

Undercurrents
By
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Harry loitered at the wharf extending into Buckra Creek, staring into the empty marsh. A breeze played the rusted hoisting cables above him like wind chimes. He'd come full circle; an island boy in the beginning and an island boy in the end. Sadness should have ruled him and would have in Atlanta, where failure stood out like a neon wound against the high-rise monuments to success. But Boot Island was another world, languishing off the Georgia coast like a comforting lover, eager to embrace broken souls like his.

He leaned back on his hands, letting his mind drift into the rhythm of the warning lights flicking on the distant bridge to the mainland. He should have never gone to Atlanta. From the time he stepped off the bus twenty years ago at the Greyhound station on International he was overwhelmed by the city's energetic ambition, his goal of earning a modest living an anemic dream compared to the wealth around him. College became a hectic mixture of classrooms and intern boardrooms culminating in a summa cum laude business degree and a starting job most graduates would envy. The next fifteen years were blur of long days and short nights, hard deals and harder acquisitions with time squeezed in to marry and start a family. Success was in sight when the takeover occurred. Harry was cast out like garbage, the downsizing damaging his soul more than his

reputation. The rest was his doing; the bankruptcy, the divorce and the drugs. A charge of possession with intent to distribute one sultry July night landed him in jail, a harsh slap back to reality. After nine months and an early release he left the city and returned to the island, not as the success he wanted to be, but the failure that he was.

The wind shifted, the acrid sulphur smell of the nearby pulpwood plant overwhelming the organic musk of the marsh. Harry crinkled his broad nose and stood, straightening out his white linen pants and tucking in his pale blue polo shirt. At least nature had been kind to him, blessing him with a physique most men his age could barely remember. Among the middle-age visitors and retirees of the island he was a mid-life black Adonis. It was a profile that brought glances and leers, masking the aura of his disappointment.

He decided to ride to Driftwood Beach. The smell of the paper mill never reached there and he needed the exercise. He climbed onto his rented bike and set off, speeding through the live oaks, grey tendrils of Spanish moss brushing his head. As much as he fought it his mind drifted back to his last days in the city.

“You don’t have to do this,” his lawyer advised the day before the bankruptcy proceedings.

“I know, Kelly,” he replied. “I just want it to be over with.”

Kelly ran his hand across his bald head. “Look, Harry, I’ve gone over the situation and it’s not as bad as it seems. All you need is a few loans to tide you over for a year. I know you have the contacts.”

Harry threw up his hands. “I’m tired, Kelly. I don’t want to fight anymore. I’ll sell you the business and you get the loans. How does that sound?”

Kelly played with his glasses. “Well...damn Harry!”

“I thought so,” he said. “Come on, let’s get this over with. I need to go home.”

The pavement ended, usurped by the tabbystone road leading to the wooden bridge spanning Jay’s Creek. He got off the bike and leaned it against a gnarled scrub pine. He took off his shoes, tied the laces together and hung them on the handlebars. Harry ambled playfully across the bridge, savoring the smooth wood against his feet and the intrusion of the hard packed sand between his toes. Minutes later he was on the beach, the sounds familiar and soothing. He crunched along, hundreds of tiny shells breaking with each step. Bleached driftwood strewn around him triggered memories long ago when he scampered like a crab on the same sand, hunting for perfect shells as he avoided dead jellyfish. He’d intended to walk only a few miles then spend the rest of the day hunting for a job. But longer he walked the more reluctant he was to leave. He trailed the beach around the northern end of the island to the wind-blown ocean side. Oak trees lined the dune, their canopies yielding permanently to the relentless ocean winds. Farther down he traversed the public beach where the dunes were sheltered by wiregrass and gazebos. Harry remembered the old shacks that used to rest there, homes of the descendents of the slaves that ran to Boot Island for freedom before the Civil War. The people were all gone, driven away by the progress that was suppose to help them, unable to pay the property taxes gentrification demanded.

