

translucent.

by Milan Lefferts

He handed over the drink, and smiled at me like I was an old friend. Nodding slightly, and with the same grin on his face, the unknown waiter moved over to Cass. His smile broadened and his left eye formed a wink. "Wild girl," he said, as he walked off to serve the next lobster-colored tourist, still nodding.

"You remember him?" I asked. She turned on her side, a sigh escaping from her mouth.

"Haven't got the faintest," Cass groaned from underneath a towel.

I thought back on the night before, but all I recalled was the sweaty atmosphere and the taste of vodka. The veil of substance abuse was always hard to see through, as if a thick fog had arisen inside of your brain. Of course, I remembered her. Cass is an amazing dancer, I thought to myself, and by 'amazing' I meant 'slutty as hell'. Luckily, so was I. A slight tinge of arousal chased away some of the fog as an image appeared of us dancing and laughing. I instinctively nodded in approval. Wild girls.

Our binge of the night before started with a masterfully pathetic rendition of Aladdin. I had seen mediocre-to-terrible community theatre before, however this was a whole new level of horrendous. Often when art crosses a certain threshold of bad, it becomes unintentionally hilarious, and enters the infamous so-bad-it's-good category.

The slight awkwardness of the situation dampened by vodka-fanta, a drink that I knew would forever be associated with this place, we sat entranced by the spectacle for over an hour. One thing that never ceased to amaze Cass was the total lack of comprehension of the English text. The performers had clearly chosen to cater to their international audience, however had forgotten to study the language itself in the process. Their mouths moved approximately when the actual singing took place, yet it was clear that there was only a rough familiarity with the music.

To their credit, the dance routines were reasonably choreographed, and to compensate for the wretched karaoke, every other song a pair of tightly-corseted belly dancers would come on stage to distract the viewers. I remember Cass noting the dramatic abundance of cleavage. "The dads and dykes need something as well," she'd said. Needless to say, I had noticed as well.

"You hungry yet?" I asked.

"Didn't we just have breakfast?"

"Honestly, Cass, no idea. Does it matter?"

"No I guess not. I can wait a bit."

It had just dawned on us that morning that there was no need for the rules of back home here. What time to eat, how much to drink, being efficient, being responsible. In this place there was only feeling, no forcing. Here, I could do whatever I felt like.

I inhaled deeply, closing my eyes. Chlorine and perhaps a faint whiff of sunscreen. Holding my breath in for just a bit longer than usual, then exhaling dramatically was one of my

small pleasures. A short moment of total relaxation. I kept my eyes closed and could feel the calm and total silence. The swimming pool grew quiet, the arguing of the British family several beach chairs down from us grew muffled. Only the soft breathing of Cass was audible beside me. One more deep breath, hold, exhale, and I was back. I slowly opened my eyes, and spotted the girl from yesterday glance at me from the edge of the swimming pool.

“It’s Beyoncé again,” I said.

Cass slowly got up, towel still placed on her head.

“She is smoking hot,” Cass said, placing clear emphasis on the word ‘smoking’.

“She’s also what, 16 maybe?”

“Never hurts to look,” Cass said.

I shrugged, pretending to ignore Beyoncé’s nonchalant glances. We’d met her at the resort’s club, or what goes for a club in a place like this, and bought her a few drinks. Obviously we knew she was mainly being nice to get us to buy her drinks, but we gladly indulged her. Cass just wanted a cute girl to dance and run around with, and how could I say no to that? Later it turned out Beyoncé had other plans with us (though that might’ve partially been the alcohol), but getting arrested for sleeping with a minor was definitely not part of our plans. Besides, Cass had a girlfriend and I was not in the mental state for such things.

Her English had been terrible, to say the least, and all we could discern was that she either liked Beyoncé songs or wanted to BE the next Beyoncé. Her performance as one of the scantily clad belly dancers at least showed her dedication to becoming a sex symbol. For a room filled with middle-aged dads, she was as close as it got.

“Alright, I’m going for a swim,” I said to a now softly snoring Cass. What a girl. I took a moment to take her in. Too white for this temperature, that’s for damn sure. Her leg was sticking out from under the protective shade of the parasol, a one way ticket to third-degree burns and sunstroke. I draped my t-shirt over her leg just in case. Wouldn’t want to see her hurt.

