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The Third Island: A Novella

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THE THIRD ISLAND: A NOVELLA

by

IRIS M. MORA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in English – Creative writing
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Thesis Chair: Dr. Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés

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ABSTRACT

The Third Island is a novella about a Puerto Rican woman of Spanish descent who faces her biggest fear—death. Death comes in many forms and for Laura Maria De La Esperanza Castel, it comes in the form of a man with whom she thinks she is in love. Vacationing on an island in the Bahamas, novelist Laura Castel finds that the only way to survive is to overcome her fear and reject being controlled by the figure who is trying to take her. She overcomes many obstacles and is taught about self-sufficiency, the history of repression of minorities groups or of the misunderstood, and the importance of protecting those who are not able to protect themselves.

DEDICATION

For my parents, who gave me wings.
For my friends, who opened up the window.
For my mentors, who pushed me out to fly.

And for the people of the world who are persecuted
be granted their right to freedom.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Departure.....	1
The Arrival.....	6
Three Islands.....	12
Masters Cay	16
Captain's Tale.....	26
Island's Past	41
The Dolphin	52
Master of the Cay.....	59
Plantation Cay.....	74
Palm Island.....	81
Rise of the Storm	94
Eye of the Storm	102

Departure

Laura looks through the tamper-proof window and notices several lakes shimmering in the distance. Their silver reflections transmit light like SOS signals, mesmerizing her to recall the first time she was ever on an airplane. It was during the early eighties when her family moved to Florida from the island of Puerto Rico. Her mother would tell her prior to their flight, about the Bermuda Triangle, and how several ships, boats, and airplanes would disappear while crossing within its boundaries. Her mother was like that, always teaching her about realities in a warped sort of way. Like the time during her seventh birthday when Laura was told as she drank grape juice, about the atrocities that happened in the Republic of Guyana's Jonestown.

"Hundreds of people died after being forced to drink grape flavored poison," Laura's mother said to her. "Their lifeless bodies, including those of children, were discovered lying face down on the tropical landscape, rotting as they swelled from the heat. Couples embraced to their death, while parents died holding on to their newborns."

There were other horrifying stories her mother told her about the world, truths that would make other children run, scream, and cry with incomprehensible fear. But

for Laura Castel, fear always stayed suppressed in her mind, and told truths would only resurface as distant memories, during times of youth reflection.

The Bermuda, or Devil's Triangle, was a frequent topic discussed amongst travelers. Having to cross over it, made people feel on edge. Maybe, that's why Puerto Ricans clap every time a plane lands safely, Laura mused. But not all planes landed safely; she remembers these misfortunes. Even ships and small boats vanished in the clear blue waters between the Commonwealth Island, Bermuda, and south Florida. Now, thirty two years later, Laura seldom hears about the devil's mouth opening wide and swallowing human transportation. To her, the Bermuda Triangle remains a playground, a court where the Devil's own children strike the traversing planes like tennis balls, making them plunge from the sky. Some of the passengers in these planes are fortunate and survive, while others drown secured to their seats in the depths of the Caribbean Sea.

A vibration disrupts Laura's childhood memories. After the plane settles, she reaches for a printed e-mail inside a red canvas bag, stowed under the seat in front of her. Unfolding it, she recalls a recent conversation with her friend Gina.

"I think you are going to love this summer rental Laura. The house is part of a three island estate. I think it's going to be perfect for what you're looking for."

"So, I will be staying on the main island?"

“Yes, the captain said they have four employees who take care of the grounds. Everything will be handled by them, including the food. They will also take you anywhere you want to go except, the nearest populated island is about two hours away by boat, and the seaplane makes brief stops only when necessary. This is what you were looking for right, total seclusion?”

“And, you don’t have any pictures?”

“None. The captain told me the owner likes to keep things private, and would not allow me to take any, but the house does have all the features you said you wanted. I did learn one interesting tidbit from the captain thought...”

“What’s that?”

“That the wealthy owner is from somewhere in Europe, and he doesn’t frequent the islands much, so you’ll have the place all to yourself.”

“From Europe, huh? I wonder from where?”

“The captain wouldn’t tell me, and didn’t go into too much detail after that. He said this is the first time the property is available, and he doesn’t know for how long it will be used as a rental. You will be a first. If I wasn’t so busy, I would rent it myself. I tell you Laura, the place is breathtaking.”

“I wonder why the owner is renting it now. You did say that the history of the place goes back to the mid 1800’s?”

“Well, you know, maybe he is in some kind of economic trouble or something. I was told that the house on the main island was built back then, but I couldn’t tell. The place is well maintained, and has endured many storms.”

“Well, it sounds like I am leaving for the Bahamas. Do you want the credit card info now? ”

“Ah, I forgot to tell you. I know you will find this weird but, the owner wants the payment in Euros. I will email you all the details. I can’t wait until you see the place. You’ll want to stay there forever.”

“Thanks, Gina. I can’t wait.”

Laura reads the printed e-mail.

Palm Island Estate Flight Information

Gina Brinkman Island Property Rentals

To: Laura Castel

Laura,

The flight has been arranged for the same day on Friday, May 12th. After you arrive at the Miami Airport, the pilot (Gonzalo) will meet you outside

of arrivals, and drive you to the seaplane. You are so daring. I don't know how you are going to stay there without a cell phone or internet for 6 months. I couldn't do it. I would go insane!

I know you paid more than you wanted to, but once you get there you will see why it was worth it. Good luck with your writing. I want to read your new novel when you get back.

See you in six months.

Gina

Laura places the email back into her bag, when an unexpected dizziness engulfs her. She reaches for a medicine packet she had bought earlier, and after washing down an aspirin, puts on her sunglasses, relaxing her head on the side of the plane's window. It doesn't take long before the engine's muffled sound, sways her to a very deep sleep.

The Arrival

“Welcome to Miami International Airport. The time is now 3:15 pm; outside temperature is a sunny 82 degrees Fahrenheit...” A deep voice announces over the plane’s intercom, waking up Laura. The flight from Orlando was a short one. The Miami airport, variegated with international flavor, pulsates to the aromas of Cuban coffee intertwined with the scents of high end perfumes seeping out of the duty free shops. The clashing aromas pack Laura’s nose, making her release a loud sneeze.

Hurrying through a long corridor towards baggage claim, her eyes drown in the colors of summer, as Miami fashion coats the airport canvas with lush reds, aqua blues, and wild shades of yellows. Laura hears a multitude of different languages being spoken, including a variety of Spanish dialects coming from the South, and Central American travelers. To Laura, the airport looks, and sounds like a theatrical production where the airplanes are the stage, the intercom is the manager calling on their actors, and the airport’s excited chatter is the joyful audience.

After retrieving her luggage, she rushes through the exit doors when her quick forward motion is disrupted by a wall of smoldering heat, not the heat she felt earlier from the warm smiles or the good looks of the locals, but a heat of burnt oil and engine exhaust, coupled with a wave of stagnate hot air, that almost suffocates her. A thin man,

dark in complexion with intense brown eyes, standing about six feet tall, breaks her displeasure when he approaches.

“Miss Castel?”

“Yes?”

“Hi, I am Gonzalo,” the man says, with a heavy Cuban accent. “We spoke briefly on the phone?”

As Laura gets close to shake his hand, she can’t distinguish what is stronger, his cologne or the stench of musty tobacco lingering on his clothes from a cigar he must have smoked earlier. “*Mucho Gusto*” she replies, greeting him in Spanish as if she would find some commonality with him.

“How was your flight?” he asks, not taking the bait.

“Very nice, thank you.”

“Are you ready. Is this all your luggage?”

Laura looks down at the bags next to her as he points to a blue snorkeling gear sack, a red medium size suitcase, and a large canvas bag.

“Yes, that’s it,” Laura says, wondering if she had brought enough. “Gina said that you will be taking me to a seaplane?” she asks, while picking up her canvas bag filled with two bestselling novels, a box of pencils, a legal notepad, and a light weight laptop computer.

“That’s right. The seaplane is at a base nearby. It’s the only way we can get to the island. My car is just a few steps away. May I help you with your bags?”

“That’ll be great, thank you.”

Laura tries hard not to grin as she follows. Gonzalo, wearing a short sleeve green-striped shirt, white pants, and a grey wool fedora hat, makes him look like he came out of a 1950’s fashion magazine. His silver goatee matching his contained pony tail, contrasts his dated apparel. *I wonder how old he is* Laura questions, noticing the wrinkles on his bronzed hands and face. He walks in long strides, causing Laura to gasp for air as she strains to keep up. They pass a number cars and buses in the terminal, before stopping next to a blue ‘57 Chevy Bel Aire with white rimmed tires, parked in the no parking zone. An attendant wearing an airport security uniform comes out of the car, and hands Gonzalo a set of keys.

“*Gracias muchacho,*” Gonzalo says to the man, as he places Laura’s luggage inside the trunk of the car. He gives the attendant a rolled up set of bills tied with a rubber band, raises his right hand as to say goodbye, and opens the front passenger door.

“Should we go?” he asks, showing Laura the way.

“This is an amazing car,” Laura says, lifting her legs inside. Gonzalo closes the door behind her, walks around the car, gets in, and before he turns on the engine, faces her lifting his head up a little, “I brought it with me from Cuba.”

"From Cuba?" she asks, lifting up her eyebrows. *How did he ever do that? Mexico!?*
Maybe he brought it in from Mexico. A lot of wealthy Americans go to Cuba through another country, why couldn't a car be brought up that way also?

Gonzalo doesn't respond. Fearing there might be something more nefarious to the story, Laura chooses to remain quiet.

"You flew in from Orlando?" he asks, a few moments later while driving.

"Yes, it has been a while since I have flown into Miami."

"Have you ever flown on a seaplane before?"

"No. This will be my first time," Laura answers, looking away as she rolls up the car window, wanting to contain her long brown hair from getting tangled by the cross-breeze.

"Well, there's nothing to it. We taxi off the base, before gliding over the water to take off. When we arrive in the Bahamas, we will land over the ocean. *Capitán Galen*, the custodian of the estate, will be waiting for us to take you to Palm Island by boat, and that's where you'll be staying, Miss Castel. It's just a short ride away from Plantation Cay where we are landing."

"Palm Island, huh? I didn't know it had a name. Why aren't we landing near there instead?"

"There are too many shallow reefs surrounding it."

"Oh, ok. *A boat ride? That will be a nice way to start my vacation,* Laura thinks.

"It's a beautiful, remote part of the Bahamas," Gonzalo tells her, looking straight ahead. "I think you'll love it there."

It took less than twenty five minutes for them to arrive at the Miami Seaplane Base on Watson Island. Gonzalo drives the car into the small airfield, aiming for what looks like a navy blue and white single engine seaplane. After getting out the car, he throws the keys to a heavy set man smoking a thick Montecristo cigar, who is standing by the plane. While Gonzalo does a preflight check the man with the cigar still in his mouth, takes out the luggage from the trunk, and loads it into the seaplane. Laura gets out of the car and in trying to get away from the burned leather, and cedar tobacco stench, walks away to stretch a little.

"We will be leaving soon," Gonzalo tells her.

"Thank you," she replies, walking back to stand in the shadow of one of the wings, away from the glaring sun. Laura reaches into her canvas bag to look for her sun glasses, but can't seem to find them. *Maybe, I left them on the plane and I didn't notice,* she thinks, frowning, after finding the empty case.

"Ok, Ms. Castel, we are ready for take-off," Gonzalo says to her, opening the passenger door. He helps her climb up inside, as the man who was waiting for them

earlier, drives off the airstrip with the Bel Aire. Laura belts in before being handed a headset, and signaled to put it on.

As the seaplane taxis, the wheels over the uneven ground cause it to vibrate. Laura watches as the plane enters the water's edge, allowing the floaters underneath its fuselage to coast it over the seawater. Gonzalo speaks to the controller before maneuvering the plane, positioning it parallel to the highway situated to the left of them. Without delay, the rotating blades increase in revolutions propelling the seaplane at a fast speed over the imaginary runway, lifting it up to the atmosphere, leaving a trail of turbulent water and the diminishing sight of the buzzing east Miami coastline behind.

Three Islands

During the flight, Gonzalo doesn't talk much. An occasional "are you doing ok" breaks Laura's concentration from the beautiful views of the ocean below. The plane flies, smooth over the Atlantic like a *Kolinsky* sable-hair brush over an artist's palette, mixing watercolor hues of blues, and greens with random smudges of white lathered sea salt. Half an hour into the flight, Laura's vision wavers as she strains, fighting the urge to fall asleep, but the subdued stuttering sounds of the revolving propeller resonating through her headset like a rotating ceiling fan struggling to cool a hot Florida sunroom, makes her close her eyes in pleasure. Seconds later, Laura no longer sees what's ahead of her, or hears what the advancing propellers are trying to tell her.

"Ms. Castel, we are approaching for a landing," Gonzalo says a short while later, waking her up.

Laura straightens herself, and cleans around her eyes before looking out the window. She feels her stomach curdle, as the plane descends. In trying to control her nausea, she looks ahead, but can't tell where the sky meets with the sea. It is late in the afternoon and the sun is journeying back away from the islands. The ocean and the atmosphere radiate, as if mixing sapphires and emeralds with hints of lavender, in a bowl of raging fire. The wind howls. The ocean waves crash against the plane's floaters as it lands, splashing them with the sounds of clapping hands as if hailing the end to a

very long day. Aiming for a wood pier, the plane decelerates as it advances, docking next to a stocky man who opens the passenger door, before offering his hand to Ms. Castel.

“Welcome to Plantation Cay. I’m Captain Galen.”

“Thank you--Laura Castel,” Laura says, accepting his hand. She looks down at the plane’s float, before stepping off. The waves rebound off the pier unbroken, forcing the plane to bobble next to the dock, making Laura worry that if she loses her balance she will fall into the choppy water below.

“Would you be staying a while, Gonzalo?” the captain asks, letting go of her hand. “I’ve got a new bottle of Havana Club.”

“No, not today *capitán*. I have another flight waiting for me when I get back. I’ve got a pair of newlyweds to fly down to Key West for their honeymoon.”

“Ah—maybe next time; it sure is nice to see you again, my friend!” Captain Galen says to him, shaking his hand goodbye. “Shall we go to Masters Island, Ms. Castel?” he asks Laura, picking up her two bags.

Laura squints at him biting her lower lip, wondering where exactly she will be staying. She sees Captain Galen hold a stare.

“I’ll explain on the way,” he says, pointing his head to the opposite side of the dock, as if wanting for her to follow.

“I remember Gonzalo saying something regarding the boat ride, but I thought I was staying at Palm Island?” Laura says, following him.

“This is not the island you will be staying at, Ms. Castel!” Captain Galen says in a loud voice, walking ahead.

