




Here I am at age six in the summer of 1982 in the backyard of my home in Cincinnati, Ohio, still innocent—and blond.

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YACHTS


Christopher Bollen

But why Croatia?" I shout over the happy hour noise of Monehann's Pub. I'm the only man at the Tribeca bar not wearing a suit, and I'm guessing the only patron taking two for one on vodka cranberry rather than whiskey neat or tequila with a chaser. Usually I would refuse to enter a place like Monehann's, were it not for the fact that Drew's company keeps an open executive tab under the Millions Magic NBA scoreboard by the cash register. Monehann's is a desperate man's pub. It reeks of cologne, offers a rifle-shooting arcade game as its chief form of entertainment, and the chance pack of women who mistakenly enter due to some directional mishap often find themselves clustered around the door. Drinking with other men depresses me. It has the undertaste of giving up, of accepting loneliness as an unalterable state, but I don't tell Drew this. He has a hopeful look on his face, as if I'm a college student who he's finally talked into going home with him.

"Why Croatia?" he repeats in astonishment, like the question answers itself. "What the hell else do you have to do in August? You're going to be miserable if you stay in the city all summer without a single excuse to leave your apartment. And you are miserable, Jim. You're really bringing everyone down lately. Don't be an asshole. Just consider it."

My name is James Johansson, and I've hit on bad times. Bad is a sub-

jective term, I know, much like gauging the damage of a fender bender to determine whether it's worth calling the police to file an official report or simply driving away in the acceptance of human error. My job as a graphic designer at Invisible Inc., a small design firm on Mercer Street, is two weeks away from being erased from my daily schedule. When I was called into my boss's office, I was told with a fray of nervous managerial smiles that, "Due to cutbacks, downturns, increasing competition from younger agencies, you know the rap, Jim, you know what our market's like," certain positions at the firm would have to be liquidated. They, of course, meant mine. I behaved like a perfect gentleman for the entire ten-minute meeting, clasping and unclasping the cuff of my shirtsleeve, nodding sympathetically, breathing in unison. The room was frost cold from the air conditioning, turning Invisible's white walls into pristine glaciers. Although it is summer, everyone in the office wears bulky sweaters and even wool scarves to beat the chill, and someone in editorial or production or IT has an incessant cough erupting through the renovated warehouse space. The boss coughed twice and sucked on a peppermint mentholyptus drop. When I finally asked if there would be any compensation, say a tiny severance for three years of unflinching duty, the smiles were replaced with prayerful nodding. The boss leaned over his gray, smoked-glass desk.

"That's not the only reason we are letting you go."

They said "liquidated," but I prefer "erased," because that pretty much sums up my entire responsibilities at Invisible Inc. In my tenure at the company, I took my mouse to the freckled skin and blood-black eye bags of top Argentine models who pressed python leather purses against their lacquered cheeks. I eased stocky thighs into swimsuits, broke jaws and reset them with softer, angelic lines, wiped out a team of gay hairdressers in sweatpants holding up hair extensions, and inserted cocktail parties or Saharan sandstorms or the monastic walls of early Richard Avedon. Once I had a girlfriend and once she asked me, standing in the leaky light of my West Village basement apartment, hand over altering heart, "Don't you feel disgusting for doing what you do? Don't you realize the ethical implications of perfect skin? Jesus, what an honest world we'd have without your talent for Photoshop."

She tripped over a stack of design magazines on her way out and later fell into the arms of an assistant county prosecutor who occasionally shows up on the evening news talking about harsher juvenile sentencing with worryingly yellow teeth.

These things happen, I know.

I suppose I'm under the delusion that the mess of my life outside the office somehow counteracts my godly powers of digital retouching. I am twenty-nine and drink more than one who, so far out of college so as not to remember a single tenet of Kierkegaard, should. I smoke erratically, a cigarette here and there, but whenever I discover an empty pack of Marlboros on my living room floor, I'm as horrified as if I've found a dead mouse lying on the oven rack. Invisible Inc. demands its employees keep an immaculate desk—no coffee cups, no pictures of loved ones tacked to the monitors, certainly no indication of bodily functions or afternoon snack cravings or a working use of notebook paper. Thus, I've never invited a coworker back to my tiny apartment swirling in dirty laundry, empty matchbooks, half-filled water bottles, lopsided plants I felt sorry for on garbage day, and other debris that floats around my bed like the flotsam of a wrecked ship. Clutter tends to be a consolation at times for people like me. A clean place might illustrate that no one is at home waiting for the lock to turn.

The only things I'm reliable about hiding are the bills. I organize them by due date. My erasure from Invisible Inc. couldn't have happened at a less economically verdant season. I read once that it doesn't rain enough in New York in summer to keep the park grass green; that's why they are constantly replanting it, making just enough deposits to keep up appearances.

Whether or not I even know where Croatia is on a map of Europe—and I think I know; I could easily locate it by process of elimination—this country does sound better than a month sweating alone in my apartment, listening to the echo of younger and more solvent New Yorkers walk drunkenly past my basement windows.

I focus on Drew and pretend I've been listening, but he's already midway through a tangent on maritime paradise.

"...Deep blue waters and a boat. A yacht, Jim. A yacht just for us.

White wine at noon on deck, sails snapping in the wind, a big wooden steering wheel turning south." Drew swallows hard, and for a second I honestly believe he might start to cry, fueled by the imaginary waves rippling across his closed eyelids.

"But, seriously," I say. "Why Croatia? Didn't they just have a war there?"

"Over," Drew replies, slicking down his blond hair with the perspiration from his glass. "That was more than ten years ago. Don't you read the newspaper? International Court of Justice? Slobodan Milosevic? Ring a bell, any of it, hmmm?"

"But recent war zones don't make for ideal vacation spots, do they? What about Mexico? Or Greece? Do we really want to be around that?"

"You saw the pictures I sent you, Did those ships look like they were under fire?"

This morning at work, Drew sent me an email that consisted of a single web link. Drew writes his emails in Helvetica, a font I personally love to use on ad captions for its cheery authoritarianism. I clicked twice on the link, although I considered deleting the message unread—a way of preventing temptation from entering the workplace. The screen turned aquamarine, and a white yacht slipped across the monitor as wakelessly as scissors through silk. When I clicked on the boat, more appeared, yachts every which way, a luxurious armada of sixteen-footers, masts stiff in a royal blue sea like a field of lightning rods, sails taut and rudders directionless. I chose a yacht at random, and pop-up windows dealt across the screen. In these shots, women populated the vessels, beautiful young women with wet hair who looked like they had recently been relieved of the cargo of their virginity. They lay on their stomachs topless, with pastel bikini bottoms and bony, bronzed legs pressed against the wood of the deck. The water foamed around them. An empty wine bottle was tipped upside down in an ice bucket. Then the shots turned pornographically invasive: a waxed cherry-wood galley kitchen; cushioned berths lined with open portholes; a card game abandoned mid-play on a sunken table for six.

A song erupted from the computer speakers. I rushed to find the mute button, but I wasn't fast enough. A child's piano picked out ris-

ing notes, as rainbow letters dance across the screen. "Come enjoy Croatia," a woman sang.

"What are you looking at?" Maggie asked flatly, leaning over my shoulder. Websites in open offices are like cable television in family rooms as a kid. Someone is bound to walk in at the most embarrassing, inopportune moment to prove some hidden perversion. Maggie's voice was brittle with a sinus infection she's been cultivating since May. Pink splotches lined her nose. She shivered in a thick black turtleneck, arms folded over her stomach in that practiced manner of aesthetic judgment. "Are those boats, Jim?"

"Yes."

"You aren't slated for a cruise project. Aren't you wrapping up the Crazia Juniors Denim campaign? We need options for the client by Friday."

"I'm just looking," I said. "Out of interest."

She took this in with a squint. Maggie is one of the art directors at Invisible, a slender fortyish woman with spider-black hair who wishes she were born of fascist Scandinavian stock and not of Shaker Heights, Ohio, Jewish divorcées. Office rumor has it that she has never been in a love relationship, and her vocabulary has been systematically reduced over the years to variations on "great" and "genius." (Examples: an emphatic "how genius" for layouts that hit the mark; "it's kind of great" or "in a way, it's sort of genius" for those that may or may not prove acceptable at crunch time; I have never been awarded Maggie's "chic" gold star.)

