

12 The Dance

Whitte woke, ordered breakfast and took it on the balcony overlooking the resort's grounds. The thoughts passing through his mind concerned the lawsuit and the unsolicited offers to buy his company. He felt alone. As he drank his coffee and nibbled on his breakfast, these thoughts began turning toward the girl.

Where had this girl come from and why was she here? Why was she dancing into his life now? The darkness in his body, his heart, and very soul that unpredictably infected him from time-to-time was remitting for now.

Who was she? Was she just some random woman who saw someone at the bar who might be mildly entertaining? There should be alarm bells; he knew this from past experiences but there were none clanging away. Again, why?

Like so many hopes and dreams and different lives he had led and the other women with which he had tried to warm to, this unexpected pleasure, a reprieve from his life would subside as quickly as it came upon him and his world would return to the chaotic life of staying one step ahead of the devil. This, he believed was the dynamic that ruled his existence. She would return to the sea of the masses, anonymously returning to her life that he could never fathom. She was young; he was middle-aged and it was something that would probably never last. Why would he expect a chance encounter to wash away deep-seated illnesses? Why would his desires rise above the din of life and why did he deserve

such repose? Was it his drunkenness that led to immediate sobriety when she asked him for a cigarette that awakened a longing, a need, that the absence of such kept his dancing at the precipice for so long? He shrugged off the feelings of emptiness for the return to something he knew would happen: a day alone.

After breakfast, he took a cab to the Straw Market and wandered about from stall to stall barely cognizant of the seated women, fanning away the building heat and flies, attempting to lure him into buying crap that was probably made in China—slave labor even displacing workers here in The Bahamas. Around nine, with his knap sack slung over his shoulder, he strolled past the British Colonial and stood in front of the McDonald's where he lit the cigarette of an old retiree who complained that they didn't let him smoke anywhere anymore. Whitte called them Nazis and the man hooted, agreeing heartily.

The Number 10 Jitney arrived in a huff of black exhaust and Whitte climbed aboard, tossing a buck into the battered Tupperware bowl the driver used as a fare box. The bus took off, pushing Whitte into a seat as it flew down West Bay Street toward the airport area. The driver honked several times, spun the wheel and sped along the bumpy road around bikes and cars. He'd stop when a passenger said, *Here, Mon* or if there was anyone standing on the side of the road waving his or her hand. After twenty minutes, the bus neared the old Whitte house purchased shortly before Jack had entered high school. The house hadn't been anything to talk about: a single story clapboard with a roof slanting toward the bay nestled within coconut palms and Bermuda grass, overlooking the gentle lapping water upon the coral sand. It had sold quickly, about a month after Robert Whitte's nosedive into the Gulf of Mexico. The house was no more, replaced by a mini-mansion

surrounded by a high cinderblock wall to keep the natives at bay. Whitte felt nothing, no nostalgia, no remorse, no loss. Was he expected to?

There are so many different attractions that two people share. Some are animalistic while others sympathetic and all that are in between. Then there is the type of attraction that is effortless; it is magnetic, two people drawn together by some force of nature that is inexplicable. It was as if they had known each other before and this was but a continuation of a relationship spanning the gulf of time. It was like a conversation that lasted forever and this troubled him. Only once before had he felt this and his life had changed irrevocably as a consequence. He wished, now, that she would just go away.

The bus turned around at Gambier Village and headed back to town. Just short of Fort Charlotte, the bus pulled over at a stop and Whitte jumped off, tossing another dollar toward the driver. He glanced across the street up a steep road and gave some thought to hiking up to Ardastra Gardens to watch the Marching Flamingoes—a favorite since he was a child—but instead walked into a turn-in surrounded by hole-in-the-wall restaurants. He picked one and ordered fried conch and fries and washed the meal down with a Kalik. It wasn't as satisfying as he had remembered.

He was now hot and dusty, if not full. He wanted another beer but he decided that his drive down Memory Lane had been lame. He found a cab and was dropped off back at Atlantis.

Jet skis—dancing on the sea like ants searching for a meal—were being rented

down the beach about a hundred yards from the resort. Offshore about fifty or so yards was a sandbar too small to be called an island but with scrub brush and other dense vegetation forming a crown above the sand. There was no one on it.

