

CLARK

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I found Clark drinking at a beachside bar on Guana Cay, one of those outlying Bahamian islands accessible only to those willing to board multiple forms of transportation at a go, which was humid and unpleasant and nearly deserted in February, and also teeming with big black clouds of mosquitoes. The bar was called Grabber's. A battered sign hanging above the bar proclaimed that Grabber's was world-famous for its house drink, the “Frozen Grabber,” a claim that I found dubious considering that the F.G. (which I could see sloshing listlessly in a 7-11 style slushee tumbler near the flickering TV) looked just like every other generic rum punch served at every other bar in the Bahamas, and the Caribbean in general, for that matter; and anyhow, everyone at the bar was drinking Bud. So I slid in next to Clark and ordered a Bud.

He looked at me in a completely unsurprised way, and slid a can of Off! bug spray along the slick wood in my direction the way I imagine old west bartenders once slid frothy mugs of sarsaparilla towards thirsty cowboys. I took it gratefully and sprayed, starting with my feet and ankles, which were itchy and spotty even though I'd only been on the island for fifteen minutes. The Off! did nothing to alleviate the existing itch, of course, but somehow the knowledge that I was (relatively) safe from future bites made the current ones feel a little better. It had been a long time since I'd been compelled to apply bug repellent, and the scent stung the inside of my nose and after a few seconds I sneezed. It made total sense to me that this product would deter insects, as it seemed to me to be plenty potent enough to deter most humans, although it did not noticeably deter the three regulars (not counting Clark) at Grabber's, none of whom batted an eye at stench or sneeze – of course, if they lived on G.C., they would be used to it.

The bartender was a dark-skinned islander in a shirt advertising the F.G. who delivered my Bud with body language that demonstrated clearly her disinterest in conversation with the red-ankled white guy. She took my U.S. dollars and handed back a mix of Bahamian and American change, which I thought was interesting, and I wondered momentarily whether vending machines on G.C. accepted both, and then I decided that (based on the number of stray chickens I'd spotted between ferry and bar)

G.C. was probably not a place with a lot of vending machines. It was only after all this was accomplished – after I was seated and stinking, hands cradling the sweating beer, and the bartender had collected her tip and retreated to a safe distance – that Clark found it appropriate to speak.

“You didn't have to come,” he said. “I e-mailed.”

“I know,” I replied. “But why give up a tropical vacation?”

Clark glanced down by my poxed feet, then back at my face, with that look of his which takes in everything out of the side of the eye and makes it look like he's looking over your shoulder – it was an expression which startled me because I had forgotten about it – and then sipped briefly but deeply from his Bud.

“No bags.” Not a question, which was another thing I had forgotten in the eight years we had been apart, was that Clark never asks questions, but rather just makes observations and allows you to explain things if you want, giving the impression he doesn't much care whether you do or don't, that if your lack of explanation has any impact on his existence it will likely be small and fleeting and he's willing to let it go.

“I got a hotel room in Marsh Harbor.”

He nodded and sipped again, and then his beer was gone, and the bartender in the F.G. Shirt replaced it with another (which immediately beaded with condensation in the humid night) so quickly that one immediately sensed the ease of their relationship – the provider and the consumer – and I knew that, unlike me, Clark was somebody that this woman *would* speak with, because she saw him every day, and this made me slightly and inexplicably jealous, although I tried to shrug off the feeling.

“There's no more ferries tonight,” said Clark, when she was gone again. “It's Sunday, so the late ferry doesn't run. The next one'll be here at eight in the morning tomorrow.”

This was all imparted in such a conversational tone that he may as well have been talking about the Yankees or pointing out that G.C. was slightly buggy. Of course, for me, the fact that there was no ferry until the morning represented a major inconvenience – among other things, I was now on a small island containing no apparent hotels for at least thirteen hours with no deodorant, which promised to become an issue shortly, given my rate of current perspiration (although, based on their reaction [or, rather, lack of reaction] to the Off!, it was doubtful that the crowd at Grabber's would mind [or notice] a little B.O.). And so for a while, Clark and I sat. The TV had the sound off, so I could hear the ocean breaking in the distance as I thought about all the people, one by one, who *could* have mentioned that mine was the last ferry of the day, and Clark thought about whatever it was that he thought about, which was always a mystery.