She breathed through the clogged estuaries of her nose.

"So now you're boat shopping?" The condescension was as thick as mucus. Two neighboring designers peered over, their fingers still typing sloppily on their keyboards.

"Renting, not buying," I replied loud enough for my colleagues to hear me. I clicked on a yacht, and again the white vessel steered smoothly through waves. "I'm taking August off to charter a boat around some islands in the Mediterranean. You *must* know how beautiful it is. We all need a break from New York before the busy fall season ahead."

It was juvenile, maybe, and imbecilic, of course. As Maggie walked

back to her desk, she must have ransacked her brain for the exact figure of my embarrassingly low paycheck. How can he afford this? How can someone with \$2,000 in their bank account, recently fired, with no job prospects on the near horizon, manage to shop for yachts in the same way most people buy surplus electrical appliances on the internet? I will tell you what possessed me to behave this way. When I first moved to New York, my roommate worked as an accessories assistant at a popular women's fashion magazine. She gave me one bit of advice I never bothered to follow until that moment. "Pretend," she said. "When everyone thinks you're already living the kind of life you want, they'll treat you better and give you more. Pretending is how to become what you want to be."

Unfortunately, I can't pretend with Drew. He's seen my apartment, and he knows the grim realities of my checking account balance. Drew earns three times my salary, fixing room rates on an international hotel chain, although that doesn't prevent him from making me pay my share of the tip when it's time to close our tab.

"I saw the link," I tell him. "But pictures are one thing." As a graphic designer, he's touched on my one area of expertise. "They're going to edit out the displaced families still living in tents on the shore."

He sighs and shakes his head. "You're pathetic," he says. Even though Drew is five inches shorter than I am, he has the ability to make his presence larger and more commanding. Where I am lean and not much for muscles, his frame widens like an accordion and his arms rise to fill the air around him. Women find him handsome for the boarding-school efficiency of his features, but I've never shaken the sense that an angry child is still marooned under the light scruff of his face. His cheeks are red from drinking, and his patience has lowered with each beer he's ordered. Sometimes I think we're only friends because I put up with his antics and loud opinions, which by nightfall usually possess all of the delicacy of a man wearing headphones while driving a four-wheel lawnmower around his front yard.

"Can't you see, I'm picking Croatia for you."

"For me?"

"Yes, for you." Drew slams his glass on the bar and motions for the

bartender to refill it. I look out the window and see families passing on the sidewalk, staring suspiciously into Monehann's and wondering what kind of men spend sunset closed up in the dark forest of each other. I understand how they feel. Whenever I walked by a bar as a child, I assumed only drunks and parole violators counted their evenings under a Budweiser sign.

"How is Croatia for me?" I ask.

"Look, we can get a boat in Italy or Greece. Shit, we can get a boat in St. Bart's, for all I care. But I know what your situation's like. I'm happy you're leaving that crappy job. It was sucking the blood right out of you and barely paying enough for you to eat. No one should lose money working. What the fuck sense is that? I'm picking Croatia because it's cheap. That war and its being a newly democratized economy isn't going to put you back more than a grand. But we have to go *now* before all the tourists realize what they're missing and send the prices through the roof. Trust me, hotels are what I do for a living. Croatia's not even on the euro, so we won't spend a dime. Come on. Did you see those girls on the website? I'm sure they're all dreaming of young American guys—even ones like you."

I ignore the insult, and maybe I also agree with it. "You do imagine yourself sailing on that kind of boat at least once in your life."

"See," he says smiling. "Think of us sailing for a week. Free of this city, free of our hot apartments. Yachts, Jim, yachts. When was the last time you had a tan? Remember what I'm about to say to you. Adventure is like a vampire. You have to open the door."

"Do you even know how to sail?"

"We hire a captain. He just can't be some buff twenty-year-old who's going to look better than us in a pair of Speedos."

I own one pair of swim trunks that go down to my knees, purchased on sale three summers ago at Barneys. They met water only once, on a light wash cycle. I don't like my body free of clothes. I don't sleep naked, and even alone in my apartment, I change behind the bathroom door. Drew senses my reticence and grabs me by my shirt collar. He pulls me an inch from his face.

"I want to go," he says, looking into my eyes. "I'm telling you this

as a friend. I need a vacation and I can't go by myself. I don't want to be here. Do you get what I'm saying?"

What he means is, "I don't want to be here for it." We never talk about Drew's mother dying in a hospice somewhere in Connecticut. Drew was never close to her. His parents divorced when he was six, and he moved with his father and still takes the train out once a month to watch him fish. Drew never holds a fishing pole, he just watches while sipping a thermos of coffee as his dad stares at the ripples in the lake. The only reason I know that Drew's mother is bad is because he called me at work a week ago to ask what flowers were appropriate to send to the close-to-dying. I've never sent flowers for any occasion—let alone for a sick parent—so I said carnations. He asked me why. I said they reminded me of hospitals. Drew exhaled wearily and hung up. He sent roses.

"Okay, I'll think about it," I say.

"It was the yacht that sold you, wasn't it?" he says. "Or was it the girls?" I nod. But he didn't sell me on either of those promises. He sold me on being a friend to him.

The plan is that I meet him in Dubrovnik. Drew convinced his company to pay for his airfare under the auspices that he was checking out the Balkan region to see if American hotels were a sound investment. Before he left, he sent an email titled "How to Let the Vampire In," which gave me directions to the marina and told me to pack light and bring lots of sunscreen and whatever else I didn't think I could buy in Croatia. Knowing Drew, he meant either novels or condoms. I pack both. In the few humid days after my job ends and before my own flight is scheduled to take off from JFK, I set my suitcase on the apartment floor and slowly fill it as I step over it to change the television channel or to answer the door for Vietnamese food delivery. My last fuck you to Invisible comes by way of my not showing up to the farewell cocktail party they organized for me. There is nothing quite like someone slapping you in the face and then raising a glass to your future. I keep my cell phone on, expecting a flurry of angry phone calls, but no one rings. For all I know, Invisible itself didn't appear. I

sit under my air conditioner in the evenings imagining the sunsets I will see from the boat. What is more beautiful when you're drowning than a yacht speeding toward you, ready to pick you up and sail you off to easier shores? Those exotic visions don't even need retouching. I only need to add myself in.

I take the subway to the airport to save money, nearly steering my suitcase over the feet of a Queens teenager who seems passionate about beating me up. To save money on my airfare, I have a ticket that skips around Europe: JFK to Madrid, Madrid to Paris, Paris to Prague, and then, after so many safety procedure demos, finally the kingdom of the unpronounceable: Du-brov-nik. A city of marble that glows white in the night. A city with its stunning bone structure scarred with bullet holes like adolescent acne. "Hvala, hvala," the pretty stewardesses cry, like seagulls from the airplane door.

We walk the pier to the boat. Drew holds insurance papers and registration forms, dressed in a ridiculous white cheesecloth shirt that exposes his swirling chest hair. He's been in the country for three days, and already his skin is tan and his hair even blonder with flecks of gold. I drag my bag behind me, a zombie of time zones, but Drew's enthusiasm for the yacht manages to keep my mood from slipping below the acceptable level of appreciation.

"It's all right," he says, eyeing me. "I've loaded her with supplies. The ship's name is *Ariane*. Sweet *Ariane*, I haven't met our captain yet. Can you cook?"

"Why? Do I have to?"

"We have to do the cooking, not the skipper," he says casually. "But that's not a problem, right? You can make eggs, can't you?"

"Sure."

"Did you make a copy of your passport?" I look at him dumbly, which is my way of refuting responsibility before it's imposed. "Of course you didn't. Don't worry. I made one of mine. We have to give it the captain. I guess they're worried we might try to steal the thing."

