

Bomba

by Jeanne Dickey

The man is middle-aged, although not rich, and the girl, aside from being very young, is not exceptionally pretty. But she has recently shed twenty pounds for the express purpose of looking fabulous on her vacation. Her brand new designer dress carries her smartly on the man's arm, down the main street of San Juan's *Condado*, which the man hasn't seen since his honeymoon. It would be a triumphant moment if the tower at the end of the block were not still smoldering behind spirals of smoke.

New Years Eve 1985 is the occasion for the new dress, even though the couple is not going to dinner. Several hours earlier, they had stepped out of a cab in front of their hotel, into a mysterious scent, sort of like burning trees but with the leaves still green. "Does Puerto Rico always smell like this?" the girl asked.

"Like what?" the man said, ushering her into the lobby.

"Oh, I don't know. Kind of smoky?"

"I don't smell anything," he said. San Juan had changed quite a bit in twenty years. Pink hotels, some with blinking flamingos, others with immense, curved driveways made of polished stone, had replaced the swaying expanses of palm trees and staggered sleepy beaches that he remembered. This afternoon, against a lowering, overcast sky, everything that had been meant to glow on a sunny day seemed sinister.

In the room, the girl immediately kicked off her shoes and bounced on the bed.

"Take it easy," the man said. "You're acting like a kid."

"Well that's why you like me, isn't it?" she said. He didn't answer. She switched on the television, giggled as she changed the channels. It seemed as though every station broadcast Spanish news. "That's all they watch here?" she said. "News?"

The man, who was Puerto Rican, gazed intently as a series of devastated images burned into the room. First, the high-rise building surrounded by a confusion of flashing red lights. Then the

street — their street. Sirens wailed, while random people wandered into the camera's eye, looking dazed. The girl threw down the remote and ran out to the terrace. She craned her neck to see around the other, more prominent hotel fronts, where a fleet of giant helicopters haunted the sky. Plumes of smoke sidled down to where she stood, barefoot, looking out over a choppy ocean.

She ran back to him.

He was on the phone, talking to someone in Spanish. "We're not involved," he said when he hung up. "Just the DuPont Plaza down the block."

"Were there — did people *die*?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Just some people —tourists who were gambling in the casino." He watched as the girl opened her suitcase, pulled out a bathing suit and a few t-shirts and threw them on the bed. Then she stopped, abruptly, and sat down.

The girl shut her eyes and tried to think of someone entering a casino, placing a coin into a slot, and BOOM — everything shattered. But it wouldn't register. This was her first vacation, her first plane ride. The day had been fascinating, but already too long with delays and waits.

The man watched her. "Look," he said, I'm sorry I brought you here."

"Sorry?" she said. "We can still have fun, can't we?"

He paced over to the window. She really was a kid. "Listen," he said, "do you think you can do what I say right now? Relax, take a shower?"

While the girl slept and showered, the man went out. He walked around for a bit, but not being able to penetrate the wall of harried police, angry Puerto Ricans and befuddled tourists, he went to a *kiosko* and bought some stuffed rice balls and sugar cane soda to eat and drink in the room. When she woke up, the girl saw the portion of food he had set out on a napkin for her, but she refused to eat it, chiding him about the number of calories in a *relleno*.

But now she is extremely hungry. They pass a plethora of restaurants -- Italian, Chinese, Argentinean. The man scoffs at each suggestion, so she gives up. Starvation has served her well, anyway. Elegantly garbed men and women promenade down the smoke-filled block, all of them watching her. Hopeful arcs of silver light shine from the undamaged hotel fronts, glitter over the street. Tiny frogs croak incessantly, musically. In this moment, the ordinary girl is beautiful. Beautiful, over the whir of helicopter blades, over the smell of burning flesh.

The man points at a neon Holiday Inn sign across the Condado lagoon. "That's where we stayed," he says. She nods. She had heard the story before, of how it had rained the first night of the man's honeymoon, and he and his wife had donned bathing suits, run outside and danced in the storm. The girl envisions them — their joy, their dark limbs, their equal ages, the hope and sexiness of their marriage — and they taunt her as if they were still dancing now across the dark, beckoning lagoon.

Near the end of the block, nevertheless a safe distance from the fire and the rescue commotion, the man takes the girl's arm and swings her into the bar of a luxury hotel. They sit on a plush sofa, in the dark, while a jazz band strikes up "My Funny Valentine." The man signals a waiter.