Clark could not logically offer to let me stay at his house, of course, and thinking about that

made me think about Leonore, which was not a subject I had considered in quite some time – and perhaps not an entirely healthy subject to consider at *any* time – so I quit considering that after a few moments, and sipped the Bud (which tasted much like stateside Bud) and considered Clark instead. His build was much the same as eighteen years ago. Still short and solid, he resembled nothing so much as a nearsighted tree trunk with a penchant for scotch, eyes close-set and ears a bit large for his face, generously lipped and possessed of thick eyebrows that were consistently raised, as if to say, “Yes, but so what?” There were, of course, superficial differences between this Clark and the one I’d seen standing disconsolate on the train platform those years ago – a pound here, an extra patch of hair here, and (most noticeably) the suntan (this Clark had practically morphed ethnicities, exuding now the raisin-like aura of a “beach person” whom one could easily picture grasping a metal detector and/or orange frisbee). But perhaps the most distinct dissimilarity (upon further inspection) lay not without but within – his eyes, although they glanced over my shoulder (or at me[?]) with all of their old vigor, seemed to have lost something: in the way that skim is not like whole, although both are milk, Clark’s eye’s were not those that I remembered, and I suspected that something may have been in between us, be it life or drink. Clark was wearing blue shorts with white flowers on them, and a white undershirt covered by a white linen button-up. No shoes – although, judging by the clientele at Grabber’s, shoe’s were not in vogue this (or any other) season.

These changes aside, as a whole Clark appeared little altered. His hands were perhaps tanner and more wrinkly; but they were still an artist’s hands, and they moved and grasped with a grace that was apparent in even the simple lift of Bud from bar to lips and back again. When, in prior lives, he and I had shared a small studio overlooking a particularly unfortunate raised section of the Q train in Brooklyn (this was, of course, before the neighborhood was “trendy” [a more apt descriptor would be “dangerous”]), I was consistently struck by Clark’s hands and the facility with which he accomplished small things. It was an ease of motion which transferred readily to the canvas. Clark’s work brought to mind the myth of the artist as being guided by some divine force (this is, of course, a myth and nothing more – every artist, or writer, or composer will tell you that hard work is *a/the* primary ingredient in their existence – although, with Clark, I sometimes wondered), and provided a stark contrast with my own sorry examples, which seemed always to be labored and awkward in comparison. That we met with similar levels of success in our professional careers is deceptive. My pieces were (and remain) inferior in almost every respect, and I know it – and Clark knew it too, although he would never say that he knew it, at least not to my face.

Clark remained silent for the duration of the above meditation. He could be quite clam-like, particularly when alcohol was present to occupy his mouth. The sun was setting over the bay beyond

the beach which bordered the bar, and the effect was lovely (and deliciously framed, although the lighting was saturated for my taste). This was accompanied by a mixed soundtrack – a foreground of bar chatter, clanking glass, TV mumble, the F.G. Cooler churning, all this layered over a white background of surf, and wind in trees, and the gentle hum of insects (infuriated, no doubt, by the presence of Off! in such quantities). It was a beautiful and seemingly convivial place, if hot and itchy, and it was not difficult to see why Clark had chosen to come here.

I sipped the Bud, and Clark inferred from this action (correctly) that I had finished my reverie. At any rate, he chose this moment to speak.

“Tell me about your work.”

“I’m doing pretty well, Clark. I certainly can’t complain. Galleries are eager to show my stuff, now that the economy’s bouncing back and people can afford to think about aesthetics again.”

He nodded and took a healthy sip of his Bud, which I noticed was nearly empty, though I wasn’t sure how it happened. My own beer was only a quarter gone.

“I’m working with lines,” I said. “Straight lines in strong colors, concentrating them near the golden section in various configurations. I divided the space” - I gestured, which drew a glance (but nothing more) from the waitress - “like so, and that way I can calculate the golden section from here to here, or from here to here, or so on, which gives me a wide variety of approaches. It sounds academic, but the results are compelling, so I’ve been told. I’m in the middle of a series of twelve for Philadelphia – they want them by November, but I’m trying to talk them back to the new year so I’m not rushed.”

This was a bewildering rush of words after a long silence, and it took me to my student days, to nights silly with wine and weed, the air thick with my gushing over Emil Nolde or Paul Thek, when Clark would likewise sit and listen without speaking a word or responding, though I knew he heard what I said. I’m aware even as I speak how ridiculous I sound – to explain a piece of art is always ludicrous, of course (especially when doing so involves calculations, ick), but especially to attempt to explain this type of art in a setting like Grabber’s, when one is surrounded by such overwhelming beauty and smothering disinterest in anything except black-and-white Sportscenter – *that* is an act which borders on hubris. But Clark asked (or didn’t ask; rather demanded) to know, and I was powerless to remain silent.