We’d shared some romance years before, and even though there was still some attraction there, we were past that point now. Friendship always consumes my lust. I think my mind works in that way to keep things simple. Black and white. Friend or lover.

I got up from the beach chair. The skin where my towel had failed to separate me from the chair stuck to the plastic, like a stamp to a letter. The sensation reminded me of the sun screen I had in my mother’s car as kid, its four suction cups a constant battle to either remove or stick in place. Perfect way to keep a child quiet, come to think of it, especially one as careful and meticulous as I had been.

I slowly meandered over to the pool looking around. It was still relatively early, but all the sunbeds had been either taken or reserved, towels, sandals and magazines marking their owner’s territory. I sighed audibly, this time one of frustration. The first-come first-serve mentality really bothered me. There were plenty of beds for everyone, just leave them for others until you actually use them. Never being one that could hide my emotions, apparently I had an angry look on my face, as I received a challenging stare from an overly muscular middle-aged man. His tribal pattern and British flag tattoos revealed enough about him that I’d rather not cause a fuss. I snapped out of it and smiled at him, his confused blinking signaling the end of the threat.

The pool itself was large and circular, surrounded by a vast army of sunbeds. Children played in the shallow end, or swam in the deeper parts equipped with water wings and accompanied by parents, aunts and uncles. The teenagers (Beyoncé among them) were stealing glances at each other, some pretending not to look, others pretending not to notice. An elderly woman, her big red-colored hair high on top of her head, swam at a leisurely pace, taking in her surroundings merrily.

It was a strange place, this resort. Fancy in the trashiest way possible, the all-inclusive was in no way exclusive. The animation team, the food, the performances, the buildings, everything was mediocre at best, hilariously bad at worst. The price had already indicated this, of course, and Cass and I were enjoying every moment of it. Especially the people. A unique mix of fake Gucci and actual gold chains, the clientele exuded the same ambience as the resort itself. Not to say that we felt any better than the other visitors, we were, after all, on the same holiday, we just knew we were different, and so did they. And we reveled in it, submerging ourselves in the trashy resort lifestyle as best as we could. I smiled at the thought: a holiday perfect in its many imperfections.

I surveyed the pool for a place to get in, diving was forbidden after all, and spotted a ladder unoccupied by the elderly or cackling children. I wandered over, passing the same waiter who now gave me a face I could only describe as 'I know your secret'. I forcefully smiled back, imagining the juicy rumors now circulating among the resort's staff.

A wave of nausea and dizziness overcame me then. First I thought it was the hangover, the dried up husk of my brains craving for water. The sickness seemed to lessen for a moment, but flared up again on the right side of my head. One hand massaging my temples, I turned around to ask the waiter for some water, when I heard it. Distant at first, hidden somewhere in my mind, a slight hum burrowing its way to the surface. And with the burrowing, came the pain. The buzzing sound swelled, not unlike a swarm of insects, a cacophony of crawlers. I could feel it behind my eyes. As the insects multiplied rapidly, a piercing, drilling headache flared up in my right temple. Grinding my teeth, my face contorted from the sudden, overwhelming pain, I looked over to the waiter, to anyone, for help. I was answered only by a look of confusion and pain, not unlike my own.

I retched the contents of brunch onto the smooth stone tiles, holding myself up by the metal railings of the pool's ladder. In the corner of my eye I saw the waiter drop his glass-filled tray, the cheap booze mixing with my vomit as their containers shattered. I witnessed his body go limp, like a marionnet with its strings suddenly cut off. With a loud crack, his skull split open on the edge of the pool, the mushy contents of his skull adding to the horrifying cocktail on the ground. Somewhere far away I felt a sharp pain in my left leg, looked down and saw a large piece of glass sticking out of my calf.

The buzzing subsided just as rapidly as it had appeared, and I tried to steady myself. I'd never seen someone die before, and I was quite sure he was gone. Scared and confused, I pulled my eyes away from the waiter's smashed head, and looked around for help. It was then that I knew something was horribly, horribly wrong.

