

The wake-up call came at 7:00 AM, and Lee and I were ready to make up for lost time. We were vacationing in the Cayman Islands, and had arrived the previous day. The inn where we had originally booked a room was across Grand Cayman Island from Seven Mile Beach, the aptly named string of oceanfront resorts. This establishment was off the beaten path, the travel agent had assured us, and a haven to scuba diving enthusiasts. It had a lot of character, she said.

It turned out that “a lot of character” meant filthy, roach-infested, with the half the phones out of order and no food. No beach on this side of the island, just impenetrable jungle and rocks. And “diving enthusiasts” must be people who had their own gear. We had been hoping to rent masks, flippers and snorkels. We were instantly regarded with disdain. We weren’t even *certified*? What the hell were we doing there?

We took the hint, and decided to abandon our lodgings to the banana spiders and palmetto bugs who had already staked their claim. We walked into Georgetown carrying our bags, and took a cab from there down to Seven Mile Beach. Lee and I had both learned to restrict ourselves to one large carry-on bag apiece when traveling overseas. One was plenty on that uneven dirt road in the tropical sun.

We had checked into a spacious and clean resort at about five o’clock in the afternoon. Our suite was quite pretty, ivory-colored tile floor, stucco walls with framed impressionist prints, the flowered pastel upholstery on the overstuffed couch matching the comforter on the king-sized featherbed – and all of it, did I mention, impeccably *clean*. The huge windows let in a generous amount of light, although they unfortunately faced the parking lot. You can’t have everything. We decided to take a walk by the ocean before sundown.

Seven Mile Beach is a wide expanse of sugary white sand and gentle surf, lined with gorgeous hotels and cabanas, each claiming a fair stretch of the waterfront for the exclusive use of its guests. Our hotel's property extended a hundred meters in either direction. It was off-season, October I think, and this late in the afternoon, the beach was deserted. We wandered a little ways away from the resort along a stand of coconut trees and then down to the water to let the waves lap at our feet. It was near low tide. The sky was reddening, the sun nearing the watery horizon.

There was a couple silhouetted in the scattered reflection of the sunset, knee-deep in the water among a cluster of rocks, about twenty meters out. They were bending over to examine something beneath the surf. They waved to us.

"Do you see anything good out there?" I called.

"Oh, yes," the guy shouted back.

"They are so beautiful," added the girl.

They both had heavy French accents. It was then I knew I was going to *love* this resort.

Soon, Lee and I wandered back onto the extensive tiled patio, past the landscaped pool and outdoor bars, and over to our first-floor suite. We'd nibbled at a tray of fruit we ordered from room service, and had fallen asleep by 9 PM.

Over breakfast in the airy, stylish restaurant, we decided that our plan for the day was to do absolutely nothing but lounge on the beach until we couldn't take any more sun, then to lounge in the shade by the pool. This really *was* off season. There were perhaps five other people at the extensive brunch buffet.

And there was *nobody* on our section of the beach. It was unbelievable. Into the distance in either direction, there were no more than ten people in sight. It was 10:00 AM, and the sun was already pleasantly hot. We spread out our towels, applied sunblock to each other, and then lay prone and motionless, soaking up the rays, Lee dozing off and me reading a paperback.

“Allo! ‘Ow are you?” said a voice from a dozen meters behind me. A girl’s voice, with a French accent.

I looked back over my shoulder and saw an arm waving.

“Come ‘ere!”

I looked at Lee and she was sound asleep. I got up, brushed the sand off myself, and sauntered over to their oversized red and white blanket. The guy was over in the water, observing whatever it was in the ocean again. She was sitting Indian style on the blanket, squeezing tanning oil from a small brown bottle into her palm and languidly massaging it into her arms, her shoulders, her chest. She was wearing nothing but a flimsy white thong.

Her thick black hair fell to her waist in a loose French braid, and she had patrician European features – big dark eyes, an aquiline nose, thick pouty lips. Her skin was brown as suede, shining with oil, not a tan line on her. She was petite, lean and fit. Her name was Cecile, she said, leaning back on her elbows and stretching out. Had we just checked in?

I had no idea how to react to the situation. The girl was gorgeous. Could I look? Should I not look at *all*, revealing my unsophisticated discomfort? How could she just recline there practically naked and make small talk so nonchalantly with a stranger? There was my wife, a stone's throw away, and her boyfriend just a short way further off in the ocean, sitting on a rock, studying something beneath the water.

I did my best to be cool with it. I introduced myself and told her Lee's name, that we had checked in last night and were staying for a week. I looked her over, but not too much, I thought. Appreciatively but not lasciviously. I realized that what I felt more than anything was envy for her – envy for having grown up in a culture where the human body is not so puritanically concealed. Where the exposure of a few more square inches of skin, especially to the tropical sunshine and ocean air, is seen as nothing other than completely natural and pleasant, and implies no intention beyond healthy relaxation. Heck, I was only wearing a Speedo myself. We Americans are so ridiculously neurotic.