Behind him, she hears his sandals strike the dock like rubber mallets on wood, hard enough to secure any loose nails as he walks toward a fishing boat docked a few feet away from the seaplane. When they arrive, Captain Galen turns around to look at her.

“We have to take a short ride to Masters Cay. Palm Island is the smallest island you see to the north,” he says in a softer voice, pointing towards a visible island to the right of them. “It’s about two nautical miles from here. There are a total of three islands in this island chain. You arrived here at Plantation Cay, and the one I am taking you to, is called Masters Cay.”

“Why did Gonzalo call the main island Palm Island if it’s really Masters Cay?”

The captain turns away from Laura, and begins to load the luggage into the boat with the name *Galapagos* scripted on its hull.

“Because that’s the way the owner wants it,” he responds, avoiding looking at her.

There's an uneasiness that comes over Laura after his stern response. His previous demeanor, friendly, warm and accommodating, is suddenly distant, cold and unwelcoming. After getting on the boat Laura sits quietly, wondering if she was just tired, and was reading too much into things that were not there.

Masters Cay

The fishing boat is about 35 feet long, white fiberglass with an open bow, a center console, and two outboard engines. Laura rests on a white cushioned seat behind the console watching Captain Galen who is ignoring her, maneuver the craft away from the dock towards the setting sun. Captain Galen is shorter in stature than her, has black hair with grey sideburns, brown eyes, and looks to be of Greek descent. His glaring white collar makes his suntanned cheeks stand out like two freshly baked dinner rolls.

The water in the strait between the islands is calmer than when the plane arrived. Laura hears the boat's propellers take off like muted chain saws, slicing the calm water in half, leaving a trail of whipped ocean. The wind caresses her hair, and respires in her ears, while her black eyes sting as she watches the sky in front of her turn into plasma orange. To avoid the sun's glare, she looks to her right and stares at Palm Island. The name is appropriate as there a multitude of palms clustered in its center. To the left of the island, she sees the skeletons of coral beds reaching upwards. Some are white, and others grey, but all are being splattered equally by the wave's moisturizing spray. To the right, there is a beach cove with a jagged edge, as if something grand, a giant, had taken a bite off its crust. *There is nothing spectacular about the island*, Laura thinks. It appears deserted, untouched, and uninviting.

Something on Palm Island shifts her attention away from the cove, making her

look inland a little closer. As the boat passes, reflections coming from Palm Island twinkle on her face multiple times before one long stream of light pauses, and hovers over her eyes almost blinding her. Laura blinks in rapid succession avoiding looking at it, when in a sudden move, it flickers away and disappears. *I wonder what it could be. There are old bottles, and aluminum cans that wash up to deserted islands all the time, Laura thinks. Maybe, it was a soda can, or some other reflecting piece of garbage.*

Looking ahead, Masters Cay seems larger than Palm Island, but smaller than Plantation Cay. On its shore, it has a wide arm of sand that holds the coast in a clasp, as if it's protecting it from the sea. There is a house, mostly hidden behind tropical lushness, in the middle of the island. On the water's edge is an extended pier, longer than the one in Plantation Cay, built to keep the boat's hull from touching the bay's sandy bottom. As the engines recede bringing the boat closer to the dock, a dark shadow emerges in the distance. The sun, setting behind Masters Cay, produces a bright yellow halo around the shadow. No longer being able to withstand the lack of light protection, Laura's squinting eyes begin to tear. She closes them, and when they open, a gleaming, coffee bean colored face is staring back at her, with intense light blue eyes that shimmer.

“Ms. Muuguzi!” yells Captain Galen, as he maneuvers the boat closer. The woman staring at Laura acknowledges him, catching the end of a rope being thrown at her. She ties it to the cleat on the dock, while Captain Galen exits to secure the rest.

“Welcome, ma’am,” Ms. Muuguzi says, as Laura exits the boat.

I can't believe the color of her eyes, Laura thinks, as she gazes. Ms. Muguuzi's eyes stare back, and like mirrors, reflect Laura's own.

“Thank You,” Laura replies.

“Ms. Muuguzi,” says the captain, as he unloads the boat, “is the main care taker of this island, and will provide you with anything you need.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ms. Muuguzi responds, before studying Laura's bags in front of her.

Laura acknowledges, and follows Captain Galen who advances towards the shore. When they arrive near the end of the dock, the wind picks up from the east, making the palm trees that line the right side of the coast sway their fronds violently against the backdrop of a blazing red sky. Using their moving leaflets like blades, the palm trees cut into each other, as if fighting for space. As Laura listens to the palm's rustling sounds, their music begins to change. Their calm and relaxing synchronized melody almost hypnotic, transforms to the clashing echoes of human screams, and exhaling breaths. Unsure of what she is hearing, Laura's eyes widen as the hairs all over

her arms spring in succession, sending escalating chills up her back. As their unnerving sound gets louder, Laura sees three tall figures wearing long black frocks, each hiding under an oversized black umbrella, emerge from behind the palms' trunks.

The figures glide over the beach, sweeping grains of sand with the bottom of their clothes, as they follow each other in a straight line. *What are they--people?* Laura covers the top of her eyes with her expanded right hand, trying to decipher their appearance, but only sees the movement of shadows. In a panic, Laura's breathing becomes shallow, making her pink lips turn blue as oxygen is removed from her veins. *Help me!* she screams, but no one hears her.

The black shadows continue to move towards Laura, indifferent that their loose clothing made of crepe fabric, flaps in a hostile manner against their extended bodies. Long sleeves hide their arms, black gloves their hands, and their pointed collars come up to their chins. The setting sun's fiery glow behind them, make each figure's aura shine like volcanic magma.

Laura focuses on an outline that appears carved in skin color, on each of the figure's chest. The moving image resembles the face of a man wearing a crown over his mane with a body of a lion. In his left hand, he holds the head of a snake coiled around his arm with its fangs exposed, in his right; the man-lion holds the neck of a large bird extending its wings, if struggling to take flight. Below the man-lion's feet are unusual

writings, scrolling over the fabric, luring Laura to read when a thrust of cool air, forces her to take a deep breath, rasping her throat, replenishing her body with needed oxygen.

When her breathing returns to normal, the crest, and the writings disperse all over their frocks, becoming tiny points of light, switching designs as the illumination moves from one tall figure to another, creating new shapes, of moons, planets, and constellations, turning the frocks of black fabric in front of Laura's eyes to segments of the night sky. The continuous moving patterns makes her feel seasick, but prior to Laura's body reacting, the shapes in front of her transform into gleaming bright stars, before turning into grains of sand that cascade from their vestments back to the earth, in order to become part of the island's shore once again.

Not seeing the crest upon their chest anymore, the unusual writings, or the night sky as she did before, Laura thinks that maybe, her eyes are playing tricks on her. *I might have almost fainted. I don't know. Maybe I'm just tired; it's been a long day. What's happening to me?* She takes another deep breath.

"Ms. Castel?" Ms. Muuguzi says, turning to Laura. Laura doesn't respond.

"Ms. Castel!" Ms. Muuguzi says, a little louder, prompting Laura to look in her direction. "I would like to introduce my children."

The figures which are now standing in front of her lift up their umbrellas in a slow manner, high enough to reveal their faces. Their short curly hair is as white as the ocean foam she had seen earlier. Their cheeks, nose, and forehead, are of the same pigmentation, their eyes however, are of the color of blood. *Why would she bring her albino children to live here, to these extreme conditions?* They look away passive in their stare, focusing their attention on the sand surrounding their bare feet. *They must have succumbed to wear those frocks, Laura thinks. It's the only way to protect their skin from the intensity of the sun.*

"Hello," Laura says to them.

They say nothing. They nod as if rehearsed, avoiding eye contact with Laura as she stands in front of them. There are two teenaged boys and a girl. Each seems to be independent of each other yet, once one nods, the other looks to the next as if for approval, prior to returning to their previous stance.

"Are they triplets?" Laura asks.

"No, ma'am. The boys are twins, my daughter is not."

"Nice to meet you all."

The children cover their faces again with their umbrellas, dismissing Laura's salutation, before walking towards the boat where Captain Galen seems to be waiting for them.

“They are heading back to Plantation Cay,” Ms. Muuguzi says to Laura.

“Captain Galen will be back to get me a bit later.”

“Will there be anyone else, beside myself, staying on this island?” Laura asks.

“No, ma’am. We all go back tonight to our home on Plantation Cay. Captain Galen will drop me off here twice a day, should you need anything. Your dinner has been arranged for you tonight. Tomorrow, and each subsequent day, I will have breakfast and dinner prepared for you. I’ll leave a variety of food for lunch, but because of my children’s susceptibility to the sun, we will not be making a trip during the noon hour.”

“That’s fine. I’ll be writing during the afternoon anyway, so this works perfect for me.”

“Please follow me, Ms. Castel. My apology for it is well into early evening and soon it will be too dark to show you the grounds. I will gladly give you a tour in the morning, if you like.”

“That would be great. I’m a bit tired now anyway. I can eat, and afterwards, I don’t think it will take me long to fall asleep.”

Ms. Muuguzi walks ahead, entering through a hidden trail lined with young palm trees, and seagrape shrubs. Laura picks up her snorkeling gear sack, and carries it on her shoulder along with her canvas bag, picks up her luggage, and tries to maneuver

her leather Mary Janes over rocks and sand forming the path. She observes Ms. Muuguzi in front of her, well enough now to notice her poise. Ms. Muguuzi's frame is small, a bit delicate, but her walk commands authority. She has high cheekbones, a thin nose, her neck is long, and her hair, is hidden by a flower pattern head dress. Unlike her children, she doesn't wear a black frock that covers her entire body, or has an umbrella protecting her smooth face. She wears a simple, raw linen shirt dress instead.

After a short walk through dense vegetation, Laura is startled at what she sees in front of her. There is a very large house, much larger than what she had imagined. A two story, with a wraparound porch at the top and lower levels, revealing floor to ceiling windows framed with dark green plantation style shutters, an oversized balcony protruding from the top floor, and a wide turret on its left side, displaying a cone shaped roof with a very high peak. There are dormers on the rooftop, and two additional towers flaunting soaring wood carved finials in the shape of urns. On the roof edges, leading to a main pitched roofline, there are two hollow openings on the vergeboard. The openings appear to be looking down like peering eyes, following Laura and Ms. Muuguzi, as they arrive at the front steps below.

Laura climbs nine steps up, before reaching the main entrance. As she walks through the front door, a few lights are turned on revealing a short entryway that leads to a dark staircase. To the left of it is an opening directing to what looks like a music

room with a grand piano, to the right a door, framed with carved mahogany, precedes a parlor with painted mural ceilings encased in gold crown moldings.

“This way, ma’am,” Ms. Muuguzi says, signaling for Laura to follow her upstairs.

“There are four wings in this floor but only two rooms are available to you. “The library,” she says, pointing to a closed door across from them, “and the master bedroom with the water closet,” she says, pointing to another door, beyond a small sitting area.

Ms. Muuguzi opens the bedroom door, exposing a large room painted in the hues of a Bahamian conch shell. Breaking the monotonous pink color, is a white marble fireplace carved with a halved clam in its center, crown moldings that wrap a tile ceiling in the same color, and silk patterned draperies that rise up to a gold gilt valance adorning each of the room’s six towering windows. In the left corner of the fireplace, there are a couple of upholstered chairs, a marble coffee table, a settee, and to the right, is a vanity, a French torchère, and a rosewood dresser. Above the mantle, is a gold mirror reflecting a mahogany canopy bed with intricate carved posts, enclosed in draping fabric, complimenting a large floral area rug in the room. *This place looks as if I traveled back in time, Laura thinks. I wonder why Gina didn’t tell me about the décor being as old as the house. It is beautiful though, and as fresh as if it was just decorated.*

“Ms. Castel, please make yourself comfortable. I will be right back with your dinner. If there is anything else you need, please let me know,” Ms. Muuguzi says exiting the room.

“Thank you,” Laura replies, before walking through a set of French doors, leading to the balcony. Outside, she hears the surf in the distance murmuring as each wave embraces the shore. A light cool breeze, and the scent of wet seaweed, reminds her that she has arrived, and is now residing on a private island, in a remote area of the Bahamas.

Captain's Tale

Gentle winds, entering through the opened windows, coo like mourning doves, fluttering the draped fabric over the poster bed, waking up Laura just as the sun rises. When she walks outside, a sky covered with clustered clouds over a sphere smeared in purple, and orange hues, makes the sun's rays look like eyelashes, breaking the horizontal waves of the ocean into long straight pieces. The islands, Palm Island on her left, and Plantation Cay straight ahead, are visible like mountains, reflecting their green vegetation and uneven gaps, expanding themselves over the dark blue bay with their likeness. Laura walks back inside, and enters the water closet, where she steps into a porcelain clawfoot tub situated by a window, allowing her to still see the sun rising over the bay. The moist lavender bar of soap she lathers, melts over her warm skin as she bathes, removing the sticky film left behind by the night breeze's salted humidity.

There is no air-conditioning in the massive house, just the morning and afternoon winds to cool off. It's still early, and aiding to the cool interior is the darkness of the room. The windows let in enough light through the heavy drapery for Laura to get dressed after her shower, and appreciate the period details of the decor around her. After exiting the bedroom, Laura looks across the hall and sees the library's entrance. She opens the door and without hesitating, walks inside to find the continuation of the turret, where shelves filled with books surround the room as tall as the high beamed

ceiling, resembling the unwrapped skeleton of an old Viking ship.

“Wow,” Laura says, her voice echoing in the dome shaped space. *Look at all these books*, she walks in deeper, strolling while reading titles like John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’s *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei*, and others in languages she is not familiar with. Laura reads upward, noticing that the books are divided based on their year of publication, ending with the 1800’s. *No new books*, she thinks, an old collection, including an encased rarity like a Johannes Guttenberg *Bible*, isolated from view, inside the estate of someone’s private island.

To the right of the turret, is an arched entrance joining the rest of the library, where a large mahogany desk hides a fireplace with an oil painting above its gold mantel. The painting is a family portrait of a graceful looking woman, a lanky but handsome man, and a tender boy. The woman, a brunette with ivory skin wearing a white muslin dress with a light blue sash around her waist, and a matching bonnet, is seated in front of a forest setting, holding the right shoulder of her erect young son. His attire, a brown frock coat, a black bowtie highlighting a long sleeve white shirt, and striped linen trousers, mimic that of his father, who is standing to the right of them wearing an added straw top hat.

“I wonder who they are?”

On top of the desk, on its right side, is a collection of snuffboxes made of silver, porcelain, and jade, some decorated with cameos, or jewels, others, painted with the faces of people, or flowers. A candle holder, made of cast iron accentuates the collection, with a tall stick of wax melted on one side. Laura picks up one of the boxes and takes a whiff of the stale remains of powdered tobacco found inside, but doesn't smell anything. On the center of the desk, she finds an array of dried leaves, and seeds scattered, accumulated, as if someone wanted to preserve them in the opened hemp sketchbook placed by their side. Behind the desk, and a few feet away, are green drapes embellished with metallic gold fringe. They appear to be concealing an entryway, next to them is an eight day pendulum clock with its hands stopped at noon as if guarding it. *What's behind here?* Laura reaches and repositions the soft velvet fabric with her left hand, feeling its smoothness on her palm like the spreading of whipped butter over a warm piece of bread.

