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Marine Ecology

April 7, 1997

I am not afraid of drowning anymore. I almost died when I was ten at The Beach, an amusement park in the middle of Ohio with a giant artificial wave pool, because I got stuck through an oversize inner tube with my feet sticking into the air and my head trapped against the tube under the water. I had panicked and tried to flip the entire tube over to get my head out of the water instead of just sliding out through the bottom. Fortunately it was a crowded day and someone ran into my feet with their head and I slid out of the tube into the water. The older boy that I had kicked was yelling at me when I got to the surface, but I didn't really notice. All I could think about was getting back to the man-made shoreline. I didn't go near the wave pool the rest of the day.

Senior year I signed up for a trip to the Bahamas to study marine ecology for school credit. I was set on doing an internship at a computer company for the four weeks instead, but I never found the motivation to write the essay for the independent study request form, and I couldn't really picture myself stuck in an office by myself for another four weeks. Especially when Neela, the girl I had been in love with since seventh grade, told me there was still one space open and tried to convince me to go. I didn't have a hard time convincing myself that I could work the extra hours to be able to afford the trip. Since my trust fund for education would pay for the equipment, lessons, and fees, I also decided it would be a wasted opportunity if I didn't take the optional SCUBA certification classes at the same time. Especially because Neela had already signed up.

It was hard to convince myself to take SCUBA, though. The brochures were filled with endless statistics about the unlikelihood of running out of air while underwater, or getting the bends during dives of less than sixty feet, or having a regulator malfunction, but all I could think about was that day at The Beach. Even as we took our closed water tests in the deep end of a swimming pool I still had flashes of fear while removing the regulator from my mouth for the split second it took to purge the water that had accidentally entered the mouthpiece with a blast of cold air. As I watched the bubbles float to the surface of the pool, I took deep breaths as if a strangle hold had just been released.

When I got home from class each day, I would boast to my parents about having blown air rings while laying on my back on the bottom of the pool, having my air tank turned off and having to reach behind my head to turn it back on, and learning how to breathe sharing a buddy's octopus for two pool lengths underwater. I hoped to have Neela as a buddy, but our instructor made us pick partners with similar height and weight. I was a foot too tall.

We had an entire week of class before we left for Andros island. It seemed as though I was living the same day over and over. Each morning our teacher posted the weather in the Bahamas and the water temperature of the Caribbean, we slept through the SCUBA instructional videos, carried air tanks between the pool and the instructor's van in our swimsuits in the snow just before lunch, and were tested about marine life from our old seventh grade text books for the rest of the afternoon. I found myself staring out the window watching the snow fall most of the day, imagining all the ways I could possibly drown in two weeks on a tropical island with Neela.

Nothing happened like I expected it to. I returned from a movie late Friday night after saying goodbye to friends on other trips, and began to pack my maximum allowed forty pounds of clothing, SCUBA gear, and sunscreen. I was filled with anticipation, but I still managed to sleep soundly for four hours. At the airport at 4:30 AM, I was too numb to be excited though it was about to be the first time I would leave the country. I slept and daydreamed on the plane from Ohio to Florida, then we hurried to find a cab from the main Fort Lauderdale airport to a tiny hangar with the faded letters of International Field Studies painted on the side. The IFS staff corralled the seventeen students, five adults, two kids, and one bawling infant into a back room to weigh our luggage. My SCUBA gear weighed thirty-six pounds and nine ounces by itself. Expecting to be put directly on the plane after all of the luggage was weighed (almost everyone had brought too much), we instead were forced to watch cartoons in a sweltering lounge in the IFS office and wait for the pilot.

