

Speechless

By

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She didn't know what to say. In fact, she had nothing left to say.

The skin on her neck pricked, wrinkled, tensed into lines which reached down her spine and tightened her buttocks. The sensation was too familiar. Her ears perked. There was someone out there. A threat that set her skin shining, her nerves a tingle. She peeped through the palm leaves and swung nervously in her hammock.

Maybe she had become lazy, complacent, let her defenses slip. It is not easy to survive all alone, firstly when they abandon you, then when you decide solitude is the only option. Her nose whiffed the air. She could sense the change. Having spent all her life trying to fit in she was in no mood for an intruder. It was too late for company.

They'd shuttled her ashore. Marooned. Shipwrecked. The lost pirate. Endlessly searching for hidden treasure. But that happens. It was her island. She ran it. No space for strangers. Nobody liked an invader. She'd learned that long ago.

The problem was this foreigner. He shouldn't be here. She could scent it was a he. The palms wavered in fear or just seeking attention, anxious that she might neglect them for another. Beneath her feet the sands had become slippery, silvery devious as her toes no longer sank into a solid grasp.

Suns were gathering strength, green skies shimmering beneath their gaze. Squinting through the rays she turned over, sleep dripping from her brain, air inhaled to refresh another season. She stretched. Lay back. The creaky woven frame shivered beneath her jagged motions. She paid no attention to such complaints. She had a more immediate problem. There was someone out there. It was all threateningly familiar.

A breeze rifled the air. He was approaching. She could hear feet dragging through the brush, the scrub and finally the fine damp sand that guarded her plot of infinity. She'd have to get up. Face him off. Let him know who was in charge, that he was uninvited, unwanted, illegal, exportable and maybe even expendable.

She'd only been looking for something better. Her parents had died in the mines, happily. They'd fought hard to pay her escape, to send her off where they knew they would never see her again. Spices tingled the mind, heat and sun hung in a fog of tumbling emotions, colour exploding into tears of humid emotion. They were smiling, hugging her as she left, and never stopped crying once she was out of sight. A living death is the cruelest of all. Goodbye, good luck, god speed and that chasm of arms extending to infinity, never to be touched again. A baggage of assorted faces and shapes as she hid under trains, climbed greased poles, cut herself on barbed fencing until she had managed with a handful of others to reach what they had thought of as safety, a promised world, a treasure trove, a cold wet land of smelly socks and burnt toast. Robbed, beaten, raped and fooled they had paid for it dearly. Diligently, she sent back postcards fluttering with happiness and wealth, until she realized her parents had gone and would no longer need the deceptions. All paid for and used, no receipt would still cover the damage: used goods were all you had, as good as it got.

Sunlight sneaked along the earth, seeping through the lattice shading, yellow strips tickling up her legs, massaging her thighs as the rays grew bloody into the mid-day tide. A slight heat-prick tingled her skin, as if it was trying to tell her something, warn her. Birds flew over, swooping low, fleeing an intrusion, wings embracing the land beneath in dark, unwavering shadows. They shrieked, piercing the air above her shelter. She shuddered. For a moment nothing was moving, just the still air stinking of intrusion.

He approached from the left. Pale skinned, butt nose, a graying blonde mop flopping idly to hide its thinness. All smiles and happy welcomes. Long, horny fingers pushed random hair behind his ears. Bushy eyebrows veiled a squint. Hairy ears she noticed.

"So good to see you," he shouted over the waves, the bristle of wind through palm leaves, the hiss of a bird diving to the kill, the rustle of a day old beard. He was well fit for his age.

She tried not to shiver.

Good? He hadn't asked her opinion.

She folded her arms across her chest. She pushed her feet in deep, down to the dark damp sand that held you firm. She didn't have a mirror but she could imagine the fine healthy presence she presented, lean, carefully hewn surgery, uplifting breasts, the heavily bronzed skin her people were so proud of. She swung her own hair in defiance. Stray strands clung to her left eye but she refused to show weakness and move them one side, out of vision. She had it clear.

He took ages to come closer, each plundering step painfully etched into the dirt trail of the loosely flung sand he left in his wake.

He choose a rock and sat carefully, testing it for dampness, rugged edges that might place further strain on his still neat trousers. A smile. Another effort at taming that unyielding mane.

"It's hot, isn't it?"

"You been here long?"

"Would you like to find something to eat?"

