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LESLIE JAMISON

Little Corn Island

I flew from Bluefields to the big island and hired an old Russian jeep to drive me to the docks. From there I took a water-taxi to *islacito*. The company was called *Elario's* but Elario was not my boatman. The boatman was his son. He pointed across the water to the Moskito Coast and said that people over there were dying for pouches of coke so small they wouldn't keep stray papers from flying off in a breeze. He stood close while he spoke, resting his palm on my sunburned shoulder. He smelled like baked salt. His skin felt like a fruit rind.

I kept silent. I did not want him to know me, even by a phrase.

My father was the one who suggested Nicaragua.

"Just think about it," he said. "It might be good for you."

My chemistry tutor, a boy named Eric, had just committed suicide. He took a bunch of pills, which is usually something girls do. It's usually something people do when they really want to get saved, but nobody had found him in the bathroom or called him on the phone.

"You shouldn't feel guilty," my father said at dinner one night. "There's no way to know beforehand that somebody's going to...you know."

"I know," I blushed. "I don't feel guilty."

"Maybe you should go somewhere for the summer," he said. "I've

got friends on this island called Little Corn.”

“What’s it like?”

“I got malaria there,” he said. “But it sure was pretty.”

Eric waited for me one Friday after our weekly Chemistry quiz. He had a note in one hand and a bouquet of test-tubes in the other, each one crusted with multicolored crystals. “We can work together if you want,” he said. “I’m pretty good with this stuff.”

My old lab partner had just requested a reassignment. She’d gotten tired of my mistakes. It was always something: I broke beakers. I combined chemicals in the wrong order, at the wrong temperature. I was only good at experiments that involved making things glow.

I said yes. He seemed smart. He was smart. He smelled like socks and old yogurt.

“This was going around,” he said, unfolding his note. “Some of the other guys wrote it.”

He probably had no idea who wrote it. He’d probably found it on the floor.

It was a list of girls: *Fuckable Chicks*. And my name was at the top.

“I’m sorry you had to see this,” he said. “But I thought you should know.” He was probably wondering whether it was a history or a plan.

He handed it over. “You should throw this away,” he said.

I took the note. But I didn’t throw it away. I tucked it into my diary that night to keep it safe.

My father had gotten more than malaria in Nicaragua. I knew that much. He’d gotten married to a woman named Gloria and they’d built a home for themselves in the jungle. When he left her for my

mother more than twenty years ago, she kept the lodge. Now she lived there with a man named Keith and a son whose name I had never been told.

When my boat arrived, Keith and Gloria were waiting to drive me back to the house my father had built. Their son ran up to the front gates to meet us, his feet slapping fast against the packed dirt road. He was an albino, or something close, with rabbit-pink eyes and white hair that was almost translucent.

“This is Lucas,” said Gloria. “Our little boy.”

He was carrying a long rod of wood with cocoons hanging off it, swinging stiffly in the breeze. Their blue-black husks showed flecks of gold in an easy back-and-forth of grip, catching of dusk, light.

“They are getting born inside right now,” the little boy pointed. “*Azul*.” I could see it in his eyes — he wanted to teach me the words for every shade. “They are blue in their shells, they will be blue when they are out of them. They will be...” He spread his palms out flat to show the size, then curled them closed to hold the sound of the color.

“His English is strange,” his mother said. “You won’t be able to put your finger on it.”

The boy grinned: “I was spoken in another language.”

Eric studied with me every Friday. He came to my house early and then we drove to school in different cars and took our identical Chemistry quizzes.

This was during the year I wasn’t eating much. I could sense that my grown-up body was going to be a different size from the one I’d known. It was going to get bigger. It was ready to move on.

I got thin enough to stop getting my period and then I kept getting thinner. Whenever Eric came over, I toasted six frozen waffles and let

him eat all of them. Sometimes I drizzled a little syrup onto my fingers and sucked it off. Sometimes I didn't.