A mile farther down the beach Harry reached his destination. The house was the only one still on the beach, built in the 1890’s by some early industrialist no one remembered. Harry had spent half his life between its hardwood walls, the only child kept separate from his poorer neighbors, his only companion the vastness undulating

before him. The scene seeped through his pores, calming his mind by pulling free memories of simpler times. He remembered endless hours of ocean tag, running back and forth with the waves in childish enthusiasm. Later he would swim, wrapped in the salty splendor of the grey waters. It was too cold to swim now; the warm air of March had yet to penetrate the ocean currents. He thought of going up to the house but decided against it. The beach was close enough. His legs suddenly tired; he sat on the dune, lay back and closed his eyes.

Something wet touched his cheek and he jumped, his eyes struggling to focus. A face smiled close to his, a face holding sparkling sea-green eyes bordered by translucent silver hair. He blinked and the face became more complete; a small, almost invisible nose resting perfectly over full, pouting lips. She crouched beside him, her fingers buried in the sand. Her lithe body was nude, her private parts hidden by her posture.

Harry shuffled back. Who the hell was this? A lesser man would see the situation as the beginning of some fantasy encounter. But if life had taught him anything, it taught him to be wary of dreams come true.

“Who are you?” he managed to ask.

The woman gave him a sad frown. She dropped her head, her hair cascading over her face.

“You don’t remember me,” she said in a sweet fragile voice. “I knew you wouldn’t. It’s been a long time.”

“I’ve never seen you before in my life.” He pinched himself, hoping for the woman to disappear as he woke from the dream. The pain came but the woman remained, her features as clear as before.

“We played so many times together,” she said. Her voice had become deep and powerful, soothing in its pitch. She rose, exposing her loveliness as she walked away with unnatural grace. Harry watched her, his breath falling into the rhythm of each step, each sway of her wide hips. She was almost to the water when she spun about and ran towards him. Harry’s heart jumped and he ran to her. Before he could reach her she was walking again, her eyes on her feet. He slowed to a trot, a grin coming to his face. She stopped and ran back again and Harry was startled. She was playing ocean tag with him.

“You used to do this for hours,” she said. Harry was shaken by a wave of anger. Who was this woman who knew his private moments? She was too young to have been alive then. Someone must have told her these things, but whom?

She turned to face him. “Remember when you gave me this?”

She held out her left hand. On her ring finger was the ring. Vertigo seized him and his arms flailed for support. One hand landed on her shoulder and she grabbed him with amazing strength. Harry’s mind fled twenty-two years away, painfully reliving the betrayal that pushed him to the beach that autumn night, holding that same ring like some disgusting piece of trash. He threw it as far as he could into the pulsing surf, deciding at that moment he would leave Boot Island and make something of himself. Success was the best revenge, he thought.

The strange woman was wearing the ring, this person with the boundless eyes, who emitted a sense of rhythm while standing still, who held his memories like discarded jewels. An answer came to him that he quickly dismissed as absurd, the result of a wounded mind. He pulled away from her.

“I don’t know how you found out all those things about me and I don’t want to know,” he said. “Please go.”

“I can’t,” she replied. “I’m here for you and you only. I always have been; I always will be.”

Harry did not hear her last words. He was running, his legs laboring against the soft sand, tufts of dirt kicked up by his rapid feet. He fled across the beach, ignoring the fire in his chest as his lungs struggled for a breath, his stride breaking only when he reached his bungalow. He collapsed against the door, overcome by fatigue, and the fear that he was going mad.

He fumbled for his keys, unlocked the door and stumbled in. He ransacked the room until he found his cognac. He guzzled it down, rivulets of the liquor running down his cheeks and into his shirt, the smooth heat inside bringing him back to his senses. He dropped the bottle and collapsed on his bed, searching for and finally finding enough calm inside himself to sleep.

Morning brought throbbing pain and stabbing sunlight. Harry rose from the bed too quickly and fell, his head banging against the old particle wood dresser. He lay there a moment in paralyzing pain, shit-faced like a damn college freshman. Pulling himself up to a squat, he looked around the room to get his bearings. The thought of breakfast made him nauseous but he had to do something to get rid of the headache. A swim was what he needed; a nice long swim.

