

From *Descant*, Summer, 1996 (Nominated, Journey Prize) and *Hotel Paradiso*

Hotel Paradiso

I lay in a tropical illness. Nausea, cramps, fever: the reaction to the touch of one of the strange plants that grew in the forests behind the village, the poison wood perhaps, or to the hallucinogenic blossoms that flourished, untended, in the lurid garden beneath my window where the banana quits fluttered, or to the dreamy caress of the green arms that beckoned from the filtered sunlight of the ocean floor, or to the venom of the sea anemone or another of the tiny spined creatures that grew in the reef.

Or just the sun. Upon my first arrival at Pigeon Cay, more than two years before, I had taken to the beach and burned my face so badly that my skin exuded a clear, orange liquid for several days. I was treated with ointments and shade, and have not since been able to spend more than brief periods in the sun.

I lay in the living room, the coolest place in the house, and gazed at the green light through the slats of the shutters, waiting for my illness and the weather to break. Ed Holder wanted to bring the doctor over. But it was only a fight, I said, that's how it began, a fist fight in a bar -- no need to bring the doctor in for that sort of thing. Refined Doctor Cutter, trained at

McGill -- what would she have done but view with disgust a cut lip and those flowers of blood around the eyes. For the first time in two years, I was lonely. I had started to dream about Isobel Cutter. I did not want her to see me like this.

The illness started with a fight, but like an opportunistic virus or an introduced species, it had transformed itself into something else: a kind of melancholy, a new way of seeing. Once, in a desert campsite in New Mexico, a scorpion bit me. It was like that, the puffiness and fever. The fear. I was unhinged.

Or was it merely torpor, those unnaturally hot days? It was late April, but it felt like deepest July. It was the islands, but it felt like the steaming tropics. The weather was freakish, the ocean breezes gone; the only movement of air on the entire island came from the ceiling fans of bars and a few ancient air conditioners.

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At Cape Hatteras, eight hundred miles to the north, a storm was gathering, moving eastward, and the seas were starting to build.

It was the weather, and it was also the season. We were between times: the tourists gone, the hotels empty. Most of the part-time expatriates had gone back to Vermont, Connecticut, New York, to their country houses in England, in Ontario. Later, in the true dog days of summer, illegal Haitian workers might come from out of the bush and from across the channel to repair and renovate, but for now the great oceanside villas, the pink and pastel green cottages, were shuttered tight.

Later, we might have sailors -- real sailors, who navigated their own boats down the coast and across the Gulf Stream, not the millionaires who chartered fantastic yachts in the winter -- but for now the lagoon and the hurricane hole were almost empty. Two of the marinas had closed for the season. Business was flat.

And for some reason the drug trade had abandoned us as well -- vanished from the islands overnight. For good, we would later learn; those fabled entrepreneurs had started flying their light planes straight to Florida, then into Louisiana, Alabama, Texas, and they had started sailing their ships up to the Carolinas, to Maine, even as far north as Nova Scotia. Our moment in the sun had come and gone as quickly as it had during Prohibition. Whole days, then a week, then two weeks passed with no one coming into the bank other than Drover, the village storekeeper. All this compounded my bruises, my aches, my pains. I was lonely. I was depressed.

"How did you get into a fight, anyway?" asked Ed Holder. "You're not the kind of guy who would be in a place like that at one o'clock in the morning."

"Jay McInerney," I said. It was a game he played, these references to novels, to literary situations. "Hardly up to your standards, I would've thought. And shouldn't the author be dead? Isn't that the rule?"

"So sorry," said Ed.

"I used to box, when I was at university, at Hart House. Have sparred occasionally with Healey here, on the beach, once even at a gym, over at Marsh Harbour. Tommas somehow knew that."

"Writers who box," said Ed. "Like Hemingway and Fitzgerald."

"Hemingway and Morley Callaghan, you mean; Fitzgerald was the timekeeper. And Tommas doesn't box; he fights. You should have been there. You could have been timekeeper. Where were you?"

"I was in the bush, talking to the Haitians in the refugee settlements."