"Oh, my God!" Laura yells, placing her right hand on her chest as if it could stop her heart from beating. There are eyes, multitudes of them, grim without perception, all staring right at her. It's an assembly of taxidermy surrounding the perimeter of the interior room--stuffed skins of exotic animals including a baby rhino, a silverback gorilla, a tiger with its fangs exposed, a baby giraffe, a zebra, and the severed head and

feet of a full grown elephant. "A trophy room," she says, trying to look away. *How can anyone kill such beautiful creatures?*

At the far end of the chamber, next to the tiger whose right paw is suspended in the air as if wanting to confront anyone trying to pass, Laura spots a large chest, almost the length of her, its top covered by tapestry. *This looks interesting.* The tapestry has images dyed in red, black, and indigo blue tinge, of armed men carrying spears and daggers, as if they are on some kind of pilgrimage, walking over a red sea, being followed by centaurs playing distorted horns above them. *I wonder how old this is.* Laura removes the tapestry after studying it, and lays it on the floor next to the chest in a careful manner, while pinching her nose to keep the long-standing dust particles from making her sneeze. After containing an outburst, Laura moves closer to the chest in order to have a better look.

The top of it is simple; a wood cover with the indented carvings of a seven pointed star. The dim light coming in from the curtain's opening, allows its impression to come alive, showing a gold glow as if resembling the radiance of the sun. Laura examines the chest closer; there are no other markings on the wood, just the star. The corners binding the chest, and a latch front center, are made of bronze. Laura reaches for the latch.

"STOP!"

The scream echoes, reverberating throughout the room. Laura's body jolts, preventing her hand, and fingers from going further. Alarmed, she turns around to see Ms. Muuguzi in an intense stare, a maddened expression on her face.

"Don't touch it," Ms. Muuguzi says.

"Oh—I'm sorry, I was just curious to see the inside."

"The chest is a priceless antique. It's been in Mr. Luska's family for generations. It is a very delicate piece, and opening the top, would have damaged it."

"I didn't know. I'm very sorry," Laura says, stepping away from it with both hands up, her cheeks warming from embarrassment. Ms. Muuguzi, looking displeased, picks up the tapestry in a hurry from the floor, and drapes it back on top of the chest. She signals for Laura to come out of the room, and in a swift move, closes the green curtains behind them, hiding the chest, the animals, and everything else from Laura's view once again.

"Ms. Castel," she says, turning to Laura, "you may use the library, and are free to handle any object within, but you're not allowed to enter the room behind the drapery or touch the chest. Do I make myself clear?"

"It won't happen again," Laura says, with a riddled look on her face as she exits the library.

"I have a prepared breakfast for you in the dining room. Please follow me."

Laura takes a deep breath before following Ms. Muuguzi downstairs. *Why would they rent this house, if it has valuables inside?*

The entryway looks different than the night before; the stairs highlighted by a spectrum of colors emitted from an array of stained glass windows at the landing, are wider than Laura remembers. At the bottom of the steps, are two carved mermaids resting on large clam shells, holding onto pearl-shaped, frosted glass lamps that don't seem to be working anymore. The chandelier, dangling above the entry, resembles a giant octopus holding onto additional pearl-shaped lamps in each arm, but instead of having eight arms, the bronze light fixture has twelve. The ceiling and walls are painted white, except for the mahogany baseboards, and the arched door frames adorned with rope-patterned trim, cherub faces, and carved crest medallions.

Laura follows Ms. Muuguzi through an arched door situated to the right of the steps, into a room with a grand piano, settees, and large windows that let in a lot more light than the other windows in the rest of the house. Through another arched doorway, is a dining room with seating for twelve, with a fireplace adjacent to the table, displaying a collection of porcelain clocks on its mantel. Ms. Muuguzi reaches for a silver tray placed on the far end of the table, on top of a rose patterned laced tablecloth. She uncovers a cloche, revealing Laura's breakfast.

"Enjoy your breakfast, Ms. Castel," Ms. Muuguzi says, leaving the room.

Laura stares down at a plate filled with boiled fish in a tomato broth, grits, a fried egg, and fresh pineapple wedges. *Fresh fish again. I can get used to this.* She takes a sip from a cup next to the plate, *black tea.* Laura looks at the piano in the other room, *it's a shame there is no music playing.* There is emptiness to the house except for the fork's clicking. It echoes as it hits the porcelain plate, before Laura puts food into her mouth.

After finishing most of her breakfast, Laura looks for Ms. Muuguzi. She walks into the kitchen through the dining room, into a small tea room, then to an oversize living room adorned with carved statues, empty of furnishings except for two tufted carved armchairs, situated by another fireplace. *This is too big of a house to sit empty like this,* Laura thinks, walking back towards the stairs, passing through the front door.

Exiting the house, she looks ahead to a clear sky, almost teal in color. Its perfection is contrasted by the condition of the house's exterior, when she turns around. The white paint on the wood siding is peeling off, some of the shutters are rotting, and the rocking chairs in the lower balcony, look as if they haven't been painted in years. The turret is covered in wild vines growing upwards, creeping towards a rusted white tin roof. *Interesting. I wonder why they haven't kept up the outside.* Not wanting to return inside, Laura walks to the bay, following the trail she strode through the night before. At the end of it, a picturesque coastline opens up where the sand is as silky and as white

as baking soda, and the restful bay resembling a turquoise and blue sequined blanket, glistens above its transparency as far as the eyes can see.

Ah-- it's so beautiful, Laura sighs, walking towards Captain Galen who is busy doing something by the dock. As she approaches, shells covered in seaweed are seen scattered next to a plastic white bucket.

"Good morning," Laura says, covering her eyes with her right palm. Her skirt flaps next to Captain Galen, like a sailboat's jib.

"Hello," he says, in an uninviting manner, straining, trying to make a hole in one of the shell's hard exterior with a knife.

"What do you have there?" she asks.

"Conch."

"Conch?"

"Sea snail," he says, stopping for a second to look at her. "It's for a conch salad."

"A conch salad? I don't think I've ever had conch," Laura says, studying the inside of the bucket.

"There are many surrounding these islands; Queen Conch," he says, cleaning his forehead of sweat with his right arm, knife still in his hands. "Other parts of the Bahamas are not as abundant. They have been overfished, so we are lucky."

"They are beautiful," Laura looks at the one in the captain's hand, a light orange sand colored shell with brown speckles, algae covering most of it, but with a glossy pink interior that looks unnatural in the sun.

Captain Galen gives the shell a final crack with his knife, before removing a squirming white shapeless creature with orange and black accents from the shell's flared lip. He lifts it up to show Laura, before throwing it into the bucket filled with salt water.

"They sure are slimy looking. Will they taste as they look?"

"No. When I cure them with limes their texture will not be slimy. Do you like fish?"

"I hope so. I've had it twice in a row now," Laura says, smiling.

She sees Captain Galen hold a stare, giving the impression that he might be too old, too matured, too tired for such youth. He takes one of the empty shells, holds the pointy end to his dry mouth and blows, making a loud hollow horn sound that seems to go forever.

"Oh--that's pretty good! Can I try?"

"Sure," Captain Galen says, handing over one of the shells. Laura holds it with both hands, and blows into it; her face turns as pink as the shell's interior.

"I can't get a sound!"

Captain Galen grins, making the side of his eyes wrinkle with pleasantry. Laura tries again, making winded sounds, not like horns but like wet whistles, until, in her final attempt; a faint, vigorous sound comes out.

"There you go!"

"I guess I will not be good at calling in the troops, will I?" she says with a chuckle, giving the shell back to Captain Galen, before covering her squinting eyes from the ocean's glare.

"What's the matter?"

"I lost my sunglasses. I can't find them, and-- I just can't take this sun anymore!"

"We can walk back to the house if you like," he says, putting another conch snail into the bucket, before throwing the rest of the shells into the bay. "Would you like to have this?" Captain Galen asks, offering Laura the conch she puffed on earlier.

"Thanks," she says, accepting it. They walk towards the house.

"How is your stay so far?"

"The house is bigger than I expected."

"It's an old house."

"Yea, there are a lot of old things in it, a lot of valuable antiques."

"The master likes nice things," Captain Galen says, letting Laura walk upstairs ahead of him onto the porch.

"Forgive me but, this place is like a museum."

"I understand."

"May I ask, in the library, who're the family in the painting?"

"They were the original owners of this house--the husband, had it built as a holiday home for his wife and son, before they all passed away a few years later.

"All three of them, died?"

"Yes. All three of them, in a tragic accident."

"What happened?"

Captain Galen opens the door to the house, and lets Laura walk in before turning to her.

"They drowned."

"That's awful!" Laura says, wide eyed. "How did your master—"

"Mr. Luska?" Captain Galen asks, before closing the door behind them.

"Yes, I remember Ms. Muuguzi mentioning his name, Mr. Luska." Laura follows him into the kitchen. "How did he end up with the place?"

"I believe Mr. Luska came from the United Kingdom, England I suppose. How he ended up with these islands, I am not sure." Captain Galen sets the bucket inside a barn style sink, and rinses the conch under cool water.

"How about you, where did you come from?" Laura asks.

"I was born here, in the Bahamas."

"You don't look Bahamian."

"My ancestors came here from Greece, years ago."

"From Greece?"

"From an island called Hydra. They were sponge farmers," he says, cutting up the conch over a wood table.

"I thought sponge farming was harvested only in the west coast of Florida?"

"Actually, sponge farming began in the Florida Keys, and then expanded to other areas like Tarpon Springs, and later the Bahamas."

The captain retrieves a bag from a small refrigerator, an out of place appliance from the rest of the archaic kitchen. He chops the conch into small pieces, adds the bag's contents of chopped celery, onion, green pepper, tomatoes, and cucumber, before spraying the mixture with lime juice. After mixing it, he turns to Laura.

"What to try this?" he asks.

"Sure."

He picks up a spoon from a jar next to an old wood burning, cast-iron stove, and hands Laura a dollop of conch salad.

"It tastes like chicken!" she says, with a wide grin. "I'm just kidding. The meat is tender, but I can't really taste it. The lime, the onions, and the saltiness, masks the flavor a bit. I like it though, thanks."

Captain Galen consumes a spoonful of the conch salad, when Laura interrupts his indulgence.

"There is a chest in the library. Do you know what's in it?"

"No-- I don't."

"Ms. Muuguzi said it belongs to Mr. Luska. That it's a family heirloom passed down generations. It does look very old. "

"According to what I was told, the chest belonged to an Irish monk who bequeathed it to the church." He puts another spoonful into his mouth, and chews while sputtering.

"It was hidden from the Vikings around 500 A.D., before being discovered in an abandoned monastery in the County of Donegal."

"So, the chest wasn't part of the Luska family like Ms. Muuguzi said after all?"

"No—the chest, is part of the Luska family's history, going further back, beyond the monk's possession." Captain Galen puts another spoonful of conch salad into his mouth. "Apparently, the chest was traced to his lineage as far back as 27 B.C. The aristocrat, who built this house Mr. Aberthol, bought it from an antiques dealer in

London, who had purchased it from the new land owners where the monastery was located. When the Aberthol family perished, there were no heirs. Mr. Luska bought the property with all its contents, and when the chest was discovered in the library, and appraised for insurance purposes, it was traced back to his ancestors. “

“That’s enough!” a loud voice, disrupts the conversation. Laura and Captain Galen turn towards its direction and see Ms. Muuguzi by the door.

“I am ready to go back, Captain,” she says, in a stern manner.

Captain Galen nods in approval, heading for the sink to rinse the spoons and bucket, while a confused Laura stands quietly next to the room’s work table. Ms. Muuguzi waits by the door, making Laura feel uneasy about being there.

“I think I should go upstairs, and begin working on what I came here for,” Laura says, walking away.

“Very well, Ms. Castel,” Ms. Muuguzi replies, stepping aside allowing Laura to leave the room.

“Thank you for sharing the conch,” Laura says to Captain Galen, before exiting. He nods, with hands still immersed in the sink.

Moments later, Laura hears footsteps coming from downstairs, heavy on the wood flooring, followed by reverberating creaks of the front door as it’s opened, and shut. She looks outside through one of the windows and observes as Ms. Muuguzi, and

Captain Galen walk on the trail leading to the bay. They disappear through the thick brush, away from the large house, and away from the island of Masters Cay.

Island's Past

Laura is up early after a restless night. Ms. Muguuzi's reactions the day before, her stern demeanor, and the manner in which she disregarded Laura during the late fried fish diner she didn't eat because of the nauseating fish smell, all of it, made her tired.

Laura begins to question why she bothers to stay on the island. She hasn't felt comfortable since her arrival, and thinks that's why her writing has fitful. *Ms. Muuguzi is a very formidable woman*, she thinks as she dresses. *Confident, strong, and set in her ways.*

Laura heads downstairs towards the dining room. Ms. Muuguzi is not present, but sees that her breakfast is ready. She uncovers the cloche, *Ah! Fish, again?* Displeased, she eats the hardened cold grits around it and, in trying to avoid tasting the smothering tomato broth, washes her mouth with a couple of bites of pineapple before drinking from the familiar tea cup she had used the day before. Captain Galen disrupts her displeasure.

"Ms. Castel?"

"Good morning, Captain Galen!"

"I brought you something," he says to her, placing an avocado green cosmetic travel suitcase on the table.

"What's this?"

"Open it."

Laura opens the vintage looking case, "Wow, there are so many!"

"Pick the one you like," he says.

Laura looks through an array of sunglasses, all different sizes and shapes, some are new, others faded, and most, are out of style.

"Let's see," she skims through the pile. "What do you think about these?" she asks, after putting on a pair.

"They could work, I think--"

"I'll be right back," Laura says, walking towards one of the mirrors in the music room. The sunglasses break her round face, making them stand out over her olive skin, like two brown light bulbs. "Nope," she walks back into the dining room.

"I think I will choose these instead," she says, putting on a pair of cat eye's.

"Those look good on you."

"Thanks, Captain Galen."

"Well-- I have to get back," he says, picking up the suitcase.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm on my way to the settlement house."

"The settlement house?"

"It's an old house, built by the Spanish. We use it as a parts shed."

"It sounds interesting. May I come with you?"

"I—really have work to do."

“I will not be in your way, I promise,” Laura says, with excitement in her voice, glad that she will be seeing something new.

“Very well then,” he says, allowing her to walk ahead of him, towards the front door.