It was enticing. Whitte decided to rent a jet ski, motor to the island and lay on that sandbar for a while, content in his belief that he was alone to face the coming storm.

The beach scorched his feet, even in sandals, as he sank an inch into the sand with each step. He passed groups of paired beach chairs shaded by large umbrellas and in almost every scene there was a man—maybe boyfriends, maybe husbands, maybe guys who had been lucky the night before—under the shelter of the umbrella drinking a Budweiser or Heineken while the girlfriend or wife or enticed woman rested on a beach towel with what little of a top she wore untied and loosely draping her breasts. A couple of these shelters had young families with children either playing in the water or making sand castles while the fathers fed their lust with sideways glances at the barely covered women, always searching for that greener pasture.

About eighty yards from where he started he approached a sign informing him he was leaving the resort property. He had read a brochure informing that quests were discouraged from renting equipment from vendors outside of the property. It was an absolving statement in an attempt to indemnify the resort from liability. He wondered how a claim against the resort would be handled. Would Bahamian law favor an income producer over a single tourist? Well, that went without saying.

The jet skis launched from the sand on Cabbage Beach and frolicked into the sea, humming and staining against the water. It was the allure of mastering a craft and the

aleness of man and machine that intrigued Whitte. He had never driven one but it looked easy enough. A mob of vendors thrashed around him but he kept moving until he came across one solitary man sitting under the shade of a coconut palm. The man's name was Harvey.

"I want it for about two or three hours."

"Dat's fine. It's eighty dollars an hour," replied Harvey with a thick Bahamian accent.

"I should get a break if I'm renting it that long."

"Okay, seventy dollars an hour," the man said squinting at Whitte.

From behind, a woman's voice said, "How about if we rent two jet skis for two hours? What kind of break will you give us?"

Whitte turned around and his heart leapt. Abigail was smiling and squinting through her sunglasses. Whitte turned back to Harvey. "Yeah, how about that? Not like you were trying but we're giving you guaranteed income for two hours."

"Does it look like I'm hurting for business? I'm da most legitimate one here. Da others rip everybody off and so day eventually make it ta me. Everyone wants ta rent from Harvey."

Amused, Whitte looked around at the lack of clamoring customers.

"Mr. Harvey, how about a family discount? This gentleman's my father," she asked.

Harvey glared at the woman and then back at Whitte, who had slightly furrowed brows. "Okay, sixty dollars an hour. Ya can't get a better deal dan dat."

Whitte pulled his money clip out of a waterproof bag where he also kept his cigarettes and lighter and handed Harvey three hundred-dollar bills.

“I don’t have change.”

“You’re renting these things out and you don’t have sixty dollars in change?”

“I’ll have change when ya return.”

“Then I want them for two and a half hours.”

Harvey showed Whitte a slight look of disdain then shook his hand. He pulled out a small paper tablet from his back pocket and asked Whitte what room he was in. He asked Abigail the same.

“Oh, we’re sharing the same room.”

He gave a look at Abigail then back to Whitte whose face had turned a shade of red. Harvey shook his head.

“Okay fine. Here,” he said handing them both life vests.

He walked them down to two beached jet skis and pushed one out into the water and ignited the four-stroke four-cylinder motor. Abigail smiled at Jack and then glanced at his left shoulder. She reached up and gingerly touched an angry two-inch scar that ran diagonally over the meat of his upper arm. Whitte frowned at her at first and then smiled.

“I be ready,” shouted out Harvey.

Abigail waded over and mounted.

“Hold on, Missy I need ta show…”

Suddenly, Abigail’s lurched forward and she was skidding through the calm water away from the beach. Whitte gave an embarrassed glance and then motioned for the other to

be started. After a brief instruction on how to operate the green Kawasaki craft he mounted and punched it. It lurched forward then unpredictably slid violently to the side and splattered Whitte into the water. Abigail splashed by him, turned to one side and sprayed him while he wiped saltwater from his eyes. Harvey began cursing and wading toward Whitte. Whitte held up his hand, remounted and sped off toward Abigail. They danced in the water with the crafts, taking turns following each other through an imaginary course, each going just faster than the other through various turns. Finally, Whitte pointed toward the sandbar and sped off in its direction. He circled the bar and beached the craft on the far side, facing the open sea.

