

Soft Blue Towels, Soft White Sands

A man was selling sunglasses. She waved him away, then waved him back and bought the sunglasses. It was hot, and a temperature-less wind blew sand up from the beach. She got up and turned the chair and lay back down. She watched a great boat pass the dock, and when it had gone she got back up, hugging herself through her towel, and went up to the pool where the chairs were guarded from the wind by the hotel. She left the glasses, and the man picked them up when she was off the beach.

How is it? her husband asked when she had sat down.

Oh, it's fine. There's the wind but it's fine.

They lay by the pool watching the boats go past and said nothing else until the late buffet at nine. White waves broke against the light green shallows, transitioning sharply from the darker, deeper waters past the buoys. The city was grey on the horizon on the mainland across the lagoon. The white sand was the softest of all the sands they had ever felt and the breeze was gentle under the hotel.

I'm spooked here.

You shouldn't be. It's just the wind.

Well, I'm spooked here. I'm spooked by the wind.

She listened a while to the curtains lifting up from the balcony, and then to his breaths as they got more regular and farther apart.

Won't you hold me?

I'm asleep.

Well, I suppose I am too.

She lay as still as she could, watching a lighted boat drifting up to the dock across the harbor and then away. Black nightbirds flew across the moon, a view she would have liked, but by then she was asleep.

The next morning they drove out to the islands. They caught a movie and they went out to the aquarium, where they saw local exotic fishes and registered for a snorkel tour later in the week, and then they went walking. Downtown looked like it might have once been made of real houses, brightly colored and pressed together too close to the sidewalk. Everything had been converted: movie theaters, saloons, shops, and small hotels above them. The sun was hot. Melted pavement shone on the bridge back to the peninsula and the larger hotels. The fans were full force and ineffective over two-story restaurant patios, where people sat in swimsuits and the white beaches extended behind them. They sat at one of those, on the second floor, drinking and people-watching and looking at the shop windows across the street.

A boy at the door of a bikini shop saw them watching, waved coyly at them, and turned profile with one hand on his hip. The people around him didn't seem to notice, and soon he was out of sight behind the crowd.

Still spooked here? her husband asked.

A little. I guess not. Not in the daytime.

The swimsuit shop seemed to only sell bikinis; there was another clothes shop next door. Three girls leaned over the wide balcony in the saloon over the restaurant on the other side of it, smoking and talking and watching the boy and the people in the restaurants. Tourists crowded the sidewalk below them.

She looked back at the bikini shop. There was only one swimsuit in the display window, a tiny bikini on a transparent shop mannequin--or it must have been transparent, and it must have been very clean; she couldn't see the mannequin at all.

How strange, she said. How creative. I've never seen a transparent mannequin.

The swimsuit, she saw when they went back down to the street, was deep blue with gold sequins, laced blue and gold with blue fringe. It glittered in the sun that came through the window, seeming to pick up the colors of the day and the night all at once.

God, don't buy that.

Why not? I'd look great in it.

You already look great.

I'd look greater.

She walked in and he followed, and she asked the shopkeeper for the swimsuit off the mannequin.

What you'd look like is you'd look like you're not wearing anything at all, her husband said.

Great. That sounds great. I'll buy it.

She paid the storekeeper and put the bikini on under her clothes in the changing room, cramming her underwear in her purse for the trip home.

Down the street was a world records museum. They saw some of the largest things and the smallest things and the fastest things, and in an hour it was dark again. The restaurants shifted into their night service and the bars filled up, warm winds blowing into open windows. The people all looked the same in the darkness, and the streets all smelled like food. The shops and the museums stayed open. It was loud, and bright, and there was much to be amazed by; the night didn't end until morning.

They spent the next few days on the beach and on the water. They rented sea kayaks and paddled out to the end of the channel behind the hotel, then to the harbor, and finally, after a few days of turning back from the tall waves and the wind, out to the ocean, looking at the private beaches and the huge mansions on the other side of the peninsula, vaster and more grandiose the farther out they got. All day small fishing yachts undocked from the mansions, zipping across the horizon and bringing up wakes for them to paddle on.

Those were magical days. When she closed her eyes at night she felt the ocean waves still beneath her, rocking her to sleep. During the day she felt the hot sun pulsing into her. At night she felt the moon and the sunsets underneath her skin, as if the light itself were passing through her body on its way somewhere else.

She woke up too early. It was still dark. The week was almost up, at the halfway point of their vacation. She wriggled her toes under the sheet, and tossed it off her onto her husband. She couldn't see herself in the dark: she passed a hand over the moon and only saw the moon, tracing the bed and the kitchen and their scattered belongings in long shadows. There were rippling shadows from the gauzy curtains, as if they were all underwater inside the hotel.