"Two *coquitos*, please."

The girl says that she would rather have a blue margarita, currently the drink of choice in New York City, where the couple lives. The waiter looks puzzled, so she says, "Forget it. Bring me the *coquito*."

The man scowls. *Coquito* is one of the few drinks indigenous to Puerto Rico, and he would very much like the girl to taste it. After all, wasn't the purpose of this trip to show her his country, his heritage? Perhaps she would prefer being out with someone closer to her age.

The girl listens as the band segues into "Someone to Watch Over Me." She leans back and smiles as if she knows what he's thinking. Sometimes, she really would prefer to be out with her

friends, drinking blue margaritas and kidding each other about the *Brady Bunch*. Right now though, the man suits her just fine. After all, when he was in college in the 1960s, he was president of the Ramón Emeterio Betances Club, a Puerto Rican version of the Black Panthers that nobody else ever heard of. None of her friends could boast of that. And he did treat her to this trip. He had promised it on one of their passionate early dates, about a year back, when his separation proceedings had just begun.

They had both felt immense excitement about the trip. So why the sullen mood? The girl can almost comprehend why someone would not feel like celebrating the end of a marriage. Almost, but not quite. The man had shown up at her door one morning about a month ago, with the family cat in a little cage. "I don't own a house any more," he said. The girl opened the cage but the cat shied into a corner. Later, after it had been lured out, the girl found the note: "Please take good care of Peanut," it said. "I love her so much." Signed by the man's daughter, the note had detailed Peanut's likes and dislikes, her habits, and even her birthday, July 4th.

"We should call home," the girl jokes over her last sip of *coquito*. "See how the cat's making out."

"I did." The man clears his throat. "While you were sleeping, I called my mother and your father."

"My father!" the girl says. "Who said you could call him?"

"It's only right."

"Nobody owns me." The band starts playing "Satin Doll." The girl motions for the waiter. "Another *coquito*, please."

"He was worried," the man says. The girl knows this is a lie. Her father had made it quite clear how he felt about her traveling with a boyfriend.

The man sighs loudly. If the girl drinks another *coquito* on an empty stomach, she'll get moody. She's quiet now, but he distrusts that calm. She's eyeing all the couples in their New Years Eve finery, in particular, a tall, long-haired woman in silk pajama style pants and her trim, even taller husband. The two waltz

gracefully, although mockingly, through the hotel bar, then shuffle into the dining room where the just-divorced man cannot afford to take his younger girlfriend.

"Let's go," he says.

"Eat?" she asks, rising hopefully.

"No."

"Then why are we leaving?"

"I'm just worried, OK? Let's get back to the room."

"Can I finish my drink?"

He takes her by the hand and pulls her out the door.

The night sky, although illuminated by the rescue operation, does not prevent the Dupont Plaza from casting its seething shadow down the street. The girl would like to find a place to eat, or a party to crash, but all of the restaurants are closed. The man is walking too fast, anyway; she has no time to linger or look down side streets.

Back in the room, she rummages through her pocketbook and finds a melted, half-eaten Snickers bar. She washes it down with tap water. "It's New Years Eve," she complains. "Everybody's partying."

The man switches the television on.

"What are you afraid of?" she mutters. "What the *espiritista* said?"

He stares at the screen, where they are still reporting about the bomb. Once when he was young, and again very recently, with the girl, the man visited a fortune teller. Both psychics predicted that he would die in the water, in a foreign country.

"Puerto Rico isn't foreign," she says. "It's part of America."

"Part of New York," he corrects her.

The girl wanders out to the terrace. Here, the frog song sounds strained, almost painful. Beneath her, a couple of Germans whisper in low voices. Both men. She wonders if they are making love. Even if she leans over the railing, it's impossible to see them. It would be outstanding, she thinks, if the man would agree to have

sex outside with her, on the terrace. More than outstanding: it would be wild.

But it's too gritty now. Smoke is still pouring thickly, traveling down the beach in human-shaped blobs. The girl wonders how far they will go. Will they reach Florida? New York? Europe? Will she still smell the smoke in a few days, when she's back home at her job? And what will she say when people ask her, "Did you enjoy your vacation?" And indeed, she thinks, should she?

"Look," the girl says the following day. "It's not our fault this bomb exploded, right?"