I spoke about my work out loud in such a place for the same reason I paid \$750 for a plane ticket to an island in the Bahamas of which I had never heard on one day’s notice (FULL DISCLOSURE: some of the cost I covered with frequent flier miles) after receiving an e-mail which seemed, at face value at least, completely nondescript (*Dear James: I find myself thinking about you often here on Guana Cay. I hope you’re well. Sincerely, Clark St. James*): I was his pawn, still, after

everything. A willing pawn, during our younger days – there was a time when I still thought I could learn by proxy the abilities which Clark possessed without effort, when I spent hours staring at his drying canvases, willing myself to absorb, before returning to my own section of the room to bludgeon bad art into creation. But now, fully aware that such yearning was fruitless, and with more than a few reasons not to respond to such a message, still I came.

Clark nodded at my absurd recitation, then downed the last of his drink and ordered another in that way he had before, via apparent telepathic connection with the waitress (who ignored me), then drank that beer with no small amount of determination and no further attempt at speech, as if the whole reason he had summoned (had he?) me to the Caribbean after two decades was to inquire about my professional life. This seemed somewhat unlikely. But I knew from experience that, whatever Clark wished to discuss, he would do it only when he considered the moment right. And so I bided (bode?) my time, sipping and swatting at those insects brave enough to venture within arm's length.

At 7:32, the sun set. The waitress flipped on a surge protector near the television, and the bar area was, from that point forward, somewhat unreliably lit by Christmas lights suspended from the faux-thatch roof.

At 8:50, after three Buds, I felt courageous enough to order a F.G. Its physical appearance was no more appealing in the cup than in the slurpee-style tumbler. Somewhat surprisingly, it was tart and refreshing, and I sipped merrily, secretly scorning the mundane drinking habits of my companions.

At 9:35, after another F.G., I realized that I was drunk, and somewhat distractedly began to wonder where I would be spending the night.

At 10:22, Clark switched from beer to scotch.

And at 11:00 sharp, just when I had (in my tipsiness), begun to forget about his existence, Clark gulped the last of his second (third? [fourth?]) scotch, and swiveled rightward on his barstool to look at me, and said, “Let's take a walk on the beach.” After an entire evening's worth of silence, I was relieved to hear his voice, and the locals had mostly cleared out, and the dark-skinned waitress was beginning to signal for last call, and so I nodded readily to Clark's suggestion without thinking it all the way through. If I *had* thought it all the way through, I might have raised pertinent objections, such as: 1) it was pitch black outside the small halo of illumination provided by the Grabber's twinkle lights, and 2) I was not really in the best shape, and walking on the beach is challenging even for those people who jog and do other silly fitness things, and 3) (perhaps more importantly) I was seriously drunk off of cheap beer and rum punch, and in my condition might well fall into any body of water near which I happened to stray. At the time, though, as I said, this beach walk of Clark's seemed like a terrific idea. Clark himself, though he had had significantly more to drink than me, seemed unaffected – in fact, if

anything, his focus seemed to have improved. His deep brown eyes, far from being milky or glazed the way they were before, were purposeful, even determined. These were not the sort of eyes that accepted “no” for an answer. In fact, I couldn't remember him ever wearing such an expression (at least, not while I had known him) – usually his eyes were dreamy and his gaze (as I've mentioned before) predominantly peripheral.

We set out together, away from the Grabber's halo, and towards the sounds of sand and surf.

It was *very* dark. And Clark was walking purposefully, and I was stumbling and trying to match his pace, and mostly not doing well at all. My cell phone was useless internationally, at least for making calls, but I had put it in my pocket out of habit when I unpacked in Marsh Harbor, and now I was glad to have it, because (when turned on), the screen provided a glow which, while faint, was enough to at least keep me from walking into large objects. This steadied me out a bit, and the breeze off the ocean was invigorating, and after a few minutes of walking I was basically keeping up. Clark, as far as I could tell, paid no attention to my struggling. He walked like someone who had a destination in mind.

