

THE TELLTALE SKETCH

by

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If I'd had any idea where it was leading, I'd never have taken that last drink of the rich red Bordeaux. With it came the courage to make my ill-fated declaration.

"That's it, Brad, I'm leaving." I was perched on the rail of his balcony, shoes long abandoned. I gave a sweeping toast to the mountains and low-hanging clutter of stars, "It's beautiful and you're beautiful and it's all been great. Special but going nowhere."

Trying to smile, I looked at the cold blue eyes and hard set of his Aryan features. "Two years, Brad, and still you don't need me, never will."

He turned to storm off but I grabbed his arm to say more. Angrily, he shoved me away. Unbalanced, I fell two stories onto the patio wall.

His family paid for the best specialists, for the most exclusive clinic. Each time they visited they asked for full details of the accident. Wealthy and political, they were afraid of a lawsuit or scandal. I didn't blame him but they did. He was very attentive to me through the surgeries and therapies but I was never sure whether it was based on love, guilt or family pressure.

We moved to the little island of St. Eustatius in the Caribbean as soon as I was able to walk wearing only the back brace. Brad's aunt had bought a two hundred year old Dutch house at the base of the extinct volcano and offered it to us for my recuperation.

"It's perfect for us," Brad had beamed, "roughing it with no electricity or running water or toilet. I'll work on my book while you're getting into shape for your return to the circuit." We both knew I'd never ski again, much less race, but the pretence was necessary, gave me a goal. Besides, we'd

often gone camping in the mountains so he knew it was one of my passions...before.

We spent the first weeks at The Old Gin House, a charming hotel at water's edge, built and run by a gay couple from New York. Its foundation was the old fort from which the first salute had been fired for the newly independent American States. We ate fresh fish and lobster, drank mango daiquiris, got to know a few local folks and swam in the tranquil Caribbean.

Our one-room house had two-foot thick walls of limestone and sand, paneless windows with wooden shutters and a corrugated roof. We hired the government tractor and its driver Al to clear the acre yard. With Al came most of his family to help clear the years of growth that hid underground cisterns for water storage and a little cookhouse with waist-level fireplace for cooking. They cleaned bats and vines out of the chimney and showed us how to cook with the charcoal that was made by Al's cousin. We bought pans, a bed, wine, all the basics, from another cousin who had the only store on Statia.

"I wish you could climb up into the volcano with me." Brad was sipping coffee under the soursop tree, very much at home. We'd been settled in for six months. He'd spent every day either inside the inactive cone or working at his manual typewriter.

"I know missing the exploration must be making you crazy. When you're better I'll take you in, show you everything. It's lush with so many shades of green, even some mango, papaya and banana trees. The smell is of wet earth and rot with hints of honey, mint and sulphur. Light filters down through growth around the volcano mouth and alters the feel of the place, plays tricks on the eyes and imagination."

I loved his enthusiasm. "I'll race you to the top soon. You were right about the daily swims, I'm improving."

I didn't interfere with his preoccupation though I longed for more of him. My hair had grown back a darker brown and straight but thick enough to cover the surgeon's handiwork. My body didn't have such a natural mantle so the white scars looked and felt hideous. It was understandable

that his passion had cooled.

I watched him begin his regular climb then I headed down to the black sand beach. The walk was through the village and usually took me an hour but it had become markedly easier. Only when stroking in the warm sea could I believe my memories. Believe I had been graceful on even the most difficult slopes, that I had danced through mogul fields. Before.

On my slow walk up from the beach I stopped at Charles Lee's Bar, as I did most days. I spent many hours on those wooden stools, watching life in the village as I listened to old Charlee's stories. He would sometimes forget the Heineken he was getting for me but his memories of the past seemed crystal clear.

"How's the back?" Charlee asked, opening my first cold beer.

"Better today, thanks," was my standard reply.

"That man of yours in the volcano again?"

I nodded. Seeing his brow crease I laughed, "You think he's got a woman in there?"

Charlee shook his head, chuckled, "You won't find a girl on this island gonna go in there."

"Why not?"

Leaning back, he got into story mode with hands folded on abdomen.

"When I was a boy climbing up inside there was as important as going out to sea. I knew I was going to have to go fishing, work the sea, but up there, that was just 'cause I wanted to and we weren't supposed to. There were three of us always gettin' in trouble. We tried every way, but that path Brad takes is the only way you can get down inside. We went all inside there. Well, 'cept the parts the sun never got to. Never went unless the sun was high. Everybody said there were evil spirits...I guess we believed 'em, but denied it of course."

He went quiet for a bit, seeming to look around at his world as it had been.

"Ya know, Stafia was centre for the slave trade when they were bringing folks over from Africa. No decent anchorage so I don't know why they chose here. Ya can still find pieces of shackle and

chain or slave beads that they used in the trade.

‘Story went there was a family brought in on one of the ships. The woman lost the baby she was carryin’ and her three kids had died by the time they got here. Her husband fell over dead while they were auctioning him off. Well, she went crazy, escaped somehow. They couldn’t find her, searched the whole island, decided she’d tried to swim home. But, accordin’ to old folks she’s up in the volcano waitin’ to avenge the deaths. You can hear her at night sometimes, moanin’ and cryin’.’”

When Charlee finally stirred, it was to get a beer for both of us. First time I’d seen him drink anything other than coke.