The settlement house, located on the opposite side of the Masters Cay, is at the island’s highest point. They walk through a trail, not as thick with native vegetation as the one leading to the bay. The landscape Laura notices has become an arid garden of mostly cacti, with grainier sand, and large rocks. There is a dwelling, a small abandoned building, lacking the protection of windows and doors, exposing its opened cavities like the mouth of a toothless woman. The walls are made of white, and grey cemented mixture, with embedded shell fragments. The roof is built with dried palm fronds, held in a high peak by long planks of aged drift wood that at one time, Laura imagines, were strong and stable before falling from their sanctuary. The wood planks seem to have floated into the island after being handled by the ocean’s hands, recreating and dictating them, molding them over time into soft grey pieces, filled with uneven gaps.

“It’s Coquina,” Captain Galen says to Laura, when he sees her touching the outside walls of the house. “Be careful, you can cut your hand with the broken shells in it.”

“Coquina is the petrified remains of crushed shells, and coral beds that in time, have been compressed into blocks. They were harvested during the Spanish occupation for building forts and other structures,” Laura says smiling. “I have seen Coquina in forts like Fort Matanzas in St. Augustine. I didn’t know that the Bahamas had any Coquina structures.”

“There are not that many, I’m surprised there is one here,” he says to her. “It might have been a temporary place for the Spaniards before dispersing the Bahamian natives to Hispaniola.”

“Who were the Bahamian natives?”

“They were the Lucayan Indians, and when the Spanish came, they were killed off or enslaved. Some died from disease; others committed suicide rather than being held in captivity. The Spanish used them, disseminated them, and destroyed their culture. Later, after there were no Lucayans left to exploit, African slaves were brought to the islands.”

“Slavery--a way for the knowledgeable to control mass populations of the vulnerable,” Laura says, scanning the island like the bright beam of a towering lighthouse. She can see all the way to the opposite side, where instead of restful bay waters the ocean is dangerous and dark; a royal blue monster, demonstrating its vigorous surges, rasping the coastline with its appendages towards the large stomach of

its shifting liquid body. She hears the tremulous waves crying like thunder, stabbing-- splattering rain.

“Slavery comes in many forms, Miss. People can also become slaves of systems, of environments, and of their own selves,” Captain Galen says to her, looking in the same direction, at the open vastness of the sea. Laura stares, his creased loose skin around the eyes, mouth, and neck, emphasizes his dark complexion. His black and white moustache, the robust unruly hairs coming out of his nose and ears, the stockiness of his body as he rests his right foot on top of a dry rock, makes him look like a tired fisherman, worn, cold, but living knowingly in wisdom from the offerings of the sea.

Laura inhales a faint gust of wind, and savors its saltiness, surprising dryness and calm. Captain Galen walks to the settlement house, Laura follows. Inside, there are mostly tools, relics, and several contraptions she has never seen before. There is a wood table at one end, a couple of old rifles standing against one corner, hidden behind a machete with a wood handle and the label, *Robert Mole & Sons, Birmingham England* *Made* engraved on its blade.

“I just need a few of these tools to take back with me,” Captain Galen says to her.

Laura nods and continues to look around. A short time later, they begin their walk back towards the main house.

“Captain Galen, how long have you been working for Mr. Luska?”

“During my early twenties, I was told by one of the fishing captains who worked out of Nassau, that a caretaker was needed for a private island. I’ve been here ever since.”

That’s a long time, Laura thinks.

“How about Ms. Muuguzi?”

“She was already here with her children before I was hired. I believe she’s from Tanzania, a member of the Nyamazwezi tribe. Mr. Luska employed her after she left her people, a bold move in order to protect her children.”

“Protect her children?”

“They were being hunt down for their limbs. Albino children are said to cure illness by witchdoctors. Their feet, legs, arms, and hands are butchered, their organs, and hair are taken to mix in potions that are said to bring good luck, and prosperity. In their native land, they are called *zeruzeru*, or ghosts.”

“She saved them, and took them out of harm’s away” Laura says, shaking her head.

Captain Galen stops his walk, turns to Laura, and stares at her eyes for a moment, before continuing onward towards the house. *That was odd. Was he going to say something. What made him stop?*

Laura is about to confront him when Ms. Muuguzi who is standing outside on the front porch, addresses her.

"We will be leaving early today, Ms. Castel," she says, holding her head up high.

"Your lunch and dinner have been prepared. You will find them in the kitchen."

"Oh, o.k.," Laura replies.

"Are you ready, Captain?"

"I'm ready," Captain Galen replies, looking in Ms. Muguuzi's direction.

"Very well then. Good afternoon, Ms. Castel."

"Good afternoon," Laura returns the greeting, puzzled by their sudden departure.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he tells her.

"Sure thing, Captain," Laura says, as she enters the house.

The house is silent. With Ms. Muuguzi and Captain Galen gone, Laura decides that after an early dinner, she will work on her new novel in the library, hoping that the room's collection of good books and artifacts would aid her into writing something worthwhile. But after an hour of a few paragraphs, and short episodes of mindless thought, Laura determines that she has written nothing worth expanding.

She takes a break, scanning the room, pausing briefly after seeing the closed green curtains next to her, continuing, until a small leather case inside one of the wood shelves lures her. "Exactly what I need," she says, finding a pair of vintage brass binoculars inside. She leaves the room, heading for the upstairs balcony, where the sun's summer tilt allows her to see daylight an hour longer before sunset. Though the

binoculars, she sees Captain Galen's boat tied to the same dock she had walked on, when she landed on the island but there's no sight of him, Ms. Muuguzi, or her children. Laura shifts the view from Plantation Cay towards Palm Island, remembering the bright lights she saw on her first day.

"Nothing," she says as she scans, trying to find the source that brought mystery to her arrival, when on the island's right side Laura sees something, making her yield a loud distressing squeal. Above the skyline, over the palm trees, just as the sun is setting, is a body floating, hovering over the land, a man perhaps, but not like any man, a form without a face almost grey in color. It turns its head to look at Laura before flying towards Plantation Cay, disappearing behind the island's thick vegetation. *Oh my God, was it real? What was it?* Laura is left speechless, gasping for air. She turns over the binoculars facing the lens, *no-- they are clean!* Laura rushes downstairs, taking the binoculars with her, wanting to have a better look from the bay. *I know there is something out there.* She walks the length of the coast, looking through the lenses, and sees nothing. She looks towards Plantation Cay once again and a plume of smoke becomes apparent, coming from the left side of the island. The smoke gets thicker, and now that the night is upon her; she sees fire, a flame, almost as tall as one of the palm trees. The fire's center soars, higher than the other two sides: *It's a cross. Captain Galen and Ms. Muuguzi, are burning a cross, but why?* Frustrated, and not able to see further into the island, Laura

gives up and leaves the beach before the flames dissipate, giving into the disguises of a night sky.

Later into the evening while attempting to sleep, Laura feels hotter than usual. Thinking she's hearing voices, whispers in the shadows, she tosses and turns on the bed, sweaty, dampening the sheets, when a loud weeping cry startles her, making her heart stop, jolting her upwards, and causing her skin to crawl. She looks around the room, the mirrors are clear, the door is closed; *there's no one here!* The drapes flutter, making enough space for a light wind to enter, causing her skin to feel bumpy once again. She lies down on the bed hiding under the cotton sheets, and before closing her eyes, convinces herself that there is nothing inside the bedroom to fear.

Before sunrise she wakes up, not able to concentrate. Laura decides to take a stroll on the ocean side of Masters Cay hoping to relax her mind from the things she saw, and heard the night before. The sun is ascending, lighting up the sky, but on this side, the horizon is a dark blue grey, the waves speak with force, and the landscape, filled with high dunes, restrain the seagrape bushes along the shore, keeping them from getting further inland. Seaweed has washed up around the coastline, bringing in the repugnant smell of decay, fish death, comingled with sea water, beaten by the heat, drenched in saline sweat.

There are a few piping plovers, flying low in formation, creating the shape of soaring wings, gliding slowly before plunging towards the ocean. They lift themselves from their dive and in a coordinated arrival, land on wet sand before burrowing for hidden food only to be pushed away temporarily by the erratic waves of the sea. Laura buries her feet in the sand, feeling shell fragments rub in between her toes like gravel, much thicker than on the bay. *If I keep walking on top of these rocks, I'm not going to be able to go snorkeling later on*, she thinks.

Before heading back to the house, an odd formed dune invites Laura to walk a little further. Its shape, not round and high like the others, is more elongated, and compact. As Laura closes in, an old wood dingy, buried deep in a dune reveals itself. She inspects it, brushing away some of the sand from its hull, looking for holes, or riven boards. *It's in good shape*, she thinks. *I wonder if I can use it*.

"Ms. Castel!" she hears a faint voice, calling for her. Captain Galen waves as she rushes back, wanting to know why he's calling.

"We have prepared your breakfast, I hope I did not disrupt anything," he says.

"Not at all, I was heading back anyway," Laura says, while catching her breath.

"Ms. Muuguzi wanted to ensure that you are taken care of this morning, since we left early yesterday."

That was nice of her, Laura thinks, wondering why Ms. Muuguzi is being more accommodating.

They walk back to the main house, together.

“Last night, I saw a large cross being burned on Plantation Cay. Why were you burning a cross?”

Captain Galen looks down at the sand while he walks, puckers his mouth, and then gazes ahead, “It’s a celebration to Guy Fawkes night. It commemorates the failed attempt on the assassination of King James I of Britain. We light a cross every year for this purpose.”

Laura looks at Captain Galen. *That’s odd*, she thinks, *isn’t Guy Fawkes Day always celebrated in November?*

The Dolphin

Fish for breakfast, fish for lunch, fish for dinner. I can't just ask her; she will rip my head off! Another sunny and fishy day here at Masters Cay...

Laura types on her computer. *It's too hot inside to write anything else*, she thinks, grabbing her snorkeling gear before heading to the bay. The afternoon landscape is free of clouds, and the bay is as clear as glass, confusing Laura into believing that the sky is really the ocean and the ocean is the atmosphere. Wanting to immerse her body in a gulf of aqua, azure, teal, and cyan space, Laura, while sitting at the end of the dock, slips-on her open heel fins, snorkel and mask, before scooting into the warm crystalline water. Allowing herself to be swallowed by the sea, she extends her legs enough to propel herself, gliding into a school of parrot fish who want to swim next to her.

It's not too deep at the end of the dock, perhaps four to six feet, mostly sand on the continental shelf. Laura comes up for air, and purges the water logged inside her snorkel, before taking a deep breath and diving in again. She discovers a multitude of conch shells scattered all over the ocean floor, their colors muted by the depths of the sea makes them look brownish green among the sea grass, unrecognizable except for

their coned spiral shapes. A coral reef ecosystem emerges, dressed like an overly decorated float on parade, showcasing a collection of living organisms like sea fans that look like leaf skeletons, brain corals resembling the organ they are named for, and tube sponges, whose cylindrical bodies are made to draw microscopic life, before filtering the ocean. There are arrays of purple sea anemones protruding from the coral bed that look like upside down jelly fish, but with an uncanny likeness to the coronal filaments of sweet passion flowers.

Brightly colored fish swim freely in front of Laura, like the butler hamlet modeling teal and yellow smudges on its face, a school master with a body tattooed like a zebra, a blue tang with its slick blue figure and puckered mouth, not as long as a trumpet fish who looks more like a twig than a trumpet, and a sole majestic sting ray, swimming with its wide flexible body as if it was flying over the ocean's landscape. After fluttering, it burrows deep in the sand exposing two eyes that look up cautiously, as if waiting for Laura to leave. Beyond the ray Laura spots a Moray Eel deep within a crevice, a long toothed animal that looks like the offspring between a snake, and a fish. Not far from it, a Spiny Lobster's antennas protrude, making it a hunter's dream giveaway.

A subdued motorized sound, heading in Laura's direction, startles her. After surfacing, she sees Captain Galen's boat idling, heading for the dock. Laura swims to it;

her head plunged, coming up briefly for guidance. After a short distance she arrives, removing the snorkel's mouth piece that has caused her lips to chap, sting, and pink.

"Captain Galen!"

"Hello there," he says, walking to the stern. "Would you like to come aboard?"

"Yes, thank you," Laura replies, treading with the mask now on her forehead, brisk waves slapping her chin as she waits.

Captain Galen lowers a ladder, and after Laura climbs onboard, hands her a towel.

"Thank you," she says, patting her hair dry, reaching for her ears before wrapping herself. "It's wonderful here."

"I'm glad you like it."

"I do. It's very relaxing." Laura looks to the horizon, and sees Palm Island to the right of her. "Next time, I think I'll head over to Palm Island. It's very close. I wouldn't mind exploring it."

"Don't!"

"Why not?" she asks, rising her voice.

"Don't swim over. The currents are very strong. I don't advise it. You can be swept out, and I will never find you."

"Ok, then, how about you take me there by boat? I just want to wander a little."

"No."

Laura looks at him. *What is going on here?* His face is turning white from the pressing of his creased angered expression on his sunburned skin.

"There is nothing there to see," he says, leaving the stern.

"I saw something, something besides the cross," Laura says, in an insistent low voice, following him to the bow of the boat.

The captain looks back at her. "There is nothing there, just thick vegetation, and rocks."

"I thought—I saw what looked like a man. He was gliding-- over the islands, leaping from Palm Island to Plantation Cay."

"Nonsense," Captain Galen says, walking back towards the boat's center console.

"I saw him clearly, while looking through binoculars. He was wearing a long grey coat, I couldn't see his face but I could have sworn he flew like a kite over the palm trees. I think there might be someone living there!"

"Flying, over the palm trees? Ms. Castel!" he says, folding his arms while biting his lower lip. "Don't you think, I would know if someone is living on one of these islands?"

I know what I saw, Laura thinks. "I saw it last night-- right before the burning of the cross!"

"At dusk?"

“Yes—like a ghost, flying over the water, from the right side of Palm Island towards Plantation Cay.”

“A ghost? You must have been tired, Ms. Castel,” Captain Galen says, flaunting a smirk. He picks up a rag from near the console, and starts to clean part of windshield.

“Such things happen when you are tired, and haven’t slept well. When your brain activity has not had enough rest. Have you been sleeping well here, Ms. Castel?”

“I think I have been--maybe, you are right,” Laura says, looking down with a pensive look on her face. “I did have a hard time sleeping yesterday, but I don’t recall having trouble sleeping the night before.”

“You might be adjusting to the heat. You are probably so used to air conditioning that perhaps, the heat is keeping you awake at night, making you see things,” he says, throwing the dirty rag inside a bucket placed near the captain’s chair.

Captain Galen is starting to make sense somewhat. I might have imagined a man flying over the island, but I still think he’s hiding something. Maybe--there is someone living on the island he doesn’t want me to discover--a fugitive. Deserted islands always make good sanctuaries for people running away from the law. But why would someone hide on such a small island without the owner knowing? Perhaps--he doesn’t know!

