



THIS
ISLAND
IS BLISS

This Island Is Bliss

I stood on the edge of the chair in room twenty-three of the Caerus motel with a telephone cord wrapped tightly around my neck and around the base of the ceiling fan. I didn't really want to die, but I did. It was a tormenting dichotomy. There was a part of me that wanted to stay alive because I could see a small light at the end of the tunnel. Another part of me just wasn't willing to make that arduous trek towards it. Then there was a whole other part of me that was just scared shitless of dying. What I actually wanted was to start over. I wanted a new life, a second chance, and a way to snuff the pain that had built inside of me. I hated what my life had become. I hated my choices, my mistakes, and myself. What I really wanted was a time machine.

I had enough tears dripping from my chin that night to satisfy an elephant's thirst. Although I was frightened of what death might feel like, at the same time, I felt a morose sense of urgency. I was certain that I could no longer live my current life. I was certain that only one of two things would happen that night: I would die, or I would end up prolonging my own misery. I can't remember how long I stood on that chair before I finally let the fear have its way.

After untying the cord, I stepped off the chair and chose to extend the misery that had become my life. I wasn't sure how long I would last or how long it would be before I finally found the courage to try again. Stepping off the chair wasn't an act of choosing to live, it was an act of delaying my suicide. Since fear was the catalyst to my inhibition and extended suffering, I made the choice of walking to the liquor store.

There was a light drizzle as I walked down the street, checking text messages and missed calls on my cellular. They were mainly messages like *where are you?*, *answer your phone*, and *please call me, I'm worried*. They came from my former girlfriend, Laura; my best friend, Billy; and my mother. I had been avoiding all of them. It was important that they not know where to find me. I didn't want anyone to stop me. I didn't even want to speak to them, because I knew they would be able to tell that something was wrong. My mother was already in tune with her maternal instinct. She was the worried one.

There was a small line-up at Moonshine's liquor store. I stood and waited behind two men. The hard liquor was sold from behind glass at the cash register. There seemed to be a problem with the debit machine, and it held up the line while the clerk swiped a man's card over and over and over again. After a few dozen swipes, it finally worked and there was only one man left in front of me. Everyone in the place, including myself, looked rough and unkempt. The man in front of me smelled like stale smoke and onions. While I waited for the clerk to find a way for the debit machine to work again, the first clean-shaven person walked in. He wore a dark suit, a tie, and shiny black loafers. He looked distinguished and wise. Taking a case of beer in his hand, he stood and waited behind me.

"Wet night," he said.

I took a glance back at him and forced a smile. He looked gentle and had a light smile, until his eyes wandered down to my neck. His eyes squinted and he zoomed in on my throat. Self consciously, I put my hand on my neck and rubbed it before turning my back to him.

"I came pretty close to killing myself once too," he said to my back.

I turned to him again, stunned and still rubbing my neck, "What?"

"Tried to shoot myself, but the gun jammed. That was fifteen years ago."

“That’s great,” I said sardonically.

“What made you change your mind?” he asked.

“Excuse me?”

“Why did you change your mind and not hang yourself?”

“What?”

“Most people only want to die because they hate what their lives have become, not because they don’t want to live,” he continued.

I played the dumb card, “I don’t know what you’re talking about, buddy.”

“If given the opportunity to start all over again, most of them would erase their pasts, move far away, and start again.”

“Right,” I said, as I turned to the cash counter where the clerk was waiting for me.

“Please tell me you have cash,” the clerk said.

I nodded and reached into my pocket for a roll of big bills. I had cleaned out my bank account to avoid having to use debit. I wanted to have cash on me. With my past luck, I knew that I might end up being unable to access my money at a time when I needed it most. Technology had never won my trust. “A mickey of your cheapest vodka, please,” I told the clerk.

He slipped me a mickey under the glass in exchange for a couple of tens. I told him to keep the change and then I made for the exit. Hoping to avoid the distinguished suicide expert behind me, I kept my back turned and my head down to avoid eye contact, but he managed to grab my shoulder just before I could reach the door.

“Hey, before you make a final decision, read this,” he said as he pushed a brochure at me. It said *Life After Death* and had a business card attached to it, which I assumed belonged to him.

“Thanks,” I said while rushing for the door and reluctantly snatching his brochure. I never looked back as I stormed out the door and back down the wet street to my motel. Along the way, I nearly dropped the brochure on purpose, but I changed my mind in favor of having something to read while I got drunk.