Her boyfriend's name, she told me, was Claude. He was from Paris, she from Lyon. They both had green cards now, and had lived in Houston for the past couple of years. They were in their mid-20's, the same as Lee and I. Claude was the maitre d' at a 5-star hotel. Cecile was a fashion model. I sat down on the sand, and we had been getting acquainted for a while when Claude wandered in from the surf to join us.

He was maybe five feet ten, with an average build. His brown hair wasn't very long, but was always wild and unruly. He had an amiable face with a mischievous grin, thick eyebrows and piercing, observant blue eyes. He moved with a loose gracefulness and was prone to dramatic gestures when speaking. His English was not quite as good as Cecile's, but definitely a lot better than my French. I liked him instantly.

“Marteen,” he said a few minutes after joining us, “Let me buy you a drink.”

“OK, but I should let Lee know where I’m going. C’mon, I’ll introduce you two.”

The three of us shuffled across the sand to our towels, where Lee had woken up and was pretending not to watch us. As we approached, she looked up expectantly.

“Hey, remember these two? We saw them yesterday.”

“Yeah,” she said, slowly looking them both over.

“This is Claude, and Cecile. They’re here the rest of the week, too.”

Claude nodded.

“Allo,” said Cecile, extending her hand to be shaken.

A huge grin blossomed on Lee’s face.

“Hi.”

She sat up to take Cecile’s hand and then squeezed it for a second before allowing it to drop from her grip.

“Claude and I are going to go get a drink. Bring you anything when we come back?”

“A Pina Colada,” said Lee.

“Whiskey,” said Cecile.

The huge, elaborate swimming pool was perhaps thirty meters beyond the high tide line. Surrounded by a wide patio of rough beige ceramic tiles which dovetailed seamlessly into the sands of the beach, it had been ingeniously constructed to resemble some idyllic lagoon. There were two islands. Palm trees grew on one, surrounded by exotic succulent plants, with rough-hewn trellises bearing cascades of flowering vines. The other island supported a vast, multi-tiered waterfall. The pool was all curves, the sides and bottom matching exactly the color of the Caribbean behind us.

Across the pool from the oceanside patio was the bar. The barstools were mounted in the pool. You could swim right up and have your drinks without leaving the water, sitting waist deep. A cleverly placed shallow walkway angled along the front of the bar, to allow those who may have overindulged to wade, ankle deep, to the inner courtyard. I never wanted to leave this resort, ever.

We perched on a couple of the submerged stools, and I forget exactly what we ordered. Something having to do with rum and fresh fruit. Water dripped from our faces and arms, forming puddles on the glass top of the polished mahogany bar. The bartender had a shoebox full of cassette tapes, and we browsed through them. Claude and I simultaneously grabbed for Steely Dan's "Aja," then smiled at each other with mutual respect.

We had another round, some kind of liqueur admixed with the rum and fruit this time. Then I ordered shots of tequila, fresh lime, and sea salt. We disagreed over the order in which these should be consumed. Claude insisted the lime and salt came *first*. We each tried it both ways. Never argue with Frenchman when it comes to drinking. They know what they're doing. Don't try this at home, you almost expect them to say.

As the last chorus of "Josie" began to fade, I ordered Lee's Pina Colada and a double shot of Chivas for Cecile. Claude nodded approvingly. We ordered new rounds for ourselves and each took our girl's drink as well as our own.

"Put the tab on room 117," I told the bartender, winking magnanimously at Claude.

"Merci, Marteen," said Claude, "We will buy you dinner tonight!"

"I'd like that," I said. "I'm sure Lee would too."

When we got back out to their red-and-white blanket, the girls were lying side-by-side on their backs, eyes closed, conversing intermittently. Now they were both topless. Claude and I grinned at each other, then stood there and enjoyed the scenery for a moment or two before he stealthily walked over and carefully dropped an ice cube on Cecile's belly.

"Ohhh! *Merde!*" She let loose a string of epithets too rapid for me to follow. I realized my French wasn't as good as I thought. Claude struggled unsuccessfully to suppress his giggles.

"Can you teach *me* to talk like that?" I asked Cecile, and Claude and Lee both burst into gales of laughter. Cecile smiled sheepishly.

"Maybe," she said, shooting Claude one last sidewise glare.

We sat in the sun and drank, occasionally running over and splashing in the surf to cool off.

They had rented a Jeep, and wanted to take us to dinner that evening at a restaurant they had heard about. It was on the other end of the island, almost an hour's drive away. Maybe we could do some tourist stuff, like stop at the sea turtle farm, first. It was a plan. We headed for our respective rooms to get ready. Lee's chest was sunburned.