"Did you find out anything?" I asked.

"No."

"What did I tell you?"

"I know something's going on. They're afraid. That's why they won't talk."

"You talk to Burnett, the fellows at the Yacht Club?" I said.

"They're a bunch of racists -- waiting for something to happen," said Ed, "a riot or something."

"*Burmese Days*," I said. "George Orwell. Am I right?"

"So, what were you doing in that bar?"

"Drinking. What else?"

It was inbetween times, and we drank. Those whose job it was to serve the winter residents and the tourists had nothing to do but hang around the bars. Even some of the Haitians who lived in the bush beneath tin roofs and the palmetto leaves of lean-tos, and made a bit of money for their families clearing other people's land, doing odd jobs -- you even saw them in the bars. That was rare. I had never seen Tommas in a bar before.

We, who had been busy since November working for the people from the north, now we had nothing to do and a heat wave to do it in. It seemed we were waiting for something to happen -- like Ed said. In the heat, in the sub-tropics, the tension builds until it must break. Too hot to drink outside at the Terrace Bar, so we drank inside, in the windowless lobby of the Majestic Hotel -- they had a species of air conditioner there -- or at the Riverside Tavern, built on wooden pilings above the harbour. Through a hole in the floor you could see the pulsating jellyfish which thrive on the sewage. The white sand, the palm trees, the exotic rum drinks, the last gleaming yachts in the lagoon, the visions of nearly naked women on the beach: what did they mean to us now?

Ed Holder said, "Weather like this -- it can't last. Something's got to happen."

"Maybe it's an asteroid," I said, "heating the earth as it hurtles into the atmosphere, like an exploding sun. We have a day to go before it all ends, day and a half at most."

I lay back on the wicker chesterfield, my arm across my forehead. I could almost see that bursting sun.

"Where's that from?" said Ed. "Not J.G. Ballard. Something by John Wyndham?"

"Rod Serling. The Twilight Zone. Guy can't get warm, is freezing to death. Then he wakes up -- surprise! -- turns out he's been dreaming. He gets up, looks out the window -- sees the giant sun, getting closer and closer."

Ed Holder was a newspaper reporter from Toronto. He was a little younger than I was, maybe thirty-five. He'd originally been a friend of Karen's, my ex. We used to talk about books, but we had never been close; he was a precise person, too precise for a swashbuckler like me, I liked to think. He was supposed to be a foreign correspondent -- a war reporter -- yet there was never a hair out of place, never a crease or a smudge on his clothing. War correspondents were supposed to suck back the Marlboros, but Ed Holder didn't smoke. He had this way of pursing his lips.

There was something else we had in common, besides Karen and a dilettantish interest in literature. ("That guy's read more books than anyone I've ever met," said Healey. "Is he gay, or what?") We had both fled. We were both refugees, foolish in our pursuit of the exotic (the rumour was that Ed lived with a teenage girl in Guatemala City), and who wanted to be reminded of that? I had not been glad to see him. It was people like him -- the connection with Karen, especially -- that I'd come to the islands to escape. I was taken aback when he came

into the bank, unannounced. He had been wearing some kind of reporter's camouflage flack jacket, all pockets and buttons, and heavy duty shoes.

"You look like a joke," I told him, "You've seen too many movies. Read too many books. You look like a war correspondent."

"I *am* a war correspondent."

"Oh? Where is the war in the Bahamas? Let me guess: it's the drug war. You're hot on the trail of the Medellin Cartel."

"I have come from Haiti."

"Let me guess again," I said, "You stayed at the Hotel Oloffson, a gingerbread mansion of towers and cupolas. You took dinner on the old verandahs, festooned..."

"Festooned?" said Ed. We strolled over to the lobby of the Majestic, for Ed had arrived on the first day of the heat wave.

