

Vacation

The customs officers greet us at the gate. They hand us the legal forms that release the island of liability for any of the relationships we choose to enter into during our stay. I sign and date the form, then I write my initials in the little box acknowledging the penalty for violating the island's provisional privacy laws. The full list of questions visitors are not allowed to ask each other is available online, and violators pay a fine that starts at fifteen hundred dollars. I can't afford this fine. I can't even afford this vacation. After this trip, with my salary, it will take me forty-two years to pay off my credit cards making minimal monthly payments.

We come to the family exchange station. An officer with a flawless olive complexion stands tall as a church on a Sunday. He checks our passports and asks if I am satisfied with the composition of my family. I've come to the island with my three sons. Jacob is eleven, David is almost nine, and Noah is six. Ever since we stepped off the plane, they've been pushing and shoving each other. Jacob called David a "string dick," David spat into Jacob's backpack, and Noah looks as if he is about to cry. It's been four years since we've traveled anywhere, aside from my sister's cabin upstate. There used to be a small lake there, but it dried up years ago.

"I'm open to readjustments," I tell the officer and hand him Noah's passport with surprising ease.

"Okeydoke," he says, then he speaks into his walkie-talkie. Another officer joins us, whispers something into Noah's ear, and leads him to a couple on a bench guarded by a battalion of creamy leather suitcases. Both the woman and the man must be in their late forties or early fifties, though they're too nicely groomed for me to be certain. The woman is wearing a pleated yellow skirt with a fitted white blouse, and her hair is sculpted in the intentional manner of someone who doesn't have children. The man is slender with a shiny bald head. He smiles at no one with a polite superiority. The woman steps forward and opens her arms to Noah. He looks at her with suspicion, so she immediately buys him an ice cream. I sign the consent form, agreeing to have my youngest spend his vacation with this nice childless couple, who'd like to not be childless for a week.

The man takes Noah's backpack, and they walk away with straight backs and purpose, Noah bouncing between them. I squash my jealousy by thinking, Noah is so young. His memory of this trip will break into a hundred pieces, rebuild itself, and break again, all before he reaches puberty. What he will remember about this island is a crapshoot, and managing two boys is easier than three. Jacob pulls on my shirt and tries to extort an ice cream, but I give him an indignant look and remind him that I already bought him a doughnut.

The officer taps on the glass to get my attention: "Are you interested in a partner for the duration of your stay?"

"What the hell," I say. "Why not?"

He speaks into his walkie-talkie again. A couple of minutes pass, and a man walks over, shows the officer his phone, and signs the consent form. His name tag reads, "Hi, I'm Bret." He is wearing sandals with Velcro straps, and a slight belly hangs over his shorts, but he is relatively tall and has a full head of curly hair and caramel eyes. He waddles when he walks, like a cartoon hippo, and I decide to find it endearing. How hard could it be to love someone for a week? I've done more awkward things in the past, like crying in public bathrooms, switching price tags on clothes in department stores, or giving birth. Bret and I hug as if we've known each other for years. This presumed intimacy eliminates the need for introductions, pleasantries, and other formalities. Bret grabs my carry-on and runs outside to find us a cab.

We drive down a narrow road, and the ocean comes at us from both sides. It's so heavy, we can feel it. The two boys become excited and forget about pushing each other. Then they remember and start over with renewed energy. I give Bret a "do something" look. Every couple needs a division of duties. I delegate dealing with the boys' routine aggression to Bret, and to myself, I assign booking dinner reservations and culpability for all of the boys' offenses and inadequacies.

Bret turns to the boys. "Look here," he starts. I put on my headphones.

We come to the shabbiest part of the island, which isn't that shabby at all. The houses are freshly painted and plump, the lawns manicured, the flowers well nourished, the cars are imported, and the children playing in the yards are clean and domestic. A big white dog with a moonlike presence welcomes us with a few barks. Around here, we are far from the affluent tourists who lock their car doors with a mixed feeling of self-satisfaction and guilt. The resort we are heading to is advertised as "affordable luxury," and the banner on their website features two chairs, blue like the ocean, facing the water. The caption underneath reads: "If you're here now, you're doing alright at home."