We pass moored ships loaded with Italian families bickering over plates of sweaty brie, young couples hugging in the hot afternoon

sun, children with early signs of melanoma running along the wood planks in brandless Eastern European sneakers that look like nurse's shoes. I take a bottle of sunblock from my suitcase and wipe my face with SPF 45, badly applied to further my pasty complexion. These are the moments when my classification as a New Yorker should override the unhealthiness of my appearance—the exotic sickliness of city life.

Drew stops suddenly, pointing to a tiny yacht several feet smaller than the others, with *Ariane* painted in cerulean on the side. A woman stands by the wheel. She has frizzled peroxide hair and a large beak for a nose, smacking gum as she uses a red fingernail to wipe the corner of her eye. The woman is speaking to someone in the galley, and, after noticing us, leans into the boat for what looks like a prolonged kiss. Even with a generous estimation of the sun damage to her face and shoulders, she must be well into her forties, although she is wearing tight rayon bicycle shorts and a pink tube top that reveals a black lace bra. After a minute, she walks across the plank and nods to us as she marches toward town with a straw satchel shoved under her armpit.

"The dock prostitutes here aren't so attractive," Drew whispers. "Let's hope that was just the captain's mother."

"Maybe she can cook," I say, but Drew ignores the suggestion as he jumps across the plank and lands onto the boat's blue foam-cushioned seats. I follow, hopping fast over the wood beam with my suitcase lifted over my head before I can lose my balance. *Ariane's* sunken deck is about as big as a pool table. "It's small," I say. "We're going to be trapped on this for a whole week?"

"Quit whining. This is our boat. We can stop wherever we want to. God, we're on vacation. Try to look a little more excited."

Drew quickly turns to descend into the galley but he stops, steps backward into me, and a man rises from the doorway, shirtless and scowling with sweat beaded on his forehead.

"Americans," he barks, waving his hands in front of his gut. This man is not the teenage Olympian we feared. He is at least fifteen years our senior, with black wraparound sunglasses covering his eyes and a scar ascending from his upper lip like a fish that had been hooked and thrown back into the water. His stomach is swollen and thick,

and his arms are wired with veins that suggest a lifetime of physical labor. A gold chain and a thin red thread with a tooth hanging off it are tied around his neck. Two tan, nearly hairless legs burst from tiny canvas shorts, and I stop myself from examining the impressive bulge of his crotch.

Drew steadies his hand on the ship's wheel and gives his practiced corporate smile. He's a believer in the power of first impressions dictating everything that follows. (I myself always believe in disappointing early and then surprising people out of their low opinion of me.)

"Americans," the captain hollers again. "Catastophia."

"Hello," Drew says while extending his right hand. "Drew here. This is Jim. You're the captain of this vessel."

The man picks his teeth with a black thumbnail and stares incredulously at us. I look away, at our tiny *Ariane* with ropes and handlebars, all bobbing delicately in the water.

"Dubo," he says. "My name."

"Oh, Dubo. Like Dubrovnik." I can't blame Drew for this etymological deduction. How tourist friendly for our guide to be named after the port.

"Not for Dubrovnik. Dubravko. I live here. My city. Mine."

"We're from New York," I say with a giddy sincerity that even irritates me. "It's a beautiful boat. Does it belong to you?"

"No. It is not mine," he snaps as if insulted by the very suggestion. "I am captain for pay, that is all."

At this moment, Drew and I could have easily vacated *Ariane*. We could have stepped backward over the plank and returned to the boating office to demand our deposit back and a release from this Dubo of Dubrovnik. Drew could have refused to hand over the Xeroxed copy of his passport to our captain, and we could have used our real passports to check into a real hotel moored to Earth with more solid foundations than an anchor. But what hope I have found in this yacht convinces me to carry my suitcase down through the galley. It is an open pine-paneled room with enough space to house a small side kitchen and a table fitted with cushioned banquette seats.

Beyond the galley is a tiny hallway with two wood doors on either

side. I open the right door and shuffle into a narrow cabin with a thin triangular bed wedged between the bowed walls. Drew takes the room opposite mine, and we don't make eye contact or talk as we hurry to change our clothes before toasting with a drink as we sail from the harbor.

"Two men," Dubo yells from the galley kitchen. "Why do you travel just two men? Where are your women? Why they don't come?"

I don't have the heart to tell Dubo that I haven't come to his country for women. I've come for Drew. My belief in any woman sleeping next to me died a long time ago in Manhattan, and that's also why I'm here: to escape the realities of my homeland.

The sun sinks into the sea in waves of purple just as the pictures promised. Dubo steers at the wheel as we leave the port, while Drew and I crouch at the ship's bow below the whipping sails. We hold shot glasses filled with white wine and bounce up and down as we enter the open Adriatic, looking one last time at the coastline and the buildings trailing behind us. It is the perfect snapshot of what we came for.

Not as perfect, but also promised, is my hangover at noon the next day. Dubo sleeps on the banquettes in the galley, angling his body around the table. There is no bedroom for him, so he takes possession of the biggest room under deck. But he wakes early to sail the boat north toward islands dotted with black castle belfries and late night outdoor discos. Drew has already risen to receive a lecture from Dubo on bathroom plumbing: a pump ejects the urine, shit, and vomit from the small plastic toilet bowl into the water, requiring two minutes of heavy arm work to prevent the waste from saturating the bathroom floor in turbulent waves. Much delinquency in bathroom procedure must have occurred at the hands of previous renters. The tiny bathroom reeks so strongly of a latrine, I decide to brush my teeth in my cabin and spit the toothpaste into my beach towel.

Drew's bathing suit should have been cause for alarm. The flower-patterned nylon shorts hug his thighs, bunch into his ass crack, and reveal too much pubic hair before the dark blond curls turn into a causeway over his belly button. Dressed in my more respectable board shorts, I

immediately fear Dubo's reaction to Drew's fashion choice—this man is going to murder us over Drew's bathing suit; we may actually be killed or humiliated or thrown overboard due to this skimpy synthetic floral item. That is, until I turn to find our captain lounging on deck in thin red Speedos, which butterfly around his hips to confirm no noticeable tan line. Dubo lets me study his crotch for a solid minute before turning to meet my eyes.

"I want breakfast."

"Dubo wants breakfast," Drew repeats, lying inertly on the opposite row of seat cushions and flipping through a tattered copy of the *Economist*. "I made him a morning snack already, so it's your turn."

I crawl back down the ladder into the galley and fish through the icebox for groceries. Drew has packed the fridge with brittle white cheeses, sliced salami, and lacy piles of prosciutto, no doubt feeling deeply romantic in the Dubrovnik supermarket about hors d'oeuvres and dismissive of actual sustenance. I crack three brown eggs and fry them in a skillet after I light a cigarette on the stove flame. The roar of the motor is loud in the kitchen and through the overhead portal windows I can see Dubo tying the sails to the masts.

"Same as snack," the captain grunts as I place a plate of eggs on the folding table in front of him. "Same as your friend."

"Sorry if you don't like my cooking, Dubo," I say, climbing back into the galley to retrieve silverware and a napkin. He chews the eggs without looking at me. I sit down next to Drew, who rotates his knees to make room for me and lifts his sunglasses to give me a conciliatory wink.

"This not cooking. That is why you need women."

Drew pushes himself up, slumping against the armrest.

"Well, Dubo, tell us where to find some."

Dubo continues chewing, allowing a sliver of salami to fall from his open mouth.

"We want to find some good beaches," I say. "We hear Croatia's got beautiful beaches. Will you take us to some of those?"

The captain sighs and places his balled napkin over the runny yolk, signifying that he is finished. His round, brown eyes droop at the lower

lids with purple horseshoes, and I wonder if he's resentful for sleeping at the kitchen table instead of in one of the cabin beds.

I offer him a cigarette, which he waves away, and then pulls a thicker hand rolled variety from behind his ear.

"So? Beautiful beaches?" Drew asks. "I'm sure you'd like to go swimming too. We don't mind."

"I cannot tell you what is beautiful," he grumbles as he lights his cigarette with a match. He glances out at the coastline in the distance. "You tell me what islands. I take you to islands. Beautiful or not is up to you."

"But surely," Drew starts and then pauses to find the right negotiating jargon. "You can make *recommendations*."