"...festooned -- absolutely; don't interrupt -- festooned with bougainvillaea, overlooking the unkempt gardens, dangerous and foreboding at night. The swimming pool was empty. Perhaps there was a corpse. You drank by yourself in the bar. In the morning, you strolled up to the lushness of the heights above the town, to Petionville, where the corrupt and the wealthy live, behind their garden walls, dogs straining on chains. Back at the waterfront, you searched out voodoo -- *voudon*, you call it -- and were disappointed to learn that visitors are welcome to the ceremonies, that the hotels arrange regular excursions. You strolled through the market, taking in the smells. In the late afternoon, you returned to the Oloffson. You felt cleansed by the tropical rain. You rested before dinner between crisp white sheets. You awoke, refreshed, excited. After dinner and your customary session in the bar, you sat on the verandah in the moonlight, too restless to sleep. You could hardly wait to get into the hills the next day to see the poor people -- the poorest in the hemisphere -- and the destruction they have done to their

land, and the evil that's been done to them. It would be outrageous, you just knew it. Yet you wished, somehow, that you could be more -- committed."

"You've been there?" said Ed.

"Never. But I'm an exile myself. I know all about the bullshit. *The Comedians*, by the way. Graham Greene."

"When did you become such an asshole?"

"Oh, it's been a gradual thing."

"You don't you care about those people, the refugees?"

But it wasn't a question of caring. Across the planet people were in motion, millions of them. I knew that; I was, after all, supposed to be an economist. I did something called "Latin American Country Analysis" for the bank, part of my scam -- how I got to be in the Caribbean. Thousands of Latin Americans entered North America every day. The flight northward was ceaseless. And it was going on all over the world: in eastern and southern Europe, inside Mexico and India, where the cities would soon collapse, in Ethiopia and Somalia, throughout Africa, where there was nowhere much even to flee to. What did the few hundred Haitians and the fewer Cubans who came here matter next to all that? And even people who were not starving and not being persecuted, they were on the move too. Look at me. Look at Ed.

But this is not what I said to Ed. I said was, "Care? Am I a caring person? Jesus, Ed. What next? Am I in touch with my feelings?"

"They're individuals, you know. They have names."

"Spare me."

"How long have they been coming here?"

"Years. Centuries. Columbus first, then the rest, looking for the green light."

"You mean the green flash?"

"A myth: there is no green flash at sunset in the sub-tropics, Ed, so you can stop looking for it. No, I meant the green light at the end of Daisy's dock, the green breast of the new world. They've been coming since long before there were unfulfilled, dreamy foreign correspondents, arriving with their tropical luggage at the Hotel Oloffson in Port-au-Prince."

I poured myself another drink from the bottle of Anjeho that the barmen had placed before us. It's true: I was becoming an asshole.

"There's another myth, isn't there, Dave," -- Dave! How I hated being called Dave; Ed knew that; he was on a roll too -- "even more juvenile than the foreign correspondent thing. The dissipated expatriate. Someone in the movies, Humphrey Bogart, maybe? Or that useless alcoholic, the guy in Mexico -- Malcolm Lowery."

"Not Malcolm Lowery -- too pathological. Go with Paul Theroux, or maybe Somerset Maugham; he was the original."

"Anyway, it's not the Oloffson I'm interested in," Ed said. It's the Hotel Paradiso."

"Home of monster cockroaches. The occasional German tourist -- they let them go nude on the beach there. What do you want at the Hotel Paradiso?"

He shrugged, playing things close to the vest. Perhaps he didn't trust me. "A story I'm working on."

"A story? Ed, there is no story at the Hotel Paradiso. It's the Riverside Tavern, you want. That's where the drug buyers go. Thugs. Or Annie's Bar. Annie allows gambling. Some of the people in the cocaine trade -- do business with your Colombians -- they're supposed to drink there. Those cigarette boats that carry the stuff to Miami. Although you're a little late. The business seems to have passed us by. But go ahead, go down to Annie's Bar. End of the reef, lee side of the island, can't miss it. Even if you don't find anything for your story, you can get laid there, I guarantee it."

That was almost a week earlier, six steaming days ago.

"Would you like me to bring you anything?" Ed said. "Water? Ginger ale?" I waved his offer away, and reached over to refresh my wash cloth in the basin of cool water on the floor by my side.

