

Tortola Means

a short story

by

Nadria Tucker

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Tourists think I'm lying when I say I can't swim, so I tell them I've already experienced enough ocean for a lifetime—that, growing up on Tortola, I've seen every type of coral, every kind of fish, swam in every inch of water surrounding the little island—but the truth is I never learned how. I was too busy learning to cook and clean.

I squeeze water from the mop and head inside, careful not to dirty the tile patio I just finished. My last job of the day is dinner. I'll cook for the father and son, set the table, clear the table, and wash dishes. I'll go home, pocketbook full of cash, and eat plain noodles with broth, easy, cheap. I dig through the cabinets and drawers, sort through the dishes, tossing rusted pots and splintered wooden spoons in the trash. How could they let everything rot?

“You need new things.”

I walk down from the big house to the rocky shore, stand near the edge of the dock. The son swims over, his strokes so perfect I can tell he's had lessons.

“We got all new last winter.”

“Nothing lasts forever.”

“Is that a bit of island wisdom?” He straps on a snorkeling mask and ducks his face under the water. “You snorkel?”

“I don't swim.”

“You don't have to. Hold onto the dock and stick your face under water.”

“I don't know . . .”

“If you're scared, hold on to me.”

You get used to tourists telling you what to do, but this is different—like he's asking. Without hardly thinking whether I should (I shouldn't), I strip down to my underwear and sit on the edge of the slimy dock. It could use a good scrub. I let him help me into the water and I suck in air as the cool wet hits my thighs, stomach, chest. He shows me how to breathe through the snorkel mask and when I grab on to him, some of the scared tension releases from my body, but not all of it. He's too close. I breathe in

deep and dip my face under the surface to look below. Coral. This close to shore, its dead, each piece a bone white hunk broken off from large formations farther out to sea. Still, there's beauty in the chalky forms, and I want to dive under, grab hold of one, pull it up to the surface, clean it off, a trophy, my reward for overcoming fear of water, of him.

I go inside to dry off. Family pictures and island crafts, mostly roosters, cover every wall and table in sight, like in every other house on the island, tourist or not. But roosters look different in a one-room apartment in a run-down, whitewashed building. Family pictures look different on my walls.

He leads me over to an alcove, accessible through a screen door and open to the sky. Inside, a fishpond, potted palms, and a hanging birdcage. Ponds are normal in the houses I work—a kind of do-it-yourself-if-you-have-the-money pest control. The fish eat mosquito eggs. But I've never seen a bird used this way. Blue and brown with a black tail, it pecks at whatever insects foolishly make their way into its gilded home.

“Turtle Dove. It's what ‘Tortola’ means.”

“Can I kiss you?”

Maybe we'll fall in love, get married, have beautiful mixed-race babies who'll never have to worry about money, never have to scrub a stranger's toilet or even their own.

“I've got to get back to work.”

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