

Lesbian Vacation

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The lesbians were arriving at the Caribbean resort that weekend, and the conversations at dinner, by the pool, on the beach were all the same. The clientele of the resort that week, all apparently heterosexuals who would not think of themselves as needing this, or any, label, had to leave their turquoise-watered paradise because lesbians had booked the resort for a week. The responses were varied: disbelief, anger, amusement, fascination. The first lesbians to arrive, before the other patrons had completely cleared out, looked pale and shell-shocked under the curious gaze of the suntanned group. The grandiose computer salesman from East Sussex sidled up to two new arrivals who ordered beer while waiting for their room.

“So, you two are lesbians, are you?” He claimed to be hurt by their disdainful response. He was also quite frustrated that he couldn’t stay with the lesbians; he and his wife had to book in at the adjacent hotel for the next two nights.

“I accept *them*,” he explained to me earnestly in his intelligent-sounding English accent, “why won’t they accept *me*?” He seemed truly puzzled.

As they arrived, the lesbians did look stereotypical in their Birkenstocks, their fanny packs, their hockey haircuts. I almost wished they didn’t look quite so “lesbian.” But mostly I felt sorry for them, confronting an inquisitive resort crowd about whom they had not been warned. I felt almost as sorry for them as I felt for myself, on this supposed vacation for a commitment ceremony. The commitment lasted only two weeks after the vacation.

Deciding who gets what after a breakup is a galling task, like forcing down cough medicine or applying iodine. Photos, CDs, pillows, linens, dishes, books, cutlery, the stainless steel mug in the bathroom that held both of the toothbrushes. His, of course.

Remarkably, as I rummage the closets of our daily lives, stirring up dust bunnies compiled primarily of cat fur and human hair, probably his, and exciting the cats by the unusual activity, I am struck by how easy it actually is, how much there has been a line between his and mine. Did we always know about the inevitable ending? Did we see into the future like weather forecasters at Environment Canada? Even the photos are so often doubles, yet I still edit the terrible pictures of me out of his growing pile. No future girlfriend, or boyfriend for that matter, will have the smug satisfaction of encountering an unflattering me. If only I could edit out the unfavorable bits of the real, unfixable, continually-moving life. Or the painful bits. You never can, of course. The unflattering tantrums, insults, tears, and accusations must be forever blazoned into the other person's memories. As much as I might try, I can't remove them, leaving behind only the gentleness, the quiet compassion, the generous love.

The photos that got the most editing were not doubles. I removed each picture of me with the sun causing me to squish up my face, with the angle making my legs look fat, with the shade swelling my nose. I put in his pile the one of me standing thigh-high in the turquoise water, squinting at the camera, flexing my left arm muscle. Flattering photo, no. But personality, certainly. My own photographic version of our life together will be of me with a double chin, grinning hideously at the camera. My own personal memories replay nothing but the insults I hurled, like softballs or Frisbees.

We went to the Caribbean, even though we were both fairly poor. We thought it would be the trip of a lifetime. We decided to have a commitment ceremony there — to exchange rings and promise to stay together always. So why am I now, a month and a half later, dividing up photos from that very trip, a ringless hand moving quickly as I decide — his, mine, his, his, mine, mine, mine ...

The resort was abuzz that week, as I mentioned, because the lesbians were coming. Seriously. All the people there with us had to leave on the same day — the Saturday — because a group of lesbians had booked the entire resort. Six hundred women altogether. The

male staff were having a bit of a vacation that week because the lesbians didn't want them socializing with the patrons, as was the norm.

It sickened me. Not the lesbians, but the bigoted, fearful responses that ricocheted around like so many tennis balls flung madly from one of those tennis ball machines. I wanted to engage with the comments, but I could feel Adam stiffen beside me each time the topic was raised. What could I say?

The day of the transition, as the assumed heterosexuals were ferried out on buses to the airport and the lesbians shipped in, I felt an ache. The lesbians looked like a lot more fun than the silicone and melanoma set with which I'd just spent a long seven days. Under the banner of the newly-hung rainbow flags, smiling women danced to loud music as they set up tables and chairs. The two main bathrooms both became women's, which appalled, amused, and bewildered the men waiting to leave, who had to walk to a different area of the resort to find a men's room. Adam used the one that had been formerly designated as a men's anyway. He would; he had just that unquestioning sense of entitlement. He thought it was all good fun.