All along the pool, people were throwing up, trying to hold themselves up with whatever they could find. The man with the tattoos lay still on his sunbed, his head hanging off the side in an unnatural angle. Another ran towards what was likely his family, getting caught by whatever

this was mid-run. His knees buckled and, falling forward onto the wet stone, slid full-speed into a garbage can, leaving red skid marks on the ground where he travelled. A child that had been climbing onto a ledge moments before, smiling at his mother lying on the sunbed below, lay still on top of each other, the kid's elbows twisted in the wrong direction, his mother's throat crushed by her fallen son, blood running from her mouth.

Amidst the chaos, I turned my eyes to the pool. Floating bodies, young and old, drifted languidly in the water, their backs turned upwards like synchronous swimmers practicing a routine. I stared for a moment at the eerie water ballet, before I realized: they might still be alive.

Steadying my ragged breath and shaky arms, I jumped into the pool.

The glass shards in my leg seemed to awaken as I hit the water, the muscles spasming against the sharp edges. Pain surged upwards, and instinctively I grabbed the side of the pool. Whimpering, I closed my eyes for a moment, to reopen them immediately as a young adult body bumped into me. Seeing the seemingly lifeless form up close jump started my heart and adrenaline, numbing the pain somewhat. I needed to do something. I needed to help them. I grabbed hold of my leg, clumsily, carefully feeling for the embedded shard. I grazed it softly and the pain returned. In- and exhaling short breaths, my submerged hand gripped the shard. I glanced upwards and the body that had bumped into me moments before released a bubbly encouragement; there was still air coming from the body. They were still alive. As that realization set in, I ripped the glass out of my leg and let loose a primal roar.

I bit down on my lip hard, let go of the shard and grabbed the floating person by the arm, pushing it towards the stairs. My leg burning and weak, I stepped onto the ladder and, in agony, climbed the few steps upwards. Still holding the arm, I dragged with all my might and managed to get the person, an apparent she, to the surface. I'd dealt with dead weight before in a more playful context, messing around with friends and trying to lift each other, but it was nothing compared to this. I changed my hold of her, moving into the water to grab one of her legs as well as her arm. As if trying actively to remain in the water, the woman's body kept sliding back into the water. Abandoning all care, I flexed everything I could muster, throwing my entire body weight backwards, and dragged her by her hand and ankle onto the stone, falling down in the process. With a sloppy sound, I sat down in the thick blood now pooled around the waiter. In disgust, I leaped up, not able to discern his blood from my own. The woman lay still on the stoney floor, and my lack of first aid training became an immediate problem. I placed my hand in her neck, the way to check for a pulse. It was faint, but there was something there. I smiled, instinctively looking around to share this happy moment. All I saw was human figures lying in various positions, seemingly sleeping, seemingly dead. I rolled her on her side, and chose to worry about what that meant later.

I dove back in and went into the shallow end, picking up a child in my arms and placing it gently on the edge of the pool. Quickly surveying the water, there were still so many floaters. Too many. I rushed to the nearest children and grabbed one under each arm, abandoning the pretense of being gentle. You can worry about that later. My brain and body went into auto-pilot now, locating people and dragging and pushing and throwing them out of the water, onto land, to safety. With the closest children pulled out, I saw a teenager drifting relatively close. I picked her up in two arms, turning her around so her head was out of the water. It was Beyoncé, her

dark eyes staring upwards towards nothing in particular, arms limp and useless. Tears sprung up again, but I had no time for those. I carried her out of the water, setting her down next to the children, and went back in.

I couldn't say whether it had been only seconds or minutes, but I was starting to get tired. The trail of red I was leaving behind from my bleeding leg was growing more faint, and I could feel my energy leave in sync with the blood. I counted. 13 people on land. Dozens in the water. I had to sit down, just for a moment. But how could I? They needed my help. I slogged to the next person, a young boy, and lifted him into my arms. His head out of the water, I could see his lips had turned blue. That's when it dawned on me: no one can survive submerged for so long. I felt for a pulse, and my fear was confirmed. I cradled the child, hugging it to my chest. He was dead. Everyone in the pool.

They were all dead.

