

MUSICIAN IN THE HURRICANE

By Brice Habeger

They untied the boat and left the dock only 30 minutes ago, but as she stood and looked over the edge of the small two-person boat into the dark, moonlit waters of the ocean below Noa was scared.

She was on vacation with her parents — a vacation that was recommended by her parents' marriage counselor. The trip's purpose was for her parents to work things out, but that hadn't happened. Instead, it was fights and drinking separately by the pool.

She adjusted her snorkeling mask but it felt too tight. Noa hated her nose. Way too big. She gripped the side of the boat with hands she thought were too large. Big paddles.

Donny, a local boy whose parents owned a snorkeling tour, was cute, two years older, and now knelt next to her readying his mask.

"You're beautiful."

Donny made the statement as if it was a forecast for how safe it was for two teenagers to be alone out on the ocean.

Noa met Donny while walking near the hotel. She liked his carefree attitude. The last couple of days, when he wasn't working, he would stop by the hotel to swim in the pool or to take her around the island on the back of his moped.

Last night, they kissed under the stars. He'd wanted to take it further. Her head swam circles trying to figure him, her own wants, and this thing out.

He flipped the flashlight on, pulled on his mask, and jumped in. His lanky body noiselessly sliced into the water. He surfaced a few yards out.

"Come on."

Noa wasn't sure. She'd really rather not. In her head, she ran the probabilities for shark attack, death by jellyfish, or even a lightning strike.

"I'm cold."

"You'll warm up."

She looked over her shoulder at the Island, which was close to two miles behind them. They were positioned over a reef that Donny said was a spot best seen at night.

Half a century earlier, a ship trying to escape an oncoming hurricane struck this reef. All of the passengers were offloaded to safety, except for an elderly concert violinist who was traveling around the world. It was his wife's unfulfilled wish to see the world before she died. There was nothing the captain could do to get the lonely gentlemen to leave the ship. The captain rounded up some crew and was prepared to use force, but the man hid and with the hurricane moving in they were forced to leave him behind.

As the winds slammed into the island, out across the waters, long into the night, a mournful violin played one last concerto.

As she stared into the emptiness below, Noa thought she could hear the sound of a violin floating across the water. Donny said that it was a possibility.

"If you don't jump in, I'm pulling you in."

She could see that he meant it.

She pulled down her mask and jumped.

The water felt like a wet kiss as she slipped beneath the surface. She'd been on the swim club for five years. She loved to look at the dancing lights underneath the water of a darkened pool. Now, underneath her and around her there were no such comforting lights. It was simply the cold embrace of a large, dark ocean: a strange mix

of an experienced swimmer and an otherwise foreign landscape.

She surfaced and looked for something to hold onto.

Donny paddled up beside her.

"Take a deep breath and follow me."

She did as she was instructed and dove. A yellow fish swam up to investigate the two of them and the light that swept through the water. She reached out, but it quickly retreated into the darkness. Suddenly the light went out and she was enveloped by blackness. She didn't know which way was up or down.

She shouldn't have, but she started to panic. Then Donny took hold of her arm.

Her eyes adjusted to the darkness and in the soft glow from the moonlight she could see the dark shadow of a small shipwreck against the whiteness of the reef. At the most, a 4 person boat.

Donny pulled on her arm and she realized her lungs were on fire.

They surfaced and gulped at the air.

"That's the ship?!"

She searched Donny's face for a better explanation.

"Yeah, I made it all up." His smile showed white against his dark skin as he reached out and pulled her close.

"I'm in love with you."

Out there on the ocean, in the middle of those tossing waters, Noa floated along with her head barely above the waters that threatened to carry her away. She breathed and wondered if Donny was telling the truth.

Thinking of her parents: did love really work? Was it possible to hear the musician in the midst of the hurricane? A teenager on the edge of her emotional experience: a vessel tossed about in a storm she wasn't prepared to deal with.

• Brice Habeger works for the city. Learn more at www.briceshabeger.com.

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