"This thing you do," he said one morning. "Not eating. Don't you get bored of it?"

"Yes," I said. "I do."

"I've always wondered about that," he said. "With all of you."

That's when I took him upstairs. Because I was bored. Because I wanted my starving to be different from the other girls'. I wanted a secret bigger than the one we all shared.

"Come into the bathroom," I said.

I showed him my scale and then the notebook underneath it.

"This looks just like your Chem book," he said. "Except it's green."

"It doesn't have any lab reports," I said. "It only has one graph." I showed him the shallow line sloping downwards, each day marked with my weight.

Then I took off my clothes. First my jeans, then my top, then my bra and finally my striped cotton underwear. The metal scale was cold under my feet.

"Don't get the wrong idea," I told him.

He nodded. He glanced up and down my legs, my cold nipples, my arms hugged around my concave belly. "What's the number?" he asked.

It was the same as the day before. He pulled a stub of pencil from his pocket and wrote it down, made one straight line to continue the graph.

My first night on Little Corn we ate dinner in the main cabana, sitting on tree-stump chairs. Our mango juice was fresh and thick, full of

pulp. We had a view of the swamp.

“We got a crocodile lives right there,” Keith told me. “Always peering around the muck.”

The swamp was covered in a milk-colored skin like you might find on the roof of your mouth after a long night’s sleep. The surface was unbroken, no sign of croc, just pocked by tiny footsteps of rain. Streaks slanted through our open-walled cabana and onto the table. My fish got rained on. I kept on eating, fork scooping the mush of the meat like I was bailing bucketfuls of sea from a sinking ship. There were tiny bones that made a web in my throat.

The boy opened his mouth to the sky, craning at the open air to catch the rain on his arched tongue. “I’m thirsty,” he told us. “But not for mango juice.” He pushed away his glass and fingered the rags of his cooling mackerel, its skin hanging in tatters off the blackened rib cage. “This one rides along its scales?”

“Swims,” Gloria said. “Swum. When it was alive.” She caught her breath on that.

“My juice is superb,” I said. “And this papaya too.”

“We’re lucky like that. With produce.”

I’d been lying. Just seconds before, I’d gotten the sudden sense that fresh papaya — not just tonight, but always — tasted faintly of human vomit.

What did I deserve their fruit for, anyway? Their kindness?

I sucked the seeds so hard I swallowed some of them. With my nibbling teeth, I picked every fish-bone clean.

Eric started coming every day before school, not just on Fridays. We stopped talking about chemistry. I never let him touch me except when he was taking measurements — the width of my arms, the

circumference of my thighs — and I never gave him any reason to think we'd ever have sex, or even kiss. We mostly kept quiet. Sometimes I asked him to speak.

“Say something about my body,” I told him. “Don't make it a compliment.”

“Your clavicle looks like it's trying to get out from under your skin,” he said. “Like it doesn't want to be there anymore.”

I nodded.

“You want me to write that down?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “Just write the numbers. Like usual.”

He'd come up with other statistics, in case I was interested — derivatives, second derivatives — and told me he could make charts of these as well.

“I don't know what those mean,” I said. “Don't bother.”

He was taking Multivariable Calculus at a local college. He called it “the calculus.” He called it remarkable. He understood concepts whose names I wouldn't learn for years. Even after months, he still smelled like the first day. He still reminded me of socks and sour dairy.

He never said that he liked me or that he wanted anything from me, but I wondered. I liked his graphs, their dark-pencilled precision. I loved seeing evidence of myself in a handwriting that wasn't mine.

Lucas showed me his family's world: mangrove roots that rose like tendons from the skin of the water; nets of fireflies shimmering against the dusk. One morning, we found an abandoned boat lying gutted on an empty section of shoreline.

“This beach is full of crabs like dried blood,” he explained. When the tide came in, the waves exhaled them all across our toes, clay-red;

and when it left again, the wet sand bubbled with their tunnels.