Back at the motel, the mirror in the bathroom told me that I had a pink, indented ring around my throat from where the phone cord dug in. It also told me that I looked like a sleepless, loveless junky who

looked like he wanted to kill himself. The mirror's honesty startled me, so I looked away and carried on with my night.

I cracked open the mickey and spread myself onto the bed. It burned like hell going down, but I got used to it after a few more swigs. My mind was pretty clear, since I really had no future to think about. I stared at the ceiling and thought about all the different feelings that might come along while I dangled from the ceiling fan. I wondered if it would hurt, or if it would be just mildly uncomfortable before the final moment. Heaven wasn't a reality for me and neither was the notion of a human soul, so all I worried about was whether my final hallucinations would be horrifying or pleasant. I had heard plenty of near death experiences that involved terrible visions, and that was what scared me the most.

The mysterious, and presumably religious, brochure didn't find its way back into my hands until the bottle was half empty. The cover was a tropical island under a blue sky, with a cheap swirling font that said *Life After Death: a reality*. The inside was a continuation of the island and blue sky. There wasn't a lot written inside except: *To die or not to die. How about NOT. The Island Of Heaven is your preferred afterlife. Start again in paradise...alive.* There was no contact information, no business or church location, and no telephone numbers; just an island, a blue sky, and those words. The back was blank and white. Obviously, attaching a business card was necessary.

The business card was equally ambiguous. It had only a name, Roman Mors, a phone number and nothing else. I wasn't willing to risk losing all hope of ending my life, until the vodka began to bring up an unexpected enthusiasm and intrigue. I had expected the liquor to make the thought of death more tolerable, but instead small remnants of hope started to bubble up inside of me and life started to become more tolerable. Those bubbles seemed to be stirred and amplified by the vodka. Slowly, I started to become a carbonated tincture of mild optimism. I still wanted to die, so I still had a fear that if I called the number that someone would be sent to stop me. It could have been an anti-suicide trap for all I knew; like a rescue mission for the hopeless, or something. However, my inhibitions had also taken a backseat, so I was certain that I would be brave enough to just kill myself in the most

brutal and urgent way with any sharp or blunt tool that was available, if someone tried to stop me.

I didn't feel that I had much to lose as I laid there pondering and visualizing the turning point that I had reached. I was at the edge of a tall, steep cliff that had a ladder to the bottom. I figured that I could start climbing down the ladder part ways and just jump off if, along the way, I changed my mind. I didn't know exactly what the content of the brochure was pointing to, but I knew that it wouldn't hurt to inquire. Well, I should say I *hoped* it wouldn't hurt. I was an indecisive wreck, and I couldn't have possibly known much of anything.

I punched the number into my cell phone before I could change my mind. The line rang about three times before a man answered, "Hello".

"Hi. I'm calling about your brochure."

"Of course. The guy from the liquor store, right? I'm glad you called."

I must have sounded sad and suspicious at the beginning of the call, but the strange man who called himself Roman, eventually began to sound pretty convincing as he told me about an island that existed somewhere in the Pacific. He assured me that the island was real and that it was home to several people who have chosen to disappear forever. He told me that he was in need of people like me. People who were willing to "die" but not die. He asked me how I felt about leaving my loved ones behind and the pain that my death would cause them. I told him that I would be saddened by it, but that I could deal with it and that my loved ones would eventually be better off without me. He drilled me with deep questions which I assumed were meant to reveal any doubts or regrets that I might have had.

"Once you die, you can't come back---ever. Do you understand that?" he asked.

"Yes."

Roman told me the date that I would be able to die. It was exactly three weeks from that night, and it would be a plane crash. Several others were going to die that day along with me. He asked me again if I was sure, and I told him I was. I had never been more sure of anything. I agreed to die in a plane crash, but only under Roman's condition that I kept everything a secret, went back to my normal life

for three weeks, and met him at the airport on the exact day of the flight with only a suitcase filled with a few changes of clothes. I would receive the plane ticket in the mail and I was to tell everyone that I was going on a vacation to Honolulu.

I pulled myself together after I hung up the phone. I really didn't want to go back to my life for three weeks; even that was an eternity. Doubts about whether the whole thing was actually legitimate kept swirling in my head the entire time. The last thing I wanted was to suffer for three additional weeks only to find out that the whole thing was a hoax designed to buy me more time to "see the light". Either way, I decided to take my chances.