I took my senior privilege and decided to be on the first plane to Andros to relax on a Bahamian beach instead of waiting for the second plane while stuffed in a twenty year old couch with eight other sweaty bodies watching bad TV. Riding cramped with eight students, an overweight diving instructor, his fifty-pound dive cameras, and a pilot in the stuffy nine-seat twin engine plane for two

hours high above the water between Fort Lauderdale and Andros island was not the bumpy roller coaster ride at forty feet that my Mom told me it would be. It was just monotonous engine drone over monotonous blue. The Andros airport with it's dusty runway and palm trees for control towers, the cab ride on the left side of pothole strewn asphalt and gravel roads in a beat up Cadillac with leather seats for fifty minutes at forty-five miles an hour, and the nearly run down field station where we finally arrived without any of our bags gave me a deep suspicion that I had no idea what I had gotten myself into.

I was still disoriented for the entire first week on the practically deserted island. Each day began with the sun rise and a morning dive, and we returned by the time those who hadn't taken SCUBA had gotten up for breakfast. The rest of the day was spent snorkeling the surrounding cays and reefs or riding on the back of an old truck with no suspension bouncing on precarious hard wooden benches nailed to the rusted metal. After dinner, but before we collapsed exhausted onto the straw mattresses with the mismatched Star Wars and Muppet sheets, we had four hours of classes in an old wooden classroom with a pygmy sperm whale skeleton hanging ominously over our heads. This was where we met the staff on the first night.

I didn't really notice her at first, except that when she introduced herself with her Virginia accent I thought to myself that this woman with straight black shoulder-length hair, round glasses, and a heart-shaped face didn't really look like a Wendy. I didn't pay much attention to her for the first week, either. She spent most of the time with her girlfriend who was an assistant SCUBA instructor for the week that she was there before she left. Wendy piloted the boat to our dive sites every once in a while in a bikini and a sarong wrapped around her waist. She looked young, but when she made me guess how old she was, I guessed every number starting at twenty all the way to twenty-seven.

"I turn twenty-eight in May," she boasted. I was only seventeen. Eighteen in August, I didn't say, though I had already assumed she was off-limits. I was always uncomfortable around attractive women.

I spent most nights just before dinner sitting on a wooden swing with a plastic cushion that looked out over the extensive inlet just off the shore of the field station. Even though it was the east

shore, as night fell over the island it was easy to close my eyes and see the glory of the sunrise just beyond the ocean that I watched every morning while I gathered my SCUBA gear and got my new air tank in a half-asleep haze. The shadows were long about an hour before dinner, so I could see anyone walking up behind me long before they were close to the swing. The sun setting behind spread orange under my feet and out onto the calm water in the inlet, which slowly faded to the purple of twilight, then the chill breeze would start to blow in off of the water. This time of night happened the same way every time.

The first week I spent alone on the bench most of the time, thinking about the coral reefs I had seen snorkeling and imagining the ones I had missed while trying to keep breathing under forty feet of water. I also spent a lot of time thinking about Neela and just how I would ask her to take that walk on the beach after class with me, and how I always lost the nerve every time.

On Thursday of the first week, the first storm started. I was glad because the dives were canceled for the next few mornings, but it was chilly and we had to ride on the back of the truck in the rain. Wendy's girlfriend had to wait until Monday to leave because the planes couldn't fly in bad weather, and we had a campfire that night to celebrate the end of the storm. I didn't really want to play silly campfire games, but one of the local Bahamians was supposed to tell us a story that our teacher said would be on our final exam. I sat and watched the shadows dance on people's faces, enjoying the inconsistent heat of the fire after the inconsistent cold of the three day rainstorm. That night I lay in bed with the images of Wendy's radiant smile as she burned her marshmallow in the fire and the sunrise which I hadn't seen for three days. I imagined she was reliving all the moments with her girlfriend that week to have that kind of smile.

I woke up the next morning and realized that the water might be calm enough to start diving again. I was getting used to being able to sleep in, but reluctantly dragged myself out of bed and returned to the dawn ritual in silence. The sky was clear and the air had warmed again, but the waves were rough and the ride out past the first pass in the reef was rough and uncomfortable. Wendy calmly steered the boat while she drank her coffee. She hadn't brought her SCUBA gear, even though our diving instructor told us she was going to start to dive with us. She was right not to; there was no dive

that day. The water was still too rough from the storm.