I don't remember climbing out of the pool, but I must've made it up there somehow. My mind was swimming, overwhelmed by fatigue, pain and fear. I sat shivering in the sweltering afternoon sun, my legs hanging in the water, the young boy's head resting on my lap. With a shaky hand I closed the boy's empty eyes, just as much out of respect as due to abject terror. Where he had looked like a zombie before, ready to pounce on my throat at any moment, he was now resting peacefully. I pushed away thoughts of the "top 10 most painful deaths" articles that I had come across in, what seemed now, another life.

I felt empty, disconnected, numb. Dissociation, my therapist called it, my favorite coping mechanism, the emotional equivalent of a circuit breaker. I just sat there for a while, running my hands through the boy's wet hair, staring at the corpses in the pool, the water distorting their bodies into blurry shapes. They didn't even look like people now. My breathing became more steady and some semblance of coherent, rational thought returned. I pushed away the fear into the little prison of my heart, where I kept my unwanted emotions. What was left of the tears and horror died down, a familiar emptiness and calm washing over me. Thank the gods for my overactive self-defense mechanisms now. I steadied my shaking hands, carefully moved the boy off of my lap and got up. I took a deep breath in, held it for a moment, then exhaled. Then it dawned on me: **Cass**.

I limped, my leg not quite capable of movement, to where I had been enjoying a refreshing vodka-fanta probably only minutes before. I had no idea how much time I sat next to the pool, or spent fishing out potential survivors. It had felt like waiting for your first date to show up, time stretched and warped in ways that go beyond any rational interpretation of '60 seconds in a minute'. The strange passing of time, malleable as it seemed, didn't count when it came to the drowned and drowning of moments before. The thought of their blue lips snapped me out of my musings, my brain already working overtime to hide the horror behind reason.

Cass's legs were out in the sun, the towel I placed over them pulled up and pushed to the side. "CASS," I called out, my voice quivering with choked-back tears. I turned the corner into the little nook that hid our sun beds, from where we'd been observing and wondering and

laughing in relative secrecy all morning. Cass was sprawled across her sun bed, perfectly still, her head clumsily lying off the side. Fiercely hoping she'd fallen asleep in an awkward pose, I hastened to push aside the little plastic table, vodka-fanta falling onto the stone floor, and saw a familiar crimson staining the area around her head. "Nononono please, Cass".

I sat down on the sun bed, gently picked up her head with my right arm, and slowly lifted her back fully onto her previous resting place. The dead weight of her body made me groan as I placed her head down carefully. "Hey Cass, hey. Can you hear me?" I tried in vain, hoping to reach her, to wake her somehow with the sound of my voice. I felt her jugular vein for a heartbeat, my fingers trembling. Nothing. I closed my eyes, shakily sucked in air, and pressed harder. There it was. I released a sob, tears streaming down my face, and exhaled all the sighs of relief I could muster. She lived. Cass was alive. I smiled at her, looking at her face, realizing that the place on her forehead where she'd hit the floor was still bleeding profusely. I reached for my towel, folded it up twice, and pushed it down on the wound to stop the bleeding. What if it didn't stop? What if she needed stitches? I told her, as much as myself, that it would all be alright. I shifted to the other side of the sunbed where there was more space, and looked around. No one moved. I tried calling for help, but the animation team's constant playlist of happy, uplifting music drowned out any sound I could muster. Perhaps, I realized, the sound any other survivor could muster as well. I needed help, Cass needed help, and we needed it now. "Hang in there babe," I whispered to her. "I'm going to get us some help okay? I'll be right back, I promise. Just hang in there." I wasn't sure she could even hear me, but I hoped she could. I really hoped she could.

The journey to the animation team's headquarters was a short yet harrowing one. Too many people to count were laying still, their faces frozen in looks of despair and anguish as they witnessed themselves and their loved ones crash to the floor. Some, like Cass, had been lying on sunbeds relaxing or sleeping, and often looked significantly less worse for wear. It pained me to ignore those who had been walking or sitting and had fallen in an unfortunate or, perhaps, deadly manner, but I just couldn't. I was tired, and scared, and desperately searching for any movement whatsoever. I rushed past the bar where we had been ironically singing and dancing only hours before, making playful jokes with the staff that had witnessed the previous night's drunken escapades. The bartender, who had been a pretty good dancer in his own right, was nowhere to be seen. I resisted the urge to peek over the counter, and choked back a tear-filled emotion, letting out a high-pitched gasp instead. No time for that now, go turn off that damned music.