But we are not doing alright at home because we are four people and one paycheck. I work for a company that studies human genome sequences to predict what a person is most likely to die from. Cancer or heart attack? Stroke or Alzheimer's? An enterprise software system analyzes the data and generates bar graphs, pie charts, and waterfall diagrams with probabilities. Who knows what our clients do with them? Quit smoking? Eat less cholesterol? Turn to religion? Maybe after they die, their family or friends print out a copy for the funeral and display it next to the coffin. Then all the guests can walk by and shake their heads: *we always knew*. People always like to know things in hindsight, as if knowing they are going to die is not enough.

At our company, the scientists have the big salaries. I work in accounting, which is basically the counting of what we have, what we don't have, and what we must give to the government. It's a perfect job for someone like me, used to not having things like retirement savings, a car with working air conditioning, a couch without pee stains, dental work, and maybe jiu-jitsu lessons for the boys. Had I gone to a four-year college, had fewer children or a partner with a second income, it could've been different. In hindsight.

The resort is a collection of small disheveled log cabins stacked on a hill about three miles from the beach, but there is a bowl of seashells on the reception desk, and the walls in the lobby are covered with large glossy prints of the ocean. There is a free bus to the beach, however. There is also a pizza shop and a souvenir stand where guests can buy refrigerator magnets, shot glasses, gum, soda, magazines, and roach spray. A tall woman with hair in a thick braid wrapped around her head greets us at the reception desk. With heavy, deliberate movements, she checks our passports and our forms, then invites us one by one to follow her into a private room. I go last. She asks me what I've come here to forget. When I tell her, she laughs.

We take our luggage to the cabin and change for the beach. There is an ocean mist air freshener and a jar filled with sand on the coffee table. A laminated card under the jar provides the Wi-Fi password and suggests using the spray and sprinkling some sand on the floor for a beach-like feel. Bret and the boys are waiting for me by the door, wearing identical blue swim trunks with tiny, toothy yellow sharks.

Back at the reception desk, the woman unfolds the map of the beach. I find a family-sized plot next to a palm tree and pencil my initials on it. The plot's a little far from the water, but it's the busy season. We miss the bus by a minute and have

to wait half an hour for the next one, which is packed, but the seats inside have been ripped out to make it all standing room, so we are able to push our way in.

"This sucks balls," Jacob says.

"Enjoy this," I threaten. "We won't be going on another vacation soon, if ever."

The beach is crowded with people laid out on their stomachs and backs, their feet pointed toward the ocean. At the edge of the water, toddlers dig in the sand and squeal with delight. Some people have little fences built from planks of white wood around their plots. They've decorated their fences with flowers, trinkets, and family photos: weddings, previous vacations, kids' birthday parties. Others didn't bother with fences or decorations. I assume those are the people who settled for less, like us. Workers are out with their shovels, walking between the bodies. They offer the experience of being buried in the sand for eight dollars.

"No, thank you," I tell them. "Maybe later."

I buy a foam football and hand it to Bret with expectation. He puts the boys into a formation, and for the next hour, the three of them throw the football to each other. I can see from their faces that they are at peace. I feel left out. Before lunch, I buy the boys a sandcastle. I resent them for having to spend the twelve dollars, but they would've never built one so nice themselves. The two workers who build it look as though they are only a few years older than Jacob.

"Do you live here?" I ask them.

"No, ma'am," one of them replies. "We come every morning by ferry."

They name the neighboring island where they live, the one with gravel roads and without a hospital. When it's done, their sandcastle has four towers, two arches, and a drawbridge. Bret takes pictures of it with his phone. The boys come running, jump on top of the castle, then finish destroying it by kicking the remains. The awkward feeling of loss hangs in the air, but we smile like it's all in good fun.

We take the boys to lunch. The restaurant is so close to the water that food is delivered by waiters dressed in inflatable dolphin suits. They bring the plates to the table, balancing them on one fin and making a swimming motion with the other. The kids just love it. David drops a handful of sand into his brother's french fries. I consider discussing David's passive-aggressive tendencies with Bret tonight but change my mind. What if he says that I'm using being a single mother as an excuse for not paying enough attention to my middle child? I do not want to hear that stronger people do better.