Suddenly, I wanted to stay, even though I'd just had about the worst week of my life. This resort and this tiny country was a place of strays, of privileged white people who belonged nowhere, who purchased acceptance under a false bond of economic brotherhood. The resort compound is an artificial oasis. The country is arid, but the resort was lush with greenery and palm trees. The country is inhabited predominantly by blacks, but the only blacks on the resort changed towels, cleaned rooms, removed dishes. I had saved so diligently and spent so much hard-earned money to come burn painfully and unattractively and feel physically inadequate and overwhelmed by all the overconfident Americans. A large percentage of the staff were Canadian, like me, but I did not feel I belonged. I was an outsider here, only pretending to be included, involved, as I danced in a line with everyone after dinner, the free wine helping somewhat. Frankly, I did not want to belong. Here or anywhere. I smiled at the two black women in blue dresses as they moved quietly from room to room with their cart of towels and cleaning supplies. They ignored me. I saw myself momentarily through their eyes and that vision hurt. I wanted no part of the sports, the excitement, the

energy, the continuous thumping music. Instead, I cried all afternoon in our room while Adam went snorkeling.

Off the coast of this island, a dolphin swam with the locals and tourists and boats, and had for 16 years. The day I saw him, I sat by myself on the beach. It was one of our last days there. Adam had meandered down to make dinner reservations at the more private restaurant because we were irritated by the custom of eating our meals with so many strangers: same conversation each meal — Where are you from? When did you get here? What did you do this morning? Afternoon? Today? I also suspect that he was checking out the beautiful, already tanned, and topless sunbathing blonde, but I tried to ignore that thought. She was from Montreal, I had found out when we went snorkeling. I couldn't help but eavesdrop on her conversation with a woman from Paris.

In truth, I was going through some emotional upheaval on this trip that I tried to convince myself had nothing to do with Adam. I glanced up from my book, from my safe spot in the shade, and stared blankly at the ocean. The very ocean itself looked empty and flat. The water was the blue of cleaning solution, as if nothing could live in it. I ached even more because I was in this place where I was supposed to be happy. Then I saw a fin slice through the water, so quickly I thought I must have imagined it. I scanned the area like radar, my heart drumming. In my ignorance, I thought it was a shark fin, and I felt called to action. Should I yell "shark"? I had almost convinced myself that it was all my imagination when the fin arced up again. I saw a back this time and realized that it was the dolphin I'd heard so much about. He was accompanying a catamaran gliding in from the open seas.

I looked for Adam but he wasn't visible along the stretch of bleached sand. I picked my way across the hot beach to the wharf and walked to the very end where the dolphin frolicked. At first, I was alone, but then more and more people showed up, with a splendid variety of American accents. A Texan was the first to arrive, and I felt grateful to share the moment.

"Isn't it amazing?" I said.

"Oh sure," the man responded and preceded to tell his various sightings of the dolphin. I didn't mind. Several men splashed into the water with snorkels on; women crouched with cameras along the shore. Momentarily sharing smiles and witticisms, all these

strangers were brought together by this dolphin. Two dogs belonging to the Texan jumped off the end of the wharf and pursued the dolphin, barking as they paddled. Adam had returned to his spot on the beach by then. I shouted, wanting to include him.

"The dolphin," I pointed, "the dolphin." We were never prepared for anything, Adam and I. We didn't have the camera at the beach with us. The dolphin will have to remain a constantly moving image in my memory, not anything captured on film. No permanent record of our moment together, holding hands, eyes shining as we smiled at each other, marveling over this gift, this dolphin who was so obviously enjoying the barking dogs.