The man is still sulking, sitting on the bed, worriedly tuned to the television news. The skin on his legs is light, compared to his face. In fact, if you only saw his legs, you could mistake him for a white person.

"We might as well enjoy ourselves," she says, handing him a brochure with a picture of a rainforest. "Why don't we go to *el Yunque*?"

The man puts the brochure aside. "Now they're saying it was the teamsters."

"Who?"

"Teamsters. Frankly, I'm relieved it wasn't the Panthers."

"The *Black* Panthers? Didn't they die out when the 60s crashed?"

"Ended, not crashed."

"So what happened to them?"

The man doesn't answer. He withdraws to the shower, and the girl changes the channel. The president of the teamsters union is gesticulating madly, silently. He reminds her of her father, who was a member of the carpenters, a mellower union that had sometimes had to strike in sympathy for the teamsters. The girl wonders now, who was responsible for this bombing. Blacks? Whites? Her father? She changes the channel again and, much to her delight, finds a *Brady Bunch* episode. If her Spanish is not quick enough to follow the news, it suffices for the *Brady Bunch*. At least it does for this episode, the one where Gregg dates a cheerleader to

get back at Marcia for flirting with a football player. The Spanish-speaking *Brady Bunch* is quite a phenomenon. Carol's voice is throaty and sexy, Mike's deep and self-assured. Even the kids' voices, dubbed by Latino actors, are not as high-pitched and obnoxious as they usually are.

"*Miguel*," the girl says in the Puerto Rican Mrs. Brady's voice as the man walks out of the shower. She gestures toward the terrace. *Vámanos.*"

A blonde, blue-eyed face with chubby cheeks fills the TV screen to its edges. He snaps the set off. "You wanted to get some breakfast before we leave, right?"

After breakfast, they wait by the curb for a van to take them to *el Yunque*. In the street, a slim, blonde woman, about the same age as the girl, proclaims loudly, to nobody, "I have nothing but the clothes on my back." Despite the woman's tourist garb — white T-shirt and pink shorts — the girl is sure she is a New Yorker, too. Confident, almost strident, she will repeat those words many times and for years to come. Other tourists — bleached, tanned, and polished, some of them with salvaged pieces of expensive luggage, but most of them empty-handed, tremble behind their tasteful gold jewelry.

"This is like *Missing*," the girl says. Do you remember that movie?"

He does remember *Missing*, the film about politically naive North Americans in South America. This situation was nothing like that. But he embraces the girl now. After all, she's just a kid, barely out of college.

Everyone on the rainforest tour is talking about the bomb. It was arson, they said. Some punks, thought to be either teamsters or Mafiosi, had gathered a heap of old furniture in a room off the hotel's casino, doused it with kerosene and then ignited it. Many people died, after the initial blast, their faces and bodies pressed against the locked glass casino doors. Rescuers had found corpses piled up against those doors, as if the people were clawing their way over each other for escape. Other hotel guests, feeling the

reverberations in their rooms, panicked. They jumped into crowded elevator cars, only to be met by flames when they descended to the hotel lobby. Luckier or shrewder people stayed in their rooms, or ran up to the roof, where helicopters were still rescuing them.

They ruminate on these details. A bald fireman explains how smoke is drawn to the elevator shafts, how heat rises. A woman in yellow shorts begins to sob, and the girl, too, feels like crying. "Enough!" someone says. Once the van pulls away from the city, they become Americans on vacation. The girl and even the man pose in front of clinging vines, buy pottery, drink mai tais.

That afternoon, swimming at Luquillo Beach, the girl forgets about the bomb. The bay is flat and lulling and sweet. The man watches her carefully from the shore as she floats on her back.

"This is what we came here for!" the girl calls out. "Every day should be like this!" Iridescent green palm trees dip their leafy branches in the water. Staring up at the sun, at the fresh, blue sky, she is free of everything — bombs, divorces, abandoned cats, the Black Panthers and the Brady Bunch, even foreign films whose messages elude her.

The man digs his heels into the warm sand. Earlier, while changing into her bathing suit, the girl had seen a slim, green lizard dart through the women's locker room. It had transported her. His experience had been different. He'd taken his shirt off, and then he'd happened to turn around, only to see another man eye him admiringly. The girl laughed when he told her about it. The more upset he got, the more she laughed. "Take it as a compliment!" she said.

He wishes the girl were not so American. Enjoying herself while people suffer, she's no different than those other tourists who have flattened their wallets buying souvenirs that were made somewhere other than Puerto Rico.