I reached the door of the animation team and walked in. I immediately spotted the sound equipment and took a puzzled look at the many knobs, switches and dials. Luckily, the small text explaining their functionality was in English. I flipped the off-switch, and a deathly silence fell on the Caribbean Village resort. I mused on how watching a movie without sound nearly destroys the tension or ambiance of a scene. Looking out at the swimming pool with the floating bodies, the lack of cheerful music changed the atmosphere from bizarre comedy to silent funeral.

I stepped outside, and listened. A mild breeze swept through the resort, rustling palm leaves and sudoku puzzle book pages. No one yelled, no one called for help. So I did, with all

the gusto of a hysterical opera singer. I screamed furiously, calling out for someone, anyone, to hear it. Please, they need you. I need you. Please oh god, come help, my friend needs medical attention. I begged as much as I asked. I demanded assistance until I could taste the metallic aroma of blood, my lungs exhausted.

And then I started to run. Anywhere. Everywhere. I went to the other pool, the karaoke bar, the three restaurants, the lunch room, the shops. Nothing. Everyone was unmoving and silent, like macabre statues in a serial killer's dream garden. Somewhere far away, a vague, droning noise startled me and I sped towards it. I ended up at the front desk, where the proprietor was sprawled on an uncomfortable bed of water bottles. Overflowing with hope, I sprinted out of the front door towards the sound that I could now identify as the horn of a car. Desperately, I ran towards a taxi parked in front of the resort, only to find its owner had collapsed with his head on the claxon. I looked around, defeated, and spied a trail of smoke off in the distance. I could see the highway next to the resort, where a bus had crashed into the railing, its passengers thrown around its interior like ragdolls. I imagined how no one would have been able to hold on, their fingers limp, as the bus rammed its front into the metal bars. I imagined their terror as they could do nothing to protect themselves while hurtling towards their doom. I thought again of the waiter cracking his skull on the concrete. About the kids floating in the pool. Somewhere far away, I noticed a dramatic tear rolling down my cheek. And then everything turned black.

I woke up, gasping for air, the sun bed underneath me creaking loudly as I jumped up. Terrified, I looked around. This wasn't where I passed out. Where am I? What happened?

"You alright over there?" Cass's voice sounded sleepy.

Startled, it took me a moment to get my bearings, the sleep still dazing my mental faculties. I stared at Cass, who seemed unphased by the horrors I had just witnessed.

"You're.. Okay?" I managed in a slow, confused tone.

"Besides this terrifying hangover, sure I am. I guess you dozed off, we lost you to a nightmare there for a moment. She laughed. "You seemed a bit restless, making cute little animal noises."

I was back in our little nook. I yawned away the sleep, the horrors still etched freshly into my mind. They hadn't faded at all. I looked over at Cass, laying perfectly hidden from the sun. I could see her breathing, licking her dry lips, adjusting her bikini bottoms. She was moving. She was alive. She really was okay. I looked at the floor where she had been lying, and saw no trace of the pool of blood I'd picked her up from before.

"If you're up for it, get me a drink will you? You know the one. I think it's time we got back to it." She smiled, her eyes still closed.

I got up slowly, still reeling from confusion, and a small jolt of pain ran through my left leg. I instinctively grabbed my leg where I felt.. Nothing. The gaping wound from before was gone. I flexed my calf however, and the pain returned. Carefully, I ran my finger along the source of the pain. Exactly at the spot where I had felt the sting was a tiny, hard bump. I turned my leg so I could see it. The bump itself was barely visible on the outside, not even a minor

imperfection of the skin. I pressed down my thumb and index finger, gently at first, as if squeezing a troublesome zit. It hurt a bit, and I felt something move under my skin. I pressed down again, harder this time. With a sharp flare of pain, the bump ripped open, revealing a small shard of glass piercing my skin from the inside.

“You sure you’re okay?” Cass said as she moved a hand through her hair, revealing a small, barely perceptible scar on her forehead.