"Not my vacation. We swim when you tell me to stop. We swim here if you say. We swim anywhere. I just captain."

Drew laughs and then motions for me to hand him the guidebook. He flips through the glossy pages he's earmarked on islands known for indulgent drinking habits and smooth pebble beaches.

"You're a big help, Dubo," he says, shaking his head. "Fine service. All right, we go to this island. Hvar."

The captain gives a half-salute with two fingers and then uses them to scratch his testicles. Under the red Speedos, those testicles are as big as apples. I glance at the page in the guidebook marked for Hvar. In one photo, youths stand with turquoise waves lapping at their ankles. In another, tuxedoed bartenders make daiquiris behind a teak bar.

"Americans," Dubo says as he climbs toward the console of navigational meters. "*Catastropha*."

"Was that woman back in Dubrovnik your wife?" I ask, promising myself that this is my last attempt at intimacy.

"What about wife?"

"Was that her we saw on the boat before we left, Dubo? The one with the blond hair?"

"Yes," Dubo says as he squeezes the wheel and studies the expression on my face.

"She's pretty," Drew says. "No wonder you don't know where the ladies are, Dubo, you're married." It occurs to me that neither of us

can stop saying the name Dubo. Up until the mention of his wife, his name is the only fact we have about the man taking us out to sea, and we can't let go of it.

"We have arrangement," Dubo says nonchalantly. "I am sailor. Not like you two, I have women in many ports. This tooth from my last one." He shakes his necklace and then grabs fast on the wheel, turning the yacht so sharply that both Drew and the dirty plate roll sideways and crash together on the floor.

I peel and chop zucchini, frying the slices in olive oil. I boil water for pasta, shake salt in the metal pot, warm loaves of bread in the slender oven, tear the prosciutto into tomato paste, and pour myself quick shots of white wine to ease the burden of being remanded to the galley, the single kitchen staff of this cruise ship. I have cooked more in the Adriatic Sea than I ever have in all of the apartments I've rented in New York. Plates rattle in the sink. Onions roll in the cabinet. On deck, Drew and Dubo argue about America.

"We are not conquerors," Drew yells in the darkness above.

"What are you?"

"People. Like you and everyone else."

"You are Americans."

"So what?"

"Many people try to take our coast from us. Always through time, they try to take it. Everyone wants it. You are only the next."

"We're not taking anything, Dubo. We're just here on vacation."

"Ahhh, vacation. You buy all the land and build houses for summer fun. This is taking."

"We're not even *on* land. We haven't even seen enough of the country to want it."

"Dinner's ready," I call from below, anxious not to enter this international court of justice, with Drew suddenly on the witness stand. In my entire four-year friendship with Drew, I have purposely prevented myself from engaging in prolonged arguments with him. I often wonder if our fighting styles are a matter of regional difference—Midwest versus East Coast—how I strive for the high road and never let the conversation dip

below the belt to inflict serious injury. Drew's rhetoric can get bloody. He isn't afraid to fire cheap shots intermixed with intrepid facts and figures. You can be waxing on about the Gaza Strip or the Republican tax policy, and suddenly your sexual insecurities or nervous twitches have been thrown into the ring. This always gives Drew a cheater's advantage. When I've called him on this conduct, he justifies himself by saying that the world is a place where real people live and real people have erectile dysfunctions and smell their farts with their fingers, and that's all part of why they see the world the way they do. Perhaps he's right, but sometimes I wonder if our friendlier intimate moments together are simply fact-finding missions for what he can later use against me.

"Dinner," I call again.

"In winter I work big ship that carry cargo all over world. We go to every country. In your country, they do not let us touch land. In America, I am not allowed to leave boat because it is not legal. They scared of me, what I might do. I cannot even eat at restaurant on dock. Take nap in hotel. Why is this? Why can I not go into your cities?"

"Come off it," Drew wails. "That's simply a matter of trade agreements. If you want to come as a tourist you could get a visa. We'd love to have you. Otherwise, it's a question for your own government to mete out. They're the ones not fighting for rights."

"You treat us worse than cargo."

I carry three plates of spaghetti up the ladder as subserviently as I know how. The night winds pour over the deck, ruffling the collars of our shirts and kiting the towels tied to the handlebars. We rock in circles as the water glows from the small bulb lights of the boat.

"What cargo do you bring around the world?" I ask.

"What they tell me ro." Dubo bites into the bread.

"Life must get pretty lonely at sea all the time," I say. Drew twists anxiously in his seat, angry that the food might distract Dubo from continuing the skirmish.

"What is this shit anyway?" Drew asks, picking his fork through the pasta.

"You could never know how lonely," Dubo says.

Drew whines out a laugh, pointing his fork in triumph at the captain.

"See, Dubo. You don't know who you're talking to. That's where you're dead wrong."

Three days aboard the yacht and my body hasn't touched water once. My nose is burned from the sun, creating a red arch like the Golden Gate Bridge to connect my cheeks. Boats have passed us, large colorful yachts, blaring airy rock music and letting *Ariane* glide by in the reflection on their metal tackle. I have started taking hourly doses of Dramamine between endless games of poker and blackjack. Dubo has not said anything to us all morning, busying himself with minor boat work and speaking foreign phrases into the CB radio in the galley. He makes notes in a leather book and avoids us.

"Don't let him ruin our vacation," Drew whispers over a hand of cards. "Don't let him get to you."

"He's hasn't," I say. "It's just that we should have factored in how long we'd spend with some angry Croat on a boat the size of my apartment. How far is Hvar anyway? Shouldn't we stop somewhere closer? There's got to be something else out here."

"Screw him." Drew tosses his cards on the table and pours himself a glass of wine. "We can't do anything about that now. We need to establish distance, not let him take the upper hand. He needs to realize that he's working for us. Servants take over the house if they don't respect who they're working for. That's called authority, and you're not helping me build it by asking him about how he *feels* all the time. We need to make the relationship clear."

"Drew," I say, throwing my cards on the table. "I'm cooking all of his meals."

"We'll get to Hvar. We'll dock. We'll put an end to him. Put on more sun block, Jim. You're turning into a stop sign."

My smoking habit has finally kicked in like a survival mechanism. It isn't long until I start lighting a second cigarette off a first. Drew lies on deck with his arms folded behind his head, but I can tell he's just waiting for another comment on America to go on the offensive. Dubo pushes his plate toward me for cleaning. There must be some mistake, I keep thinking. There must be something we did wrong in

planning this trip. I practice Croatian phrases from the guidebook, words like *diarrhea* and *speedboat* and *help* in the local language. This could be useful—this would be useful—if I had anyone else to say these words to but Dubo.

And then there is no mistake. A seaside cul-de-sac of white sand hangs in the distance. Green patches of grass appear with soft purple patches of lavender. Yachts, many and spectral, crowd long wood piers. Bodies walk along cement sidewalks. We arrive in Hvar Town, Hvar Island, the recipient of 2,724 hours of sunshine each year according to the guidebook, just as the sun creeps into the west. We can hear music from giant speakers and the clink of trays held by waiters carrying ice cold drinks. Drew and I stand on the nose of our yacht, ready to be received.

They call it sea legs, the feeling of adjusting to stable terrain after days on a boat. My whole body seems to continually lurch forward to test whether my feet will be there to catch me. I make my way through the crowd with a drunken stagger. Drew has dissolved into the seaside disco, where tourists chug rum from two-foot neon tubes. Girls in bikini tops wave their arms to DJs who spin outdated house from a second-floor balcony. I turn my back to the sea, not wanting to look at it, but I am still tossed around by the young bodies creating dance floors out of every inch of space not covered by plastic raffia outdoor furniture. The three women I have spoken to, two French girls and a German backpacker with painful buckteeth, only want to ask me questions about New York. It is after midnight, and even the palm trees reek of alcohol. Too many men are taking their shirts off and lathering their muscles in their sweat as if it were cologne. I understand right here next to two Australians screaming encouragement to pound tequila that I was right all along about not finding love in the roving waves of Carpe Diem Bar. People don't go on vacation to find love, you idiot, they go to get away from it. They go to wake up in unfamiliar hotel rooms, uncertain of what positions their bodies held the night before, tasting lips that don't speak the same language, the sensation that only someone who will never hold you account-

able and never learn to pronounce your name correctly can offer. I am usually skeptical of alcohol-induced epiphanies and try to control myself from memorizing this one for later reference. But under the waxy palms of Hvar Town, I cannot let go of the loneliness that drifts around these people, who are trying for maximum joy at any cost. We have sailed three days to find them. The epiphany is that I was right all along. You are lonely, Jim, here or there. You are a lonely person, but maybe you have no choice. Maybe that's just who you are. The colored lights crisscross over a sea of arms.