After maybe fifteen minutes of this nocturnal journeying, Clark turned abruptly to the right, away from the tide which had been, until that point, within inches of lapping up around his ankles, and towards a rise in the land which I felt more than saw. I followed. My ankles were itching again, and (although I couldn't see properly), I knew I had been re-bitten (my Off! Had become worn-Off!), and I vaguely remembered reading once about a beach creature known as the no-see-um, which was basically like an angry mosquito with powers of invisibility, and I was happy to be drunk because otherwise this thought would have been troubling. The normal, see-um variety of mosquitoes were quite bad enough.

At the place where beach met land, there was a rise of perhaps four feet, against which some thoughtful soul had placed a forklift pallet as kind of a makeshift ladder. Clark, barefoot still, clambered up this device without any apparent problems. I (scratching my ankles, still abstractedly concerned about the n.s.u.'s) took a little more time. By the time I finally got up the ladder (pallet) and caught my breath on the trail above, I was quite a ways behind. But I could hear Clark in front of me, navigating in the near-total blackness with his mysterious Clark magic, and I followed, clutching my phone in front of me like a crucifix and wheezing deeply with each step.

The trail rose, and rose, and became rocky, and eventually ceased to become a trail, but instead was just rocks. I strode wearily forward, ankles burning, head swimming with booze and confusion (no small amount of either), and at one point I felt like I had taken a wrong turn and lost him completely, but then I heard a noise up ahead, and I reckoned he was still there, somewhere. And then, through the

buggy hum of humid air, I could just make out the familiar sound of surf, ahead of me but also below, and I realized that we had traversed the whole length of the island, and now the waves we heard were not the gentle lapping of the bay, but the thundering of the pacific.

I was soaked with sweat and getting more sober by the moment as I took one final step and then felt Clark's delicate hand on my shoulder. I looked at him and panted without speaking, and he didn't say anything either, not then. We walked a little bit further together, and then crested out outcropping of stone, and suddenly the black nothingness ahead of us was of a different sort, and I became aware of a vast expanse of ocean.

Sometimes (not often [but occasionally]), the timing of life is extraordinarily cinematic, and this was one of those moments. Because just as Clark led damp, exhausted me to the top of what turned out to be a formidable cliff, the clouds which I had not even realized were covering the moon suddenly parted, and the three-quarters moon that I had not realized was there shone through, and all of a sudden I could see everything (formidable cliff, rocky beach, immense sea, etc.) pretty well.

Clark walked ahead of me all the way to the edge, and then sat with his feet dangling off the edge of the outcropping the way a child might, and I only waited for a few seconds before sitting next to him. The cliff was high – eighty feet, maybe? – or at least high enough that I slid to a sitting position with some caution. Clark appeared (perpetually) nonplussed, and stared out at the waves and was generally as inscrutable as always. There was silence for a moment, and I shifted my rear end, which caused a small cascade of pebbles down the face of the bluff and to the moonlit gravel far below, but the sound of this was almost completely lost in the low roar of the surf – and when Clark finally spoke, to say the thing he'd brought me a thousand miles to hear him say, the same surf meant that he had to say it at a near-shout.

“Leonore's cheating on me,” he said.

“What?” I responded.

But Clark didn't answer, because he knew that I'd heard the first time. And he was right. I was gone. My mind was already spinning back, dizzily, to the afternoon not too long after my graduation (with the second degree [the one that Clark had never needed because someone who could do what he could did not need degrees to prove their skill]) when I came in out of the horrible Brooklyn heat, and walked up those seven flights of stairs in a sweat, and found them locked on the floor like a still life. They were naked, still, but no longer active – asleep, in fact – peaceful and content and utterly happy, and this infuriated me, because it was what I wanted with Leonore but had never been able to completely achieve, and because Clark God DAMN him could accomplish this so easily, just like he could painting, and life in general. And so I woke them up and there was bellowing and screaming and