Relaxing that afternoon in our hammock under the soursop trees, I watched Brad skilfully working his way down the rocky path. He was good at everything he did.

“Hello Tatiana,” he kissed me on the forehead. I loved the way he said my name.

He gave the hammock a push to start me swinging and grabbed the bucket. Lifting the lid on the crypt-like cistern, he dropped the bucket in and pulled it up with the attached rope. Quickly stripping, he dumped the water over his head, laughing heartily.

“Yes! Every inch of me loves that rush!”

His lean, fit body was gorgeous. The sun was still high enough to add a golden glow to his smooth wet skin. I enjoyed watching his daily ritual even though it underlined the separation of our lives.

“So Great Explorer, what wonders have revealed themselves to you today?” I laughed.

He gave me a queer smile as he began toweling off, “I’m not alone in there, I’m sure of it.”

“What happened?”

“I’ve felt it from the first trip in. I’ve been all over the interior. There’s no sign anyone’s ever been there, not one bit of rubbish.” He tied the belt on his kimono and began searching his backpack. “Look what I found today.”

In his hand was a slave bead. Dark blue with yellow irregular spots, it was about an inch long

with a hole for stringing it on a thick cord. We'd seen similar ones on display in the little museum.

“When I picked it up something moved on the other side of a mango tree that was a few feet to my left. It was in the shadows so I couldn't see anything, but it felt and sounded big. Other than birds there are only rats, snakes, a couple of cats, nothing of any size. I searched, found nothing, and you'd never find footprints in there with the thick ground covering of leaves and greenery. It was eerie.”

“Sit down, let me tell you the local legend.”

He opened a bottle of wine while I talked.

By the time I had finished he was smiling. “I told you I was unsure of my reasons for dropping the book on rock climbing. They gave me money up front, for Christ's sake. I simply lost interest. This novel I've started isn't like anything I've ever written.”

He stood gazing at the volcano. “Now I know the basis for my main character's nightmares. I'm obviously attuned to this place.”

This serious pronouncement had not a touch of the sarcasm Brad would normally have directed at anything deviating from fact. He spoke not another word that night, so engrossed was he in getting his thoughts on paper.

I put the wine and a sandwich next to him and began the sketch that was to become so famous. Such confidence and total absorption as he sat on the bench at that rough wooden table in the light of a kerosene lamp. The sparse interior of our cottage leant the perfect setting. I even included the two fruit bats that attached themselves to the exterior of our mosquito net every night.

Brad was gone when I awoke. It was typical of his total commitment to a project. I spent the morning working on the sketch. In the afternoon I walked and returned to our empty house at sunset. Exhausted, I lay down to rest. Sleep came immediately, like it used to after a good day skiing.

The moonless night was pitch black when I awoke...alone. Unable to sleep, I worked on the sketch

until first light. I knew it was good, the most poignant I had ever done.

I walked the half mile to Al's house as the morning chorus of roosters and dogs spread across the island. They were just getting up when I arrived and the smell of coffee was inviting.

"Al, I know he would have told me if he'd planned to stay in the volcano overnight. I can't make the climb or I would go look for him myself."

His sons rounded up some friends. Their search turned up nothing. Surprised and a bit relieved, I went to see Charlee.

"You have an argument?"

"No! He's obsessed with the volcano. After I told him your story he decided he was in touch with the spirits here. He worked on his book until really late and was gone before I got up. Then he didn't return last night. I'm sure something's happened to him, Charlee. Do you know someone who will search really thoroughly?"

He organized six boys, none of them over fourteen. I bought them a round of cokes while he gave instructions. After sending them off, he told me to go talk to his son who was chief of the five man police force.

There I ran into macho attitudes. They obviously expected Brad would crawl out of some local woman's bed eventually. They did call the two hotels and the airline representative who oversaw the daily flight to St. Maarten. Nothing. They promised to talk with the fishermen who had the only boats on the island.

Back at Charlee's I had a much-needed beer. "What could have happened?"

Charlee said calmly, "Ya can't control what ya think, but ya can't let it mash ya up." His opaque eyes gave the impression of seeing far, understanding all.

The boys showed up just before sunset. They had found Brad behind some rocks. They said it was horrible. They said there was lots of blood. They said it was one of the places Charlee had told them to look...where there was no sun.

The rest is hazy. I stayed at The Old Gin House that night. My call to his parents was disjointed. I suppose I didn't make much sense. The police had Brad's body down 'cooling' by the time they got there the next day. An official flew over from St. Maarten to examine him, another to examine the site and ask questions. Brad had been beaten to death with a stone.

With his parents were a doctor, an army officer and their lawyer. They brought Brad and me back to the States with them. They left the officer to investigate.

The jury decided the prosecutor was right. That I had blamed Brad for the accident, for my irreparably damaged body, for never being able to ski again. They reckoned my hate was strong enough to get me up and down that rocky path.

The psychiatrist said, "Well yes, obsession could drive a person beyond her normal physical limitations."

The photographs they showed didn't do justice to the treacherous path...nor to the beautiful rain forest inside.

No one wanted to hear about the long dead slave's revenge.

It's not so bad. I probably won't have to serve the full twenty five years they gave me. And, they've let me have supplies for drawing.

Brad's parents kept his unfinished manuscripts and the four slave beads that were found in his pocket. They didn't want the sketch I had done of their son. Because it had his blood on it.

Silly. It was only a drop.

finish