He showed me ugly things as someone else might show their scars. We poked sticks at seething anthills, smelled the warm rot of a compost heap behind the kitchen. We followed a muddy brook into the jungle, fishing out plastic cups and dirty socks. We reached one bend that was glutted with tangled reeds and the splintered husks of coconuts. "Here's where the creek goes bad," he said. Huge-bellied dragonflies were gliding low over the water. I imagined jelly-dotted eggs, hatching somewhere beneath.

The energy of his affection — his constant clutching, his senseless chatter — all of it weakened me. More than anything, I was exhausted. I savored mornings when his mouth was too full of their homemade granola to speak.

We found a dead turtle on the beach one afternoon, shell jammed against a rotten tree-trunk. Turtleflesh was dangling under its hard-curved back, clumps of jellied muscle puddled on the sand, skin flaps gleaming. The surface was rippling with flies, undulating like black cloth thrown over something still alive.

Did crocodiles eat turtles? I pictured the razor line of a long snout punching through the belly, rummaging for the goods. If this ever happened, it must have been happening since the beginning of time: a prehistoric system of disappearance.

"Coyote done it," the boy said. "Most likely for that." He shifted his weight from foot to foot, fluttering his fingers in his pockets and glancing off into the jungle. When he clutched my hand, my skin felt the flush of his, the sweat. He said: "I don't like this here." I felt him tug.

"You know what they say about turtles?" I asked him. "Every time a turtle dies..."

He shook his head.

“It leaves behind a treasure.”

He brightened. He knew that there were various voices people used at certain times, particular tones for comfort.

“Cause they eat leftovers from the pirates?”

“Yeah,” I said. “That.” I wanted another person to see the heart of me — hard and blistered, thick with rot. “If you reach inside, you can find it.” I nudged him forward.

“In *there*?”

“In there.”

He hung back. “I would need to wash my hands before dinner.”

“You would.” I nodded. “I would make sure of it.”

“But it’s so *loud*.” Even from our distance, we could hear the drone of the flies. “I don’t like that noise.”

His fear was so definite and pristine. I wished it could be touched.

“Go,” I said. “Maybe it’ll be in its stomach. Or one of its webbed feet. It can be a gift.”

He was sobbing now, his whole body shaking. He approached the shell and reached his arm into a ragged mound of mush near the bottom — sand-crusting tissues, rubber sleeves of skin. The flies rose seething all around him.

After a moment, he pulled his arm back out again and turned around. “Don’t think it was inside.” He kept swallowing, again and again, pulsing out the white paper of his throat. His pale arm was red to the elbow. He wrapped both arms around my leg and pressed his cheek against my thigh. “I couldn’t find it.”

I could feel the warmth of turtleflesh, sliming against the soft back of my knee.

“Don’t get that muck on me!” I unpeeled his arms and flung them away.

Eric committed suicide on a Friday morning. I was two hours late for school. I kept thinking he would show up. I kept waiting. He didn’t leave a note behind. Just the pills, a few left in the bottle.

I thought the boy would tell his parents what had happened with the turtle. I pictured their slack-jaw shock, their tongues still wet with chewed fruit. “You did *what?*” They’d ask. “Did anything go into anyone’s *mouth?*”

But the boy didn’t give anything away. “I like this spicy milk,” he said, pointing at his soup. “And even more than that, I like things getting born inside other things.”

His parents raised their eyebrows at each other: Did he want a sibling? Another crop of caterpillars?

“But most over that I like treasure-hunting.”

He had been sobbing, swear to god, on that beach — sobbing.

“Maybe,” the boy suggested. “Maybe some other night we could have turtlemeat.” Just like that, we had a secret.

Gloria wanted to take me to a bar she knew. “It’s been so long since I’ve had a girlfriend,” she said. “Someone to play with.”

“I’m not good with people,” I told her. “Or with Spanish.”

“That’s fine,” she said. “This place is all about music. They play it loud. There’s dirt-floor dancing.”