"Scream 'Yeah' if you're from Venezia," the DJ yells into the microphone.

Yeah.

"Roma."

Yeah.

"Barcelona."

Yeah.

"Athens."

Yeah.

"New York."

I give up on finding Drew. I figure that I am here to help Drew forget about his mother, and that might be easier for him tonight if he forgets about me. I shove my way to the exit, where a velvet rope has already fallen to the floor. The yachts along the pier drift quietly in place like deserted mansions, one bumping lightly into the next. Dubo snores in the kitchen. If he hears me tiptoeing to my bedroom, he makes no sign of goodnight.

"We go then?" Dubo asks me in the morning. For once I wake early, unable to fight the restless rocking of the boat to be awarded deep sleep. "You find no women here? Lots of Americans for you."

"We go," I say rubbing my eyes in the stark sunlight above deck. "I don't like Hvar."

"Your friend on board?"

I climb down the ladder and knock lightly on his door. An exhausted "What?" comes from his berth.

"We're ready," I tell Dubo.

On deck, the captain announces that he will use the sails today. The winds are strong, he promises, as he hops over the coils of rope to wrestle the white canvas from the mast. There is an odd, blissful smile on Dubo's face. Empty beer bottles line the pier of Hvar, and skippers sip coffee in the cafés, sharing stories about their latest hires. I don't bother to change into my swimsuit. I ignore the warning blisters of sun damage on my burnt face. We sail softly out of the harbor, and Dubo squats next to me by the blue cushions. He extends a small peach in his calloused hand. A number of faded scars cover his thick legs. He can tell I'm looking at them. He seems proud of their number.

"Thank you," I say, taking the fruit and resting it between my thighs.

"We must go back now. Be in Dubrovnik in two days. I have new group to take out."

Does anyone have fun on this boat? I want to ask Dubo this question, but instead I bite into the peach. I am thankful we can no longer see Hvar behind us, just the sea and fragments of a rocky coastline disappearing into the blue.

"Your friend, you know him long?" Dubo asks.

"A few years."

"You know him good?"

"I guess," I reply. He offers me a cigarette from his ear, and I can't help but wonder if this move is strategic: make the passengers miserable and then on the trip home flood them with last-minute hospitality to ensure a generous tip.

"I think he is scared," Dubo says, pulling on the ropes to position the sails against the changing wind.

"Why do you say that?"

"Americans scared. Scared of everything. Your friend a lot of talk, but underneath..."

"You don't know him," I say. He grins, tugging on the ropes, skipping around me to keep the sails filled with wind to launch us forward. "What about your wife?" I ask him. "Does she know you have women in every port?"

He eases up on the ropes, taking a few minutes to watch the sails slap loose in the air.

"I tell you, we have arrangement. We don't think like you. Not scared like your friend. I live in Spain two months during end of war with one woman. Beautiful. Big." Two hands scoop the air to signify breasts. "When you live at sea, cannot expect to settle. Wife not scared like you. We not Americans."

"Fine," I reply. I start dealing out a game of solitaire on the table, but Dubo's hand suddenly reaches out to touch my wrist, a soft gesture that shocks me more than a slap would. I can't imagine Dubo touching a man this way even as he is doing it.

"Have camera?" he asks me.

"Yes."

"You take picture for me?" He says this quietly, like a secret he wants to keep between us. "Picture of me on deck."

I pull Drew's backpack out from the storage bin underneath the cushioned seat and find his digital camera. We have only shot a dozen photos on this trip, and somewhere along the line, perhaps when visual evidence might threaten to keep our memories of Croatia honest, decided not to shoot more. Dubo climbs up onto the bow of the boat. He steps in front of the main sail, inflated like a clean lung. He gives himself a moment for a manly pose, sucking in his stomach and tightening his arm muscles. He then opens his mouth revealing a surprising set of clean white teeth.

"Take with sea behind," he orders through his smile. "Make sure you get sea."

"Right. Hold still."

I snap three photos of our captain, one vertical and two horizontal, all with the same satisfied pose. As I zip the camera back into the bag, he hurries back down and slips a small card from his front pocket, placing it in my hand.

"My address here," he says pointing. "By marina we sail from. Will you?"

"Will I what?"

"Will you send pictures to my house?"

I nod, deciding not to tell him the camera is digital and neither Drew nor I will likely be making glossy 5x7 copies of any frame captured

on the boat. I imagine an entire wall of his house devoted to shots of this man at sea, a whole murky hallway that his poor, frazzled wife paces down for days on end, entirely unaware of what her husband is up to in the sea outside her door.

I tuck the card in my wallet, alongside two crumpled five dollar bills.

“Once we cared about American money. It worth more than anything,” Dubo stares piteously into my wallet. “Now we don’t take it. Not worth paper. You tip me in euro or kuna only. My policy.”

Apparently favors in Croatia don’t carry any reciprocal value. Dubo returns to the ropes and the sails. I close my eyes to concentrate on the motion of returning home, graceful and restless, and fall asleep. An hour later I wake up to feel the burn on my forehead. I try to smoke the cigarette Dubo has given me but can barely choke down the heavy tobacco. I climb into the galley to prepare the afternoon lunch. The boat lurches. I have to hold on to the metal bars along the ladder to keep my body from crashing against the walls.

“Hello,” a voice says from the darkness. It’s not a voice I recognize. A woman’s voice, lazy American. I see her sitting at the kitchen table, peeling off pink nail polish with the edge of a butter knife. I stare at her in amazement, unable to form a proper response. Her long brown hair is swept over one shoulder, and she wears a red bikini top. Her face is freckled but the skin around her mouth is stained dark with a birthmark. Her eyes are the color of prunes. Her thighs are crenulated with onset cellulite.

“Who are you?” I ask.

“Shannon,” she replies with a lilting West Coast accent, as if her name were a promise of optimism and warm weather. She must have realized by my expression that the question demanded a more informed answer than her name. “I’m with Drew,” she says more cautiously, as she places the knife on the table and sweeps the nail-polish shavings onto the floor. “Is that a problem?”

“What are you doing here?” I resist moving further into the galley, not wanting to claim any responsibility for her presence. “I mean, on this boat. Now.”

She covers her mouth and lets out a low belch.

"Excuse me," she says. I hear Drew working the pump in the bathroom. "Can I ask where we're going?"

"We're going back," I say almost angrily.

"Back?" she repeats.

"Yes, back. Back to Dubrovnik. This is our boat. You shouldn't be on it."

Shannon closes her eyes as if she is working out a tricky math problem and then opens them again.

"That won't do," she says quickly. "You'll have to turn around. My friends are in Hvar. And all my stuff. You need to take me back right now."

"Look, we've been sailing for a good four hours. We can't just turn around. We aren't going back." I'd rather send this woman off in the inflatable dingy that is strapped to the top of the boat than return to Hvar, and for once I'm certain Dubo will agree with me.

"No, no, *no*, no, no." Shannon slides around the table, swinging her heavy legs, and manages, in only five feet of space, to skip to the bathroom door.

"Drew," she screams against the wood. "Drew, get out here. This guy says we're at sea and that we left Hvar hours ago. Damn it, open the door."

"We can't go back," I yell even louder, hoping Drew will hear me so I can cancel out her pleas before he listens to them. Shannon swivels her head at me, her face, all but the stain around her mouth, turning bright red.

"We'll see about that."

Drew opens the bathroom door and steps out in his boxer shorts, chewing dryly on spit, which signals that he's just been vomiting.