She refused to answer. A crooked smile should be warning enough.

He took the hint and stumbled off, back to where he had come from.

She wondered why he was wearing such crotch tightening dark clothes in a place like this. Maybe he too had been shipwrecked without warning. He wouldn't survive long.

He wouldn't go away. Each morning he panted his way towards her and struggled at conversation, lines of bait that failed to catch, never reeled in.

"You all alone?"

"Are you sure?"

"What do you survive on?"

She could ask him the same but she just preened in response. The attention was temptingly attractive but far too illusive. She could smell his strangeness. He just wasn't one of her own and that was all that mattered now. She played along. He would learn soon enough.

The days stretched out.

"Are you sure there is nobody else? No way out of here?"

He shuffled on his rock, eyes squinting, taking a breath, pausing as if searching for the question which would stimulate a response. He was turning sun burnt with the strain.

She stared at him trying to care, trying not to hate, aware of his shrill need for acceptance. She didn't need a Man Friday.

"There must have been other visitors?"

As he shuffled through the questions she just smiled to hide her venom, the red heat of anger at his intrusion. It was such a relief when he backed off after each fresh attempt, a dogged look of resignation hanging from his brow, clinging idly to that mop of ever dwindling hair. He could do with a shave she noticed and his trousers were beginning to fray. He wouldn't last long.

Lying there, huddled in the shade, she couldn't quite wipe him from her memories. His presence haunted, gnawed through her, settled like an abscess. Once she had pleaded for just such a rescue: now it was closer to an insult.

Slowly, carefully, she calmed herself, focused her energy, soothed her vengeance and went out to find some fruit and water. He wouldn't survive much longer.

She couldn't avoid him. He seemed to be everywhere. Maybe the island was smaller than she had imagined. She had stopped exploring at one point, after the first few days in fact. She hadn't the energy, the need: her own little world had become just fine.

His daily presence gnawed her to a bone. Mornings were no longer dazed sunlight and hazy thoughts, rather hasty, hesitant fingers of doubt as she shook herself awake and dreaded his next visit. Nights changed from starry eyed dreams to darker, thunderous fears as he came for her and his hulking foreign figure wandered and ravished her landscape, scraping her mind raw with the rough brush of so many unwanted footsteps.

"We could share the work you know. Maybe find a way out in the end."

He remained uncomfortable on that rock. "It would be easier, together."

He was respectful. And incredibly grating in his insistence.

"Think about it. We don't have much else to do."

His patience was making her feel guilty. Could he not understand she wanted to be alone where there were no strangers: where everyone was just like herself.

But he wouldn't go away. She found the blood stains where he had hunted, fish bones where she used to swim, the smoke of a fire that she had never dared light. Did he not understand it was her land and he hadn't even squatters

rights. He should have died by now. It wasn't his space. Hers. Just hers. She was beginning to scream at night. He was learning to survive and wouldn't perish like all the others. She had forgotten who they were. He remained like a wine stain on an old table cloth you couldn't face throwing out.

Her dreams were nightmares, rekindled by his remaining presence. Bloody shapes, grasping claws, fancy uniforms, ugly lips and funny noses in a world that had once been familiar. They were bearing down on her, eyes puncturing as they examined, double crossing, squinted from behind plasma screens as they labeled her as funny or weird. A stranger in a foreign land where hills and rocks were sharper and steeper than they ever appeared from the shore, or from a rickety rubber dinghy close to capsizing.

The moon rose above her schemes. She blackened her face against the shadowy light, darkening her skin further with damp soil, camouflaging her intentions. She probably loved him but there was no way she would tell him that now.

Her hands raced, flipped through the motions. Paring the wood she sensed it's reluctance but wore it down with determination: she'd never lost the instinct for survival. The shavings slipped away to cover her feet. Her lips froze into hard, sharp lines, reflecting the growing shaft between her knees. Determination forced the number to grow slowly, her lair deepen, the plan advance. The stranger would be expelled, deserted, shipwrecked, left to survive on an other island without treasure. Long John would have approved. The family silver was scarce but secure.

She covered the pit carefully as the moon faded, tracing devious patterns in the brush at her feet.

He appeared, eventually. She knew he would. He had never failed her. She had it all planned, had carefully chosen her site. His screams shattered the heady

air as he bolted through the trap, just beside the rock he sat on every single day. Birds rose in painful shrieks, animals scuttled in fear of the unknown. Calmly, she crawled closer and bent over the rim.