“Dancing?” I said. “I’m not good with that either.”

“Pretty girls don’t need to dance,” she said. “They just need to show up.”

She wore a short red skirt with cowboy boots. "I can pull this off," she said. "Don't you think?"

I nodded. Her thighs were bronzed and meaty. Men like legs like that. My own legs felt like sticks inside my jeans. I wondered if we'd leave together. If she got me drunk enough and left me alone, I knew I'd probably kiss somebody and let them slide off my shirt in the back room, just to feel like I'd finally inhabited my body for a moment in this place. I knew there was a logic in that, one of those calculations we make about feeling better: If I am here, then I am not there.

There was a dirt road at the bottom of the hill, with a small fishing store at one end and a church at the other. Between them was an empty lot full of car parts, piled around three huge coolers covered with peeling pictures of popsicles and ice cream sandwiches. I wondered how cars had been junked here, where nobody drove.

"Welcome to town," said Gloria.

It was easier to call it "town" than think of another word for what it actually was.

The bar was a concrete box covered in chili pepper lights and neon beer signs. Inside, there were two men who used up their English pretty quickly: "Good night," they said, like they were saying goodbye right off the bat. They kept asking: "How are you?" and I kept nodding in reply: *Yes, I am.*

They both had gleaming shaved heads and broad features — noses flat and sloping as if they'd been carved from wood. One of them had a dark purple blemish across his cheek, like his eye was casting a shadow.

"I'll take the stained one," Gloria whispered in my ear. "I like his pupils."

I sat back and watched while she spoke their language. She seemed different in Spanish, feather-voiced and dreamy, as if she were speaking the words to a lullaby whose tune she couldn't quite remember. She touched their muscled arms quite frequently, but they kept looking at me. She'd follow their eyes each time, catch my gaze for a moment and start talking again.

They bought rounds of *flor de cana*, condensed milk and rum in squat-bottomed jelly glasses. The bartender was a white woman with blonde dreadlocks and an accent that made her voice sound — sometimes, at the end of her sentences — full of sudden panic. We made rhythms out of clinking our glasses and then we drank. I could feel the sugar crust across my teeth. The unstained man began to stroke my cheek.

From behind him, Gloria winked. She returned to the rough noises of her English: “He thinks you're pretty.”

“Yes,” he said, pausing his finger at my jaw. “Good night.”

I was still a virgin. I'd never told Eric that. I imagine he assumed otherwise.

Gloria was perched on the knees of her stained man, whispering into his ear. Her flushed cheek was pressed close to the burgundy of his skin. She laughed and took his hand, lacing her fingers around his. “Can you hang out?” she said. “I'm not ready to go home yet.”

I hadn't asked her to.

“Is Keith...?” I said. “Is he expecting you?”

“Keith is asleep,” she said. “I promise you.”

I didn't say anything.

“Me and him,” she said. “We're the only people awake on this whole goddamn island.”

“I'm awake,” I said.

The island seemed too small for her to be doing whatever she was doing.

“Don’t worry about things you don’t understand,” she said. “It’s complicated back there. It’s not complicated right here.”

I nodded. I let my man wrap his arm around my back, nuzzle his smooth head into my neck. “Sure,” I said. “Let’s hang out.”

She handed me her purse and left for the back. Then it was just us: me and the man sliding his finger under the elastic of my underpants. The bartender polished glasses with a rust-stained rag. She leaned over to whisper: “Baby, you know they don’t have police in this place.”

I nodded. I got the drift all right. The man stood up and took my hands, pulling me towards the front door. I picked up Gloria’s purse and followed him outside. We saw a man selling sodas on the street, just strolling down the middle of the road at midnight — wearing no shirt and pushing a wheelbarrow full of cans. He had wiry black sideburns and tits like a chick. There was a machete strapped around his waist.

My friend handed him some money and got something dark. It came in a plastic bag, clipped in the corner for drinking. We passed it back and forth. It tasted good — flat and sweet.