"Jim," he says tiredly. "Tell Dubo to go to Hvar. We've got to drop her off. Back where we were last night."

"No, Drew. Dubo needs the boat back. We'll lose a whole day if we turn around now."

I climb up the ladder to the deck, no longer interested in entertaining this conversation and flatly refusing to act as the emissary to Drew's mistake. Dubo stands at the wheel, and before I can give him any warning, Shannon and Drew are behind me, until the three of us

appear before him like an American tourist committee insisting on superior service.

“Dubo,” Drew yells.

“Ah, who is this?” Dubo studies Shannon, taking in her breasts and long brown hair, the way the eyes create invisible hands that are already grabbing and massaging. “Hello, pretty lady.”

“Hi,” Shannon replies with cloying American flirtation, the charm in her voice so confident that any accommodation will be made with the right feminine inflection. “I need to go back to Hvar. Can you turn the boat around? Can you do that for me, sweetie?”

“Cannot go back,” Dubo says. I’m almost proud of him for not falling for her crass seduction. “We will not get to Dubrovnik in time.”

“Listen, Dubo, we say we want to go somewhere, it’s your job to take us.” Even with his hangover, Drew has managed to locate his authoritative corporate executive voice. “This woman needs to go to Hvar, and we’ll take her there.”

“You not in charge,” Dubo growls while fixing his eyes on him. “You have boat six days. My job return boat in Dubrovnik on time. Friday night. No later.”

“That’s not going to work,” Drew replies coolly, but a slow whine is now cutting through his words. “Take down those sails and use the motor for fuck’s sake. Turn this thing around. That’s an order.”

Dubo smiles, not like he did for the camera, but a wry slow grimace that confirms he has no intention of budging. When Drew’s hand reaches for the wheel, Dubo’s fist comes down hard, knocking away the arm that threatens mutiny of *Ariane*.

“We not go back. I am captain. I say.”

Shannon starts to moan. The corners of her eyes are beginning to glisten in the sunlight. She turns to Drew and huffs out air. Drew is rubbing his wrist like a punished child uncertain of his next move. He isn’t used to losing, especially with a foreigner who he is paying out of his own pocket. He looks at me like I’m suddenly expected to argue his case, but even I have lost a kernel of respect for his abilities to keep the power in his corner. My eyes do what they always do naturally in heated circumstances. They become specialists in examining shoes.

Drew must sense the crowd turning against him, because he punches the air, screams a short succession of curse words, and descends the ladder. A second later the door to his berth slams shut.

"What about me?" Shannon cries, wrapping her arms around her stomach as if she is greatly in need of a hug. "I can't go to Dubrovnik. I don't know how to speak Croatian. And all my friends are waiting for me."

"Pretty lady." Dubo extends his hand, and Shannon accepts it reluctantly, choking on her tears. "Tomorrow we drop you in Korčula. You take speedboat back. Take only a few hours. Now you have a day at sea."

Shannon nods unhappily and sits on the blue foam cushions, accepting her fate. I climb into the kitchen to prepare lunch, and, as I'm halfway down the ladder, I hear Dubo asking her, "That friend. He good in bed to you?"

"No," she says laughing. "We passed out as soon as we got back to the boat." She pauses and then clarifies. "I don't even know him. I mean, I just came because I wanted to see the yacht."

The boat floats and crashes, spikes up in the air, hovers for a second free from gravity, and then collapses in the brutal, black, cemented waves. Light rain and seawater spray my face on deck as my stomach convulses, and I puke yellow liquid over the side of the boat. Kitchen plates in the galley crash to the floor and knives spin in the sink. Dubo warned us that a storm was coming. "Bad storm," he said, and ten minutes later the sky turned dark and the clouds sewed together. The storm hit us straight on. Dubo roped the sails against the mast, and *Ariane* tipped sideways, dropping beach towels, flip-flops, and plastic cups into the churning water. I ran to retrieve the Dramamine in my suitcase, but as soon as I swallowed the two pills, they came back up. For the past hour, I vomited the entire lunch I prepared into the sea and now the acidic juice of my stomach lining is having its turn at escape.

The one advantage of living alone is sickness by oneself. I hate puking in front of others, slumped over a toilet while someone watches with commiserating sighs and useless consolations. Shannon's determination to talk to me while I lay hanging over the yacht leaves me defenseless

to shut her up. She sits on the deck cushions, impressively untroubled by the rocking vessel, with Dubo's sea cap tied around her chin.

"I don't get this country," she says. "We went swimming twice in Hvar, and you can't even sunbathe on the beaches. They're all filled with rocks. You can't find a single inch of sand. And the water's freezing. I said to my friend, Claire, I said, 'I have a swimming pool in my backyard with the water set to eighty degrees all year round. Why did I come all this way to swim in ice-cold water when I've got much better stuff five feet from my living room?'"

Shannon tells me that she's a Hollywood producer. She made three films last year on tiny budgets and two of them did *phenomenally* at the box office. The third was just a small "heart" project that will recoup its losses on video, but the point is, she agreed to make it because the story touches people. "If you do one out of three that shows people you're trying to make *meaningful* pictures, that's all you need. When people know you're willing to risk financial success on a quiet emotional drama about a homeless woman who dares to beat the odds and becomes a ballet instructor where the daughter she gave up for adoption takes classes, they'll come to you for their bigger, lucrative investments. It's all about proving you have compassion." I lift my cheek off the wood deck and look over at her and then vomit into the cup of my hand.

Shannon eventually gives up on sharing her resume with me and disappears below deck. When I finally feel strong enough to join her in the galley, I find her sitting at the kitchen table next to Dubo. Her legs are strung over his lap under the table, where his hands are massaging her calves.

"I very good at massage," Dubo pronounces, sliding his fingers toward her thighs. Shannon squirms, telling him to stop but her paroxysm of giggles is full of encouragements. I walk quietly past them to guzzle a glass of water.

"Hey, Jim, Dubo was in the war," Shannon says matter-of-factly. "He was a soldier against the Serbs. He says Americans didn't do a damned thing until Dubrovnik was shelled."

"Great," I answer, trying to avoid eye contact with either of them.

"Dubo, do you think the storm will end soon?"

"More left," he replies, also uninterested in making eye contact with me. "All night it rain. We close hatch and stay under."

"Tell us, Dubo, be honest," Shannon continues. "Did you kill anyone?"

Dubo pulls the piece of thread around his neck and shows her the tooth hanging off it, the one he said belonged to a girlfriend.

"I defend coast. Plant mines in ground on stomach. On stomach for whole year."

"I thought you were in Spain during the war," I say.

"No Spain. Later Spain. They take all men all ages and put us in army. You ever been in army?"

"No," I reply. Dubo mutters a comment in Croatian and slides his arm around Shannon's back, trying to unhook her bikini top.

"Stop it," she squeals, and I turn, thinking I may have to defend this idiot woman's honor against a man twice my weight, but she's laughing as she slaps Dubo's arm and then places her forehead on his shoulder.

"Can we open some wine?" she asks. Dubo points at me and then to the cabinet that stores the bottles Drew and I brought.

My head spins and my stomach drops. I stumble to my cabin and fish through my suitcase for the vial of sleeping pills. I swallow two pills down dry with all of my remaining strength and fall back onto the mattress.

In the darkness, someone lies down next to me. I can hear a dense metronome of thumping coming from somewhere on the boat. Someone pivots their legs against mine and I feel their shoulder blades slide against my back. I try to roll over but a hand slaps my hip to keep me in place.

"Shut up. It's me," Drew says. "Go to sleep."

"What are you doing?" I am unable to make basic calculations, pushing head counts through to a simple conclusion.

"I'm crashing with you. Move over."

"What about..." I'm about to say, *your cabin*, but suddenly the thumping registers as coming from Drew's bed, and the simple math turns the vibrations into the unmistakable sound of sex.

“Oh my god, Dubo and Shannon? Jesus. Are you serious?”

“Shut up, Jim,” Drew’s breath smells of whiskey. He must have kept his own supply in his luggage. His speech glides loosely over syllables. “Don’t say a thing. Not a word. You don’t know a thing and you never did, so just don’t talk.”