The sea turtle farm was interesting, ask me about it sometime. Dinner was fabulous. I remember lots of bamboo, lazy white ceiling fans, caged cockatoos and Matisse prints, shellfish and coconut curry, espresso and tiramisu, midori and ouzo. Champagne. We got to talking about pirates, which led to a spirited discussion of who had cooler clothes, Prince or Adam Ant. Prince won unanimously. It was obvious the four of us were going to be inseparable for the next few days.

On the way back to Seven Mile Beach, Claude insisted that an unlikely-looking narrow track into the dense jungle was a shortcut. Despite our reservations, he turned onto it. The road was barely more than a couple of ruts in the dirt, walled in by dense foliage. It was very dark. Swarms of alien-looking blue-and-white crabs with red eyestalks scuttled out of the headlights into the underbrush as we slowly crawled along.

“I still don’t think this is a good idea, Claude,” I said.

“Pffft, it is what the four wheel drives are for,” he said.

“What if we get lost?”

“We *are* lost,” said Lee.

“It is not so big an island,” said Claude.

“What if we get stuck?”

“Like last night,” said Cecile.

“Last night?” asked Lee.

“We went on the beach with the Jeep,” said Cecile, “and we were trapped in the sand.”

“What did you do?”

“The gendarmes came,” said Cecile.

“Gendarmes?”

“It is against the law to drive on the beach,” said Claude.

I didn’t like this story.

“What did you tell them?”

“We pretend we do not speak English,” laughed Cecile.

“They pushed us out,” said Claude, “And we drove away. They didn’t follow us.”

“Not far,” added Cecile.

We had stopped.

“We’re stuck *now*, aren’t we Claude?” I asked.

“I will get us out,” he said, “I use the front wheels now.”

He shifted into four wheel drive.

The Jeep lurched forward perhaps a meter or two, then rolled backwards, engine still roaring. The front end was now sitting noticeably lower than the back. Claude shifted into reverse and backed up maybe a couple meters, then we were mired down again. He shifted again, and the Jeep promptly slid down into the deep ruts he had dug on the first pass. We were now definitely *stuck*.

“I guess I better get out and push,” I said.

I took a heavy black flashlight from the glove box, and got out into mud up to my ankles. The jungle was uncomfortably close, the insects and frogs and whatever else lived in there making a racket fit for a Tarzan movie. The Jeep was sunk into muddy water up to the frame. A few car lengths ahead, the road looked reasonably dry and navigable.

I started to take a step, and the mud sucked the shoe off my foot. I turned and bent down for it, and as I fished for it the other came off as well. I dug them out disgustedly and threw them on the floor of the passenger’s seat. I waded barefoot to the back and wedged my shoulder into the tailgate of the Jeep, knees bent, toes curling for leverage in the muck.

“Okay!” I shouted, and heaved.

The engine roared and the Jeep moved forward a few feet. Twin fantails of mud sprayed up in the red glow of the tail lights, spattering my face and chest. I had no traction at all, and my feet slid out from under me. I fell onto my knees in the mud. The frogs continued to sing raucously.

“Shit!”

“I will help you,” said Claude. He said something in rapid French to Cecile as he climbed out the driver’s door. She clambered up from the back seat to drive.

“I might as well help too,” said Lee. She was wearing a light pastel cotton dress, the only semi-formal article of clothing she’d brought. But she was taller than Claude, and strong. This was no time for gallantry. We lined up barefoot along the back of the Jeep, angled into it, and Claude shouted, “*Allez!*”

We made another few meters’ progress, the wailing tires throwing a slimy brown spray which coated us all from head to toe. Lee was the last to fall down. The Jeep had made some forward progress, but now was in deeper than ever. When I stood up, I could see Cecile’s face in the rear view mirror, eyes wide, hand held to her mouth to cover her laughter.

“Some short cut, Claude,” I said. I was trying hard to be mad, but it wasn’t working. Lee sat calmly in the mud, awaiting further developments. Cecile was giggling helplessly from the driver’s seat.

“We need something,” said Claude, “something for... how do you say?” He was making grasping motions with his hand.

“Grab? Yeah, the Jeep needs to grab on to something. Traction,” I said

“Yes,” said Claude, crashing into the fringes of the jungle. “Like this!”

He had seized a large dead branch and was pulling it out into the road. It resisted for a moment and then gave with a loud snap. It was about four feet long, nearly as big around as my wrist, covered with dark, rough bark and fungus. We wrestled the branch into position in front of the rear wheel, poised like a lever beneath the frame of the Jeep. We hoped that it would be forced into the rut and give the tire some traction. Claude and I assumed our positions, leaning into the tailgate. Lee went a few meters out in front of the Jeep with the flashlight, to act as a navigator for Cecile in case this actually worked.