We started kissing. He pushed me against the stucco wall and cupped my breasts through the fabric of my shirt. I let him. Then I stopped him. Then I let him again.

“Why are you here?” he said, but not unkindly. He laughed. He took his hands away. My breasts felt suddenly cold, uncovered. He shook his head and went back inside. I wondered if he would fuck that bartender. I wondered if he wanted to. I wondered which path led back to Gloria’s home.

I found the trail that forked off from the church and stumbled

back up the hill. I found the lodge and fell asleep fast once I got there, tangled in the gauzy fist of my mosquito net.

The boy shook me awake the next morning, ripping away the netting to get a better perch on the mattress. “We need to get *going*,” he said. “If we’re going to find one.”

“Find what?” I could smell the rum on my breath.

“Howlers,” he said. “Right now the sky is monkeys. But they get gone past noon.”

I pushed him away with coiled toes, but he just rolled back into the netting — pulling it taut as he leaned back over the side. “I’ve been fur-close before,” he said. “I’ve grabbed a tail. I could find one.”

“It’s early,” I told him, even though this sunlight — hot like breath through the netting — only came around noon. I couldn’t stand the weight of his limbs on the blanket, his bony knees against my shin, the stretched fabric rubbing over my sweat-slick skin. “Why don’t you come back later?”

But he just wriggled even tighter, wrapping his arms around my waist. I could feel the bud of an erection between his legs. I felt nauseated. “Jesus!” I pushed him. “Get the fuck off.”

But he was back an hour later: “Come with me,” he beckoned. And I did. He took me to a bamboo cage deep in the jungle, where he’d trapped a single baby monkey.

“How did you do this?” I asked him. But he wouldn’t answer. He opened the latch and clutched the monkey close against his chest, pulling the bandana tight across its mouth so that it wouldn’t nip his fingers in its angry tremors of chattering.

“Do you want to feel the fur?” he asked, loosening one arm to grab my palm. He brought my fingers close to the silver streaks along

its hairy flank.

“Why don’t we play a game?” I suggested. I wanted to make him feel the way I felt.

“What kind?” he asked. “Which set of rules?”

“A kind of test,” I told him. “But we’ll need a cage. And a monkey.”

“Which we’ve got,” he pointed out. *Yes, we do.* Soon we would say: *did.* He would learn the sharp lines of memory, how it could sketch itself as deep as bones.

“Put it back in the cage.” Commands felt smooth and cold against my tongue, like bullets. “We need to get to the water.”

At the shore, I took off my shoes and placed them neatly side-by-side behind a log. I rolled up my pants to the knees and walked into the tide. I beckoned to him, wordless: *Follow.*

He set down the cage and marched into the water. Already barefoot, he had no shoes to remove.

“Stop,” I told him. “Bring the cage. The game happens out here.” I stood knee-deep, my pants — of course — wet. Everything got soaked one way or another: from sweat, rain, ocean.

I knew it would have to happen quickly. There was a spell but it would break if I stretched it too thin, tried to hold too many moments in its net. It was taking all his strength to hold the cage above the waves.

“Set it down,” I told him simply.

“That’s underwater.”

“I know.”

“It’s too much inside.”

“It’s the test.” I smiled at him, urging. It was the first time I’d ever done that, smiled.

He put down the cage and we could see the bars of bamboo shimmering under the cold clear waves, their motion steady like breathing. For a few moments, the monkey's thrashing made the water froth. And then it didn't.

I grabbed the boy's hands to keep them still. I rubbed the back of his palms, making circles with my fingers. I could feel him shaking from what he'd done.

I gripped him tighter, felt his fists clench up in mine. I led him back to shore and left him standing by the water. It did not seem, for once, as if he wanted me to stay.

Gloria was waiting on my bed, folds of mosquito netting gathered in her lap. She had a glass of something green and thick, tucked into her palm. When she smiled at me, I could see mossy bits stuck in her teeth. She was squinting.