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At night, I cannot sleep. Whenever I turn on the tattered mattress, I feel like I'm wearing my bones on the outside of my skin. The rumble of trucks from the nearby highway is constant but erratic. What I'm trying to understand is how time changes. Year after year, I take the same bus to the same office, suffer through the same city traffic, and buy the same coffee from the man who runs a small grocery next to my office building. We greet each other in the same tone, he complains about the heat or the cold, and one of his front teeth stays missing. This man has been more permanent in my life than Noah's father, or even Jacob's and David's father, but only recently have I learned that his name is Ralph. People come and go. My boys are going to go, taking with them the deficit of all the positive memories we had no time, or patience, to make.

I imagine the ocean shuffling its waves outside, and each wave hits the shore like a car crash. Bret snores softly, more like purrs, in his sleep. He was very polite after sex, asking me which side of the bed I prefer. He was very polite during sex as well, which was fine given the circumstance: the boys sleeping in the part of the room sectioned off by what's called a privacy screen. Not to mention the general despair we felt after traveling. With all the preparation and anticipation, it's hard not to be disappointed.

I hear a little cough and a moan from one of the boys. Jacob, I think. He is not doing well at school. The teachers complain that he is confrontational, and when he is angry, he throws things against the wall or at people. David is compliant and gets decent grades, but recently he told his teacher that he lives in a foster home and that his father is in prison for armed robbery and his mother has a debilitating genetic disorder that has left her in a wheelchair, drooling. Noah is quiet. He knows all about prehistoric lizards and, for some reason, is terrified of watermelons. At times, he disappears in the noise and drama of his older brothers. Maybe they, the couple he is with, will not wait to notice him until he is not around. Bret mumbles something, then turns on his side. I cover him with the blanket, suddenly feeling protective of him.

I decide that we should do a family activity. There was a travel brochure at the reception desk for a bird oasis, a dome filled with birds. I find the place on my phone and learn that children come there to feed the birds seeds and dried crickets and then paint their feathers with watercolors. The birds, the website says, have grown accustomed to this practice and suffer from depression when children do not come. I assume Noah will go there because that couple seems

to be the type that enjoys nature when it's well-groomed. Noah is a patient kid. He'll be good at bird painting, and they'll watch him and smile at each other with the serene appreciation for parenting I've never had.

I click the admission button and see that the tickets are eighty-five dollars per person. No discount for kids, and I'd have to pay for a cab there and back. I quickly compute the total cost of this trip, shiver, and try to find another activity that will leave us enough money for meals and alcohol. Maybe whale watching or a motorboat rental. Turns out there are no whales in the area but a ton of boat rental companies. I find one that offers a substantial discount because their boat also serves as a lifeguard vessel. They combine cruising and sightseeing with monitoring the water for drownings. Their website claims that people do not drown very often, though at times, they, of course, do.

Early morning on the day before we leave, we meet the captain of the boat at the pier. The boys are not yet awake enough to hate each other, and when they see the elegant white boat with a red stripe, they giggle with excitement. Bret is looking at me with gratitude, maybe even admiration. The captain looks young—he still has baby fat on his face—but his upper body is a fully developed and prominent landscape of peaks and valleys. He tips his hat to us, catches the boys as they jump on board, then shows us life jackets and ropes under the seats. “We could tie the boys to the boat if the water gets rough. Or to each other if they get rowdy.” He winks at me.

I lather my boys with sunblock, and when Bret gives me a quizzical look, I rub it on his back and shoulders as well. He turns his head, smiles, and lightly squeezes my hand. All the little tricks people do to feel less lonely, like touching or having yard sales or building parking garages.

For the first hour, we bounce on the choppy waves, motoring past the yellow beaches, green mountains, boats dancing in marinas, and shorefront restaurants polka-dotted with beachgoers. Bret finds a pair of binoculars onboard and studies the shore as if he is planning a military excursion.

Bret is not a talkative man, but I've learned that he likes Frosted Flakes with chocolate milk and funny YouTube videos of animals doing human things, like riding skateboards or tickling each other. He packs his boxer shorts by first folding them in half, then rolling them into a tube. He has a scar above his upper lip from the time he was six and a stranger at Walmart accidentally cut him with an umbrella. When the boys joke or goof around, he doesn't laugh. He says, “That's funny,” and ruffles their hair. The other day, he fixed a torn pocket on David's

backpack. Pulled out a needle and thread and sewed it back together. I've never met a man who traveled with a sewing kit.