“Are there other people living on these islands that I have not met yet?” Laura asks. The captain doesn’t respond.

Laura is about to ask him again, when a loud splash behind the boat makes them turn around. A large fish had jumped out of the water. They look for it, in the direction of its reentry, but don't see anything.

"There!" Laura yells a few moments later, signaling to the undulating water a few feet from the boat. Leaping in front of them is a large bodied creature with a long beak, and slick body.

"There he goes again!" Captain Galen says, pointing in its direction. "It's a lone one. I don't see a pod."

"It's a baby dolphin!"

"A calf," Captain Galen says, correcting her.

"I'm jumping in."

"I don't think that's a good idea. He's probably sick or..."

Laura jumps into the bay, and swims towards the dolphin. She treads water when the calf approaches, engrossing her eyesight with his large body, much larger than she had expected. He glides next to Laura while looking into her eyes, making a visual connection as if saying "hello." After a few turns he moves in closer, never taking his sight off her, cautious, wondering, playful. In a swift move, the dolphin brushes against Laura's right leg with his rubbery body, frightening her.

On his next turn, he allows Laura to touch him. They connect somehow, two mammals in the shallows of a clear blue sea finding each other, respecting their space, embracing in a world of remoteness. Just as Laura is about to see him off, the dolphin jumps, giving out a cry, baptizing Laura with the ocean water as if telling her that in the vastness of a restless sea, he has found a new best friend.

Master of the Cay

It's the middle of summer, when afternoon thunderstorms come and go, leaving cooler weather only temporally. Tonight it's not raining, but there are lightning bolts, assaults of twisted light discharging in the distance. Created by heat, these thin stripes of blinding energy look like veins, a line of arteries exposing themselves to Laura's eyes like camera flashes, highlight the sky and earth surrounding them, before penetrating into the ocean. Laura is awake late in the evening again unable to keep cool in the large master bedroom of the house. She walks downstairs, and steps outside where an eerie calm fills the atmosphere, and fast moving clouds coating the night sky work hard to conceal the light of a full moon. She paces along the coast, on the ocean side of the island, wanting to see more of the lighting spectacle that has caught her attention. As she walks, Laura thinks about the novel she is working on, how she has avoided Ms. Muuguzi for five weeks, and how she has become wary of Captain Galen who still doesn't want to share the mysteries of the islands with her. She has gotten used to eating fish, every day, for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, figuring that perhaps, fish might be the only type of meat available to Ms. Muuguzi, and the rest of the island's residents. Laura strolls, listening to the ocean's relaxed surf whisper, touch her with its spitting breath.

She stops and sits on the beach for a while, feeling the soft sand below her, observing her toes appear as her dilated eyes adjust to the night's darkness. After minutes of gazing at the moonlit ocean, there are progressing rumbles coming from inside the sky as lightning bolts move closer. The wind picks up, the surf becomes restless, and her body cools off. Wanting to go back, she stands up when an elusive light to the left of her, catches her attention. The light, still far away, moves jagged like a restless firefly, hungry with desire, entranced in a ritualistic pattern as if looking for a mate. Laura stares at it wondering who, or what could be there with her. "Hello?" she calls out, but there's no answer.

Laura worries that whatever it is, it's getting closer. After a few minutes, she sees a shadow, a figure appearing to be that of a man next to the bouncing light. *Who is that? Could it be--*"Captain Galen?" but the figure's walk doesn't match Captain Galen's; it's much taller, and slimmer than him. Without an answer, Laura remains still.

"Who's there?"

Could it be the man I saw flying over the island?

"Who are you?" she asks again, her tone becoming more alarmed.

Laura's body shakes as her heart races, making her breath become erratic. Before she has enough time to escape, to run away, a man wearing a hooded rain coat holding onto a lantern is upon her.

“Ms. Castel?”

Laura gives a sigh of relief. *I wonder who it could be.*

“I didn’t mean to frighten you.” The man lifts up a hexagon-shaped lantern with a melting candle in its center, high enough for Laura to see his face.

Laura gasps. The light of the lantern illuminates the night surrounding them with its brightness as if it was daylight, replacing everything in hues of black with vivid color. In front of her, there is a pair of eyes as cloudless as a noon sky, reflecting with a stare the deep blue ocean, breaking the visible spectrum, shattering light as they look intensely into her brown eyes. The man’s face is smooth, like the white sand she has felt on her bare feet from her walks on the bay. His reddish blond hair, curled, wet, and shoulder length, matches his trimmed beard and mustache, making his face radiate like an unspoiled sunrise. Laura is left speechless, as his eyes follow hers in suspense.

“Ms. Castel?” he asks again.

Laura, entranced, is unable to speak the words that want to come out of her mouth.

“I’m Mr. Luska, the owner of the island.”

“Oh!--hello--I’m sorry, I didn’t know!” she says, extending her hand to greet his. His grip is firm, enough to have a good shake. When his greeting extends, she releases her hand quickly, turning her sight to just above his chin.

“I didn’t mean to startle you. I just got to the island a few minutes ago, and decided to take a stroll.”

Laura stares at his lips. They move in slow motion, softly speaking words that she no longer hears. His eyes still fixated on hers, look like they want something. *Why is he on this island? Is he staying in the main house? What is he doing walking here if he just arrived?* Laura wonders, but before she asks questions, a deluge of rain pours over them.

“Well, how about that?” he says. “Let’s run!” he yells, taking Laura’s hand, dragging her along, with the lantern swinging recklessly in his other. At first, Laura lets go of him, but he takes her hand back, holding it tight, keeping her from releasing it again. Laura yields, and runs with him, together getting soaked along the way. Their running movement through the rain, over the sand, and the rocky coast, extinguishes the candle light inside the lantern. They reach the front of the house, and run up to the front porch before he lets go of her. Laura looks at him; she feels, but can’t hear her heart beat over the thick droplets of rainwater coming down on top of them, hitting the metal roof, making harmonizing music, mimicking the resonating sounds of calypso steel drums.

“Wait here,” he says to her.

Laura turns around after watching him enter the house; the landscape beyond the front porch is dark the same way she saw it before she met him.

“Here,” he says, giving her a towel upon his return. “That came out of nowhere, didn’t it?” Laura stares, still speechless from the look in his eyes.

“Thank you,” she says to him, finally getting the courage to speak as she dries herself.

“I should have arrived at Plantation Cay. I didn’t mean to intrude.”

His hair is curlier, his face wet--his long sleeve white shirt after removing the rain coat, clings tightly to his body, revealing an accentuated chest that rises with every breath that comes out of him. He smiles at Laura, and Laura, has the courage to smile back.

“Are you hungry?” he asks.

Not particularly, she thinks, before nodding back with a yes. They both walk inside.

“Here,” he says, placing a chair closer to the fireplace, located in the dining room. He retrieves another dry towel, and positions it around her shoulders replacing the first one he gave her, before working on lighting a fire.

“This should do it,” he says, looking at the lit wood, now intensely radiating a dancing orange blaze. “This should keep you warm while I make us a sandwich.”

A sandwich? Laura thinks. *The kitchen is empty, there is no food. I guess he will find out when he gets there.* She walks up to the fire when he leaves, trying to dry her hair with its

heat. Minutes later, Mr. Luska comes back into the dining room with two plates, each filled with what looks like a sandwich, along with coconut slices.

“I hope you like pork,” he says to her.

Pork. Where did he get pork? Could it be? I'm I going to eat a different type of meat. I am hungry, hungry for something new, and fulfilling. But where did he get this food? After pulling out a chair, he signals for Laura to come up to the table. Sitting next to her, he picks up a fresh chunk of coconut, and presses it between his thumb and index finger, squirting a little of the milk juice into his plate while looking at Laura. Laura picks up her sandwich and takes a bite, tasting the moist shredded pork seasoned with spices of garlic, pepper, bay leaves, oregano, and cumin.

“I hope you are comfortable here, Ms. Castel,” he says to her, placing the coconut piece back onto the plate.

“Actually--yes, I am very comfortable, except, it's a little hard for me to sleep during the evening because of the heat. Overall though, your home is very nice, and appears to have a lot of history.”

“I am pleased with it.”

Really? She thinks, what about the poor conditions on the outside? There is no maintenance, no upkeep. How can he be pleased?

“It’s been hard getting someone to help Captain Galen repaint the outside. He is getting up in age, and I don’t want him to get hurt trying to do the upkeep by himself.”

That makes sense. That’s nice of him.

“Besides, it’s a challenge transporting materials to this remote location. As you might have noticed, everything needs to be brought over by boat, or seaplane. It was much easier back when the house was built. There were a lot of ships that passed back and forth, making it easy for the owner’s slaves to gather what they needed.”

Laura looks at him as she eats her sandwich, staring at each other in silence.

“I apologize for not introducing myself properly. My name is Ivan--Ivan Thanatus Luska,” he says, extending his hand to Laura once again. Laura quickly swallows the food in her mouth.

“Laura María de la Esperanza Castel,” she says, wiping her right hand on her skirt, before reaching to shake his.

“Spanish name.”

“Descendants mostly from Spain. How about you Mr. Luska, where are you from?”

“Call me Ivan.” He looks down at his food, picks up his sandwich, stares at it closely, and without biting into it, returns it to the plate before looking back up at Laura, “I’m from everywhere.”

Why's he so general with his answer? Laura waits to hear an explanation, but he doesn't give her one.

"Where is everywhere?" she asks.

Mr. Luska gets up from the table, and heads towards the kitchen. Before reaching the entrance, he turns around, "Would you like some tea?"

"Sure," she replies, disappointed that he walked away before answering. While he's gone, Laura glances around the room wondering why he is there alone with her. *Where are Captain Galen and Ms. Muuguzi? How did he get here?*

A cup and saucer is placed in front of Laura, startling her. "I hope you like it," Ivan Luska says to her, pouring tea into the empty cup. He remains standing behind her chair, waiting for Laura to take the first sip.

"Aren't you going to have some?" she asks, looking up at him.

"Not right now. How is it?"

"It's very good."

"It's from India, a place called Darjeeling," he says, sitting down.

"India--I always wanted to go to India, and see the Taj Mahal."

"It's not as big as it seems. But a marvel for sure."

"Any other marvels you have been to?"

"I have seen it all."

“Really? Have you been to Machu Pichu?”

“Yes, I have.”

“The Great Wall of China?”

“Yes, there too.”

“How about--the North Pole--have you been to the North Pole?”

“As a matter of fact, I was there recently.”

He must be joking with me. How can he have been to the North Pole recently? It's possible though, it is summer. Maybe I should ask?

“The chest upstairs, hidden behind the red curtains, what's inside of it?”

Ivan Luska looks at her, his eyes seem to get deeper, almost as if she is in them, getting lost in a cell meant only for her.

“Oh, the chest? There is nothing in it--it's empty.”

Wow. All that protection—for an empty chest? Laura thinks.

“It's a family heirloom.”

“So, I have been told.”

“Enough of the chest, are you done with your tea?”

Laura takes another sip, “I suppose—”

“Come with me,” he says, taking Laura's hand once again, guiding her towards the music room. “I would like to play something for you.” He pulls one of the settees from

a corner, positions it closer to the grand piano, rolls up his sleeves, and signals in a gentlemanly gesture for Laura to sit.

Before he begins he rests on the piano bench, opens the fallboard, and stares briefly at Laura, before placing his suspended hands over the keyboard. In succession, he moves his hands over the black and white keys, filling the room with nocturne melodies, making Laura close her eyes anticipating, allowing the reverberating sounds to embrace her. As the music continues, her spirit separates from her body, leaving her form seated on the settee. The rest of her floats slowly into Ivan Luska's arms, where his own essence positions itself as the lead in a hovering dance. He captures Laura's soul in midair, holding her in position, waltzing her as eloquently as his hands play the grand piano below them. Laura soars freely through the room, following his lead, hypnotized by the melodic composition, dancing as she has never danced before. After finishing the score, he gently returns Laura's spirit back to the settee where she remains seated, staring straight ahead, wondering what has happened, and why there are unfamiliar sensations happening inside her body.

"It's by John Fields, *Nocturne number 2 in C minor*," he says after he is finished, waking up Laura from her trance.

"It's beautiful."

“Come,” he signals her with his right hand, “sit by me, I’ll play another one.” Laura is hesitant, but complies by removing the towel away from her shoulders, laying it flat on top of the settee, before walking to him. He makes a space for her on the bench, and after sitting down, reaches around her, pulling her closer to his body, completely encompassing Laura, penetrating through her with his transparent being. He lifts up his hands through the keyboard, allowing hers to be on top of his, both in a set position, ready to make music. Laura’s heart beats, scared, but feeling in comfort. He begins to play, allowing her hands to feel the vibration of each key he presses. She feels his breath on her, the heat coming from his mouth gives her chills. The notes are softer; the movements are less continuous, as if he wants to keep Laura touching him, feeling his hands move to the beat of a grave tempo. When the pace speeds up in a measure, and gets louder, her heart beats to the new rhythm, giving a pleasurable feeling that fills her, making her almost pass out with the sound of his music.

“Excuse us, Mr. Luska,” a voice speaks from across the room, startling them, helping Laura to come out of her trance. Ms. Muuguzi, and Captain Galen are standing by the door.

“Forgive our intrusion,” Ms. Muuguzi says. “Captain Galen is here to take you to Plantation Cay.”

“I didn’t realize the time,” Ivan Luska says, standing up from the bench. “Thank you, Ms. Castel, for a lovely evening,” he bows before kissing Laura’s hand. Laura notices Ms. Muuguzi give her a sullen look, as if she couldn’t believe that Laura and Ivan Luska, were sitting together in such closeness.

“Shall we go, Captain?” he says, pulling down his rolled up sleeves. Laura watches him leave, but before he does, he looks at her intensely one last time.

“It’s going to be a while before breakfast is served, Ms. Castel,” Ms. Muuguzi says to Laura, picking up the towel from the settee.

“Would you mind telling me the time?”

“It’s just after 5 AM.”

“Ms. Muuguzi, don’t worry about breakfast. I think I will be heading up to the bedroom. I have not slept, and I am a bit tired.”

“As you wish, Ms. Castel.”

Laura heads upstairs and looks out the French doors. She sees the boat leave the island just as the sky is beginning to change color. *Ivan Thanatus Luska*, she thinks, while resting on the bed. *I wonder why he is here, and why now?*

It was the first time Laura was able to sleep comfortably in the master bedroom. The morning breeze coming in through the opened French doors helped her body stay

cool. She wakes up just after noon, and looks at the white tin ceiling, wondering if what she experienced the night before and earlier that morning was just a dream. She sits up, and is surprised to see that on top of the marbled table, the vanity, and the dresser, are arrangements of cacti flowers, some she has never seen before, all different shapes and sizes, blooming, exploding with strong succulent scents like that of ripe melons. The largest arrangement, the one on top of the marble table has an envelope by it. Laura breaks the wax seal medallion imprinted with the initials ITL. Inside, she finds a music score with the title *Sonata Quassi Una Fantasia* L. Van Beethoven Op. 27, No. 2, and a note written in cursive that reads,

“In case you are wondering, this is the piece we played together. It was the first movement. I hope you liked it.

