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Whistle shrieking, the *Heron H*—a small tramp cargo ship that resembled a tugboat—labored out of the Belize City harbor. Her hold was crammed with hogs. To clear my head of their mud and sewage stink, I sat on the railing, my back against a beam and my legs straight out in front of me, so I wouldn't flash my underpants. I watched in fascination as Belize City retreated building by building, then disappeared entirely, replaced by palm trees and an occasional tin-roofed shack.

Our cabin, where Aaron, my new husband, had stashed our suitcases, was directly across from me. It was the size of a closet and had two bunk beds nailed to the wall, each covered with a stained, inch-thick mattress. No sheets. No pillows. I had already made up my mind to stay awake the entire trip rather than sleep on one of those filthy mattresses.

Farther down the deck, just outside the head, an enormous brindler bull was tied to the railing by his horns. Anyone using the head had to yank the door open and dash inside before the bull kicked the door shut in his face. I was twenty years old, born and raised in the New Jersey suburbs, and had never seen an animal with testicles the size of cantaloupes before. I couldn't stop staring at them.

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As the scenery slid by—no more shacks, just sea and sky and a bank of greenery dense as fog—a black man wearing creased trousers and a see-through white shirt shuffled past me. He'd been back and forth a few times already, flipping through a deck of cards, asking people if they wanted a game.

But this time he stopped, cocked his head, and regarded me as the oddity I was: the only white woman on board. He was skinny and very black—a Garifuna, I decided. The Creoles in Belize City tended to be toast-colored and better fed. I refused to make eye contact, hoping he'd leave me alone. My escape from Verona, New Jersey, into the rainforest was a fantasy come true, and I wanted to savor it in private.

The Garifuna held out his hand. "You would shake hands with a black man in his own country?" His voice wasn't belligerent; he was just asking. He didn't even sound especially hopeful.

Idealistic to the core—although not the radical leftist Aaron was—I leaned forward, my hand extended. "Of course!"

We shook. More accurately, the Garifuna pumped my hand once, then dropped it. "What you doing here? You Peace Corps?"

"No."

"Papal Volunteer?"

"No."

"What you could be, then?"

Good question. How could I explain that I was the wife of an anthropologist who planned to spend the next year studying the Kekchi Maya? How could I explain an anthropologist? Or that I was running away from home to grow up? "I'm a teacher," I said in a burst of inspiration. Only a small technicality. I *would* be a teacher, once Aaron and the local priest decided on an appropriate village. As of now, I was simply Mrs. Aaron Ward.

The Garifuna nodded his approval. "Where you going teach?"

"Toledo District."

"Ahh—you going to Punta Gorda then!"

Punta Gorda was a small coastal town where Aaron and I and the

Heron would part company. “No. I mean yes, that’s where we’re going. But that’s not where I’m teaching.”

“Barranco?”

“No.”

Subtly his features rearranged themselves. “You going teach Indians, then.”

“The Maya. Yes.”

“But they backward, Missus. They eat pure corn and beans, just so. Why you want it live in a trash house in the bush and eat corn and beans?” He gestured wordlessly toward the bow, where a dozen barefoot Maya sat stoically on wooden benches, their faces as blank as a platter of pork chops. The Garifuna’s expression said he’d seen my future and it made him squeamish. “Good day to you, Missus.” And off he went, in search of a better class of person to play cards with.

Late that afternoon the wind came up, although the day was still bright and calm with no clouds. I abandoned my front-row seat on the railing when the *Heron* started to pitch and decided I’d sit—nothing more, just *sit*—on the lower bunk. Through the open door I watched sapphire blue waves, their crests smoking with foam, slap the *Heron* from side to side with a crack like a tree splitting. Then I watched one of the passengers heave his lunch just outside our cabin.

Aaron materialized next to me on the bunk. “Do you believe this weather? The purser said we’re getting slammed by the tail end of a hurricane.” Then he took a good look at me. “Uh-oh. You don’t look so good, Squirrel. How’re you feeling?”

“Not good.” I slumped against him, watching the horizon climb the door frame and then swoop out of sight as though it had never existed. My stomach followed the lurch of the horizon line. The air inside the cabin was stifling.

“Buster Hunter wants to know if we’ll take tea with him.”

I groaned. Buster Hunter was the captain, a hulking, white-haired bull of a man, dressed in grimy, oil-soaked pants and a vest like one of his own deckhands. “You go. I’ll stay here.”

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“Poor Squirrel. That’s one thing we never thought of packing—seasick pills.” Gently Aaron wrapped his arm around my shoulders and rocked me. He smelled salty, with undertones of pig. His role model was Robert Jordan, the protagonist of Ernest Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. I couldn’t recall any of Hemingway’s heroes traveling on pig boats.