Going back to my life was anything but enlightening. It was the same job, the same people, the same routines and the same debts. My life was redundant, and I realized after the first few days that it was absolutely necessary to end it. Laura still loved me, but not as much as she loved her new fiancé. Having mutual friends that somehow manage to let important pieces of information slip, like how she brags about his big dick in conversations, isn't exactly the most rewarding aspect of an already dreadful existence. I wanted to slash my aorta with a utility knife the very second I came back, but I didn't. I had too much hope. I forced myself to endure the monotony of my job, my friends, and my mother in order to reach a destiny that I wasn't even sure existed.

Billy drove me to the airport on my final day of existence. He wanted to come inside to wait and have a coffee until my plane boarded, but I told him I wanted to be alone. Seeing him offended didn't really phase me, not even when I told him I was going to Hawaii without him. Deep down inside, I think I have always had a deep-seated hatred for the guy. It goes back to him dating an ex girlfriend of mine from high school right after she dumped me. It's a long story and I should probably never have held a grudge as long as I did, because it happened back in high school and he had been a good friend ever since. However, none of that mattered anymore. Not to me. The three weeks had felt like a year and I was relieved to be finished with it all.

It was four in the morning and the airport was mellow. I carried my suitcase in one hand as I reached inside my blazer pocket for the plane

ticket that I had received in the mail. I walked along until I spotted a line-up at the AirShu terminal. I scoured through the line of sixty people until I found Roman. He looked exactly the same as he did in the liquor store.

“Roman?” I asked rhetorically.

“Ah, Matthew,” he said. His face lit up as he put his hand out for a shake, “I’m glad you showed up.”

“Of course I did. I’m glad this is really happening,” I said.

“You bet it is. In less than four hours, you’ll be dead!” he said, laughing hysterically at himself. A few people waiting at the terminal glanced at me with strange smirks.

Probably looking dumbstruck by Roman’s bizarre sense of humor, I moved to my place at the back of the line. A subtle wash of doubt came over me. The entire experience became surreal at that very moment. I didn’t know what to make of Roman’s joke. Suddenly, I realized that I had no idea how someone could even pull off a fake plane crash. In the entire three weeks, the thought and speculation only came to me once or twice. It wasn’t until I was actually waiting in line at the terminal that I began to feel truly insecure and skeptical. I had no idea what I was getting myself into. The thought of a real plane crash popped in and out of my head as I stood there. Perhaps I was about to become the victim of a deliberate plane crash and die an actual death. I had no idea what to think. I was scared of flying and it probably would have been much easier if I had just hung myself. Anxiety started to brush over me, not because I didn’t want to die, but because I began to realize that I may have inadvertently postponed a more peaceful death in favor of something more terrifying. Being in a tin can, thousands of feet in the air, and plummeting to a fiery death didn’t really appeal to me.

Just as I was about to turn around and flee the scene, an astoundingly beautiful blonde walked up behind me in line. She carried a single suitcase and reached into her pocket for her plane ticket. She looked at it and then looked at me. She put her suitcase down by her feet. “Is this the flight to Honolulu?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said, probably with a nervous stutter.

A smile accented her blue eyes and wrinkled them into a pair of attractive crow’s feet. “Good,” she replied.

“Yeah,” I said. I put my suitcase down and looked ahead to see how much time I had to weasel my way past her and out the door.

“So why are you here?” she asked.

“Uh, what?”

“Why are you here?”

Her smile and overtly content demeanor made me believe that she had no idea she was going to die. I throttled one of two possibilities as I stood there gazing into her arousing eyes. She either knew what was supposed to happen and believed it was legitimate, or she was clueless and going to die.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

“Yeah. I’m fine. I’m here because---,” I was lost.

“I’m here because I’ve had enough of it all,” she confirmed, nonchalantly while checking a broken nail.

“Yeah. Exactly. That’s exactly why I’m here too.”

“I’m sure that’s why most of these people are here. I bet some of them are criminals and fugitives too,” she said, before pausing to take an inquisitive glance down the line. “I wonder if any of them are famous.”

“I’m not sure.”

“That would be neat if they were.”

“Yeah. So, do you know what’s going to happen?” I asked. There was no way to hide my concern.