All the best,

Ivan T. Luska.”

Laura cannot contain a smile. *This is so sweet*, she thinks. *How did he—has he come back?* After a quick shower, she rushes downstairs where she is surprised to see Ms. Muuguzi. It’s too early for dinner, and too late for lunch.

“Ms. Muuguzi, I thought you would be back at Plantation Cay?”

“No, Ms. Castel, Mr. Luska wanted me to stay behind in case you need anything. He wants to make sure you have something fresh to eat after your nap.”

“Is he here?”

“He is not, and will not be coming back. He is a busy man. Besides, with all due respect, Ms. Castel, it’s none of your business. What would you like for lunch? We have fresh conch caught this morning.”

Laura is taken back by Ms. Muuguzi’s response. *What’s going on. Why is she angry?* Laura looks at her, Ms. Muuguzi stares as if trying to find out, why Laura wants to know Mr. Luska’s whereabouts.

“Conch for lunch will be fine,” Laura says, trying to defuse the stare, wondering why Ms. Muuguzi is asking about lunch when she never did before.

“Very well,” Ms. Muuguzi responds.

After lunch, Laura heads to the beach, sits on the dock, and looks towards Plantation Cay, and Palm Island. The day is sunny, the water calm. The sunglasses Captain Galen had brought her, help her see something in the water through the glare. *It’s the calf!*

He comes up to the dock where Laura is sitting, her bare feet dangle on its edge.

“Here you are again!” she says to him.

She kneels down, and feels the top of his rubbery beak. He opens his extended mouth, acknowledging with a smile, the friendship that has evolved between them.

“You are adorable! What am I going to call you?”

Before Laura has a chance to name him, the calf dives, turning briefly to look at her, before disappearing in the depths of the bay once more.

After an hour contemplating the horizon, Laura walks back to the house. The day seems to have moved a lot faster than in other occasions. She eats dinner alone in the dining room before going to bed early. She dreams of Ivan T. Luska, and the music that had filled her heart earlier in the day.

Plantation Cay

What's this? Laura thinks, after waking up the following morning, finding a large pink box on top of the bed's side table, gleaming like the inside of a conch shell as if the shell was inverted from the inside out. Laura feels the box's smooth exterior with her fingers, before carefully opening a bronze latch securing it. Inside, she finds an array of jewelry, rings, necklaces, bracelets, earrings, and cameos of all different sizes. Some are made of gold, platinum, or silver; others display pearls or stones like emeralds, rubies, sapphires, and diamonds. *There are so many!* Most have bands adorned with intricate motifs, while others have simpler styles that seem dated, almost vintage.

"None of them glisten as bright as you!"

Laura sees written on a note, attached to the interior lid. *I can't believe he is doing this,* Laura thinks, trying on a ring with a large emerald stone. She looks at it, wondering at her luck. *Why is he giving me all these things?* She gets dressed and walks downstairs where she sees Captain Galen working by the front door.

"Good morning," she says.

"Good morning."

Captain Galen looks at her hand, his eyes glimpse coldly at the ring on her finger.

“Don’t be fooled, Ms. Castel, by what your eyes perceive and by what your heart wants. Only a fool will allow such things come to light, obscured things, which to an un-glared eye are not real.”

Laura stares at him. *Why is he saying this to me?*

Captain Galen grunts before turning away from her.

“Captain Galen,” she calls him, wanting to get his attention, but he doesn’t respond, and continues to walk away from her.

“Captain Galen?”

“I’m busy, Ms. Castel. Please leave me alone.”

Why is he so cold all of the sudden?

“I’m heading back to Plantation Cay, is there anything you need?” he asks, turning around briefly to look at her.

“No, not at all,” she answers. Captain Galen’s sandals stomp on the wood flooring, before he exits through the front door.

Laura wanders alone in the house after his departure, and walks into the music room. She sits on the piano bench, recalling the time she spent there with Ivan Luska. *I wonder what he’s doing*, she thinks, running her fingers over the keys after opening the fallboard, staring at the ring on her finger, exhaling absent-mindedly while examining the room. *I would like to see Ivan again*. Laura sighs, as she stands up. She heads to the

dining room and looks at the unlit fireplace. *I wonder when Captain Galen is coming back.*

She walks to the front door, and after opening it, feels a light breeze on her face. *Maybe I should swim over to the island,* she thinks, while looking up to a cloudy sky. *Maybe not! I wish there was a—*

“The boat! The boat in the sand.” Why didn’t I think of it earlier! I’m going to take it over to Plantation Cay, and go see him, she thinks, while running upstairs to change.

Laura leaves the house in a hurry heading to the ocean side of the island, and finds the dinghy as she saw it before but this time, half of it is covered in seaweed. She discards the foul smelling ocean algae from the inside before pulling, in an attempt to free it away from the sand dune. At first, she struggles. The sand packed inside the boat is wet and heavy, too much for her small frame. She cups her hands and scoops out a large amount. *This is ridiculous.* Laura pulls on the boat with added effort, making her breathing profound, sweat drips on her forehead as she groans. Her forearms and lower back ache from the continuous tugging, and pulling, the weight of it buried, is far beyond her given strength.

She sits and rests on the beach, hot, thirsty, and exhausted, overwhelmed with eye floaters, appearing in front of her face like winking little stars. Laura tries again, and with a firm tug, frees the boat from under the dune’s grip, yelling loud enough to surpass the blaring waves, releasing laughter in between her happy screams. She takes

a deep breath and drags the empty boat by a secured line on its bow, along with an oar and most of another, to the bay side of the island.

The bay is not as calm as Laura wants it to be. The waves hit the hull of the dingy going over it a few times, soaking her body from both sides. *I shouldn't have done this today*, she thinks, while rowing backwards against the surge, saturating her sunglasses with salt spray as she looks behind her, hoping to stay the course. After an hour of fighting against the current, and struggling to see through the fogged glasses, Laura arrives at Plantation Cay. Fatigued, she ties the boat to the dock, and leaves the salt covered sunglasses behind before walking inland, atop the familiar dock she had walked on when she first arrived.

Beyond the shore, Laura sees an open field revealing multiple rows of prickly, long stem leaves protruding from the ground in large numbers. Amidst what appears to be a pineapple plantation she hadn't noticed when she first arrived, are Ms. Muuguzi, Captain Galen, and her children. The children, wearing the same black vestments Laura had seen the first time she met them, in addition to large black hats that cover each of their faces, have no other protection. *She said that they never work outside during the afternoons! Why are they out here now?* Laura sees Ms. Muguuzi's head come up briefly, as if she sensed someone watching her. In haste, she proceeds towards Captain Galen,

catching his attention, pointing at him with erratic mannerisms. Captain Galen throws down a trowel, takes off his gloves, and walks in a rush towards Laura.

“Ms. Castel, how did you get here?”

“Well--I thought to take a trip this way since I have not seen the island, so I used the boat I found buried in the sand. I didn’t think it was going to be a problem.”

“You shouldn’t have used that dingy. The wood is not strong enough. You shouldn’t have gone out by yourself.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s not part of the rules of the island.”

“What rules?”

“The master would be very upset if he found out you put life at risk coming here.”

“What? It was just a short ride over; it wasn’t even that far! Besides, I know how to maneuver boats. It’s ok; you don’t have to worry about a lawsuit or something.”

“That is not the point. I have to take you back.”

“I can go back by myself. You don’t have to stop what you are doing. I was hoping to see what this island looks like, and by the likes of it, I can even help with picking pineapples.”

“No, you are going back with me to Masters Cay.”

Captain Galen grabs her arm and pulls her, walking towards the boat dock. *What is going on!*

“Please stop. STOP!” Laura screams, before Captain Galen lets go.

“Why can’t I stay here, just for a little while?” She rubs her left arm, now throbbing red from the pull he gave her.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Castel. Would you please keep walking, and get into the boat!”

“What’s going on. Where is Ivan? I don’t understand. Why can’t I tour the island, or talk to Ivan Luska? Why can’t I help out? Why are you treating me this way?”

“Because it’s not safe, ok. You need to go back.”

Laura doesn’t know what he means by that, but the lines on his face emphasized by his sunburned redness, and his insistence on her to leave, makes her feel threatened this time around. Laura climbs onboard and wonders, why there is so much control of what she sees and does on these islands.

Captain Galen starts both engines and commands the boat in full throttle, to glide towards Masters Cay. Laura looks back, her hair flaps in front of her. The dingy scrapes the dock, making a high pitch squeaking sound as the wake left by the engines push it with full force against the dock. *What am I going to do now?* She sees Ms. Muuguzi stare, her dress captured by the wind strikes her body, as her children continue to work under

the heat of an afternoon sun, harvesting the land as if they have been doing it all their lives.

As the space between the boat and the dock gets wider, something moves along the coast, shifting Laura's attention away from the woman who ordered her to be removed from Plantation Cay. On the beach, galloping through the compacted sand, are medium sized animals, hordes of them, splashing salt water with their hooves onto their moving bodies, as they step into the ocean. *It's a drift—a drift of pigs! I thought they didn't have any animals on these islands. Where did they come from? Something is not right here. I need to find out what.*

Palm Island

It sounds like wet slaps, recurring over and over, causing her to awaken early.

Laura struggles to sit up, annoyed, she wants to sleep a little longer; yesterday's event, had made her stress tired. Whatever it is, whatever is causing this strange sound, wakes her up too soon. It's still dark outside; the sun has not come up from above the skyline, there is no reason for her to get up yet. Now that her eyes are open, the slapping noise seems to get louder, coming from underneath, on the right side of the poster bed. Laura sits up, turns on the light, and when she is about to step off, lets out a scream.

"Oh, my God! What is this. Help, help, somebody help me!"

Covering most of the area rug next to the bed is the body of the dolphin calf who had befriended her. The noise that woke her up is his bloodied tail, slapping against the hard wood floor, as if trying to swim away from the dry space that is traumatizing him. Laura reaches down onto his body and embraces him, getting her cotton nightgown soiled with the same warm blood that splatters away from his broken skin. The door to the bedroom opens. "You did it--didn't you?" Laura asks, looking at Ms. Muuguzi, tears running down her face. "You probably did this! Why? Why did you do this to him?" Ms. Muuguzi doesn't respond, and retreats closer to the door. "No—you can't—you can't die!" Laura attempts to pick up her friend, but he is too heavy. She feels his dry rubbery body against her bare arms. The pair of eyes she had seen as they glided in

the bay weeks ago, wet and gleaming are now opaque and dehydrated. After another attempt at picking him up, she sees Captain Galen come in, pushing Ms. Muuguzi to the side.

“Help me, Captain Galen, help me! Please help him live; he needs to go back to the ocean; please help me take him back to the ocean!” Captain Galen kneels down to take a look.

“There is no use, Ms. Castel, he is already dying.”

“Don’t just leave him here; you have to try—we have to try and save him, please help me. I can’t do it by myself, please help me!”

Ms. Muuguzi aims to walk towards them.

“Go away!” Laura yells at her. “Go away, and just leave us alone!”

Captain Galen folds the carpet over the dolphin’s body, tries to pick him up, but can’t.

“Let me help!” Laura says, assisting the Captain. But the dolphin is still too heavy even for both of them. In one last attempt, as Laura pauses to gather her thoughts, the dolphin exhales out of his blowhole, before succumbing, allowing death to take him.

“NO! NO! NO!” Laura screams standing up, leaving the bedroom, running as fast as she can downstairs. The loud exhaling breaths coming out of her slackened mouth as she sprints out of the house, exhausts her body from the confusion she is experiencing.

As she runs through the trail, her bare feet sting from the rocks that cut into her skin like knives. After a short distance, the adrenaline discharging into her body keeps Laura from feeling anymore pain.

When she reaches the bay Laura stops and looks around in a daze, before running into the water, soaking her body as if trying to relieve the internal agony that is killing her. She falls into the shallows, half her body immersed, the salt water mixing with the tears that keep coming out of her. She swims, holding on to her breath as fast as she can when a shadow from above, brings her out of her confusion. She stands up on the sand, the water now up to her shoulders, looking for what has glided over her. She doesn't see anything. The morning sky is grey, not lit enough for her to identify the mysterious shadow. The water drips from her hair onto the bay as she looks on when a light, something shimmering far away from her, makes her take a second look.

It's coming from Palm Island! The beam glimmers multiple times, as if signaling distress. *Could it be the man I saw. Is he sending a distress signal? Maybe—what if—what if he's being kept there against his will! It's a long swim, a mile?* Laura thinks, while wanting to discover the source of it. "I can make it. I can make it to Palm Island. I know I can."

Laura swims, wishing she had her snorkeling fins with her. The sun rising over the bay helps her see more of where she is heading. The water is calm, but the exhaustion from the dolphin incident, is taking a toll on her stressed body. She crosses the wide

strait that prior to her swim, appeared to be narrower. Luckily, the currents that Captain Galen had told her about before don't seem to be in her path. She stops a few times to gather her bearing, aiming for the beach cove to the right side of the island. She submerges to soak her head and sees three black tip sharks hover underneath. *There are a lot of sharks in Bahamian waters*, she recalls, but she has seen enough of them in her snorkeling trips, that they don't trouble her. She swims past them, focusing on the coral beds ahead. After a continuous crawl, she sees them again drifting nearby; making her worry that perhaps, they are following her. One of them swims in front of her face, close enough for Laura to hear her heartbeat throbbing inside her chest, forcing thumping sound waves to resonating like sonar pings. She stops to look around, hoping that the shark is not circling around attempting to bite her. She glances towards Palm Island and decides that after a half hour swim, the shore is just a short sprint away, and that nothing, not even a black tip shark, is going to keep her from reaching the shore.

The beach is small, much smaller than the one in Masters Cay. Winded, Laura bends down to rest, and looks at the open cuts on the bottom of her wrinkled feet. She takes off her cotton nightgown, wrings out the water, and places it on top of a rock to dry. Laura examines the area, most of the inside of the island is concealed by towering palm trees, coastal scrubs, and Caribbean pines. She coughs from the dryness in her mouth. When it subdues, she licks her lips trying to diminish the brininess before

puckering up, gathering enough saliva in the back of her mouth to swallow. She picks up the damp nightgown, and puts it on while walking inland, fearing that her thirst, will be too much if she stays in the sun for too long. She avoids walking over rough terrain as she steps on sandy spots, visible through the plant filled landscape. *Ouch! Damn it!* Her soft skin bleeds after her right foot steps over a small jagged rock, hidden by undergrowth.