As she beached her craft next to his and turned off the engine, he removed his life vest and threw it at her.

“What the hell was that back there?” he barked.

She took her vest off and pushed back wet strands of her hair from her forehead.

“What do you mean?”

“The whole father thing?”

Abigail started laughing. “Well, last night you mistook me for a whore so the least I could do was intimate that you are an incestuous father.”

Whitte huffed and walked closer to her. She grabbed his face, pulling it down to her and kissed him. He returned the kiss and she pulled him into the warm sand. Whitte gently pulled away and lay back, and closed his eyes. The warmth of the sun amplified the tenderness in his heart and a part of him began to drift off into a dream of Belize.

“Jack?”

“Umm.”

“I enjoyed last night and I’m enjoying now.”

He pulled the watertight bag from his pocket and removed his cigarettes, offering her one. She shook her head and so he lit one for himself and turned on his side, facing her, taking a deep drag.

“So why have you infected me?” he asked.

She smiled. “I don’t know what I’ve done to you but you did something to me.”

“I’m too old for you,” he said.

“I don’t think so,” she giggled, “I think I may be too old for *you*.” She leaned toward him and kissed him again.

Heat enveloped him. It was the demon unlocked and yet, it was held in check by something... Restrained lust? Love? No, innocence revealed. What else could it be? She was the girl next door.

Her eyes smiled and she stared at him softly and longingly and suddenly a wave of expectation washed over her. “Do you want to make love in the water?”

“No.”

And just as sudden, the wave crashed. “Oh.”

“Hey, look,” he said, being careful with his smile, “It’s not you. And it’s not that I don’t want to make love with you because I do.”

“But?”

“But, this feels different.”

“Are you in some kind of pain?” she asked suddenly serious, “I mean,

emotionally?”

“No.” He took a drag from his cigarette. “Maybe reservation.”

She watched a cruise ship begin to shrink over the horizon.

“Tell me who Abigail... I’m sorry. What’s your last name?”

“What’s in a name?” she egged him on.

He smirked at her.

“I’m spoiled. I’m 23 and I go to law school at U.T. and I’m bored,” she replied in a monotone that seemed to be rehearsed. “I’m here with some friends and I realized that they aren’t that fun and I’d rather be with you.”

He chuckled. “You’re idea of relieving tedium is to shack up with an older guy?”

“I thought we were past that.”

“I guess.”

“Are you that insecure with my age?”

“Yes. I am.”

She rolled over on her side and kissed him gently on his lips and then withdrew. She fingered the scar on his upper right shoulder and then gently kissed it. “What’s this from?” she asked.

“I brought my fists to a knife fight.”

She laughed as if shaking herself out of a trance. “I have a good one on my right calf.” She rolled over and showed him a dime-sized scar on the right side of her right calf and then an exit wound on the other side.

“Jesus, you were shot?”

“Accidentally. It was a party at someone’s ranch and a couple of guys had a twenty-two and started shooting at a tree. We were all pretty fucked up and a shot ricocheted and struck me in the calf. Kind of random.”

“It had to hurt.”

“I was plenty drunk, like I said. I thought a bug had bit me and then suddenly I fell down and couldn’t stand up again. They took me to a hospital, patched me up and I was fine.”

“Pretty nonchalant aren’t you?” he stated.

“Yeah, well, I think it’s pretty cool to have been shot and live to fight another day.”

Whitte laughed and then lay on his back, inhaling his cigarette with his eyes closed. There were only the muted sounds of jet skis humming like bees, seagulls, a slight breeze, and the ocean lapping at the sand.

“You’re a wealthy man, right?”

“Yes.”

“So why didn’t you just pay what Harvey asked in the first place. I mean money is nothing to you.”

He turned to face her. “I am a strong believer of free markets. If you pay the going rate without trying to get a better deal, people take advantage of you. If you negotiate and make them dig deep down to meet your price then they have respect for you and themselves. That’s important.”