“Allez!” he yelled, and we made another meter’s progress forward. The tone of the squealing tire changed, and after a moment the sharp odor of wood and rubber burning permeated the rich loamy musk that already filled the air.

Claude stopped pushing, stood up and squelched his way over to examine his handiwork. I, however, had continued to push, and Cecile was still gunning away, spraying me with foul-tasting water and charred strips of bark.

“Arrete, Arrete!” Claude was calling, frowning.

The branch had become completely buried in the mud, burned slick from the friction, wedged irretrievably beneath the tire. Claude and I looked at each other.

“Hey guys, look at this,” called Lee from the front of the Jeep.

She was shining the flashlight on something lying at the side of the road. It was a piece of wood, a board about six feet long, a foot wide, an inch thick. It was perfect. I still have no idea what it was doing there. We wedged the board under the wheel, and were back on dry ground in no time.

The road did turn out to be a short cut. Even after our little mishap, the trip back to Seven Mile Beach took ten minutes less than the trip out. Claude smugly pointed out the time we had saved several times along the way.

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The resort rented masks, flippers and snorkels to all of us the next morning, and we set out in the Jeep to find the most remote beach we could. We drove along the coast on the northern side of the island until we were definitely a couple miles from anything, and found a likely-looking beach, with small grassy dunes and a handful of rocks rising up from the shallows.

The water was remarkably clear, and remained no more than waist deep for a hundred meters out or more. The first fifty meters out was thick with kelp, the narrow green strands waving in the gentle tides, looking from below like a well-kept lawn must appear to an insect crawling amongst the blades of grass.

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“That is absurd!” said Cecile, flopping onto her back beside Lee. “Americans are such *children!*”

I couldn't say I disagreed.

“Marteen, come here,” said Claude quietly.

“What is it, Claude?”

He was kneeling over a small leather satchel in the bottom of the armoire. He tossed a couple of blouses aside, reached into the bag, and pulled out an ornate green bottle with an elaborate, antique-looking label. He turned and held it up like a trophy.

“Do you know what this is?” he said.

The word had leapt out at me the instant I saw the label.

Absinthe. *La Fee Verte*, The Green Fairy. The legendary, beloved, infamous emerald-colored bitter liqueur that was all the rage at the Fin de Siecle, the aperitif of choice for Toulouse Lautrec and Paul Gaugin at the Moulin Rouge. It had *other* ingredients than alcohol with... interesting effects. It was wildly popular in France throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, by far the most consumed beverage besides wine.

It was especially associated with artists and poets, sometimes nicknamed “The Green Muse.” Addiction to it inspired Van Gogh’s unique expressive vision and drove him to suicidal madness. It was a favorite of Rimbaud and Baudelaire, Hemingway wrote of it, Picasso included it in several subjects. Arthur Conan Doyle portrayed Sherlock Holmes drinking the stuff. Mark Twain and Walt Whitman loved it, as did Edgar Allen Poe and Aleister Crowley.

Due to its highly addictive nature and the frightening effects of long term toxicity peculiar to absinthe, it had been banned internationally before our grandparents were born. Jim Morrison was said to have tried some bootleg absinthe in his final days in Paris.

“Absinthe,” I breathed, “Where did you get this!?”

“From home,” he said, waving his hand vaguely, grinning slyly.

“I thought this stuff had been illegal for a hundred *years*,” I said, “doesn’t it have opium or something in it?”

“Opium,” laughed Claude. “Non, non, it has *absinthe*. Artemesia, the plant.... How you say...” his hands were demanding, *come on, come on...*

“Wormwood,” I said. “Same as Chartreuse. I had that stuff once. Tastes like Absorbine Junior.”

“Chartreuse,” said Cluade, “pffft. Chartreuse is for the English. I show you how to drink *absinthe*.”

*Artemesia absinthium*, or wormwood, is in fact one of the principal ingredients in Absorbine Junior, and gives it that distinctive smell. It has always been known for its healing and pain-killing properties, and used in recipes for herbal remedies back to the days of Hippocrates. The liqueur known as absinthe was in fact devised as a tonic by a pharmacist with the cartoonish name of Dr. Pierre Ordinaire in the 1700's.

There's also a chemical in wormwood called thujone, supposed to have narcotic properties. Among some primitive peoples here and there around the world, the shamans *smoke* varieties of plants in the artemesia family which are known to contain thujone.

Of course, I didn't know a lot of this back then. I knew the stuff was legendary, that its formula had been a closely held secret, and that the taboo on its distillation cast doubts on its very existence in traditional form. But there it was. I could tell by the look on Claude's face that this was the real thing.

He reached into the bag and pulled out an ornate and oddly slotted oversized spoon, and a handful of sugar cubes.