Walking off-centered, she places her weight on the ball of her left foot, hoping that her right foot doesn't become infected. Through the shrubbery, separating sea grass, and other tall plants with her bare hands, she clears a path, revealing a contained area enclosed by a barrier made of coquina blocks, the same type of coquina used in the settlement house she saw in Masters Cay. Inside it are above ground vaults, headstones, and cement markers. She glances at one of the headstones, and reads the name Arturo P. Serrano, with the faded dates 1593-1645 carved below it. Other headstones have the same death dates inscribed on them, as if the island's residents had all died in the same year. *Tropical Diseases. That's probably what killed them.*

To the far right of the tombstones, adjacent to the wall, Laura spots three above ground vaults, one of them, resting in between two larger ones. Inscribed on the top of each, are the individual names of Annette, David, and Edward, all with the last name of Aberthol. *It's the family! All three of them are buried here.* Laura gets goose bumps thinking

about how they died, drowning together, when a swishing sound coming from inside the dense vegetation surrounding the graveyard, makes her jump.

"Hello?"

She hears the sound again.

"Hello, who's there?" Laura asks again, wondering why the person living on the island is not coming out from hiding. "It's ok to come out. My name is Laura — Laura Castel. I am staying in the adjacent island. Are you stranded?"

There is no answer, and after a few minutes, she doesn't hear a response. *I wonder why he is afraid*, she thinks, heading in the sound's direction, being careful not to hurt her foot again. *I hope there are no snakes here. That's all I need, a snake bite to finish my foot off!* Laura takes a few steps through the dense vegetation, and doesn't see anyone. She turns around, and before trailing back to the cemetery hears a flapping noise, making her deviate left, through the limbs of dead shrubs.

In front of her is a cleared field, where a single wall broken in half, connects to a foundation. *This must have been another settlement house*, she thinks, walking away from the structure, avoiding being exposed to the sun's intensifying rays that beat down like laser beams. *I'm so thirsty.*

"Hello," she yells, this time louder, expecting that the person who lives on the island, has water she can drink. Not getting a response, she walks deciding to follow a

dirt trail, heading in the opposite direction. Watching out for rocks, she comes across a men's brown loafer, lying half buried on the trail. *What the..?* She picks it up, brushes it off, and looks up to see something unexpected. A few feet away, as high and as wide as a small house, is a mound of shoes, all kinds of them, piled up as if they were thrown there without reason. *What is this? How did all this stuff get here?*

There are all different kinds of weathered leather oxfords, tennis shoes, high heels, baby shoes, and even boots. *Is it garbage? Could they be using this island as a landfill?*

Laura thinks, *perhaps, but why would they do this to this beautiful island? Money—maybe*

Ivan Luska needs money! Laura doesn't think too much about it, when searching through the mound, she finds a suitable pair for herself. She sits on a grassy area, trying on a pair of woman sneakers that feel soft on her feet as soon as she stands up. Laura is glad to have found them, her right foot had dried up, and the cuts had coagulated. After a short rest, she decides to continue walking on the trail heading west on the island, when a glare in the distance calls out to her. *The light!* She walks briskly ahead, looking for the source.

What! Another mound? To the right of her, she finds a mound of cameras, all different types. Some have rusted; others are missing lenses, as if they were thrown into the pile carelessly. *It has to be a landfill island, but why is everything sorted? Why would anyone live here? Maybe the person I saw, is the caretaker?* A short walk further, Laura feels

increasingly uneasy when she finds additional sorted mounds, positioned zigzagged on both sides of the trail, as if the piles are leading her somewhere. There are mounds of wallets, and purses, hats, and clothing of all sorts, toiletries, and even toys. But what makes Laura cringe, is the mound of sunglasses she sees last. Next to them, is the avocado green cosmetic travel suitcase Captain Galen had brought her, open, tilted, spewing its contents freely on the ground. *I don't understand, if this is supposed to be a landfill, why is everything in separate piles?*

“Hello. Is anyone living here?”

Laura walks away from the mound of sunglasses when a gust of wind makes the side of her mouth rise up in revulsion. *What is that bitter gas smell?* She raises her left hand up, spreading it large enough to cover her nose, and mouth before gagging. The wind shifts making the smell even stronger. *God, now it smells like rotting meat!* Laura tries to run away from the stench, deviating from the path she had taken earlier. In her rush, she discovers a few pieces of luggage scattered sparingly on a new trail, away from the smell. Curious, she inspects a baby blue suitcase; its color is mostly faded, the inside liner is ripped, its hard case cover resembles that of suitcases built in the 1950's. Ahead are other suitcases, a bright green one missing its second half, another made of leather torn in one corner, and a black polyester fabric rolling suitcase still displaying a

faded airline tag of some kind. She looks inside of them, but find that they are all empty.

Laura walks following the trail, when a very large mound blocking the path stops her. The mound is not like the ones she saw before of man made things, but a mound of mud, and dirt. Laura bypasses it, when her sense of hearing suddenly ceases as if she has fallen into an abyss. The sounds of the breaking surf in the distance, the chirping seagulls, the rustling of palm fronds, have all vanished. In front of Laura is a ditch the size of a football field, half-filled with water, crammed with suitcases of all sizes, colors, and shapes. Most of the suitcases are shut, but as she gets closer, what her eyes witness causes her nose to stop smelling the foul odor that surrounds her, and her tongue to stop tasting the saliva that has been trying to hydrate her mouth. Lying inside of a few opened suitcases are corpses, naked bodies of adult men, women, and children. Their remains appear to have been mummified, as if the liquid that gives them life has been consumed, wiped out in order to make their frames fit inside the small cavities. *This is not real. I must be hallucinating. I'm exhausted, and thirsty. My mind is playing tricks on me.* Laura's head whirls as her mind wavers in and out of consciousness, denying her eyes of what is in front of her, when one particular corpse, a young boy, his slender white body resting on top of others, gazes back, reaching with his rigid left arm as if trying to get out of the ditch. His opened mouth speaks to Laura, asking for help via swarms of

buzzing flies. His rounded eyebrows, and the folds on his forehead that are partly covered in mud, balance the terror in his bulging eyes. Laura's senses come back to life when the scent of excrement and putrid death fills her nose causing her legs to react by sprinting in the opposite direction.

She runs, getting lost inside the island. After gathering a sense of direction, she realizes that all she has to do is to search for the coast, and follow it until she locates the beach she arrived at. In her search, perspiration exudes off her forehead, trying to cool off the sides of her sunburned face. Her lips split from dehydration, cut by the shallow breaths exiting her mouth. When the lack of water almost makes her faint, she arrives at a rocky shore, facing what she believes is Masters Cay. Running, she climbs on top of large uneven dried up coral beds, before jumping into the ocean below. She swims with extended strokes, drinking saltwater as she tries to catch her breath. After a continuous sprint, she wants to stop and tread water. *I have to keep going*, she thinks, pushing to go further. But when her arms and legs falter, and her body can't propel her any further. A mast, a sailboat mast sticking out of the water, appears before her in the distance. She reaches for it, and holds on while breathing heavy, dizzy with exhaustion.

Submerging herself, Laura takes off the sneakers that feel like dumbbells, when under her treading feet, she sees a bank filled with sunken boats, of all different lengths, and shapes. *There are so many. It must be a man-made reef!* But after taking off her shoes,

what Laura sees beyond the vast volume of boats, makes her leave the mast in a hurry. Mostly in pieces, and scattered all over the ocean floor, are the wings, engines, seats, and cracked fuselages of commercial airplanes. *The suitcases, the bodies, the shoes!* Some of the smaller planes remained intact, unbroken, as if they had landed safely on top of breakers before descending into the deep.

Not wanting to think about anything but making it back to Masters Cay, Laura swims unwavering, causing her body to hyperventilate when a fast shifting current takes a hold, stopping her from moving ahead, dragging her body against her will towards the unforgiving sea. In trying to escape, she struggles, splashing water with her swirling arms and legs, before exerting herself. In straining to stay above the waterline she gasps, taking in gushes of the liquid that is trying to kill her. She gasps in desperation before choking, her body drifts submerged, limp, when an arm reaches around her stomach, and yanks her back into the oxygenated atmosphere. Laura coughs discharging spurts of seawater from her mouth, as she tries to regain consciousness.

“Ms. Castel—Ms. Castel.” She hears a familiar voice whisper, waking her up briefly. “Everything is going to be ok,” he says, scooping her up in his arms, carrying her away from the boat back towards the house. Laura rests her head on his right arm taking in his smell of prolonged sweat, fish and tobacco, while looking back at the dock with slanted eyes, feeling her weight light as a bird’s. He takes her upstairs to the

bedroom, and gives her water to drink before placing her on top of the poster bed, as if nothing happened. Laura falls asleep quickly, sticky, damp, sweaty-- but she doesn't care. She is too exhausted to care.

There is an unusual smell in the room, resembling skunk spray combined with earth, and citrus. Laura hears footsteps. Ms. Muuguzi is being followed by a tall figure that stops to rest by the bedroom's door. Laura opens her eyes; mosquito netting surrounds her, making her feel claustrophobic. As she lays on the bed, Laura looks but can't distinguish what Ms. Muuguzi is doing on top of the marble coffee table; the netting is too dense for her to see through. Before she has time to speak, Ms. Muuguzi opens the netting next to her, and blows smoke onto Laura's face, making her gag.

The smoke lingers, containing Laura in the enclosed area, filling the interior of the enclosure with waves of ghostly fog as white as the netting surrounding her. In trying to breath, Laura tears open the netting, seeing that the person standing by the door is Ivan Luska. He waits, staring, penetrating her with his sullen blue eyes. Laura wants to get off the bed, but she is too dizzy, too weak to release herself from the netted cell. She reaches out to him with both arms, wanting for him to come get her, but he doesn't. Laura's eyes blink slowly in succession, as she stares. Her arms fall to her side, her head

tilts back on the soft pillow. She inhales deeply, breathing in the drug filled smoke that makes her fall sleep once again.

Rise of the Storm

Was it a dream? I wonder...The mummified bodies, the boats and planes? What is happening to me? Yes, it is a dream as nothing like this could happen on an island without anyone noticing, and doing something about it. I must have gone snorkeling and almost drowned. Besides, the man I think I am falling in love with, the man who stood by the door watching over me every day as I recovered Ivan T. Luska, would never approve of such a thing. It can only be a dream, a result of the smoke filled medicine that is trying to help me.

The netting flutters, gusting winds push inside the room, forcing Laura to look outside. The bay is choppy that usual. It has been days since Laura last saw Ms. Muuguzi or Ivan Luska. She hasn't seen Captain Galen either. *It was all a dream*, she thinks as she looks through the room for evidence. There are no blood stains on the carpet, no smell, no marks on the wood floor, no trace of her dead friend. Even though she hasn't seen the calf on the bay recently, she doesn't think too much about it. *Perhaps he has found a pod, and joined them in the open ocean.* Laura has something else to worry about; her stomach is gurgling. The food being fed to her in Masters Cay has become scarce. The fare had been served as usual until after her recovery, when the lunch and dinner meals began to diminish. Now, the only meals Laura is given to eat are the breakfasts she detests. To fill up in between, she eats coconut, cactus steams, and

pineapples she gathers around the island. She has also learned to survive on clams, and other sea creatures she finds under rocks, or near the shore.

Looking for crabs, she walks along the rough side of the island, pondering if the food scarcity is only temporary, and how much longer she can go on in these conditions. She wonders if Ivan Luska is still on Plantation Cay, and if he is, why he hasn't come back to see her since she's gotten better. She questions why each morning after waking up, the breakfast is already on the table with no sign of Ms. Muuguzi. Laura bends down to look under a rock, when something in the surf catches her attention. Traveling with the waves is a small object, pink in appearance. She waits for the surf to bring it back and when it does, Laura trembles.

On the sand, is a pink sneaker identical to the one she wore on Palm Island. As the surf drags the shoe taking it taking it back to the sea, Laura gasps. *It's not a dream! Everything is real, everything I saw--is real!* She runs back to the house. *I have to get out of here. I have to find a way to get off this island, but how?* She pauses in front of the steps when she arrives, placing her hands on her hips as she tries to calm her erratic breathing. As she looks up at the house's neglected exterior, her empty stomach churns bile, making her throw up. While hunched over, she turns around to takes a whiff of fresh air when she sees the path leading to the bay. *I am going to steal Captain Galen's*

boat, she thinks, trying to inhale. At dusk, I'm going to Plantation Cay, and steal the boat! He leaves the keys in the ignition. It will be simple to do. It's the only way!

Late in the afternoon, before the sun sets, Laura looks through the binoculars towards Plantation Cay. *I will go now. They won't see me. It will be dark by the time I get there. This is the best time to do it.* She puts on her swim suit, and neoprene boots, grabs her fins, snorkel, and mask, before heading towards the bay. Standing at the end of the dock, Laura looks ahead, remembering that Plantation Cay is much further than Palm Island. *The gear will help me get there faster,* she convinces herself as she glides into the water, trying not to stir it too much before swimming off. On her way there, she avoids thinking about what she has seen. All she wants to do is to go as far away from Palm Island as she can, even if it means leaving all her belongings behind, including her unfinished manuscript.

Exhausted, Laura arrives at the boat at dusk and notices that she can't climb aboard from the water. She has to swim past the pier, and come back over the dock in order to get into the boat. *I hope no one sees me,* she thinks, removing her fins, and mask, leaving them on the beach. She walks in a careful manner over the dock, avoiding making a sound. When she reaches the boat, she climbs onboard and looks for the keys in the ignition. "Damn it! I can't believe it. They are not here!" *What am I going to do?* She searches around the console. "Nothing!" Frightened that she may not be able to

leave the islands, she searches again inside the boat, uncovering cushions, probing inside crevices, opening coolers. In one of her attempts, while trying to look inside a small compartment, she pinches her hand, and as a reaction to the throbbing pain, begins to cry. She sits on the floor of the boat rocking, holding on to her aching hand, asking what she had done to deserve this. As the pain recedes, she listens as ripples hit the side of the boat. With tears running down her cheeks, she looks up and sees a moon looking back, highlighting the streaks on her round face as if they were Lucayan tattoos. *Maybe—the keys are somewhere in their residence!* She stands up, and looks towards Plantation Cay. *But where is the house?*

She runs away from Captain Galen's boat back to the beach, her feet thump over the wood dock, tapping to the sound of her deep breathing. She tracks through the sweet-smelling pineapple field, following one of its watering furrows, hoping that at the end of it, she will see a path leading to the house. *Where is it?* She looks around; *it has to be around here. It can't be too far!* She makes a left turn through a row of palm trees, when fire in the skyline, startles her. A large flame, making loud crackling sounds, wavers in the distance. *It's a cross. They are burning another cross!*

Following the edge of the line of palm trees, and trying not to be noticed, Laura gets as close as she can to the burning cross. Hiding behind thick vegetation, she clears a small opening, and looks through the hole, when an unusual smell catches her

attention. *Its smells like dirty pennies*, she thinks. *Where is it coming from?* Looking for the source of the smell, Laura is startled by Ms. Muguuzi's children who emerge from the dark. They tend to what looks like rags lying on the ground. *What are they doing?* Laura opens up the space a little larger when a shadow, appears over the children, landing next to them while carrying something in its arms. The children retreat, taking the rags with them as the shadow places what it carries on the ground. When the shadow turns around, Laura gasps. In her shock, she breaks a small branch making enough noise for the being to turn towards her. *It's Ivan--Ivan Luska!*

Behind him, scattered, clothed and now in focus are the bodies of dying people. Ivan Luska looks briefly at Laura before kneeling down. He picks up one of the moving bodies.