Harry made his way to the southern tip of the island, barely in control of the rental bike. He convinced himself that the incident on the beach the day before had been pure

illusion. He laughed out aloud, the bike jiggling its way to the beach across jagged pavement.

This was quiet beach hidden from tourists by a palisade of water oaks guarding high dunes covered with sea grass. Harry worked his way through the palmettos and prickly pears, tossing the bike aside as he reached the short stretch of marsh separating the trees the dunes. Pulling himself through the tangle of grass and mud, he climbed the dunes then stumbled down the steep sides to the deserted beach. The ocean played its ancient tune against the hard-packed sand of the beach. Harry swayed, at first because of drunkenness, but suddenly found himself entwined in the rhythm of the waves. He felt it often in the city, but standing near the beach, the endless fathoms before him, the pull was irresistible. He shed his clothes then stumbled into the water. The chill sobered him, the waves lapping against his calves, his thighs and then his waist. He lunged into the surf and swam.

It was the only place he ever felt really alone. His only concern was the rhythm, the stroke of the arms, the kick of his legs and the crest and trough of the waves. Success did not matter here; wealth was no concern; only a man and the sea and the ancient rhythm.

His lungs burned, the signal that his limit was near, but Harry kept swimming. He wanted to keep going, to be swallowed into infinity, his problems and failures lost in the waters before and below him. He continued to swim, each stroke long and laborious, the pain like a blow with each stroke. But he would not stop. He answered the call of the ocean and understood its meaning. With his last effort he turned onto his back, flinging his out his arms and opened his mouth.

The sea consumed him, rushing around his limbs and torso, filling his mouth and nose rapidly. But he did not choke nor did he sink. The waves held him, rocking him gently, the brackish fluid in his lungs like a lover's breath. The movement was sensual and Harry was aroused. He should have been drowning but he wasn't. Was this what death felt like? Was this the final ecstasy before the loss of his soul, the vanguard of the light? It didn't matter. Cradled in the buoyant bosom of the sea he felt content. Money never bought it, power never attained it. It existed in the waves and the tides and the foam. It ran through his lungs and caressed his skin. It was his before he left, it was his again. Harry closed his eyes and slipped into intimate blackness.

He awoke with the sensation of sand against his back. A seagull's lament rose from a distance, its cry expressing his disappointment. He opened his eyes tentatively, the sun driving away the clouded dregs of his last thoughts. Why wasn't he dead?

The answer hovered above him. The woman's face loomed over him like a cloud, her body naked as before, her sea-green eyes bright with emotion.

"You saved me," he said.

"Yes."

Harry sat up, shaking his head. "I didn't see you. How did you know?"

"You were inside me," she said. "I would never let you die there."

Harry's head spun as he tried to comprehend her answer. She knelt before him, placing her delicate hand on his grizzled cheek.

"We are bonded, you and I. We are part of each other. The reason is irrelevant. The truth is all that matters."

She leaned forward and kissed him hard. He was swept away by the same rush he felt when he was drowning and now he understood its source. The kiss ended too quickly; she withdrew from him and backed away to the edge of the surf.

“Do not leave me again,” she said. “All you need is here.” She walked into the waves, dissipating into the grayish water until she disappeared completely. Harry waited to see her swim away, but there was nothing.

He had always loved the sea, but never did he realize she loved him as well. He felt a contentment missing inside him for so long, an emotion he had neglected and ignored when he left for the city to seek something he had right before him all along. The sun began to rise, emerging from the horizon as seagulls sang to announce its arrival. Harry stepped into the waves, the dampness of his lover caressing his calves.

“I will never leave you again,” he whispered. “I promise.” He kissed his hand and placed it in the waves, the water swirling around his palm warm and tender. He turned and walked away, leaving his footprints in the sand. She followed him, filling his imprints with herself, then swept back into the constant, contented waves.

The End