I kissed the pale, tight skin under Aaron’s jaw and gingerly lay down on the mattress, trying not to touch it, my cheek against my folded hands. “I’ll be fine. Go have tea with Captain Hunter. Tell him I’m flattered but indisposed.”

By the time the *Heron* dropped anchor at Stann Creek that night, I’d thrown up so many times my ribcage ached. Cockroaches scurried up and down my bare legs. I hardly had enough strength to pick my head up and look out the door. Aaron lay in the upper bunk, snoring.

The *Heron* wallowed at a long, ramshackle wharf, pitching so hard I was surprised that the people trying to board her didn’t lose their footing and drown. Women teetered on pilings, handing boxes and crates and children to people already on board. The wharf itself was nothing more than a string of oil drums lashed together, lit by a beacon hung from the mast of a derelict sailing schooner. People yelled back and forth in Creole, Spanish, Mayan, Garifuna, English. The beacon on the schooner turned blue, then white, then orange.

A Maya man with a sloping forehead, a sensuous, down-turned mouth, and a machete strapped around his waist like a sword was trying to wedge a treadle sewing machine against the rail. Garifuna women swayed down the passageway, baskets of fresh fruit on their heads, bracelets cascading down their arms like rivers of silver. Buster Hunter stood on the *Heron*’s upper deck, his face changing color with the light, his hair radiating from his head in little wisps, like flames. He looked like Satan directing a scene in hell.

Moaning, I curled into a ball and prayed for a quick death.

When I had announced my wedding plans to my parents, they were appalled. They disapproved of Aaron’s politics. They disapproved of the

fact that he, an older man—he was a graduate student—was taking me, a sophomore at the University of Michigan, on a “working honeymoon” for a year in the jungle. Like most people, they had no idea where British Honduras was. Africa? An island off the coast of China? Only my German-born grandfather, who had run away to sea at fourteen, knew it was a tiny Central American country the size of Massachusetts, south of Mexico and east and north of Guatemala. Its entire eastern border faced the Caribbean as though the country were sprawled on its side, facing the azure half-moon of the earth’s second-largest barrier reef. Along its spine grew some of Central America’s most pristine rainforest. That’s where Aaron and I were going—where the Maya lived.

“We used to ship mahogany out of Stann Creek,” my grandfather had said, chewing thoughtfully on his pipe. When I was a kid, his tales about life on the high seas enthralled me. It was my fervent wish to grow up and be a sailor like Grandpa Brombach. But along with adolescence came the dawning realization that girls didn’t sign on as sailors in order to see the world. I’d have to manage it some other way.

So I got married.

The morning of the third day the sea subsided. The *Heron* had slowed to a crawl, and I felt well enough to venture out on deck and find out why. A man in a handmade wooden dory wielded his oars to keep his little boat from colliding with the *Heron* while the man next to him held up a string of fish. A thin, elderly Creole wearing a grimy apron hung over the *Heron*’s rail, talking to them. The fish and some money changed hands, and the men rowed back to shore. I couldn’t see a town. I couldn’t see a house. I couldn’t even see a trickle of smoke streaming skyward.

Aaron showed up a few minutes later. “How do you feel? Are you in the mood for breakfast at the captain’s table?”

“Yes, I am,” I said, surprising myself. “I’m starving.”

Bear-Bear grinned. “I’m glad to hear that.”

Confidently he bounded ahead of me up the ladder to the upper deck. He always moved as though he expected inanimate objects to

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get out of his way. An expert skier, he had a sturdy build, brown hair, leaf-green eyes, and a complexion that turned red and peeled before it tanned. The ladder was slick with sea spray and hard to hold on to. Self-consciously I glanced down to see if any of the Maya were peering up my skirt. Skirts were a sore point between me and Aaron. I would have been much happier wearing jeans, but he wouldn't allow it. "Only Kekchi men wear trousers, Squirrel. The women wear skirts. Why draw attention to yourself and confuse them when there's no need to?"

His argument was logical but not persuasive. I couldn't explain—because I wasn't consciously aware of it—how vulnerable a woman accustomed to wearing jeans could feel in a skirt. But the fight I had really minded losing was over cigarettes. Aaron had argued that since the Maya women didn't smoke cigarettes, neither could I. He didn't tell me they smoked *puros* instead—small, smelly, hand-rolled cigars.

The Maya were eating dabs of what looked like raw dough with their fingers. Not one of them even glanced in my direction, and the women—whose own skirts were so long they grazed the deck—didn't seem to care how a white woman climbing a ladder was dressed.