Ah-- it's a woman!

He holds the woman up placing his arms under her armpits, positioning her lethargic face in front of his, before inhaling with his pursed lips the spirit that keeps her alive. Her body drops in front of him, limp, and lifeless-- mummified.

Ivan Luska's eyes glow brilliant red, louder than the flaming cross over him. He commands Ms. Muguuzi's children to take the woman's body away, as if they are all in this bloody hell together. The children take off the dead woman's clothes, and place them in a pile, separate from her shoes, and other personal items. Laura gasps. *The*

jewelry--the jewelry he gave me, she thinks, pulling the ring off her finger. It belonged to these people!

She throws the ring to the ground and before Laura has a chance to run away, a large hand covers her mouth while the other, drags her out the area back towards the beach.

"You shouldn't have come here," Captain Galen whispers on her ear. Laura tries to release herself from his grasp, but as before, he is too strong for her. When they reach the beach, he removes the hand over her mouth, while still holding on to her.

"Let me go, let me go," she yells, squirming, trying to break free from his grasp. He pulls, forcing her to keep walking.

"Laura--be quiet," he tells her.

"Let me go-- please let me go! You are evil. You are all evil!"

"You don't understand."

"I have to get out of here. Please let me go!" Laura releases herself from him, but he is quick to grab her again, shaking her to stop.

"Laura, stop it!" he says, slapping her. "Look at me."

"I've seen enough," she says crying, holding on to her right cheek, as if she could take away the pain. "I thought you were my friend. Why am I here? Why are you doing this to me?"

“Laura, I’m trying to help you. I will explain everything, but for now, I have to remove you from this island.”

Laura turns to him with swollen eyes.

“You don’t understand what is happening here, but you will. I need for you to give me time. I am here to take care of you. Trust me Laura; I will help you get back to where you came from.”

Laura’s heart wants to trust him, but her eyes have seen enough. She is not sure of who to trust anymore.

“I will get you out of here, I promise,” he tells her.

Laura stops struggling, and looks at his sweaty face. There is a certain amount of confidence in his eyes.

“Let’s get you back to Masters Cay before he comes for you.”

“But, he saw me!”

“He didn’t see you, or he would have been here already. Trust me Laura. You will go back, and wait for me. Tomorrow, be at the dock after sunrise. Make sure it’s after sunrise. We will leave this place together. There are no more secrets. You have seen the face of death, the horrors of destruction, and the perils of unrestrained power. There are unexplained things that happen in our world Laura, things we don’t

understand, too complex, or too distant from human comprehension. Do not fear what you have witnessed, for seen is part of the process of survival.”

Captain Galen walks Laura to the small dingy she left behind, and helps her inside. “Remember Laura, I’ll be there after sunrise. We will leave this place together. Have trust in me.” He pushes the boat away with Laura drifting inside it shaken, back towards Masters Cay and to the confines of its merciless ruler, Ivan T Luska.

Eye of the Storm

Laura is awake all night. It's not what she has seen, or what lies ahead that has kept her up, but the blazing winds coming into the bedroom, and the riotous surf she hears making her think the ocean is right underneath her. The shutters on the house have also kept her from sleeping; they slam against the walls, booming like African drums, wanting to break loose from their fittings. Adding to the army of sounds are the clicking and snapping noises coming from downstairs, as if the house is rocking, trying to break free from its foundation. As the sun rises, Laura can't believe what she sees out of the French doors. The surf has come up past the dock, covering most of the path leading to the house. There are downed trees limbs everywhere. Loose debris encircles the island, as if inside an unrestricted wind tunnel.

"What's happening?"

Laura rushes downstairs. She is startled by Ms. Muuguzi and her three children, who stand by the entry door, looking outside. The children's faces are uncovered; their skin is pale, and as white as the surf caps on the ocean water that is quickly gaining ground, moving closer to them.

"Where is Captain Galen?" Laura yells, trying to be heard above the wind gusts entering the room. She stares at Ms. Muguuzi's children trying not to remember their obligation, and the horrors she experienced the night before.

"He is not here," Ms. Muuguzi replies.

"Where is he?"

"He went back to Plantation Cay."

"Why would he do that?"

"I don't know, Ms. Castel."

"How long ago was that?"

"About an hour ago," Ms. Muuguzi responds.

"When did you get here?"

"Last night."

She's been here all night, Laura thinks. Why would Captain Galen go back, and in this weather?

"I'll be right back," Laura says to them, walking outside onto the front porch, her long hair whipping violently in the wind. "Captain Galen," Laura yells through her cupped hands, "Captain Galen!" *What if Ivan Luska did something to him?* "Captain Galen!"

Laura walks back inside and runs upstairs looking for the binoculars. She scans Plantation Cay, and sees that Captain Galen's boat is still tied to the dock, rocking up-and-down, breaking planks in the process. "Oh, no! Captain Galen, why haven't you

left?" She glances towards Palm Island; most of the land is already underwater. "This is not a storm—it's a hurricane!"

"Ms. Muuguzi!" Laura yells, running down stairs. "Ms. Muuguzi!" Laura takes a deep breath. "We should leave this house, and head towards the settlement house. It can withstand the wind, and it's also at the highest point of this island. I don't think this house is safe!"

"No!" Ms. Muuguzi yells at her. "I will not have my children leave this house. We have weathered many storms here. We will be safe here. Besides, the settlement house doesn't have a solid roof. It's made of thatch."

"I remember," Laura responds. But she knows about hurricanes and houses well enough that a wooden house, with creaking sounds coming from its walls, is not a good sign. She also thinks that the surf will continue to move inward, and that it's a matter of time before it floods the downstairs.

"The roof in the library, that roof is solid enough to protect us," Laura says to her. "How about the room behind the green curtains, its high enough to keep us away from the surf, isn't it?"

"I'm not sure," Ms. Muuguzi responds.

They run upstairs, all five of them into the library, and when they tear away the velvet drapes, find the unexpected.

"The door is sealed!" Laura screams.

"Captain Galen must have sealed it," Ms. Muuguzi tells her.

Laura handles the hinges securing the door. *He must have gotten the hinges when we went to the settlement house! But why? He must have been following orders--Ivan Luska's orders!*

"What are we going to do?" Ms. Muuguzi asks, raising her eyebrows, looking fearful.

"Wait here!"

Laura heads downstairs towards the dining room, grabs one of the dining chairs, and carries it over her head after exiting the front door. The bay water has already flooded the front lawn of the house. She runs through it, holding on to the chair, splashing water onto herself. Laura struggles to keep the chair from wavering, as she heads higher up on the island. A squall pulls the chair away from her hands, making it crash onto the ground, disintegrating in front of her. She covers her head as if her arms can protect her skull from being crushed by flying coconuts and other debris. Laura runs, avoiding being near any tree when it starts to rain.

When she arrives at the settlement house, the roof is already missing. *Damn it! I hope the machete is still here.* She finds it in the same spot she saw it before, right next to the gun. She picks it up, and while getting soaked in heavy rain, runs back to the house.

When she walks into the library, she finds Ms. Muuguzi, and her children, huddling next to each other. Laura handles the wet machete and with full force, hits the hinges securing the door, breaking them in half, opening the room where the chest with the seven pointed star lays hidden from the world. As soon as they enter, a cracking sound from above startles them, making Ms. Muuguzi and her children run towards the far right corner of the small room.

The rooftop, with the wood beams resembling those of a Viking ship, is being lifted up by the wind like a flying disc. The bare roof opening, exposing the library to the outside, shows Laura a grey sky above her, discharging rain on her face, while damaging everything else it touches. The library's furniture, the shelves, the precious books of literature, everything in the room that was protected from the elements for years, is being destroyed by the rainwater.

Laura runs back inside the small room where its rooftop is still intact, and is protecting them from the storm. She removes the stuffed dead animals, moving them into a pile inside the exposed library, takes the tapestry from the top of the chest, and covers the children's heads with it.

"Keep this, it will protect you from the rain," she says to them. When she reaches to pull out the chest, the children begin to scream.

"What's happening, what is wrong?"

Ms. Muuguzi tries to calm them, but their screams get louder, when a shattering sound makes them stop.

Laura rushes downstairs to see what has happened. The chandelier in the entryway, has crashed onto the floor, pushed by the rushing winds coming into the house from the opened front door. When she reaches to close it, she sees the bay water going over the front porch. On the porch's ledge, a multitude of bodies have gathered, floating together, settling after being brought in by the rushing currents.

Realizing that if they stay in the house they might die, Laura runs back upstairs. *We have to head towards the settlement house,* she thinks.

"Let's get out of here!" she yells. "It's not safe; the house might break apart by the flood waters. We have to go to higher ground."

Inside the small room Ms. Muuguzi tries to make her children stand up from on top of the chest, but they refuse.

"Make them come. They can't stay here; they will die!" Laura yells at her again.

Ms. Muuguzi tugs on her children's arms, trying to pull them away from the chest but they show their resistance by spreading their legs as they hold on to each other.

"I can't get them to come with me!" Ms. Muuguzi yells at Laura, who is waiting by the door.

Laura walks inside and grabs one of the children's arms, but the others, help in releasing it. She sees them girdle around the large chest, as if they were protecting it. *The chest! What secrets is it holding. Could it be the culprit behind all this misery?* Laura runs back to get the machete, and uses it to scare the children off. She takes the tapestry, unfolds it onto the floor, and forces the chest on top it. When she tries to drag the tapestry holding the chest out of the room, the children try to stop her. Laura picks up the machete once again, and wards them off.

"Get them away from me!" she yells, looking at Ms. Muuguzi.

Ms. Muuguzi pushes her children, away from Laura's weapon. After falling into the floor, the children concede, allowing Laura to pull the chest out the library, and towards the stair case.

The ocean water is up to the first step of the stairs, making the chest float when it reaches the bottom. Weightless, it hovers over the water, helping Laura drag it towards the front porch. As she is doing this, Ms. Muguuzi's children escape from their mother's command, and run pass Laura, exiting through the front door.

"Stop, what are you doing, stop!" Laura screams. "Ms. Muuguzi stop them, they are going to be swept away!"

"I can't, I can't!" Ms. Muuguzi says, breaking down in front of her, kneeling on one of the steps, while holding on to a banister.

“Children, come back!” Laura yells, while watching them move through the water.

Laura looks back at Ms. Muuguzi, wondering why she is not running after them. She sees her powerless on top of the stairs, as she watches her children walk to their deaths. The strong woman Laura had known and dreaded all this time, the person whose whole essence seemed based on being a fighter, was diminished in that moment. The authoritative Ms. Muuguzi of before was gone, and on the steps, lay a beaten down woman, an extinguished soul. Everything that she had understood of Ms. Muuguzi, her demeanor, her strength, her intelligence, her self-confidence, was being washed away by the advancing waves.

“I have to help her, I have to help her, and save her children,” Laura yells to herself, while running outside, exiting the front porch, pushing bodies away as she walks through waves that crash against her legs. The children track through the flooded yard, the bottom of their garments heave over the rushing water.

Ahead of them, Laura is startled when she sees the figure of a man in the distance, standing in knee-deep water, wearing a long frock the color of the overcast sky.

“Ivan Luska?”

The man opens his arms wide, expanding the fabric on his sleeves like the wings of a bird, as if making a sanctuary, inviting the children to come and join him. The children, drag over the water heading towards him.

“Come back!” Laura yells. “Come back!”

But the children don’t listen.

When they reach Ivan Luska’s right sleeve, they huddle together, as they did under their mother’s arms. The loose fabric in his right arm covers their entire bodies, hiding them from Laura’s view.

Ivan Luska turns his sight towards her.

“Come with me,” his voice echoes.

Laura becomes entranced by his eyes as before. The same eyes that looked deeply into hers the night he played the piano, the night he fed her something she had not eaten in a while, the night she began to fall in love with him.

“Come join with me Laura. I will give you—new life.”

Laura walks to him, the waves crash like whips against her body, when a suitcase floating in front of her thumps her right thigh and wakes her up from her trance, causing Laura to realize that the man she was falling in love with, the man Ms. Muuguzi saw as a husband, the man Ms. Muguuzi’s children had seen as their father,

the man Captain Galen saw as someone he could respect and look up to, was not a man but a beast.

“Noooooooooooo! She screams, closing her eyes in trying to avoid his stare. She raises her arms up in front of her, as if to keep him away.

“I want to live!” she screams. “I want to live, I-want—to, live!”

When she opens her eyes a tidal wave higher than the palm trees lining the coast approaches like a blast, fast, unwavering, with no moral authority of what it will destroy in its path. The wave covers Ivan Luska and Ms. Muguuzi’s children, before coming after Laura, and the rest of the dry earth behind her. She tries to run through the knee deep water, back towards the house, as if the house can save her from the destruction of the wave’s wrath. She reaches the front porch when the powerful surge takes a hold of her, swallowing her body whole, taking it back to where it came from.

Submerged, she sees the wooden chest tumbling, rotating in slow motion, as if time was rewinding in front of her. She extends her arms enough to reach the latch, and in an attempt to hold on to it, unlocks it, opening the seal, releasing the last winged spirit into the open sea.

Before the ocean pours into her mouth extinguishing her final breath with the intrusion of water into her lungs, Laura envisions her mother, as she did on her seventh birthday.

“They created the perfect utopia,” Laura remembers her saying. “It was a way to take control of their lives, and their beliefs. And when the time came where control was no longer revered, their leader demanded for them to relinquish their souls. As they drank the grape juice infused with poison, in their minds they were not killing themselves out of spiritual convictions, but out of their own predictable fear.”

As Laura descends, she no longer fears the beast for a greater power has always come to extinguish those who do evil throughout history. It is inevitable, unstoppable that the currents will shift, and when it seems that hope is no longer a possibility, faith multiplies in the voices of the roaring wind, causing the currents to take Laura’s body far away from Palm Island. She lets go of the opened chest allowing the past, carved into the molded limbs of a slaughtered tree, to be entombed amongst other artifacts, buried deep within the salted sands of the earth, where it will keep for later generations to discover.