“What?” I say defensively.

“You heard me.”

“Don’t take this out on me. I never even wanted—”

“Wanted what? Then I wish you hadn’t. I wish I had never asked you to come on vacation with me. You’re so pathetic. It’s all so fucking pathetic, and all you do is sit there, the weak, stupid shit that you are, making it all worse. Worse for me. I can’t be the only one. I can’t. I only invited you to come because I felt sorry for you.”

I don’t answer. I stare into the darkness as Drew rolls over, his chest against my back like he is spooning me with his soft breath blowing against my neck. It occurs to me that the hour of any possible resuscitation has come and gone. There is no saving our time in Croatia. No event will make the journey worth the price. We’re lost here together, as close as I’ve ever been to Drew, sharing a mattress with him, his arm falling over my stomach, his lips pressed against my shoulder. A lifeboat sent to find us wouldn’t know where to look.

The last image I have of Shannon is of her skipping over the plank onto the dock of Korchula. She wears Dubo’s white cap and his wraparound sunglasses. These items free her from having to make any excuses with direct eye contact. This is how I will remember her: turning around in Korchula to wave goodbye.

She did make one confession earlier when we were alone in the galley. “I’m on vacation. It was one of those dumb things that happen. You do it and forget. I’m not sorry, Jim, and I’m not going to be embarrassed. I’m on vacation. You do stupid things. That’s it.”

I wave back to her. Dubo salutes with a smile. Then he releases the ropes of the yacht and revs the motor. We speed out of the port on our route to hit Dubrovnik by nightfall.

“American girls so lovely,” Dubo says to me from his stance behind

the wheel. He winks and then demands breakfast. "Need to eat. American girl wear me out. I tell you, not hard to find love in Croatia. I like your women. Don't like your men."

"Why do you not like us, Dubo?" I ask. "Why?"

"Psst." He tries to wipe the smile from his mouth but it is frozen in place. The scar on his lip rises in a snarl anyway, and he looks out toward the open water. "Nothing to love."

"That's it." Drew barrels out from the galley. All morning he hid in my cabin, and I had hoped his hangover and sense of failure would keep him there for the rest of the journey. But now he takes the ladder two rungs at a time with his suitcase and backpack hanging around his neck from their straps. His blond hair juts out in all directions, and his lips are cracked from dehydration. "I'm getting out too," he yells. "Right here."

"Drew, calm down. We'll be in Dubrovnik tonight."

He stares at me without focusing his eyes, as if I'm part of the landscape he has come to hate.

"No way. Let me out. I'm not spending another second on this boat. Not another second with him." He points to Dubo, who looks sincerely troubled by Drew's sudden deranged appearance. Dubo shakes his head and drills the motor, sending the boat soaring through the water away from Korchula and knocking Drew backward against the ladder with bags strangling his neck.

"Dubo," Drew screams. "Turn around. I'm getting out. Let me off, motherfucker."

I try to take Drew's bags from him, but he shoves me onto the cushions. The captain eyes him nervously and then pretends to stare in concentration at the waves.

"Are you going to let me off or what?" The anger in his voice is now daring refusal. Drew has finally made a decision not to back down, like a corporate directive, a signature locked in a suitcase.

Dubo shakes his head. "We go back now. You get off in Dubrovnik. That is plan."

"I'm going to report you to your company," Drew says, shaking his pointed finger at him. "You like that idea? You are never going to hold

anyone else hostage on a boat again when I'm done with you. I'm going to make it my mission to get you fired forever, asshole."

Drew drops his bags and climbs onto the top of the boat, twisting around the mast pole to reach the black dingy, which crowns the yacht like a cheap ornament.

"Drew, stop it. Let's just get back. Please."

"No, Jim. I don't care about your plans anymore. Just let me off."

Drew unhooks the dingy, raises it over his head, and battles the wind as the inflatable raft nearly blows away into the sky. In an awkward roll, he manages to pull the dinghy down onto the deck. "If you don't let me off, Dubo, I'm jumping out in this. Turn around."

Dubo squints and grinds his teeth. Only when Drew throws his bags into the dingy and carries it lumberingly to the side of the boat, making good on his threat, does Dubo seem to grasp the full weight of the situation. He cuts the motor. The yacht spins clockwise in the wake.

"No dingy," he commands. "No air. Drown. Sink."

The captain hurries to the side of the ship just as Drew tosses the plastic shell into the water along with his possessions. As he steadies to jump, Dubo grabs him by the arm. At this action, Drew spins around and swings a punch at the captain's face. The fist, pumped and tightened by every insult and previously undefended shred of manhood, misses Dubo's jaw by an inch. As Dubo lets go of his arm to dodge the assault, Drew falls, his whole body horizontal and then disappearing over the side as he crashes into the sea.

I run to the edge to look over. The cursing comes as a relief that he is still alive. Drew dogpaddles in the water. I search the surface for signs of the dingy or his luggage but there's nothing there. It sunk just as Dubo predicted. There is only Drew punching the water that foams around him.

"Catastropha."

A life vest smacks the water next to his head. For a second I'm convinced Drew will resign himself to the sea floor rather than grab hold.

"Jim," Drew says, screaming up at me. "Jim, the water."

"Take the life vest," I call. "Don't be ridiculous. We're leaving today. Don't make this worse."

He looks up at me, and I can't tell if he's smiling or crying but his mouth is open toward the sky as he treads in the Adriatic drift.

"Jim, it's so cold and clear. It's perfect. It's exactly how I imagined. Why did we wait so long?"

The moored boats are black but the lamps along the marina attract whirling white insects. Waiters stack the outdoor tables and hose the trash into the sewer. Drew and I walk quietly away from the single cash machine in the port. My suitcase trails behind me on its rickety wheels. We have no money, no currency, no credit cards, and only my single debit card, which has just been denied for lack of funds. The wallet we were depending on, the one with enough kuna and credit to afford us a taxi to a hotel and a room with double beds and air conditioning and cable television, sits somewhere at the bottom of the sea.

"You can't get anything out? Not even an advance?" Drew asks incredulously.

"I guess I'm overdrawn," I reply meekly. "But I shouldn't be, unless my last check from Invisible didn't clear. I swear there was some money left." It suddenly occurs to me that I have no job waiting for me on the other side of my plane ticket back to New York.

We walk in silence. The sea air slips around us, smelling like we do, of fetid water. The only comfort we have is the ground beneath our feet.

When Drew climbed back on board *Ariane*, he sat in the cushioned seat with a beach towel draped over his head and only communicated with yesses and nos. Dubo put the motor on autopilot and disappeared into the galley, returning with the last of the cheese and ham and an open bottle of white wine. He placed three plates on the folding table. He wrung his hands nervously and tried to make eye contact with us, so much so that I finally granted him his wish and looked into his clear brown eyes. They stared at me grievously like I was his last friend on the planet. I wasn't sure whether Dubo was experiencing a tremor of guilt or it was Drew's threat to lodge an official complaint that made him look at me like that, but I genuinely felt sorry for him.

I didn't want to pity Dubo, but I did. I wanted to pity Drew, but I

didn't. I pitied myself most of all. I pumped the last of my urine from the toilet and packed my only bag.

After the yacht sailed slowly into the marina, Dubo tied the ropes and dropped the anchor. Neither Drew nor I waited for our captain to place the plank against the pier. We jumped over and walked away like two passengers in a car accident trying to get as far from the scene as possible.

"What do we do now?" Drew asks me, stopping underneath the last halo of lamplight at the pier. Beyond it is the black road leading into town.

"Can you call your bank?" I suggest. "Maybe they can wire some money."

"My bank. Why not your bank, Jim? How about that?"

I stare at him. I no longer care what brutal child erupts from his handsome face. No cheap shot in the world could stop me from leaving Drew just as I left the boat, walking away from him to find my own shelter for the night.

"I don't have any money, all right?" I say bluntly. "I'm not hiding any from you. That's the end of it. Just a ticket home tomorrow."

"I can't call my bank," he says. "There's nowhere open right now to receive it anyway. Nothing until morning."

"I wish your company had opened a hotel here."