Breakfast with the captain was Creole bread, scrambled eggs, and fried fish. I scooped some eggs on my plate, a few slices of bread, and two fish. Before tackling the fish, I cut their heads off and maneuvered them discreetly behind the eggs so I wouldn't have to look into their poached, milky eyes.

Buster Hunter was wearing the same clothes he'd had on in Stann Creek. From the smell of the cabin, he'd probably been wearing them a great deal longer than that. But he had a wonderful view from up here, and while he talked I gazed over his shoulder at the jungle that stretched in an unbroken green line from the shore to the horizon.

"My only real competition's the *Caribe*," Hunter rasped. We had passed the *Caribe*, a decrepit tramp freighter that also hauled passengers, during the night. She had run aground on a sandbar. "Owned by a bunch of Creoles from Belize City. Got greedy, they did." He emitted a short, unexpected laugh. "Greedy choke puppy. *Heron's* my boat, and

Belize City to Puerto Barrios is my run. I carry the mail. They'll learn." He shoveled a forkful of fish and eggs into his mouth. "I own stock in Brodie's," he added, as if that clinched the argument—which it did. Brodie's was the colony's biggest general store.

The fish were crunchy on the outside, moist and sweet on the inside. Since I saw nothing on the table that resembled a napkin, I wiped my mouth using the back of my hand the way Hunter had. "Who were they?"

He swung his massive head toward me, scowling. "What's that?"

I slid closer to Aaron. Up close, Hunter looked even bigger and more alarming than he had from a distance. "Those men who sold your cook the fish. Who were they?"

"Half-breeds. Must be a dozen of 'em back in the bush there. Mother's Kekchi, father's Garifuna."

"But where do they live? There's nothing *there!*"

Hunter laughed again, smacking the table so hard all the dishware jumped. His fist was the size of a ham. "There isn't, except the Indians. Took some Brits down earlier this month, bigwigs from Belize Estates, and all they did was bellyache. Turns out they'd hired a Maya workforce. They're hard workers, I'll give 'em that, but when it came time to plant corn, every last one of 'em dropped his tools and disappeared. Went home to make plantation. If I'd known they were going to hire Indians, I could have set 'em straight quick-time. The Maya don't eat with knives and forks, believe in every kind of heathen mumbo jumbo, and won't let anything come between them and their cornfields. They say they whisper in the ear of the ancients when they plant. Bunch of savages, if you ask me."

I felt Aaron stiffen. Under different circumstances he would have joked that the Maya were *noble* savages, like the ones the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau had described. That was the main reason he wanted to study the Kekchi—to find out who they really were. As for me, I had never seen people like the Maya before. I'd never seen anybody like Buster Hunter before. And, for all the time I'd spent exploring the

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woods as a kid, I had never seen wilderness like this before, either. Did the rainforest where Aaron planned to take me look this isolated, this unwelcoming? And what if the Kekchi really *were* savages?

But I should have asked him those questions when we first discussed honeymooning among the Maya. Now it was too late. For better or worse, I was already here.

Don Owen-Lewis, the Amerindian development officer, met us in Punta Gorda and drove us to his house in Machaca Creek. The road was muddy, a single lane defined by tire tracks. Toledo District had no paved roads and no electricity, although Don lived in a sprawling, Western-style house with beds and fluffy pillows and indoor plumbing. Machaca Creek was even hotter and more humid than Belize City had been.

“Tommygoff will kill you quick-time,” Don informed me after dinner that night, his yellow-flecked hazel eyes alight with mischief. He had a long, skinny build, a ribald sense of humor, and black hair that stuck straight up on his head like a rooster comb.

This man has lived in the bush too long, I thought. Don’s job was to integrate the Maya, subsistence farmers who practiced slash-and-burn agriculture, into the colony’s market economy. He had lived here eight years—Aaron had met him the previous summer. Since I couldn’t tell if he was trying to amuse me or scare me, I didn’t react. Also I didn’t know what a tommygoff was.

“Man in Crique Sarco stepped over his threshold one day and tommygoff bit him on the foot,” Don continued gleefully. “Sat down with his back against his house and lit a cigarette. Dead before he finished it.” Don himself was smoking at a furious rate, as though to emphasize his point.

“Is that so,” I said mildly. Okay—a tommygoff was a snake. And Crique Sarco was a Kekchi village where Aaron and I would spend the next three weeks. Last summer Aaron had lived there with Manuel and Petrona Xi, a young Kekchi couple and their children. (Don’s first home had been in Crique Sarco; Manuel and Petrona were his next-door neighbors.)