"You disappeared on me last night," she said.

"You seemed busy." I said.

"I thought you were busy too."

"I wasn't busy," I said. "Just awake."

"Here's how you make it up to me," she said. "Come out again. You and Lucas always finish up your little games by nightfall."

"Do you know what we did today?" I asked. "Because I'll tell you."

"If I wanted to know," she said. "I would have asked."

That afternoon I found him lying on the dirt between some trees, wearing nothing but a ragged pair of swimming trunks — their purple elastic frayed against his ghost-pale waist. His skin was swarming with fire ants, there must have been hundreds, red speckles like sunlight

moving across his chest, climbing the sharp rungs of his ribs. He was curled like a fetus, skin wet against the brown earth. In this posture he looked overgrown, still-born. He turned to look at me: "I made the water rotten," he said. I wondered if he meant he'd pissed himself in the ocean. I could tell from the lumpish quality of his voice that he'd been crying.

"What are you doing?" I kept my voice flat. "Get up."

He crawled into a sitting position and brought his knees up to his chin, clasping his legs with white-knuckled fingers. He nodded at the dirt and said: "I wanted it to hurt me back."

I bent towards him: "You can't," I told him. "You can't choose that."

I started flicking ants off his skin, snapping my nails against the hard curve of his cheekbones, the sticks of his arms. I liked the flitting impact of his skin beneath my fingers, the sudden sparks of paler white where the blood drained away.

"Stop it," he said. "I can flick myself."

That night Gloria was wearing an orange sun-dress patterned with big yellow swirls. There was one across her belly that looked like an intestine. "Cute," I said.

"I'll need it," she said.

I didn't know what she meant. I was wearing the same pair of jeans I'd worn the night before.

The bar wasn't exactly full, but we weren't the only ladies. Where had these other women come from? They all had the same frosted lips and lilac-shadowed eyelids. It was as if they'd been trapped on a life-raft with the same six pieces of make-up.

Gloria whistled. She said: "Looks like we've got company." She

spotted her stained man across the room. This time, he was alone.

“Get us a couple of shots,” she whispered. “No sense in playing coy.”

Three shots later he was using some of his fingers to twist other fingers into pretzel shapes around each other. “You two are...?” he paused, holding up one knotted hand. “In love together?”

“No,” I said. “Good night.”

I tipped back my shot-glass for the last drops of tequila. They stung, just like the first ones had. *Stang*, I thought. Why didn't people ever say that?

I turned to leave.

“See you at home,” said Gloria. She waved. I hadn't said goodbye yet.

“No,” the man said. He traced an imaginary tear down his wine-dark cheek. “I do not want your love to die.”

“We're not in love,” I said.

“But we could be,” she said. “Before the end of the night.”

I bummed a cigarette from the bartender before I left. There was a salt breeze outside that smelled like garbage and I thought I could hear a sizzle from the neon beer signs, mosquitoes popping against their glow. I crouched by an abandoned popsicle freezer. When I struck my match, its flame illuminated a painted ice-cream sandwich curling away from the side of the metal.

A few moments later, Gloria stumbled out the back door of the bar. She pulled her man by his leather belt, already reaching for his buckle. The red glimmer of the chili-pepper lights settled on them like a mist. When she knelt down, I kept my gaze trained

on every motion — her head moving back and forth, tick-tock, like clockwork.

I walked over. I felt suddenly sober. I made a perfect bee-line towards them and tapped Gloria on the shoulder.

She stood up and wrapped her arms around me. “Why don’t you tell me what you want?” she said. “I’ll see what I can do.”

The man smiled. His cheeks creased — one was shadowed, the other purple in the light.

“Go home to your boys,” I said to Gloria. “Your other ones.”

I knelt down into the rubble. There were chocolate bar wrappers and pigeon shit all over the concrete, small stones against my knees. I curled my lips over my teeth. I got ready to finish what she’d started.