"If you'd been there with me, you might have learned something -- about the Hotel Paradiso."

"That is what your fight was about?" said Ed.

"Yes, in a way. I think it was."

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I sat in the fetid lobby of the Majestic Hotel, the third night of the heat wave. The bottles glowed in the yellow light behind the bar. Red and yellow streamers rippled out from the air conditioner above the doorway. A group of Haitians sat at a table in the corner: Seymour Dufresne who worked as a chef, Ti-Paul from the ferry, and Tommas -- Tommas the Poet, as he was called. He did not live in one of the settlements in the woods -- those agglomerations of cardboard and plastic sheeting, driftwood and bits of cast off wood and iron; they looked like garbage dumps. He had an actual house, a concrete bungalow out on a corner of Burnett's property, in return for which he did a little work around the plantation. Burnett even paid him a wage. Tommas was a Haitian who travelled. He was interested in politics. He wrote and published poetry in three languages. He knew that voodoo was nonsense.

The Haitians were drinking Wray and Nephew -- clear overproof from Jamaica -- the cheapest rum in the bar, but also the most dangerous. Ti-Paul from the ferry was the most outgoing of the three. He said to me, "Hey bass, business bad?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Least you got a job."

I was coming to hate my desk in the little bank overlooking the harbour as much as I had hated my desk in Montreal, and those long grey corridors. But it was true, I had a job, and it would be churlish to say more.

Seymour said, "How come you never lends us the money? How come, bass?"

Was his banter good natured? It was difficult to tell. Seymour was always looking for financing for some kind of salvage operation, refurbishing the cruisers and sail boats that people abandoned or that washed up in the swamp and up Black Creek. But who would the buyers be? Not the rich people or the drug dealers -- they were the ones who had abandoned the boats in the first place. The buyers would be the villagers and the Haitians, and they didn't have money.

I did not answer Seymour's question. I sat at the bar drinking my beer. I became aware of Tommas, looking up at me.

Ti-Paul and Seymour both had scruffy hair and beards. Tommas was clean-shaven, short-haired, neat, and intense. He wore gold-rimmed spectacles. He was one of the few on the island who I had always thought in some way respected me, who did not see in me a mere banker. When he turned to me, I assumed it would be to talk about writing.

He said, "Haitians don't need money, right bass?" He put exaggerated emphasis on the last, a word he never used. "The black man always has *voudon*." The frames of his glasses glittered in the yellow light. I could not see his eyes. But there was something in his voice. He said, "You still lending money to those Nazis at the Hotel Paradiso?"

"Norwegians, not Nazis. And it's only a revolving line of credit. Working capital. They repay like clockwork." Why was I explaining this to him?

"You should give the money directly to us." He pounded himself in the chest, and he hissed as he spoke -- quiet unlike him -- leaning towards me.

There was a silence. The silence spread to fill the room.

Tommas said, "You like to box, bass?" Again, that unnatural emphasis. "Bass, you box, I said?"

"Oh, it's nothing. Used to do a little -- I'm out of practice."

"Do me the honour of sparring with me."

I'd be happy to, I told him. I meant sometime -- in the future. But Tommas had risen from his chair. He folded his glasses and put them on the table.

"Here? Now?"

"It would be a great honour." By then I knew from his expression that it was not honour he was interested in. I had twenty pounds on him, but I was afraid. He said, "The room is air-conditioned. Why not?"

In boxing I had one move, or sequence of moves: I would guard with my left, jabbing, waiting for the chance to throw an uppercut with my right -- my one punch. It had worked at Hart House and it worked with Healey. But I was flat with Tommas. His big punch was his left; my guard was useless, and I did not know how to adapt. He danced around for a few seconds, snapping at my midriff, then he connected with my right eye. I wobbled, felt warm blood. The room tilted. I jabbed but didn't touch him. There were two more hits, one to my mouth, one to the other eye. Tommas was using both hands. He held his arms low, a sign of contempt. With the final blow, I fell to the floor. It was over in perhaps a minute. I had not hurt him once.

