

A Short Story

ALMOST ALONE

TEEN & ADULT



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Almost Alone

A dull light, pale as skim milk, began to fill the sky, but the sea remained a dark, rippling expanse of gray. With the first touch of the rising sun, the colorless ring of clouds floating on the horizon suddenly burst into flaming orange and hot pink. My whole world, subdued and indistinct under the false dawn jumped into focus. As if by magic, the tropical waters separated into shades of green, blue and turquoise and the swells rolling in from the Atlantic no longer seemed as large or as menacing. The waves upon the bow of my boat sent up iridescent sprays in the warming air.

The sea was like a crumpled foil, a massive sheet of countless reflections twinkling under the early morning sun. In spite of the dark sunglasses I wore, the light was so penetrating that it seemed to pierce my

eyes, sending daggers to the back of my skull. Already my face ached from the constant squinting. Frigate birds swooped around the speeding boat, searching for food to steal. Their harsh screeching a bitter complaint.

I throttled back. The high steady whine of the outboard dropped to a low drone as I approached the south end of Dog Island. Here the island, merely a speck in the Eastern Caribbean, was so wave-battered that the shoreline resembled a wall studded with sharp spikes. Along this totally inaccessible and dangerous coast, brown pelicans digested their fishy breakfast, as they calmly bobbed up and down on the swells beyond the breaker.

The anchorage lay on the north side, protected by a barrier reef and guarded by hundreds of coral heads. These formations of elk horn coral rose an average of twelve feet above the bottom and most were as large as a small car. The cove resembled a graveyard of prehistoric beasts where all that remained were the intricate branchings of their gigantic racks. The way through this labyrinth to the beach was tortuous and extremely difficult to navigate. The water was so calm, so astonishingly clear that estimating depth and relative distance was very tricky.

Fingernails on chalkboard. Twice. The telltale sound of oh so gently kissing some coral I had mistakenly judged to be meters below the keel.

Beneath this mirrored surface more than one boat's skeleton lay slowly decaying - - wrecked upon the grasping antlers of elk horn coral; stark testimony that the calm, serene appeal of this deserted cove was deceptive.

Set between pastel water and verdant land, the beach was a dazzling band of white dappled with the crisscrossed tracks of hunting birds and scavenging crabs. With a stern anchor set, new nylon slipped smooth and satiny between my fingers as I payed out the line. A soft glide in; a hiss, more vibration than sound, and the bow gently nudged the beach. I hopped onto the wet sand, my feet slapped on the hardpack the first few steps. Then, sinking ankle-deep, I was trudging in soft, shifting powder. Already, the sand had given up last night's chill, quickly becoming foot-scorchingly hot.

The bowline I tied off on a low, sweeping branch of a wind-bent sea grape. The tree grew where soil and sand eternally competed and there, with a multitude of twisted limbs, it hovered protectively above the dune. Casting cool shade from the blistering sun, my favorite tree welcomed me. On this trip the tree was clustered with fruit, grapes fuzzy and dull rather than smooth and shiny. Even when ripe the fruit seemed confused, at once sweet, yet puckery. The skin thick and tough, the double seed overly large, but the slippery purple flesh sensuous and luscious in its contrasts.

Having filled my plate, a broad fan shaped leaf picked off the tree, I hunkered down in the still moist sand, eager to savor the fruit and precious solitude. Here no human intrusion choked the sea with garbage and crowded the land with condos.

“God, I love this place!” The cry echoed away unchallenged. With chest tight and soul exuberant, I was painfully full with the cherished beauty of it all. And then one wriggling, digging toe discovered a crushed soda can hidden in the sand. Colors faded out, its dubious promise of refreshment long gone, a foreign thing carelessly, thoughtlessly tossed aside. A rude violation of the spirit of this place. And me and all those who will come after. Damn it!