On the way back to the field station I watched her conversation with our instructor. I thought she was noticeably perturbed and really wasn't interested in his advances. He obviously didn't think so. A couple times she glanced at me watching her and instead of turning my gaze and looking at the floor like I usually did, I cocked an eyebrow as if to ask her why she was still talking to him. She just looked into my eyes as though she was searching for something that she thought she saw.

Breakfast helped my nausea after the half hour boat ride on the choppy water. Neela and most of the other divers had gone back to bed by the time I had finished eating, so I went to sit with Wendy who was sitting by herself near the window of the dining room of the lodge. She was staring at the waves slapping on the shore with a half-eaten orange in her hand. I couldn't think of anything to say when I sat down, she just turned her head and looked into my eyes with that same searching gaze I had seen on the boat, her brows furrowed in concentration. I never saw her wear her glasses after the first night when we met her.

After a strange eon while we stared into each other's eyes she finally broke the trance. "Eye contact is very important to me," she stated. The words were superfluous; I had already understood her completely. I felt a strange wisdom and security in that gaze, not the discomfort of an awkward silence. "Do you want some orange?" she asked me, as she pulled off a wedge of the fruit in her hand, our eyes still locked. I couldn't tell if she even voiced the question, I just opened my mouth and took a bite of the ripe fruit.

I lived the next morning in a dream. Somehow I expected that Wendy would be on the boat when I got there with my tank and equipment, and I was in no hurry. My SCUBA buddy had paid the extra few hundred dollars for the advanced certification, so he was diving in a deeper part of the reef for the rest of the week. When the rest of the class that was taking only the regular course had paired off again, I was left without a partner since I was too tall for Neela. I watched Wendy carry her tank from the end of the boat and strap it into her BC. Dive-masters usually didn't have partners, but when she looked at me and asked me who my partner was, all I had to do was smile.

I wasn't afraid of the backwards free fall off the side of the boat into the rough water that

morning. I calmly replaced my snorkel mouthpiece with my regulator and began the descent down the anchor line. We were the first into the water, and when I looked around me all I saw were the silent reefs and the bubbles from Wendy's regulator rising from below. I hadn't released enough air from my BC to reach the reefs near the sandy bottom so Wendy pulled me down by my fins and held my arm while she reached up to open my purge valve. I slowly sank down into her arms and we gazed into each others' eyes through the few inches of space that separated the masks from our faces.

A kiss is a different thing forty feet below the surface of the water. I wanted to take off my mask and regulator, but the salt water burns my eyes and we could only share our air for so long. And I didn't think about it until that night when I was sitting on the bench watching the orange glow fade beneath my feet. I kept going over the whole dive in my head. I closed my eyes and relived the feeling as I looked into her eyes and locked my fingers with hers. I remembered the rainbow parrotfish darting in and out of the reefs as we swam by hand in hand. I remembered the sweet sadness as our air pressure dropped below a thousand pounds and we were forced to begin the slow rise to the surface. I remembered when we surfaced in each others arms and that I knew that I didn't care who saw us from the boat.

I didn't notice the long shadow when Neela came up behind me and sat down on the bench next to me. I looked at her and she smiled, understanding. I turned back to watch the orange dancing on the tiny ripples on the water. I didn't need to say anything.

It was overcast the day we left the field station, like the day before the storm. I was nauseated for the entire plane ride back to Fort Lauderdale, at least partly from the punch that I hadn't realized was spiked, but not completely. The plane erratically changed altitudes and for the entire two hours my stomach was in my throat. I held Neela's hand most of the way, and during the worst drops I squeezed her hand to keep my mind off of the feeling in my stomach. She returned the squeeze and looked at me knowingly. When I stepped off the plane at Fort Lauderdale airport I looked into Neela's eyes and managed a weak smile. And I knew that I would never be afraid of drowning again.