

What You Catch a Glimpse of, Forget As Soon

by Robert Detman

There are gestures, unmarred by the words put to them after all has failed. When Y. stopped you from talking to apply lip balm to your dry lips. Or she sidled up to you to read what you had written for her. When you lay on the grass together she put her head on your chest and curled her body around you. In the night you watched her sleeping, you heard her teeth tapping as if taking little bites of number twelve spaghetti, so quietly. Her hand gripped your shoulder. Gestures cannot be undone, incomparable.

Several months earlier, you flew to the Big Island, rented a car and drove the two lane road that encircled the island. In North Kohala the remote beauty brought you to resolve about Y's predecessor, X., an ache and hollowness in your gut, gasping tears of relief. In the light, in the air, drifting, you had freedom again. An escape from what held you immobile. Near the trip's end, you recognized the Big Island was as much a paradise as any place you had ever been, or would ever be.

Friends mentioned traveling there and driving all the way around the island, on a budget, camping, how you would appreciate the landscape—yet you think how you'd have appreciated it more if you had shared it with someone special. Oh yes, that sand in the wound, that you did not go there with a lover, but perhaps in spite of one, X., it's true.

You knew it an unwise thought, but you were relieved to get away. Later, when you will reveal to Y. the reasons you took the trip, you will call it a “post-relationship meltdown escape,” the phrase you use in an email you write her long before you really get to know her. She will read this, laugh, and think you stalwart and independent, but later, when she thinks she knows you, she will look out the

window and confess that your comment made her think you were depressed. You do not agree, yet you will admit to yourself, alone, that this was your mindset during that trip.

In Kapa'au, you stood transfixed before the statue of King Kamehameha, an eight foot tall polychrome sentry on a pedestal on the courthouse lawn. It reminded you of first grade and a social studies textbook that had a photograph of an Eskimo's face on the cover, wearing a kind of eyewear without glass, fashioned from a piece of wood with a long slit to look through, ideal for a blinding snowstorm perhaps, since you couldn't see the Eskimo's eyes. This book had been carelessly flung at your face by a girl you thought liked you, knocking out your two front teeth. Standing there in Kapa'au you imagined whacking King Kamehameha with a sledge hammer and shattering him into several million pieces.

In the flush of romance, you will regale Y. with that trip, in her grim apartment that you will block from consciousness, where you will make plans to travel together. Where will you go? Nicaragua, perhaps, a friend said it is *the* place to go. Or Belize, maybe a side trip to Guatemala, as you will overhear Y. explain to her friend on the phone, *That's where his novel takes place*.

There are words. Gestures are often forgotten when there are words. A month after insisting that she does not cook, Y. will make you the most delicious chicken cacciatore. No, she did not say she did not like to cook. She said that she did not cook. In the narrowness of her eyes, the set and shield of her face, wholly not letting go, or giving in, there is no surrender. You must surrender to love. With ambivalence there are words. But you are cooking now, you will tell her.

You will be open in communication. You will let her know that she'll get no surprises from you. Without admitting the aversion to your candor, she will withhold her thoughts, believing you might judge her. She will be fearful of hurting your feelings, sensing your consideration of words, language. You will have unconditional trust in this person but for your own misgivings, such that you will question her sincerity, the way you hope not to ever have to. That

she is unable to have your clarity will bring about the undoing. Which will make you wonder if you merely hide behind honesty and forthrightness. Words.

Y. will remark on the ideal vacation length, saying, five days is plenty. You will consider her remark very telling of a viewpoint that you characterize as hopeless, but you will say nothing. She will decide that your needing to go away when there is trouble, as you admitted you did with X., is a sign of weakness. A validation of a theory. Upping the ante, you will conclude that for Y. life is rote, such as when she will reply, after you relate your story, the one in which you nearly drown, that life is just a series of check boxes. But you will say nothing.

You will sense she collects convenient information from you without giving you the benefit of the doubt, as this alleviates having to justify why she will drink too much gin and become sullen and insult you in front of your friends; or, to hide that behavior, ask for your help in a childish voice. Isn't this nearly the definition of Sartre's *bad faith*, you will note, the one section from *Being and Nothingness* you had read and highlighted all those years ago? Yet, when you will examine your motives, as when you flew to the island, was this not what came to pass with her predecessor, X., and the instigation for that trip? What made you stand on those high cliffs embracing the wind but that you didn't feel you could build a life with someone so constrained?