That's a lot to know about a person, about the same, give or take, that I knew about the fathers of my boys. The older boys' father, who never forgot garbage day and was an excellent cook, barely said a kind word. For him, the world was the size of his kitchen. Noah's father, who was full of sappy compliments and other sentimental utterances, would "forget" to tip delivery men and hotel staff. "This world holds an immense beauty," he used to say, and then, after Noah turned three, he left us to travel to other more exotic locations. We fought as if we had lifetimes ahead.

My boys are sitting close with their knees touching. David leans over and whispers something into Jacob's ear. They both laugh. David covers his mouth, then whispers again with more determination. Jacob shakes his head but doesn't push him away. For a minute, they look like brothers who share more than a competition. Bret is still studying the shore with the binoculars, now and again raising himself on tiptoe. He looks a bit ridiculous, but it's alright. We resemble one of those happy families in brokerage account commercials. I imagine myself ten pounds thinner and wearing a hat with a brim like the rings of Saturn. I imagine this boat doesn't need to rescue anyone, including us.

The next moment will be the one I'll lie about in the incident report. I will omit these details: Jacob's cautious footsteps as he walks over to Bret; David's face—all clenched jaw and narrow eyes, like a house boarded up before a hurricane; a fat tropical fly that lands on my knee—I try to whack it but miss; Bret's eager, ingenuous smile.

"What do you see?" Jacob asks.

"A river running from the top of the mountain. And wind turbines. Do you know how wind energy works? Why is that funny?"

Jacob takes a step back, tightens his hands into fists, and thrusts those fists into Bret's back. Bret's body leaps forward, and he makes a sound when he hits the water. It's an unusually squeaky sound, the kind you'd expect from a bird, not a human. I will describe this sound in the incident report, alleging that it is how I knew Bret fell.

"Stop!" I yell to the captain.

He is wearing AirPods and doesn't hear me. Behind us, Bret is fighting to stay above water like he has a dozen wheeling arms, and everything around reflects a deafening silver light. The boys collapse with laughter. I freeze. I want to charge at them, grab them by the hair, and throw them off this boat. First Jacob, because

he is bigger and stronger and might fight back. Then David, who'd be scared and helpless without the muscle of his older brother.

"Man overboard!" I scream, and it feels surprisingly empowering.

The captain hears me. He turns off the engine, blows his whistle, grabs a life jacket, and raises his arms preparing to jump. But the boat jerks, and he loses his balance, almost falling backward. Now, there is some distance between us and the spot where Bret fell—I mean, was pushed. I squint into the sun's reflection and see something moving in the water, a splash.

"There," I yell. "Go back."

The boat coughs, doesn't start, and the captain curses. He seems oddly flustered for someone whose job is to rescue people. A few minutes pass before we are moving, and a few more while the captain struggles to control the boat in the jagged waves. We spin around before taking off in the direction I'm pointing. When we get there, there is nothing but water. Maybe I lost the spot. Maybe it was a fish or a wave's shadow. Maybe there was nothing there at all.

The captain blows his whistle again and jumps into the water anyway. He swims with broad strokes around the boat, expanding his circumference on each turn. He dives under, I pray, but he comes up empty-handed. The orange life jacket is trailing behind him, looking despondent. The boys stop laughing. Jacob begins to hiccup, but David elbows him in the stomach to stop.

I hadn't asked Bret if he could swim, even though our contract didn't forbid it. But couples go for years without asking each other important questions: Do you like Victorian houses? What's your credit history? Would you kill Hitler if you could? Would you adopt a three-legged dog? Can you say the alphabet backward? When you stand in a slow-moving line at a coffee shop, and everyone else is being patient and civilized, do you get a sudden urge to scream at the top of your lungs? Are you happy? Instead, they ask each other something ridiculous, like: Would you leave me if I gained twenty pounds or became paralyzed from the waist down after a paragliding accident? Who could foresee that? It's like trying to predict a landslide by looking at gene sequences.

The boys have crawled into a small alcove under the control panels. They've lowered their heads and raised their knees to their chins. Four small eyes are studying me. What they're trying to figure out is whether I have the power to fix this, like I have the power to find lost gloves or open the dishwasher when it jams.