"It would never work."

Drew sits on the curb by the taxi sign, resting his face in his palms.

"I don't even have my passport, no way of getting the money tomorrow even if it's sent. This is bad. Very, very bad."

"There is one last option," I say finally. "If you're willing. But it's going to hurt."

The card in my wallet reads *21 Zlataraska*, which matches the number on the chipped white door. The one-story house is strewn with ivy and inlaid with bricks cemented at odd, makeshift angles. I ring the buzzer while Drew stands ten feet behind me on the side of the road. I convinced him to come here because there is one last person in Croatia who does have a copy of his passport.

Footsteps behind the door shuffle along a carpet.

The frizzled blonde we saw the first day on the boat answers, wife to Dubo, stranger to us. She peers out from a crack of light with a distrustful cocked eyebrow as if I've come to repossess her dining room table and she should have known not to open the door. A loose floral dress hangs around her body, and she wears faded pink socks.

"Hello," I say as warmly as I can. "Is Dubo here?"

I can already see him behind her, hiding in the darkness of the hallway with a white unbuttoned shirt and a layer of moisturizer spread across his face. Classical music trickles softly from farther down the hall and candlelight beats against the wallpaper.

"Let's get out of here," Drew cries behind me.

"Dubo, we don't have any money," I say over the shoulder of his wife. She opens the door wider to expose more of her husband and glances at him worryingly. "I'm sorry to bother you. We need that copy of Drew's passport." And then I beg against Drew's wishes. "What we really need is a place to stay."

Dubo frowns. "Hmmm... ahhh." I have no idea what he is thinking, why he would take pity on us when he is no longer under any binding contract, why he should risk having us in his own home. I stifle a whimper that comes unexpectedly up my throat. Well, I stifle most of it. I let a little of it out.

"Will you let us in? Please? We can sleep on the floor of your kitchen. We don't care. We'll take anything. Please?"

The woman turns, and they exchange heated sentences in a flurry of V's and J's.

"Please," I repeat. "Can we please come into your home?"

"They talk like Dracula, don't they? They probably are vampires."

Drew and I sit alone at a plastic picnic table in the damp grass of the backyard. Rose bushes surround the house, sharp thorns that safeguard the crumbling brick and warped screens of the kitchen windows. Beyond a wood fence, I can just make out the red blinking lights from the tops of yachts anchored in the Dubrovnik harbor.

"Drew, we need to be polite. We aren't in a position to argue anymore."

Dubo's wife already led us to the bathroom. Drew and I both took a shower and changed into the last clean clothes I had in my suitcase to make our appearance more presentable—two young Americans of good breeding and innocent motivations. When we were dressed, she led us out into the backyard and then returned silently to the house. The blinds in the kitchen windows have occasionally cracked open, allowing Dubo's eye to gaze out at his former charges before snapping them shut again. I wonder if he worries that we will mention his behavior on the boat—Shannon or otherwise—to his wife. The back door opens and she walks out, now with a thin corduroy jacket over her housedress. She carries a teapot and two china cups on a copper tray.

Inside the house, I imagine Dubo pacing up and down the hallway, rubbing his hands together and biting his bruised, black nails.

"This has no caffeine," she says softly. "It should help you sleep." Her English is exceptional. She sits down on the bench next to me, smelling of lavender, and pours hot brown water into the cups. I wonder how I ever found her ugly and unrefined. Her eyes are deeply set and the skin of her hands and wrists is crane white, as she places the cups in front of us with the gentle motion of a mother.

"Did you have a good time on the yacht?" she asks.

"Yes," I reply before Drew can say otherwise. "The coast is so beautiful. Croatia is such an incredible country."

"Dubo, he loves the water. He loves the beaches. It's hard for me to convince him to stay home even on his days off. I like it too, but for me, I only go out once in a while."

"He's a good captain," I say.

She smiles at me.

"Yes, it is nice now. Nice that you see us this way. During the war, his boat was taken from him. You can imagine how hard that was for him—although he would not show it. Anyway, it was too dangerous to sail then. You may have seen some of the destruction that the bombs caused during the war. Buildings flattened. Our neighbors crushed in their homes. They wanted to destroy Dubrovnik only because it is so wonderful, a place of pride. But now the war is over and we are making money again. We are thankful. Dubo, especially. He has his

job working on this boat. He gets to show people like you what he fought to keep safe."

Drew slouches on the bench opposite us, his arms folded over his chest, and he keeps his eyes focused on the cup in front of him.

"Do you have any children?" I ask. The bedroom where we changed our clothes was decorated in bright, candy colors and posters of English soccer players.

"Didn't my husband tell you? We have a daughter at university in Zagreb. First year. She studies painting and graphic design. She wants to work for magazines. We miss her so much not being with us. Dubo makes fun of me. He says I cannot stop being a mother so I treat the turtles like Ana."

"Turtles?"

"Oh, yes, we have a whole family living here with us in the garden. They knock on the back door with their shells when they are hungry. But Dubo mothers them too." She turns to look at the house, where the kitchen blinds snap closed. I can see a shadow backing away from the window. "Last spring, he cut down a tree in the yard. He took his axe and didn't see her. He hit her right on the shell. He felt terrible. For days he tried to nurse her back to health, wrapping her in towels and bathing her in water. When she died he refused to tell Ana on the phone about it. That's how bad he felt." She blushes and laughs as she waves her hand through the air and then suddenly places it over mine on the table. "May I ask you something? I only ask because you are American."

She stares at me with a downturned mouth and eyes blinking rapidly. I nod and curl my fingers around her fingertips. Drew watches her intently, as if he suspects she will also say something offensive about our home country.

"Is it safe in America? Is it safe in New York?"

"Yes," I reply. "It's very safe. Why?"

Her eyes are watering. I can feel the blood pumping through her fingers as if they will soon begin to tremble.

"Ana will go to New York in the fall to study. She is part of an exchange program at NYU. I worry I am not a good mother. Dubo

will not forgive me." She pulls her hand from mine to wipe the bottom of her eyes. "He says I am being a bad mother. He will not forgive me for allowing her to go. He thinks she will not come back. But all children do come back, don't they? They don't stay away forever."

Drew slams his fists on the table and struggles to his feet. He stumbles into the darkness of the yard with his back to us. Boat lights flicker beyond him in the water. A faint whale horn blows in the distance, and bats flutter through the branches of a flowering jacaranda tree. I wonder if he is thinking about his own mother dying in a hospice in Connecticut.

"Tell me," she whispers. "He said nothing on the boat? I saw you before, when you were leaving last week. I was relieved it was two men. Men talk to each other. They tell each other things."

"We really didn't speak much," I say to her.

"He said nothing at all? Nothing about us?"

"No," I say. "He told us about the war. He showed us some beautiful islands. He never mentioned a word about his family."

"He was happy then?" She shakes her head and I can sense the intimacy closing between us, that she is already returning in her mind to the house and to her husband who hides behind the blinds of the kitchen window, worrying what secrets two American men are filling his wife's ears with. "New York is safe then," she says with relief, "safe for children. I am stupid. Forgive my questions."

In the periphery I see Drew hurrying toward us. His eyes are red and his hands are balled like a child's at his hips. I know he is about to tell this woman something so upsetting that she will never forgive us. She will wish she had never let us in through her front door. He will tell her something irreversible, something completely annihilating about her husband because it will be the absolute truth. I try to talk before he does. I try to erase what he starts to say by speaking as loudly as I can over him. I try to wipe it all out.

Drew points his finger at her and I can make out, "How dare he blame you for being a bad mother—" But I am almost screaming now, demanding her full attention. "New York is the safest place on the planet," I yell. "Nothing bad happens there. It has tall magnificent

buildings and streets free of crime where people eat and drink and listen to music in the parks and the only bad part is not having enough time to see everything. You wish you could never sleep. It's just like in all the movies and pictures you've seen. No one gets hurt or sick or lonely, I promise, because everyone looks out for each other. New York is lovely. *The very best kindest safest most beautiful place in the world where nothing can possibly go wrong.*" I feel tears clotting my eyes as I look at her, and for a second I am certain that she believes me. 