I was so angry, but not even about the betrayal. I was angry because everything was so difficult for me, and because I was scared of life outside the confines of the school I'd called home for six years, and because next to Clark I was talentless and and knew it. But I couldn't articulate those thoughts. And so I screamed at her until she was sobbing, and I screamed at him, but it had no effect – his face never changed – in fact, he never said anything, and he never covered himself like Leonore did, just stood unabashed until I felt so sick that I had to run out the door and down seven flights of stairs and out into the air. And the streets were crowded and I didn't want to cry myself, but I couldn't hold in the tears, and I ran with tear-streaked cheeks into Prospect Park and sat on a bench and felt the worst, and the most alone, and the most scared I had ever or would ever feel. And the awful thing was Clark's face when it happened, the way it didn't change, and in that moment I was certain that he – my best friend, with whom I had lived and worked and shopped and eaten and drunk for half a decade – did not care one wit about my condition. And the fact that, as my train was pulling out of Penn station two days later, carrying me back to my parents and away from New York, I spotted him on the platform – not disconsolate, not any different than usual, but there watching nonetheless as I pulled away – meant nothing, because in my mind he had already become a demon. And I never considered the fact that they, the two of them, could actually be in love, even when the wedding invitation came and I read it while twisting the skin of my naked finger. And I never thought that it would last, even when the first baby was born, and then the second and the third. And I never could have known in those years that, even without contact with the *man*, I could not survive without the *art*, and that I would be compelled (compulsed) to read every article and save every clipping and visit each gallery as his star rose and mine as well, although not as brightly, until two years ago when Clark Saint James and his family had disappeared to parts unknown, presumably to live out their lives in the happy glow of true love and a sizable bank account.

And above all, I never thought that I would see him again. Especially not on Guana Cay.

This maelstrom of feeling swept over me in a matter of moments, and left just as quickly, leaving me empty and exhausted. Perhaps Clark expected me to say something. But I couldn't form words just then, and after glancing at me, I think he understood that, because he continued.

“It started a few years ago. She would leave for work in the morning, and when I called, she wouldn't be at her desk. It took me quite a while to get suspicious” - he inspected a nail by moonlight - “because, as you know, I tend to be somewhat oblivious. But after several months of this, I was curious enough to drive to her office and ask around. And I found out that, not only was it common knowledge that she was having an affair with one of the web designers, but that she had actually quit her job the previous week so that she could spend more time with him without my knowing. This was,

as you can imagine, quite a blow. And to make matters worse, on my way back out to the car, as I was mulling the situation over, I saw the two of them together. They were holding hands, and she had an ice cream cone. They looked like teenagers, so absorbed in one another that they didn't even notice me across the street. It was all very disconcerting.”

Clark said all this in a calm sort of way, as if he were discussing the weather. Small, dark clouds stippled the moon as he continued, and Clark spoke from intermittent darkness.

“I considered confronting them, but decided against it. I thought it would be better for the kids – and easier for me, I suppose – to find another solution. And so, after some thought, I announced that our family would be moving abroad. That I needed a new atmosphere in order to find “inspiration.” Of course, Leonore was upset. Disproportionately so, though I knew why. But my mind was made up, and she eventually came along. I thought that that would be the end of it.”

Clark stares out at the sea, expressionless. “But a year after the move, I saw him. The web designer fellow. Here on the island. At Grabber's, in fact, though he left as soon as I arrived. One guess where he was headed. I knew then that I was fighting a losing battle. If this man was willing to follow Leonore to another country, then their affair was something more serious, and more durable, than I had anticipated.” He paused, and listened for a moment to the humming air. “That was eleven months ago. Since then, Leonore and I have grown physically distant, which I imagine is a relief for her, but is very difficult for me. I still see this man – the web designer – his name is Peter, I think – from time to time. Of course, he doesn't know that I know who he is, and that makes him somewhat fearless. Once, I spotted him at the end of our street, just leaning on a tree trunk and waiting for me to head to the bar so that he could come see Leonore.” He pauses. “But I've given up on confronting them. What's the point? If they're truly this committed to one another, then creating a scene will do nothing but traumatize the kids and speed up the inevitable. I imagine that Leonore plans to leave as soon as Ashley – that's our youngest – goes to college. And that will be it for us.”

That was arguably the most that I'd ever heard Clark say at one time (or even in one day), and I was left feeling baffled about how to react. I was perfectly aware that I would be justified were I to slip into a righteous smugness, sort of a “ha ha, now it's your turn,” sort of thing, but as Clark spoke, I realized (maybe for the first time) that he had had something with Leonore of which I never could have dreamed – a life. A real life. What was it, after all, that Clark had taken from me eighteen years ago? - a youthful infatuation based on sex and pot? - a hastily-conceived and ringless engagement? That was nothing compared to what he himself had lost, if everything in this tale was true (and it was, I knew, because Clark was honest at all times, even when he shouldn't have been [although he was always politely mute about comparing our respective bodies of work]). And so after a few muddled ticks, the

primary emotion which welled up in me upon hearing all this was pity, and it felt strange to pity someone next to whom I'd always felt so small and worthless – a bit like a Greek feeling bad for Zeus, or something like that. I had the sudden urge to put my arm around his shoulder, but refrained, because touching him suddenly in the dark while on the edge of a frightening cliff seemed risky; and also, he started to talk again.