Eventually, Y. will not want to travel with you, and she will no longer talk of you with enthusiasm to the friend, of those qualities that initially made you so compelling to her. But when will she switch modes, going from the positive-optimism of popular relationship talk—what your therapist calls healing communication, as in, how two people help heal each other's relationship wounds by diving, unbidden, into the icy water, without fear—to her disappointed late night confessions to her friend that *He's not who I thought he was*? At what point will the friend level with Y. that *It sounds like you're not into him*. To which Y. will rationalize, *He's good to me*, or, *He wants what I want*. You don't think she will use

that generous tone, but in her gathering frustration, words more destructive and self-defeating, knowing her friend will not pick apart her hyperbole.

So it was, several months before all of this, at Pololu beach overlook, the setting for an afterlife, you misjudged beauty's appeal. A hot and cool breeze whisked across the conveyor of waves. A sheet of metal wisped into spray. You were drawn into the ocean, possibly too far out for safety. All of your knowledge of what to do or not do was not eased by the recognition that in your effort to get back to the shore, you were being drawn further out. You knew you should let the waves push you down the coast, to "go with the current" as you'd read in a sidebar of your guide book, though this was completely in violation of your instinct. This is the denouement, how you fight the water to get back to the shore, the only horizon you could wish to get to, the one that three minutes earlier you had noted with some satisfaction that if you could remain stationary, almost one hundred yards out, where you could touch bottom on the tips of your toes, sharp rocks, the grainy sand bar, there you could align yourself with the sign that said DANGER: HEAVY SURF. PEOPLE HAVE DROWNED HERE with a row of trees at the edge of the path, and you would be safe. Except that when you looked again you were pushed further into the deep and—this is the panic note—further from shore. Thinking simply, I don't want to die. How ironic were the thoughts you had prior to going in, such as, it's a wide bay, it doesn't look too dangerous, or, I've swam in worse. . . there's a piece of granola stuck in my teeth.

One early morning a few days before, at Ho'okena Beach on the opposite side of the island, venturing into the ocean, a blue canyon of cold water, flapping face down with snorkel mask and fins far above the ocean floor—the lava shelf slid away gradually into the depths and you fantasized you were lost at sea—you couldn't see the bottom, just dim murk. In this immensity, you did not feel in danger, just a surrender to how insignificant this vastness made you. The sun crested the steep hill and tore through the morning chill, warm at your back. Out of the cloudy shadows you could hear them before

you saw them, their squeals and squawks that you would later learn were not communication about you as first imagined, but their sonar so as to not collide with you, odd land mammal floating at the top of their world. In their tight cluster, you counted seven, perhaps more, you weren't certain, making a pass at you. Their, if possible, bemused snouts, coming toward you from the bottom; then, before brushing past on their downward arc, passing alongside with a jerky carousel motion. You were nervous and recalled that animals are attuned to fear—but who had heard of dolphins attacking humans, after all. The smallest among them half again larger than you . . .

Your feet slip from the shelf, a wave knocks you and your body goes slack, fatigued, almost resigned, and yet you forget yourself, lo, the reason you are here, and struggling more, as this is what you do, you are not giving up yet, though simple physics and an unpleasant gulp of seawater and not another soul around—the beach empty but for your belongings, a green bag, a dim speck on the horizon—might convince you otherwise. You are almost relieved that there is no one there to witness your comic thrashing. No one can save you. In giving over, giving up, it is the picture of futility to describe your flailing arms, rolled and battered by the unstoppable surf as you are. Each wave a volley you stumble through, churning and folding over you. It catches you off guard and lifts you into a space not made for you. For this, frantic, evasive action. You are a rock in the pond, one part per trillion, we are of the sea, you think, we are sixty percent water so it's no wonder she'll take you back and leave the remaining forty for fish food. In your racing thoughts, you eke out a laugh, for in trying so hard you have forgotten everything you had read about evading the riptide. You gasp and swallow brackish water knowing this mechanism is the sum of a greater whole of untold parts. The wonder of panic is how it will put your problems in perspective, will seem to nullify them long enough for you to catch a glimpse of a truth, to contemplate when and if you will get back to the shore, waterlogged, looking back to the site of your struggle, feeling the adrenaline surge, bracing warm sand and sun heated rocks, poking your fingers through sugary sand clefts, drying in an eastern breeze,

face to the sun again, all in the desire to tell her, eventually, Y., of your experience.