Of course, while the dolphin is treasured on this island, and motorboats have been banned to protect him because he swims too close to the propellers, one must wonder why a dolphin would spend sixteen years of his life swimming with boats and people and dogs. He's a stray. He must have been thrown out of his group, rejected, abandoned for some reason. Did he commit some dolphin crime, some indiscretion? Or was he simply not meant for relationships with his own kind? He found another group to belong to, the barking dogs, the loud, eager Americans, the chugging catamarans, a group with lesser expectations perhaps. I felt sorry for the dolphin. I wanted to tell everyone to go away. I wanted to jump in the water and cradle the gray creature in my arms. I know it's ridiculous, but it was like I could feel that dolphin's pain and loneliness and fear as he swam about the empty ocean looking for acceptance.

I felt that way all week about everything on the island. The human strays that flooded the resort with expensive clothing and bright hopes. It was a resort for singles, which we didn't understand beforehand or we might have reconsidered. Lean cats loped onto the compound at night, slurping water from the swimming pool. Numb dogs stood boldly before people, staring at their food. At two in the morning, one man attempted to eat a sausage that he'd just purchased for an unreasonable amount of money. The dog just stood there, staring. It didn't whine; it didn't beg or demand. It just stood. The man surrendered in despair and handed the sausage over, much to his female companion's delight. Indeed, that was probably why he did it. My faith in men's motivations was declining.

Adam and I were there for our commitment ceremony. It sounds strange now, and sounded strange even then, as we planned it and

talked about it. I could not bring myself to get married — too exclusive, heterosexual, patriarchal. When I was trying on bathing suits before the trip with my friend Denise, she inquired about the “commitment ceremony.”

“What is that all about?” She sat in the changing room area and assessed the suits as I emerged from behind the curtains.

“I don’t believe in marriage.” I turned my bottom toward her, and she shook her head a bit too quickly.

“Why? Don’t you love him?”

From the curtained-off space, as I struggled out of one suit and into a rather sexy bikini, I tried to explain my politics. Of course I love him. So much so that he managed to convince me to ignore my beliefs enough to agree to a “‘til death do us part,” romantic ceremony. I didn’t feel particularly convinced that even this concession was right.

“Isn’t a commitment ceremony a gay thing?” Denise interrupted.

“Exactly,” I said. “Why should I have the right to marry, just because I’m heterosexual?”

“Are you?” Denise laughed, prompting me to try to explain that, in this case, I was, and that it was problematic. I should not accept heterosexual privilege.

“Ah, life’s too short,” Denise stated flatly in response. “Just do what you want.” Her eyes widened as I emerged from the little room in my new bikini. She nodded her head, slowly, approvingly. I paid for the suit with my gold card and was ready for the South. Some privilege can obviously be overlooked in certain circumstances. And, while I refused to admit this at the time, Denise has a point. I was once a little girl who, like many, was encouraged to imagine white fluffy wedding dresses, knights in shining armor, and a big party where I would be a princess.

Because of my politics, Adam consented to a commitment ceremony rather than a marriage. Because of Adam’s ability to convince, I consented to a commitment ceremony rather than sticking to my politics. Feeling both like a hypocrite and a smugly pleased girly-girl, I wore a diamond solitaire. We went to the Caribbean and exchanged rings, just the two of us, in our room, not even on the beach as we had planned. We didn’t have a big party or sign a legal document; I didn’t wear a fluffy dress.

Perhaps I should have.

It took him only two weeks after our return to get fed up, overwhelmed, or whatever the emotion was. He left. I'm not certain where all my anger had come from, why I preyed upon him so, each day as he returned from work. What did I expect from him? Why did I insist on the daily enumeration of his failures as if compiling a grocery list when it was obviously mine that caused the problems and drove him away?

I do think it is important to note that, previous to Adam, I had been in a couple of lesbian relationships after a lifetime as a heterosexual. What happened? How did Adam suddenly become my life partner — for three years? How did I default to heterosexuality again? I really thought it was so simple; I really did. I fell in love with him. *It is all about the person not their gender*, I could say philosophically, worldly wise and assured: *identity is fluid*. I couldn't understand the gay community's — my community's — sense of betrayal, their eye-rolling scorn. And Adam was so supportive, marching with me at Pride, encouraging my attendance at women's dances, Take Back the Night rallies. Only now as I pack up his things, do I see how many rainbow flags, lesbian humor books, artwork from former lesbian lovers are scattered throughout the apartment. I realize now that I never actually relinquished that former identity, unusable with Adam. I clung to it like an empty perfume bottle that seems too pretty, too cherished to throw out, or like a favorite T-shirt that you can take on and off at will. As if anything could be that simple.