On the way back home, at souvenir stands, rest stops, and pottery stores, every chance he gets, the man drinks more *coquitos*. "It's the only damn thing left that's Puerto Rican," he says, smashing

the fifth plastic cup under his foot. The driver of the van gives him a watchful look. The girl smiles weakly.

“He'll be alright,” she says, and wonders if she means it.

After all, she thought later, over the Burger King supper they had both agreed on, if it was the teamsters, the violence itself had no racial significance. And they had had a fun day, too. At least she had forgotten about the bomb. But the man keeps ranting.

“What do you want to do tomorrow?” she asks. “I hear there's a tour of the Bacardi plant.”

“How about the Red Cross? How about volunteering for the goddamned Red Cross?”

The girl bursts into tears. She just can't stop, even when they're back in the room. Doesn't know why she's crying. In bed, he reaches for her, but she turns away. She falls asleep with his hand cupping her shoulder.

The girl had pictured the ocean in Puerto Rico as blue and lulling, softly spiraling as the sound inside a seashell. The next day though, as they lie on the beach outside their hotel, the water seems abnormally wild. True, the air has cleared, but a lugubrious cloud has settled over the Dupont Plaza, where helicopters still hover.

“Is the ocean always this rough?” the girl asks. Somehow, it seems part of the tragedy. It's as if the helicopters are as powerful and ancient as the moon, compelling the tides. As if they were there before the girl and the man had ever met and decided to go to Puerto Rico.

“It's January,” the man says, adjusting the towel beneath his neck.

The girl takes off her T-shirt. Before leaving the room, she had rubbed her entire body with Coppertone SPF 45. Her family and friends had recommended this.

“What's that smell?” the man asks.

“Sunblock.”

He turns over, buries his nose in the towel. Some courageous souls are actually braving the violent waves in their polka-dotted bathing suits. The girl contemplates joining them, but

the chopping helicopter blades put her in a trance. The fortune teller had informed her of one vague marriage and two tentative children in the not-too-distant future. She had not named the thing that would kill the girl. They must wait until you were forty to tell you that.

“. . . Gotta have my birks on the beach,” a young woman on a nearby blanket says, drawing the girl back to the here and now. She puts on her T-shirt and then a long-sleeved sweater, covers her legs with a towel.

“Oh, for sure,” her friend says. “I love mine. I have seven pairs.”

It takes the girl a few minutes to realize that they are talking about their Birkenstock sandals. But the conversation has already meandered, past graduation (High school? College? She doesn't want to be caught looking at them), to the Jimmy Buffet concert (she hates Jimmy Buffet), to some party, or day of partying (*“Wasting away again in Margaritaville . . .”*)

“So Kate boots again,” the first woman says.

What is booting, the girl wonders. Is it puking? Starting a computer? Doing drugs?

“Your legs are frying,” she says to the man.

“What are you talking about?”

“You're getting a sunburn.” She has suffered enough of them to recognize the warning sign — pale, mottled, purple flesh, like flat goosebumps.

He slaps his leg. “My people do not get sunburns.”

And they don't “boot,” either, the girl thinks. She shucks her T-shirt and towel, walks away, toward the shore line.

The man calls out her name. Hearing the panic in his voice, she turns to see him standing on the blanket, waving at her to come back. His fear, she thinks, not mine. Whatever is going to drown him, will, with or without her.

She sets out for the water. The scorching sand abrades her feet as she begins to stride faster and faster. She wishes she'd worn her sandals, but it's too late to turn back and get them. She

breaks into a run, stops when she reaches the ocean. Too close, she thinks. Too close to that column of flame, the burning tower, to the ordinary people walking into a wall of fire. This ocean offers no relief. Brutal, to be tossed about in that sea, ferocious now with the ashes of burned tourists, their odor lingering abjectly in your nostrils.

Fearful that a wave will come and swallow her, the man calls her name again. Not even tempted to run away, the girl who heard her name called lets her gaze wander all the way to the horizon. Tonight, on the terrace perhaps, they will make love. She's sure of it. And tomorrow? Who knows if they would still be together? Did the people at the Dupont Plaza know last week that they were going to die? Nobody could predict the future.

The man calls her again, and this time she turns around and walks back toward their blanket. Foam breaks over the ocean's surface like a million diamond rings.

