

Crossing Over

by billy robinson

Joan's biospy showed the cancer had come back. She should have been preparing herself for chemo, but she booked us plane tickets to the Galapagos. She said, "Death can wait another ten days." It was supposed to be a joke. Was I going to fight her on it anyway? I never won an argument she was serious about winning.

Then right before boarding she grabbed my arm. "I just want to have fun."

What could I say? I crossed my heart.

And I tried. Goddamn it, I did. That first day out on Espanola Island? I made some stupid joke about blue-footed boobies. Then our guide Miguel told us that the bigger and brighter blue-webbed feet attract the female, so I picked up my size thirteen sandals and said, "How do you think I landed you?" That got her going.

We kept busy, too. Off to the iguanas with their blotches of coppery green and red. They blew snot on themselves to keep from shriveling up on the scorched black rock. And there was the flat awkward-looking Mola Mola fish, which had no real navigational system to speak of and therefore drifted wherever the current took them. We dined on guanabana and papaya and passion fruit, more than anyone could ever want. Then in the evenings we watched films about flamingos turning pink from the ton of shrimp they ate. By the time we crawled back to our berth we were beat and content.

Plus, Joan met a couple to hang out with. Mainly the woman, Kassie. She looked like Grace Kelly. Her boyfriend wasn't my cup of tea. Kind of a drip. But I hung out with him for Joan's sake. We went out on the Zodiac with them and Miguel. At night, we ate together in the

ship's dining room. And drank. At one point Joan got onto the subject of Lonesome George. She read about him while on the plane. The world's oldest living tortoise. 150 years and still kicking. "Maybe he's got some secret we don't know about," she said, winking. Then she glanced at all of us. "You know why they call him Lonesome George, don't you? Because no one could find a mate for him. Oh, they tried. A world-wide search, too. Flew in those perfectly-matched women tortoises like from Harmony dot com. They even set the mood. Soft, munchable leaves, a pool of swamp water to splash around in. But nothing, zippo. He wasn't interested." At the end she said, "When I see him, I'm gonna give him a good talking to." Kassie laughed. I too thought Joan's take on it was pretty amusing.

And I must admit, there were times when I felt good, even buoyant. The mid-day part, especially, when everyone remained on the ship because the sun would've fried our flesh, and Joan and I lay out on hammocks under a covered awning with books from the ship's library. I picked up one about Darwin's finches. It stated they weren't much to look at but his entire theory of evolution was based on those little fuckers. How over the many years the trees got harder and those with the sharper beaks managed to survive. The symbolism wasn't lost on me: Joan, having already been through so much, was still hanging around. I didn't tell her any of this. Instead I told her, "You are more beautiful today than when I met you twenty-six years ago."

But then some hirsute fuck said at dinner that that night we were crossing back. He meant the equator. I wasn't sure, so I checked the calendar. It was true--two days was all we had left. I didn't sleep that night. Joan snored in our berth while I peered out the porthole at the roiling waves, at all that vast inkiness, and at the frigate birds (or were they albatross?), flying in the ship's wake. I kept wondering where the equator was in all that darkness, if I could pinpoint the exact moment when we crossed over.

Because I wasn't ready. I wasn't ready to head back home. Back home it would be winter. It would be where Joan would start to die.

The next day, Joan and I were supposed to swim off Fernandina with the hammerheads, but I decided to stay on the ship. The last thing I wanted to do was hang out with Kassie's boring ass boyfriend. So instead I hung out with the captain. Somehow the conversation got around to Lonesome George. I told him about what my wife had said at dinner. How she was going to give him a good talking to. But the captain looked at me. "Oh, I'm sorry. You didn't know? Lonesome George died last year." I made up an excuse and went to my berth and slept. Joan came back and shook me awake. Her eyes were on fire. "I swam with a hammerhead! Twenty feet below me, can you believe it?" I watched her slip out of her bathing suit to take a shower. But I grabbed her hand and pulled her on top of me. I started to kiss her. She started to move under me. I didn't want to be on top of her. I felt the weight of me too much for her suddenly. I tried to switch. But she wouldn't have it. Afterward, we lay there for a few minutes. Then I told her that we weren't going to be able to see Lonesome George. "Yes," she said. "I know." Then she kissed me on the cheek and got up to take a shower. I got to thinking of her six months down the road. Her bones sheathed in skin thinner than cellophane. From the bathroom, she yelled, "Kassie thinks you're so funny." One time on the Zodiac passing an outcrop of penguins, I'd said they were the most dignified animal in the kingdom because they wore tuxedos. "What do you think of her?" she yelled, and suddenly I knew where she was going with all that talk about Lonesome George. I wanted to say, I don't, but it came out, "Fuck you."

Joan and I didn't talk that night into the next day, our last, as we climbed Santa Cruz. She still wanted to see the tortoises; I still wanted to wear my irritation like a stain. At one point Miguel said prepare to climb into a fog. "Every year a thick soupy mist descends on the island. It's called *guava*." About halfway up Joan noticed

something about me—perhaps it was my labored breathing? I kept up, two from the end. After I was last to be herded through thick stands of scalesia trees, I found Joan had stopped to sit on a rock. "Park your keister, Mista," she said, and patted the vacancy next to her.

I sat and she said, "Just grab a hold of that." I wiped my brown and looked In the distance. The Zodiac was tucked away in the corner of the bay, and the ship, listed gently just off the sandy beach margin. Beyond it was the ocean. Big and beautifully blue. "It's a place at peace with itself," she said. Then she looked at me. "I read that in a book yesterday."

I squinted ahead and picked up a turquoise pebble. I went to put it in my pocket. But Joan touched my hand. I'd forgotten about Miguel. How he said every grain of sand or turquoise pebble is where it must remain. I realized then that nothing is a souvenir. He was right about something else: a curtain of mist was now descending upon us.

"Here come the doldrums," she said.

There was a joke in there somewhere, something about my failing to lighten her mood. But I didn't say anything. Instead I grabbed her hand; I squeezed it like a vise grip.

Soon the mist was near-constant. "Come on," she said. "We don't want to get lost up here."

I got myself up, then helped her. "Wait!" she said, and skipped off over the hardscrabble terrain. "Take a picture of me."

She'd gone too far, camouflaged into the foggy hillside. I said, "I can't see you anymore."

"Snap it, anyway," she said in a voice that was calm. "I'm right here."