Adam and I spent just about every second of our vacation together, even though we didn't get along at all. I demanded reassurance from him for vague insecurities, such as the cellulite on my thighs, the size of my breasts, my lack of tan. In this place with these people, these things suddenly mattered. Bewildered, he retreated from me. I nursed my wounds and cried. He did consent to go off snorkeling by himself once or twice. I'd gone the first time, not thinking about my lifelong fear of the water. I was attempting a new laid-back version of myself — easygoing, taking things as they came. It really wasn't working, this version of me, but, in the spirit of trying, I trekked down to the scuba shack, got fitted up with snorkel gear, and boarded the catamaran. I didn't know how to snorkel, having diligently avoided water sports for thirty-four years, my whole life. It didn't occur to me what I was about to do. I was willing to be flexible, but I was completely unprepared for what that meant.

The catamaran stopped over a coral reef way out in the ocean. The island was visible, far off in the distance. We were to jump into the water, snorkel gear squeezing our noses, forcing us to breathe through a tube — the sound of deep labored breathing. The fins on my feet caused me to panic — how do I stay afloat? Adam showed me how to point them down, “like a ballerina,” a metaphor I liked; it encouraged me to be lighthearted, girlish. Move them slowly. I did. Good. Okay, I could do this. Then, the snorkel gear came over the eyes and nose. Fit the mouthpiece in — bite it. Okay. Now, put your face in the water, just so. Okay? Okay, I nodded.

When I said I was unprepared, I understated the case. I could never have been prepared, even though I spent my childhood on the ocean — the cold, Canadian Atlantic one — and watching Jacques Cousteau on television. When I swim in natural waters, I keep my head above the water and try never to think about what might be underneath the surface. This activity now expected of me was at odds with my whole approach to survival. I was now required to look underneath the surface and, moreover, to revel in the beauty of it.

For the few seconds I managed before utter panic conquered me, I did marvel. I glanced down into the depths, taking a huge gulp of air as I put my face into the water, because instinct told me to do so, even with the mouthpiece fixed between my teeth. Suddenly, I was floating far above a tremendous mountain range, fish darting colourfully, like birds, along the crevasses far below. A world existed here, invisible to most people most of the time, unthought of, unexplored, but always beckoning beneath the surface. Most amazingly, it resembled the world on the surface, as if there was really no difference at all, just one of atmosphere, of medium. I was not ready. All I could hear was my own labored breathing. I was aware of my struggling legs, the miles of water between me and land, in any direction. I panicked. I wanted safety.

As I coughed and struggled onto the boat, I tried not to cry. I tried to save face by being playful about my fear. I talked about it far too much after that, at dinner, around the pool; while everyone else discussed the arrival of the lesbians, I nattered on about my fear of snorkeling. Other patrons reassured me, suggested I take lessons in the shallow water, agreed that diving right in at first might have been a bit overwhelming. Uncharacteristically, Adam kept silent.

There was a world under the surface that I knew about now, a fascinating world that my fear would not allow me to access. I was stuck on the surface, it seemed, barred from exploration by my own inability to trust myself, to trust my capacity to stay afloat no matter what, my breath, my fluttering legs, my waving arms. These were the things I thought of as I watched the lesbians transform the resort, as I waited with my luggage and my heterosexual partner. I was silent and tired, ready to return home to familiarity, to the safety of normalcy. I wanted the comfort of unquestioning routine again. I didn't want to have to think anymore about the black women cleaning the rooms, the wealthy white patrons, or the incoming lesbians.

There are no pictures of me and Adam snorkeling. At least I don't have to edit them. I like to think I would try it again, if given the opportunity, although I have no desire to return to a tropical paradise. Instead of succumbing to fear, next time I would start out in shallow water, much more slowly, so that I wouldn't shoot back to the surface, condemned to bob there helplessly like a piece of waterlogged driftwood.