“But Jimmy,” he said, and that took me back, because he was the only one who had ever called me Jimmy, which meant that I hadn't been referred to in that way for quite a while, “you know what the worst part is?”

This sounded to me like a rhetorical question, but he paused briefly, as if waiting for an answer. Of course, I had no answer to offer, so eventually he was forced to continue.

“The worst part is that I haven't been able to work. For years now. Ever since I found out, I can't even sketch without feeling sick. I always thought that having a crisis – a real, honest-to-god personal catastrophe – would make me even better than I was. But it didn't, Jimmy. It's destroyed me, to the point where I am utterly incapable of doing the only thing I could ever do well. Do you what that means? It means I was never the real deal. I was a pretender. Because the great ones take their pain and direct it inward, and they emerge better.” He sighed. “I always imagined that if something awful happened to me, that's how I would react. But instead, I'm impotent.” He holds his hands up in the soft light. “Impotent as a husband, impotent as an artist. I do believe I've outlasted my usefulness.”

These were bitter words, but spoken also without any real emotion – admission as recitation. It was apparent that Clark was merely stating aloud sentences he'd honed to perfection (polished like rocks) inside his head, and that he was imperturbably convinced of their truth – regardless of how ludicrous they may have seemed to an outside listener (i.e., me). And they did seem ridiculous, because one does not simply stop being an artist, and certainly Clark was no pretender, and everyone must react to crises in their own way, and when the tables were turned, and Leonore left me for him, I had also gone through a period of frustrating worklessness, so I thought maybe the whole “tortured artist” persona was a myth and his situation was basically normal. So I wanted to comfort him – perhaps I even opened my mouth to say something – but he anticipated this reaction and raised one of his dextrous hands in a silencing motion. And I stayed silent.

“I suppose you're wondering why I wrote you after all this time,” he said.

Which I was, sort of.

“I wanted,” he said, “to apologize. It occurred to me, after all this happened, that I never had.” He paused. Darkness. Pounding waves on rocky shore. “I wanted to,” he went on after a moment. “I followed you to the train station the day you left. It wasn't that I wished to undo what Leonore and I

had done – I was convinced that that was for the best, honestly, I felt sure that we had a connection that you and she and lacked” – he looked at me, and I gave a small nod, because I had felt that too (although I hadn't admitted it to myself until this very evening) – “but it killed me that our connection had to happen at your expense. I understand that I'm not terribly good at being a friend. But you and I were friends... Best friends, even, if that's not too cliched a term... Certainly the most successful relationship, outside of my marriage, that I've ever maintained. For many years, I saw the disintegration of that relationship as a necessary consequence of the inevitability that was my and Leonore's romance. But as that romance has crumbled, I've come to see the end of our relationship for what it was – a tragic mistake, and a callous act on my part.”

It is indicative of Clark's unusual understanding of life in general that it took him the better part of two decades to see sleeping with his best friend's fiancée as something other than a necessary evil. But this admission, which would have been odd coming from anyone else I'd ever met, was perfectly sincere coming from him, and that sincerity was projected in the entire tenor of his body, in the rigid way he sat and especially in the burning intensity of his eyes. His shame was so apparent, in fact, that I had to look away. I was suddenly overwhelmed by emotion – the release of years of pent-up rage, the sudden deeper understanding of what I considered the defining conflict of my life, and most of all, a feeling of gratitude towards Clark for making an overture which led to the moment, here and now, where I could finally forgive him, and we could begin to know each other again, and maybe slip back into that inexplicable familiarity that we had instinctively developed within weeks of meeting – in other words, I was unspeakably happy that maybe now, at last, I could find again the happiness that I had had in the past, which seemed to be impossible without him present.