Down in the hole last breaths were seeping from the battered frame. The stakes were gouging life from his shriveling limbs, crawling through his body like poisoning worms. His eyes made one final appeal for recognition but met only hers and closed silently.

It took hours to raise the crumpled wreck from the earth. Dragging it through the scrub she cursed him. She swore and pulled, and pushed, until finally he was expelled over the cliffs. Clouds gathered, wind shrieked through her land, skies darkened until they squeezed out the rain. Water beat the rocks to spray her with foam. The elements splattering her bare body until it was washed clean and blood had faded from her finger nails and melted into the outburst.

By morning it was all gone. Evil was rejected. Deceiving pasts locked away. She could no longer remember him. There would be no further additions to her world. Purity reigned.

Victor glanced at his watch and tapped his boss on the shoulder. Time to move forward.

Victor had been his speech writer for every major campaign. They'd got the tone just right. He was confident. They trusted each other. Read each other's minds after years of words floating together into streams of convincing truths. A jangle of nerves would flush out the adrenaline and it would set the place ablaze. The vice-president stepped towards the podium having turned briefly to pat Victor on the shoulder. Lights flashed, the smell of knotted flesh, immense emotion. He tensed the lapel of his suit, the neatness of well ironed fabric lent a final burst of pent up confidence.

A noise rattled in Victor's head. Instinctively he cupped a hairy hand to push the ear piece closer not to miss a word, any last minute alteration to their staging.

A hazy voice repeated the message, apologetically, stumbling over the brief syllables which left little to the imagination. Then a silence as if waiting for further instructions. No need. Victor looked at his boss's back. Imposing, tall, immaculately dressed as he should be, suits slightly looser as he'd grown older but firm and imposing, tight crotch, firm arse, chest still arriving before stomach as he moved to the spotlight. Victor knew the first words would already be rolling silently over his lips, ready to tear into the text, rip it apart, spit it out in a rage of enthusiasm. That's the way he'd written it.

Victor's hand slipped from his ear. He paused for breath, a split second of decision. She was gone. After all those years.

From the boat men who'd picked her up as she tried to swim ashore, to the up coming politician who risked everything as he fell for a struggling immigrant and let her help him to the top against all expectations, all warnings. She had always had a sense of timing, the ability to attract and move events forward. Until she just got too tired. All her initial struggles and traumas began wrecking their revenge, eating away her mind, tearing at her consciousness until she didn't recognize her daughter's name the day they had to tell her Gemma was dead. "Gemma," she muttered vaguely, a faint smile curling into oblivion. "Gemma, what a pretty name." And then she had more or less stopped talking for good.

Victor moved forward to whisper in his boss's ear. He paused. It wasn't quite the moment. It wasn't quite necessary.

The vice president turned slightly, sensing his approach, catching his eye. He turned away. Victor stepped back. There was no need for words. They'd been working together long enough to convey emotions and policy shifts in the wrinkle of an eye, the slight shift of a heavy shoulder. Victor kept his distance, enough to encourage without impinging. Just the two of them now.

The vice-president stepped up to the podium. He was prepared, Victor had written a good one, but the first seconds were always tensing. He let his eyes focus, the lights dim as the applause billowed. Tele-prompter was set. He gripped the stand firmly, leaned forward over it, a hint of aggressiveness, assurance. Silently, he mouthed the opening phrases, poised to unfold them into the exquisiteness of a fifty minute rant.

He sucked in a breath. The applause was beginning to waver, not lose force but fade in expectation of his words, his ability to generate more hand beating. The prompter flickered into focus. He could sense Victor about five steps behind, rushing to life before him on the screen.

Even in the void of forgetfulness she could innovate and manage to pass herself away: a fitting tribute. He was proud.

She may have given in but he couldn't.

He let his hand pat back his hair one last time, straying flecks of dying blond straggling his ears. Then started to speak.

Victor knew his tone, they molded it together. The anchor had been freed, they pushed the boat out and started to test the water.

The words began to flow. But he couldn't quite keep her off the screen. She floated before the crowd, an island lost in space. She'd always said he kept that hair too long. Like a pirate. At least he'd just shaved. She would have approved. And she might finally remember Gemma. He let the speech roll forward. When deserted there is no option but to keep paddling.

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