“I wasn’t told much. Just that we fly over Honolulu to some island far away.”

Her answer and lack of concern didn’t really sooth my anxiety as I watched her pick and chew at her broken nail without a care in the world.

I couldn’t bring myself to escape the terminal in time. As I turned to the front of the line for a glance, I heard Roman’s voice from a distance ask, “Are you coming?” It was then that I realized the line had nearly disappeared. There was a long, empty space in front of me. The striking blonde picked up her suitcase and nudged me forward. The moment to flee had expired and the plane was boarding.

The plane was a midsized jetliner. It could have only seated a hundred people. The blonde followed me through the metal detectors, the loading bridge, and all the way onto the plane. She eventually

found her seat and I continued toward the back, feeling claustrophobic and dizzy. To make my situation even more unpleasant, mine was a window seat near the rear of the plane. The view of the steam and fire blasting from the wing engine was all mine.

The take-off and every bubble of turbulence had me grasping my seat tightly. There was no television, no music, and nothing to distract me from what I thought was about to be the worst death anyone could have asked for. The only distraction was an old, balding man who snored beside me. I couldn't have even admired the ocean's horizon if I was brave enough, because the contrails from the engine blocked most of my view.

After what managed to be the longest four hours of my life, I was relieved to feel the plane turning and circling for a landing. As the plane turned, I caught a view of a small, lush, green island that rested alone in an endless ocean of brilliant blue and turquoise. I knew it wasn't Hawaii. Looking down at the paradise that awaited me, I could feel a giant smile meeting both of my ears. My chest loosened with the first bit of genuine happiness that I had felt in years.

The landing was rough, but the smell of tranquility was ripe with the island's humidity. I strolled patiently out of the plane and down a set of portable stairs, into the hot sunshine. Three black buses waited for us on the runway. There was no buildings, no airport, and not a lot of usual runway personnel. We filed down the stairs, while a man in a black suit guided us toward our designated buses. It was along the way to my bus that I caught up with the blonde from the terminal. We were assigned the same bus and we sat beside each other along a rough, dirt road that led to a small village of futuristic buildings that looked like laboratories. We never spoke much, and when we did it was trivial and impersonal chat. We both seemed comfortable and in unison with our quiet excitement about a new future. Our communications were subtle and almost telepathic. They consisted of subtle glances, flirtatious and excited smiles, and countless sighs of relief. Our old, awful lives were behind us and we were able to revel in our first shared commonality, in silence.

The buses separated and ours stopped in front of a boxy, pale and creatively inept piece of architecture with square windows, gray siding, and black borders. It was like a giant gray box nestled in a wooded

hillside. Today, this building is our home and has been since we arrived. The roads on this part of the island are paved and it has the character of a small island town. Tall palm trees line the side of every paved road.

Our bus, of about twenty people, emptied onto the smooth asphalt road. We were greeted by Roman himself and led into the building. It was, and still is, less like a laboratory on the inside. He showed us around what is now our living quarters. We were taken through the shared kitchen, the recreational area and the indoor pool, which is encompassed in a dome of glass on the top floor and has a clear view of the nearby beach and ocean. The décor in the entire building is warm with soothing colors, soft furniture, and home-like smells. It's like a four star hotel. Each of us has our own room, and on our first day we were given a key and number. My room was eleven, which coincidentally was right beside the blonde's room--- she was in room ten. Our rooms still haven't changed. The only thing that anyone would find unusual about the buildings, and the island, would be the complete seclusion and exclusion from the outside world. There are no phones, no internet access, no mail, and no radio or cellular communications of any kind, except inside the administrative building. The entire island, as I eventually found out in confidence from Roman, is an operation run by the United States Government. The entire airspace above the island is protected by the military, and cargo planes bring daily supplies and food to the island twice a month. The planes stopped bringing more "dead" people to the island over a year ago. The island's population was capped at about three hundred, equally divided into men and women. Couples on the island are only permitted to have two children.