Tommas put on his glasses and left. Vero came around from behind the bar with a towel, helped me to my feet. Seymour and Ti-Paul looked down at me from their table, expressionless, no longer jovial. I was wheezing. The smell of beer and earth and old cigarettes on the floor of that bar -- I thought I would vomit.

"I'm a little out of practice," I said.

"No shit, oh Great White Father," said Seymour.

So it was about the Hotel Paradiso, how we lent to them but not to Seymour Dufresne. "A matter of policy," I explained to Ed. "At the bank, we have a thing called 'loan criteria.'"

"How does the hotel keep going?" asked Ed.

There was a question I couldn't answer. Or was it one I had never asked? People were waiting for someone to develop the Hotel Paradiso, turn it into a Club Med or something. But there were no buyers. Only those few German tourists. And the bar, where the very lowest-end visitors liked to go in hopes of inter-racial sex.

"Is it possible," said Ed, "that you don't apply your 'loan criteria' to European hotel owners in the same way as you do to Haitian refugees?"

"It is possible," I said.

"They have a pier there, at the Hotel Paradiso?"

"They have."

"Freighters dock there?"

"Occasionally. Only place on the island they can tie up, drop off building supplies, minivans and the like. Occasionally the *Violet Mitchell* on its weekly run from West Palm. Others from time to time.

"I think I know how they make their money," said Ed.

"I thought you'd say that. You reporters -- clever."

"Yes, and I've been here what -- not quite a week. You've been here over two years."

On one side of the Hotel Paradiso was the swamp they called Fish Mangrove. Half water, half land, wound through with narrow paths, it was where many of the illegals first came

ashore, swimming or dragging small boats into the muck and making their way into the bush under cover of darkness. Bare foot prints in the clay told their story.

To the south the land rose in sharp coral cliffs. The Hotel itself was set in a picture-perfect half-moon bay, a crescent of white sand fringed by a row of royal palms. Here the sea was still and clear; you could spot exotic creatures -- angel fish and giant rays -- swimming along the bottom. The pier extended almost to the middle of the bay, so that yachts sailing the passage might stop.

But few stopped here. The setting may have been Tahiti but the hotel compound was Guam -- some US base after the troops have pulled out. The shore was jagged with the hulks of some derelict cars and trucks and empty oil drums. There was an old bulldozer and a heap of ossified asphalt -- someone had once planned to build a go-cart track. The hotel building was concrete, streaky grey with a dull blue metal roof. Scattered in the unkempt growth behind were cement block cottages with incongruous thatch roofs.

And behind those, a thin stream of smoke from a bonfire. We approached as the sun sank behind the silhouette of the forest on the big island. Ed had shamed me into accompanying him. Besides, my health was improving, the nights were cooler, and I could not lie on my chesterfield for ever. We tied the outboard to the pier, and we saw something dark and looming in the dusk of the middle channel. A freight boat, the *MV April Gallagher*.

The proprietor of the Paradiso was a Norwegian named Swan. The captain of the *April Gallagher* was also Norwegian, originally a whaler, who had come to the United States years before. (This was reported later in the Miami papers). They were sitting at a table by an open window in the lounge. They looked up as we walked up the path from the beach. The captain turned to Swan, as though to ask a question.

"It's only my banker," said Swan, and then to us. "Not come to collect, have you? Join us?" I declined. There was no air conditioning here. The walls were streaked with moisture.

"Who is your friend?" asked Swan.

"This is Mr. Holder," I said. "He is a client of the bank, from Montreal. He's interested in resort properties. May we look around?"

Swan considered a moment. He said, "Is Mr. Holder as discreet as you are?"

"Absolutely."

"Then go ahead. We have only four guests at present. Try not to disturb them."

I showed Ed the lounge, the kitchens, the cottages, two of which appeared to be occupied. Then I waited for him on the small rise behind the hotel. People came here to watch the launch of the space shuttles from Cape Canaveral, eighty miles to the west. There would be a pale green flash in the morning sky as the booster rocket burst away. Nearby, a Haitian worker threw rubbish onto the bonfire.