Her husband was asleep next to her, awash in the white light of the moon. She stood up carefully from the bed and tiptoed over to his side. She cast no shadow, even as the curtains tapped against her body, except for the silhouette of the swimsuit she had fallen asleep in. Golden blue dots of light danced over the bedsheets as the light passed through the sequins, the only color she could see in the dark. Her heartbeat was interleaved with the loud ocean waves crashing against the reef. Except for the moon, the ocean and the sky were one plane of blackness, with no horizon.

It was hot outside, and midmorning by the time any tourists left their line of hotels. The bus was empty except for her and the woman it had stopped for. The sun rose fast, lighting first the ocean to one side and then the lagoon, washing the bus and the street and the sky in blue and pink pastels.

She got off when the other woman did, a short bridge away from where she wanted to be. She ran past the restaurants and the movie theaters and the trinket shops. Her right side ached like hell. She felt swept up in a wind she hadn't felt since college track. God, what if she was disappearing, getting weightless--what would it be like to float off the ground and up and off the Earth? She imagined herself wrapped up in the curtains, ripped from the window some night, flying out above the black ocean. How long had she been fading for?

Had her husband noticed she was gone? She tried not to think about it, and focused on the hot pavement hard and uneven under her feet.

The boy outside the shop was already there, in new tight swim trunks, and her bikini in the window had been replaced by another one. There were two customers in the shop: a man who seemed bored, barely registering the door chime as she walked in, and a small boy, probably his son, who was engrossed in golden sandals on a shelf as the shopkeeper enthusiastically showed him around.

She ran up to the shopkeeper. What's wrong with me? she yelled. He bent the wings on the ankles of the sandals back and forth, loosening them up, and then he helped the boy put them on, tying the straps against his shins. The boy looked thrilled. She waved her hands around them, yelled at them not to buy anything, but they didn't seem to see her. The boy and his dad paid and left with the shoes, and finally the shopkeeper turned to her. He looked tired.

What do you want? he asked.

Thank God, he could see her. What's wrong with me? What's happened to me? she asked.

I sell things. I don't do the understanding. I just sell things.

What do I do? What can I do now?

He didn't answer, and she repeated the question, louder. I won't leave, she said. You have to help me. I won't leave. I'll--I'll haunt you.

He laughed, then stopped when she didn't. I don't know what you should do, he sighed. He gestured out at the street. There are jobs here, employment opportunities. You have an advantage, if you want them. If not--if anything, I guess--I can offer you a job, if you

want it. It won't pay well. He gestured again to the shop windows, facing out at the people walking by. The boy at the door was gone; evidently he had been sold. We always need more mannequins.

She realized he hadn't been gesturing at the street or the boy. She took in the vast rows of shimmering, floating bikinis. Some of them shivered, slightly, though the door was closed and she felt no breeze against her skin. She gave a yelp, then screamed, tearing the swimsuit off and throwing it at the salesman. The invisible mannequins shirked from her scream, then straightened lithely. Now that she had noticed them she couldn't not notice. The swimsuit glanced off the salesman's glasses and fell twisting to the ground, the sequins catching the light and twinkling beautifully.

She ran out onto the sidewalk and elbowed through the crowd onto a bus as it pulled out, not paying the fare. No one looked at her, but no one sat next to her, either, and the seat next to hers was the only one left empty as the bus filled up. Now I'm really wearing nothing at all, she thought, hugging her knees into her chest and staring at the empty seat.

Two men got on and serenaded the bus. One leaned against the back of the seat in front of her. There was a worn, peeling Disney princess sticker on his guitar. She wondered if he had a daughter, how old she was, and how old the sticker was. The warm air hit her hard through the open windows as the bus sped up, the sound and the smell of the salty air mixing with the sound of the music and the smell of the bus. They passed taxis, motorcycles, and buses, so many buses. They passed the flea market, and a man looking out at the commerce from the roof.

An old lady got off at the start of the line of tall hotels and she followed, walking slow. The sun was high over the shimmering grey sea behind the tourists and hotels. It was still windy on the peninsula, and the beaches were mostly empty. Fast boats tore by, and their blue wake broke apart the silver reflection of the sun. The ocean under the clouds was golden blue where there weren't clouds, silver where there were. A huge ship sped past the hotels, glowing gold in the sun, then black against the sun, raising a great mist in its wake.

At the hotel, her husband and the doorman were standing at the entrance talking. When he saw her her husband opened his arms wide, a blue hotel towel stretched between them, and wrapped her in a warm embrace.

Now you're really not wearing anything at all, he said.

You see me?

Of course I see you.

He embraced her through the towel. The doorman looked past them into the busy city, at seas of vacationers in an endless humid summer.