"Why the hell are you sitting?" I scream at them. "Start looking!"

They jump to their feet and zealously begin to turn their heads left and right. They check my face for approval. I imagine Bret's lungs filling up with water. Their ears are pink from the sun and stick out like their father's ears. I hated those ears.

Whatever mechanism nature has that prevents us from harming our young is flawed at best and doesn't work at all for goldfish. Maybe the goldfish eats her hatchlings because she can no longer stand their constant, desperate neediness and their selfish, naive arrogance. Or how they turned another ordinary day into a shit storm. She asked them why. They said, "We don't know," and she simply lost it.

The captain swims back to the boat. He is breathing heavily. His face is flushed. "We have to radio the shore," he says.

"You have to keep looking!" I scream.

The rescue boat with the supervisor comes within the hour. I don't know how we pass the time. I keep offering the captain water and reapplying sunblock on the boys. I grip David's shoulder so hard he flinches, but he doesn't complain. When I lift Jacob's arm, he is boneless like a ragdoll. The captain keeps mumbling something about sweeping currents.

The supervisor brings with him four divers in scuba gear, and while he drops his anchor and ties his boat to ours, they jump into the water one by one. He must be in his sixties, short and stocky, with thick eyebrows, curly hair, and an equally curly beard. He leaps onto our boat with a lightness surprising for his weight and age.

"Good afternoon, ma'am. Hello, lads," he greets us. He acknowledges the captain with a curt nod. His calm and husky voice instills the confidence that he will sort all this out, bring order to everyone on the boat, in the water, and below it.

"Is anyone here hurt?" he asks.

"No. Yes. Maybe," I say. "Where is here?"

"Okay," he says. "Please, ma'am, take a seat."

One diver peeks out of the water, shakes his head, and goes back down.

The supervisor sits next to me and takes out a tablet from his bag. "We need some information about your partner for the incident report."

"Temporary partner," I say.

"Of course," he says. "That doesn't change anything for the report, ma'am. We treat all incidents the same."

The night before, after the boys fell asleep, Bret and I watched a movie about a woman with partial amnesia who kept forgetting who her husband was. She'd sleep with different men. Then she'd snuggle next to them and put her head into that nook between their head and shoulder. That motion stayed the same. Everyone knows how to fit their head into the nook. No one fumbles that like they fumble a handshake, a kiss, or condolences. I couldn't ask Bret his last name because that was a forbidden question, but I could place my head into his shoulder nook. I think of that moment and feel nauseous.

"What is your partner's name and age?" the supervisor asks.

"Bret. Forty-three, I think. He must've fallen. Maybe there was a sharp turn or a wave? I didn't see it happen. I was watching my boys."

The boys stare at me like I'm a house on fire. I imagine telling the supervisor what really happened to Bret and how the boys' lives would turn out after. I imagine having to live with those lives. Guilt would come and go. But there is guilt we can bear, and there is guilt related to our children for all the times we couldn't pause their lives when ours were going under. After children leave, guilt stays.

"I understand," says the supervisor. "I have children myself, grown now. One just had a baby, and the other is finishing grad school. How time goes. Do you have Bret's identification number?"

I look for the email authorizing the temporary partnership that I received at the airport. I read the long combination of numbers and letters out loud, and the supervisor types them into his tablet.

"Found him," he says.

I turn to the water with hope, but the only world in which Bret has been found is the digital one.

"Please," I say, "you have to find him."

"We will do all we can." He sighs. "Was your partner wearing a life jacket?"

I shake my head.

"It's good to be extra careful," the supervisor says and points to my boys who are wearing their life jackets.

How careful can we be? I once read on the internet that a person could drown in less than sixty seconds, and it takes as little as half a cup of water to fill their lungs. But everyone's lung capacity is different. People don't go around telling everyone how much water they can take in. They might not know themselves.

Three divers climb back onto the supervisor's boat and rest, sharing dried mango and Cheez-Its. They have a quiet conversation, still wearing their wetsuits.

The fourth diver is still underwater. It's late in the afternoon and increasingly windy.

"I'll take you and the boys back to shore, ma'am," the supervisor says. "We will keep looking."

I do not ask for how long.

