtain of vines to read a tiled wall. “Club Med.”

I knew I should say something about the resilience of nature, but I felt suddenly tired. My hangover crept back. I wanted to curl up in the ruins and sleep a hundred years.

“Where’s Fitz?” said another student.

There’d be no sleeping: of course Fitz would wander off. I cursed silently,

then I told the students to follow me and began jogging around the old resort calling his name.

Half an hour of hunting and still no sign of him.

We regrouped. The students circled around me, dutifully awaiting my next instruction—and yet I couldn't help thinking how outnumbered I was.

"You would tell me if you knew where he was?" I said, giving them each a hard stare in turn. "You would tell me, right?"

The students stared back, sweaty and confused. One girl looked about to cry.

"Drink some water," I said, regretting my accusations but noticing, also, how late the day had already become. Dusk crept closer. I'd neglected to pack any supplies. "Hydrate," I told the students, "then we'll do another sweep."

This time we extended the search, circling out to the beach, even peering up the legs of the lifeguard chair. We whistled; we shouted until our throats grew hoarse.

Still nothing.

The students, unflappable, continued sifting the landscape. I paused and began trying to formulate an explanation. Fitz got lost? Ran away? Evaporated?

In the late afternoon light, the sea sat silvery and oblivious. I almost felt jealous. That horizon line, so effortlessly smooth, like a single sheet of polished metal.

Except for something—a floating something—about thirty yards out.

The pale limbs of a body.

"Ms. Vargus!"

I saw a student running towards me and braced myself for the heart-squeeze of failed responsibility.

Then I realized I was fine.

"Fitz—" the girl nearly barreled into me, breathless, pointing—not towards the sea—pointing towards a set of tracks, a castaway stride, sliding farther down the shore.

I looked at the body again: a hunk of driftwood.

They were freed, the Lucayans told one another, when the sun saw his reflection.

They named the island "Eleuthera," a Greek word for freedom.

Freeman status? the plantation owners asked. How about apprenticeship?

Club Med: "Be free and fabulous."

I found Fitz in a cave that opened like a yawning mouth.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" My question ricocheted off the high ceiling, the damp limestone walls.

Fitz didn't answer. Instead he sat cross-legged, serene. His gaze flickered towards an oblong boulder near the front of the cave: a rock oddly shaped like a lectern—a pulpit.

“Make a speech,” he said. His pale face leered, spectral in the half-light.

The other students, by then, had drifted into the cave as well. They wandered about, necks craning back to stare up at the high ceiling. Whatever Fitz was getting at, I decided to ignore. “Okay, show’s over,” I said, “everyone back to the van.”

“Make a speech,” Fitz repeated, this time louder.

The other students stilled, went quiet.

“You’re not feeling well, Fitz.” I tried to sound calm, even bored. “You have sunstroke—that’s why you got lost—we need to get you back to school.”

He didn’t move. I glanced at the rock again, its unusual shape. Was there something magnetic about it? I imagined my hands on its surface: smooth and cool.

“Come on, Ms. Vargas.” Fitz’s voice echoed and expanded, as if channeling a thousand voices, a chorus of the dead. “Tell us about paradise, about a better world.”

The other students stared at me, waiting.

The Harvard students stare at me, waiting.

If I could, I would say this: after Columbus pushed his way to the boat’s bow for the first view of land, after the last Lucayan died huddled in a cave and the Eleutherans starved, then baited ships; after the plantation fields—rows of cotton, spires of pineapple stalks, the whip crack of progress—after the rum-runners, the Navy base, the resorts that burned coppice for golf course grass, named themselves “Cotton Bay,” “Pineapple Point”; after the hurricane; after tarmacs became landing sites for drug planes instead of princesses and tennis stars; after settlements emptied to only slaves’ ancestors and Haitian refugees and a few sunburnt whites sequestered up in Gregorytown, all of them—black or white—drunk on nostalgia; when all that was left of the Lucayans was a few chipped bits of palmetto ware, there was us.

“Don’t you believe?” said Fitz. “Aren’t you a believer?”

He began laughing—or choking—his head lolling back, the guttural noise crowding the cave like the beating wings of bats.

“Sunstroke,” I told the other students, as I wrenched Fitz to his feet and hustled him back to the van. “Sunstroke,” I told myself.

In the dark of night, water pours from the sky, slips through limestone like a sieve.

A joke no one seems to get.

Nehemiah holds out his hands and looks towards heaven. Water leaks through his fingers too. The drop drop drop of tears.

We returned to Camp Hope later than planned, but no one seemed to have noticed. Everyone was busy celebrating the work of the biologists. Earlier that day, they'd pulled a monstrous primeval shark from the depths. Eyes an iridescent green, six radiator gills. The shark had never seen light the way we had, swimming so deep: the length of the Empire State Building beneath our boats.

"Halleluiah," Adams boomed on the phone, when I described the discovery. "We're going to have research vessels up and down the coast! They'll never get that cruise ship port with this in our back pockets. This is damn fine news. Damn fine. And on that note, Dawn, you ready to become assistant director?"

Under the surface of the sea, the surface of memory—that taut lip of time—they swim back and forth, as they've done for millennia. Those ancient things we barely believe exist: pulled from the water like drowned secrets. A species that outlasted the dinosaurs. They circle us still, eyes filtering the eternal twilight of the deep. They had seen it all, every item that sank to the ocean floor: every spear or hymnal, doubloon, manacle, pearl necklace. Every pen and student notebook.

"The Lucayan people had a myth," I tell the Harvard students, at last beginning my speech. "Once, their people lived in a cave, unable to leave, for fear the sun would turn them to stone."

And they listen, as they always listen.