“But he probably has a family to feed.”

“Yes he does and when we turn the skis back in I’ll probably give him another

hundred for a tip, even though he was kind of an asshole.”

“And you do things like that.”

“Like what?”

“An act of kindness after an act of ruthless business. Why give that man another hundred when you—or should I say I—got the price down?”

“Because he has a family to feed,” he smiled.

“So why not give him a thousand dollars?”

“You have to earn it. I pay better than most and I get the best.”

“And so, how much will you pay me?”

Whitte smiled slyly. “I haven’t decided what you’re worth.”

She splashed his chest with sand. “I’m worth more than you can spend.”

“And you’re that confident?”

“I can be.”

Whitte looked at her fair skin. She was beginning to grow pink, offsetting the bright red of her one-piece swimsuit. Her drying hair was tangled and pushed over to the side. He pulled her sunglasses from her nose and wiped the speckled salt from them with a dry corner of his shirt.

“Why, thank you.”

“You’re burning.”

“I don’t really burn much. I’ll be okay.”

“Suit yourself. I’m going to tell you I told you so.” He lit another cigarette. “Abby, what does your family do?”

“Well, my mother’s dead and my stepfather’s a prick.”

“I’m sorry about your mother.”

“Don’t be. I mean, don’t get me wrong. I loved her. She was the only person in my life. A drunk driver killed her. She felt nothing. It happened quickly.” She stared off into the ocean. “I hate my stepfather. He went on with life as if she had never been there. Oh, well. I really stay away from him as much as possible and, you know what they say, *whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.*”

Whitte placed his hand on her cheek.

“Don’t feel sorry for me,” she said, “I don’t.”

“My mother developed Alzheimer’s and then my father died. It took me a long time to get over that. It was sudden, just like you’re mother.”

“Did you hate them?”

“For what?”

“Leaving you?”

“Yes but things happen and it’s how we react to it. I didn’t react well but I learned to live with the pain.”

She looked back to sea. “I hated her. I was all alone.”

“What happened to your real father?”

She thought for a moment. “He was much older than mom. He died of cancer.”

Whitte turned to her, changing the subject. “Have you ever been in love?”

She smiled faintly. “Once. When I was much younger. A very ambitious man. It didn’t work out,” she said, taking off her sunglasses to look at Jack. “Do you know what

love is?”

“No.”

“So you’ve never been in love?”

He laid back and looked up into the perfect blue sky. He closed his eyes and Belize was there but it was beginning to fade. “I was young once.”

She giggled. “You were the ambitious young man?”

“Yeah, once,” he said. “I met a girl.”

“That’s the beginning to almost every story.”

He turned back to her and chuckled with her. “Yeah, I guess that’s probably right.”

“Tell me about her.”

Whitte thought for a moment. “No. That’s not a story to tell.” He turned to her.

“You know what they say about kissing and telling.”

“No. I don’t,” she ridiculed him.

He laughed.

They laid there in silence, both within their thoughts.

“She hurt you, didn’t she?”

“You know, Abby, I don’t have any right to complain about anything. My father worked his ass off and handed me a fortune. I had a path laid out before me and before I could take another road, I fell into a trap. It happened.” Whitte’s eyes gazed off into the sea, away from the land and away from the girl. He now felt sad, alone, removed from the carnal pleasures of his earthly bounds. “Sometimes things don’t go as you plan,” he said, “and you learn to compensate, to get away from something that went bad. Those

compensations become habits and habits form a life. I can't say that I'm proud of who I've become."

She pulled his hand to her cheek and then slowly to her lips where she kissed his palm. Then she drew him closer, placing his hand behind her neck, urging him to pull her to him. Their lips met and he could feel her warmth. He pulled her closer and she responded to him and then he thought better of the situation and pulled back and laid his head on the sand. "No," he whispered, "you're special."

She withdrew and put her sunglasses back on, following his eyes to where the cruise ship had been.

"Jack, I don't know that I'm that person."

"I think you might be."

She stood up and walked to the jet skis.

"You want to race back?"

"Okay," he laughed, "let's race."