From the back of the hotel, Ed beckoned me, then called; it was becoming hard to see in the fading light.

"Something to show you," he said. I followed him around the side to a basement stairwell. He opened one of the wooden doors. Cool, mildewy air wafted up as we descended.

There were perhaps thirty people in the basement. They sat huddled on the dirt floor. I recognized none of them. These were people who had never ventured from the settlements into the village. How long had they been here? How long had they been waiting for passage elsewhere? None could speak English. A few had suitcases, many had green garbage bags. I noticed a young woman with a child in her arms. She reminded me of something: one of those photographs of wide-eyed refugees, an icon. The basement smelled overpoweringly of urine.

"I grant you, this is peculiar," I said to Ed. I began to sweat; my fever threatened; my eyes hurt. "Let's get out of here."

Outside it had become dark. Clouds moved across the face of the moon. At last a breeze was rising.

Ed asked how long refugees had been on the island. I couldn't tell him. No one saw the first Haitians disembark, drag themselves through the stinky mud of Fish Mangrove. One day they were simply there. We only knew they worked cheap – a few dollars a day – and work that few others would do: clearing the bush for a new house or someone's whim – a banana plantation, a stand of papayas; quarrying the razor-sharp coral; washing, peeling and cleaning at the kitchen sinks of resort hotels.

April 20 dawned beautiful, the air cool, the sea calm. The weather and my fever broke. But there was something strange: My house faced the lagoon and the still sea beyond Eagle Rock; the Atlantic was almost half a mile away across the hump of the peninsula. Yet you could hear a steady roar. A rage sea was up.

The first reports came crackling over the citizens band at one in the afternoon. Ed Holder insisted we take the outboard and have a look.

There are two stretches on the Pigeon Cay-South Florida run where ships are at risk; the Gulf Stream and Whale Cay passage. Sailors are prepared for the Gulf Stream. Whale Cay is different. It is the only part of the passage between the islands and the Gulf Stream where ships must enter the open ocean. The rest of the way is protected by the reef and the islands along Little Bahamas Bank. Whale Cay is unique in another way: it is one of the few places where the offshore reef is interrupted, and the ocean floor rises, so that the Sea and the Atlantic Ocean come together in shallow waters, creating the potential for large breaking seas.

There were no buoys, no aids to navigation here. The waves were 25 feet high, flecked with foam. We would have to turn back momentarily. Ed shouted at me from the front of the boat, but I could not hear him over the bright roar. Then he pointed. He had his story. The *April Gallagher* was a hundred and sixty feet long with a twenty-five foot beam and a draft of ten

feet, and she wallowed upside down in the main shipping lane at the north end of Whale Cay. The bow remained above the water, brown and splotchy.

Air-Sea Rescue came later and picked up the survivors: the captain and all but one of the crew of six. The rage that day was the result of a build up of water from heavy seas off George's Bank and Cap May, a thousand miles away, a surge that moved towards the islands at a speed of over 600 miles a day, thirty miles an hour. The stern of *April Gallagher* had been lifted out of the water as she came back into the inner passage; without her rudder, the ship broached and rolled upside down in an instant.

It proved impossible to rescue the passengers.

I wondered what they had seen as they sailed north that morning, the air so clear, the long green cays shimmering to the east, the small islands to the west like muffins against the forests of the big island, low and light compared to the hills of Haiti. And the turquoise sea -- how it sparkled! They would have seen the candy-striped lighthouse, the pastel villas among the wispy pines, the cut-out of the high palms.

They would have been below, straining to see through the portholes. There would have been silence except for the throb of the engines. In the air, the sea-salt freshness, and a whiff of diesel fumes assuring them that they were steaming northwards, away from the islands.

Behind the Hotel Paradiso, I walked through the remains of the bonfire: plastic bags and suitcases and ragged clothing which nobody could possibly have wanted. Some old furniture. A television set. They had been allowed to bring one bag each.

I gazed out to sea, towards the green light of West Palm Beach, the Florida Gold Coast, the strip-plaza continent that stretched away from there. I knew what it was we had been waiting for. A new world was being born.