I have been here for over two and a half years now. The blonde whom I met in the airport is Cassandra. She gave birth to our daughter, Annabelle, just over six months ago. The island is a true paradise, but living here turns out to be a lot more difficult for some. Despite the true paradise and beautiful nature of this free-spirited island, there are some who have regretted their decisions to come here. Although I am not, nor will ever be one of those people, in my time here, I have seen my share of suicides, murders, and crimes of desperation. There are those who eventually begin to succumb to their

natural desires for the past. If I told you that I have not reflected, or thought about my past, my old friends, my lovers and my family, I would be lying. I have, in fact, shared in the same sadness and depression that has consumed some of the others, but I have never let it destroy me. Those who have succumbed to those feelings have either perished on their own terms, or on the terms of others. On occasion, these feelings have caused some to murder, beg for their return to the real world, or commit suicide. The begging is always in vain and will either end with suicide, a crime punishable by death, or with acceptance and rehabilitation. The latter is the most seldom.

The island holds many secrets, most of which we'll likely never know, or care to know. Most of these people have never even been told how they died, or exactly where they really are. When we speak of crimes punishable by death, we mean the obvious, like murder. However, "punishable by death" has another meaning on this island. It's a meaning that is never elaborated or spoken of until it happens. One such crime took place after my first month on the island. It involved a man named Henry. He had been seen begging Roman the night before the incident. As usual, he was refused and left crying on the beach as Roman walked away from him. Late that evening, Henry broke into the administrative building after somehow managing to bypass the security system. When inside, he made unsuccessful attempts to contact the outside world. He also managed to dig through scores of confidential files. The administrative building rested near the beach and could be seen casting a shadow at sunset. Morning came, and I was on the beach watching the sunrise with Cassandra while the rest of the island slept. It was a peaceful morning and it was around the time that administration officials, including Roman, got to work. It was then that Henry was caught reading through several forbidden files. He managed to shove past Roman in a panic and run out of the building and onto the beach, with three armed guards in pursuit of him. Cassandra and I turned around to the sound of his screams as he ran towards us.

"They used us! They used us! They lie! They lie!" he shouted as he made his way closer. I recognized him as the balding man who snored beside me on the plane. I never really got to know him on the island.

“My god. What’s his deal?” Cassandra said, growing more uncomfortable as he approached.

“It was for war! It was all for war! They told them our plane was hijacked. They used a remote controlled replica! A replica! They crashed it into---,” before Henry could finish, a loud thunderbolt crackled through the air and blood exploded from the center of his forehead. Red spatters rained across the white sand only a few feet from me as he plowed into the beach, face first. Just like that, chaos became silence.

Roman approached Henry’s corpse and hovered over it for a few moments in silence. He eventually looked over at us and smiled. “Jesus. The fucker went mad. He almost killed you both,” he said, before ordering his men to clean up the mess.

That frightening morning came and went unspoken, except for its general technicalities, like Henry’s break-in and his dangerous insanity. Neither Cassy or myself ever spoke about it in private. Roman never mentioned it or asked us about it, and his behavior never changed. He was the same old Roman the very next day. Strangely, Cassy never seemed bothered by it either. Her concern only lasted the remainder of the day, only to vanish completely by the very next sunrise.

Today, I had my usual cup of coffee and stared out at the morning sun as it rose on the ocean. I thought about a lot of things. I thought about Annabelle and how beautiful she is. Her toys and teddy bears are always scattered around the living room floor. They act as a constant reminder of her happiness, security, and innocence. I always think about her future on the island and how perfect it is that she’ll probably never know anything else. She’s about to live a future that everyone else could only dream of. Her life is one that most parents try to accommodate for their children, but always fail to achieve. This island is a world of happiness, serenity, peace, and isolation from the filth and horror of the real world. The world outside is nothing more than a bad memory that I share with a few others, and one that Annabelle will never have to endure.

I seldom think about the calamity that must still exist on the outside. I rarely think about those I have left behind and the suffering they must continue to feel, not only from the loss of a best friend, a lover, or a son, but from the passing of their everyday human events.

Their wars, their deceptions, their diseases, and their dramas don't exist here. The darkness that lurks on this island today is only a byproduct of a decaying and failing society. It exists only in painful memories that attach themselves to emotions, sometimes to cause sporadic outbursts of nostalgia and regret. One day, this island will be a new world, a new future, and a new consciousness. Over time, the memories that plague the minds of their parents will vanish and our children will be free. They may be curious and inquisitive at times, but to them there will be nothing else. This island will be all that they know. The misery of a world that is dead and gone will become obsolete. When I grow old and die with Annabelle at my side, I will take comfort in knowing that this island is bliss.