I realized that there were tears at the inside corners of my eyes, threatening to well over, and I lowered my head and watched them drip through the moonlight to my lap. When I looked up again, after a few seconds – certainly no more than ten – Clark was gone. Not just his remarkable eyes or artist's hands, but the whole of him, gone, and I was sitting by myself. I looked back over my shoulder at the path over which we had come, knowing as I did so that he wasn't there (and indeed he wasn't, it was dark and empty) – and that meant that he had gone the other way, out over the cliff and down onto the beach. And so I looked that way, wondering dimly if perhaps there was a ledge to land on, or some shrub to grasp. But there was no shrub and no ledge to be seen. Just rocks, and sand, and eighty feet below, the splayed and broken body of the greatest artist I would ever know. He was bent at angles that his keen eye would have found intriguing. The moon washed over him like smooth smoke, and the tide licked tenderly at his feet.

I called 911, the only number my useless cell phone would allow. And I sat. And I waited. And

I sobbed, quietly, to myself.

* * * *

The funeral was held not in Guana Cay (as Clark likely would have preferred), but in New York, where it quickly became a circus. There were perhaps a dozen attendees who could legitimately number themselves friends and family – this crew was dwarfed by the hundreds of artists, professors, students, and celebrity-chasers who showed up to go through the motions of mourning a man they hadn't met. I wore a black suit (which mostly covered up the lingering red welts which marked the numerous chompings of Guana Cay n.s.u.'s I had endured while waiting for the [rather lackadaisical] emergency response team from Marsh Harbor to arrive) and listened to a minister from some denomination or another talk about death, and rebirth, and the other abstractions which are commonly brought up at funerals. Truth be told, I didn't pay much attention. I was a bit woozy and unstable during the whole ceremony, disoriented not only by the experiences of the week before, but by the presence of so many unfamiliar faces contorted into masks of grief. The waves of black silk and satin were uncomfortably similar to the black waves of the Pacific, and when there was an “amen,” and everyone exhaled and adjusted in their seats, I shuddered. When the minister intoned his (hopefully) final prayer, I slipped out of the church and onto 27th street, and felt somewhat better.

The service was followed by a social gathering at someone's apartment to which I had, for some reason, been invited. Being a rather weak person, I felt I couldn't *not* attend (although that would have been my preference), so I resolved to get in, look sympathetic, and leave again as soon as possible. This plan was scuttled for two reasons: 1) the party (if that's the word) had an open bar, which I felt, in my querulous state, compelled to take advantage of, and 2) as I was drinking my free whiskey and doing my best to be invisible, Leonore walked purposely across the room to engage me in conversation. My instinct was to flee, but I felt that that would be impolite, so instead, I drank the rest of the whiskey and waited for her to arrive.

“James,” she said.

“Yes,” I answered, then feebly added, “I'm very sorry for your loss.”

Leonore was older, of course. She had put on wait, and her jet-black hair had a single streak of gray in it which began near her right temple and ran past her ear. She was tired, stressed, distraught, with a forehead no doubt more deeply lined than a week before. But she was still very beautiful, and still (although we hadn't spoken for quite a while) tangled up in my emotional constitution. I felt myself reddening, and hoped it was just the sudden infusion of scotch that caused my flush.

“You were with him when it happened, weren't you?” she asked.

I nodded.

“Why...” she started, and her voice caught, and I felt a lump in my throat at the sound. She started again. “Why did he do it? I mean, he brought you out there, right? After God only knows how long?” – I nodded – “Did he tell you anything? Did he explain himself?”

I looked at her, and I could see that her concern – weakness for web designers aside - was real, not feigned.

“He told me,” I said, “that he couldn't paint. That he was unable to work. And that it was making him very unhappy.”

She looks at me, sad – but something else, too – hopeful (?) – and asks, with a voice that's slightly shaky, “That's it?” She paused. “That's all he said? He asked you to come to the Bahamas for that?”

“It was very strange,” I said, truthfully.

Leonore nodded, and looked in that moment like she did when we were young, full of life and love, and it seemed like she might hug me. But she didn't, because we weren't young any more. Instead, she put her hand gently on my arm, and left it there for a few seconds, and then tears clouded her eyes and poured down her cheeks, and she excused herself in a choked voice and moved quickly away from me and towards the kitchen. I watched her go, swirling the ice cubes in my empty glass. Soon, it was clear that she wasn't coming back.

Standing up, I looked at the bar and considered ordering another whiskey, then changed my mind. The room was noisy, and someone laughed in an unhappy sort of way. No one noticed when I placed my glass on a convenient table, put on my coat and left. Face flushed but head clear, feeling better with each step, I walked down three flights of stairs, hailed a cab and drove away, itchy insect bites and all, into the frigid, crystal evening.

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