The supervisor gestures to our captain to join the divers on the other boat and checks that our life jackets are properly buckled. He turns the radio on, and it's tuned to a classical music station. We pass several beaches, mostly empty, overcast, and repentant. The Moonlight Sonata has always made me cry.

In the secret room, I told the receptionist that I came to the island to forget that I wanted a different life. She laughed and said, "There are many ways to be disappointed."

We pick up Noah the next morning at the reunification point in the airport. The place is like any other waiting room: the smell of bleach poorly masks the smell of sweat and dismal consolations. Rows of chairs in gray synthetic fabric draw no distinction between the ways in which people can be lonely. The few people here are mostly elderly. Some are sitting down while others are hugging and kissing cheeks. As customs go, there is hardly a difference between how we say good-bye and hello.

Noah is by the window watching airplanes take off and land, looking more grown-up than ever. He is wearing butterscotch suede loafers, his hair brushed and split carefully to the side. He rests his hands on his knees, as if he is guarding a house with a pair of stone lions. I kneel, grab him, kiss his forehead, then nose-dive into his hair to eradicate that stupid side part. He hangs on me like a wet winter coat. The older boys don't intrude, wait for us to let go, then greet their younger brother with fist bumps. I ask Noah if he is hungry. We are all operating under a silent agreement that all is ordinary. That's what families do. The older boys tell Noah they've seen a whale shark. This is a lie.

"I saw a baby bird," Noah says. "It died."

He takes a long breath, holds it, then exhales the story about his trip to the bird oasis with his vacation parents. The woman asked him to call her mom for the week but didn't insist when he kept calling her Linda. The man told him to call him Allen and said that Noah needed a "creative outlet." Noah didn't want to paint birds. He wanted to swim at the beach or watch cartoons, but they promised him cotton candy.

"Lucky," says David but with no hostility.

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"I got nauseous in the car and threw up, and Linda was mad at Allen because of her dress and because this was his idea," Noah says. "Then we got there. Allen was mad at Linda because it was hot and muggy, and he couldn't breathe, and he forgot his sunglasses. Then we stood in line for paint and brushes. Then we went to look for a bird. Linda said we should learn to enjoy nature even when it's crowded. Then I saw him."

"Saw who?" I ask.

"The baby bird," Noah says. "He was on the ground and had no feathers. He looked more like a mouse with pink skin and a yellow beak. Linda said not to look because nature is cruel that way. I asked why. She didn't say. So I looked. He made a tiny peep sound and tried to move. Remember when we were on the bus, and there was a boy with sticks dragging his legs on the floor, and you said not to look? That's how the baby bird was trying to move, only he had no sticks. He was pulling himself with his wings. Allen said he must've fallen out of his nest and was going to die, and we should end its suffering. Then he took off his shoe. Linda said, 'Don't.' But he slammed his shoe down, like this, and it made a crunchy noise, like when Jacob sat on that bag of potato chips. Linda said it was time for cotton candy and tried to pull me away, but I cried and cried and cried."

Noah begins to cry. He opens his mouth and presses his face into my stomach, leaving a wet stain on my dress. Jacob pulls his hair at the temples. David is chewing the collar of his shirt. They have these infuriating habits, and I cannot reason or plead for them to stop. I inhale the air they are breathing, but I cannot exhale it. Inside my lungs, it turns into a liquid denser and heavier than water. It pulls me under.

I buy them chocolate croissants on the way to the boarding area. Noah sits between his older brothers and wipes his hands on his shorts. The chocolate stains look like dried blood. I wipe him with a napkin, pick him up, and sit back down with him on my lap. The older boys lean against me. They are heavy, but I consent to their nonnegotiable presence. They throw their arms and legs over me. Our breath becomes synchronized. We are like one giant insect with eight legs and eight arms but without a central nervous system. An unintentional monster who might break into pieces or knock over a coffee cart if it tried to walk. We don't mean any harm.

A voice over the PA announces that boarding will begin in half an hour. The voice is muffled. It chokes, fades, breaks to the surface with gurgling noises, then recedes again. We collect our things before boarding, our backpacks and

carry-ons, empty cups and candy wrappers. We move slowly, trying to find balance between tolerance and remorse. Noah for eating the cotton candy after all. The older boys for what they did. And me.

An attendant walks by and asks if we need any help.

“No,” I tell her. “We are mostly okay.”