

Four Days On the Equator Friday with Cal

Friday night. I had been wandering the streets of the island for something to do, finding the few island bars surprisingly quiet. I started the evening rather late. I had been walking around looking for a place that still served food at 9 p.m. A warm, salty drizzle had been falling on the streets earlier and the mist was now barely visible in the streetlights. The streets were empty. The only exception was the occasional islander in a yellow poncho moving slowly and without direction. After walking around for a half hour, I finally found a place with a raised porch still serving fresh grilled shrimp. There were two waitresses and a cook and nearly a dozen locals who had nothing better to do than hang out with their working friends and belt reggae songs playing on the radio. A damp, black cat found its way up to the deck and was sitting patiently at my feet waiting for food, affection or both.

After dinner, I decided to see if any excitement whatsoever was taking place on the island. I ducked into one empty bar and ordered a Beliken beer. The bartender was quiet and moved like humid ocean air. He leaned up against the bar, watching the flickering light of a bad TV reception. Talking to no one, I walked back outside to see if anything stirred on this tiny atoll. The streets were dark and empty. I had been walking for only a minute or two when I heard someone call out my name. I turned and could only see a hand emerging from a shadow, waving frantically for me to come over. I walked slowly towards a typical island hut on stilts. The paint was white and peeling, the wood beaten by wind and salt water. I walked slowly, unable to see yet who it was. He was sitting on the stairs with his back against the wall and almost completely submerged in the shadow except for his dark, bare legs. Suddenly a big, toothy smile shot out like an eel's grin from the shadow and I could tell right away it was Cal, my dive instructor. He patted an old, plastic lawn chair and told me to have a seat. I hesitated for a second, looked around the empty street and decided this would probably be the most activity on the island that I would find this night. I told him sure, I'd join him and pulled up the chair.

He asked me what I was up to. I said nothing, just looking for something to do. He laughed. We began to talk about diving and his adventures in the sea. His 6-year-old boy was in the street holding a red plastic gun and kicking an old soccer ball around, pretending to shoot me between kicks on an imagery goal. His plump, shy wife came out silently and sat on an overturned bucket next to the stairs. Cal and I continued to talk about the ocean and the way light and darkness distorts everything underwater, making it seem like you're moving even slower. His son continued to kick the soccer ball and point his gun at me, but with less frequency. I continued to play dead. Cal went inside to grab something. His wife stared straight ahead with a proud, subdued smile on her face, rocking back and forth on her bucket between the shadows and the yellow light as I told his boy how his dad taught me to dive. He pointed his gun at me again, this time with his arm outstretched, but he didn't shoot. He just stood there staring at me one eye closed, the other not blinking, not smiling, not moving.

Cal came back and enthusiastically thrust a slice of pizza at me as he took a big, hungry bite out of a slice he had in his other hand. A white guy with dreadlocks pulled up on an old Schwinn bike. Cal asked if I wanted anything to drink. I told him I should get going. He wouldn't have any of it. He told the guy with dreads to go to the store and get some beer. The guy got on his bike and took off without another word, weaving around puddles as he rode away. Five minutes later he was back with a plastic bag full of bottled beer. He handed Cal the bag, took one for himself, and then was off again. I insisted on paying for at least half, but Cal refused, telling me most people who visit the island worry too much about money- *just let me buy you a few beers, man.*

So I sat back down and started to drink the night away with Cal. After a couple of beers, his wife took their son inside to put him to bed. It was just Cal and I. The streets were quiet. The music from the nearest bars was faint. The more beer he drank, the less he talked about adventures in scuba diving and the more he began to talk about his past. *I went AWOL.* His story unfolded and he admitted to being in the Belize army. *Didn't I think he was in the military?* Well he had the tattoo to prove it. He lifted up his shirt to reveal the tattoo I had already seen dozens of times over the last couple of days when he

peeled his wet suit down. *But that was 7 years ago.* He told me that he's hoping they never find him on this tiny island and just gave up. He laughed and shook his head and said "fuck" quietly and repeatedly to himself.

The conversation slowed but the awkwardness of silence did not exist between us. We sat for awhile in front of his house, taking pulls from our beers and staring out across the road to the Caribbean sea where the shapeless midnight air was carried on ocean waves crashing against the reef. You couldn't tell where the night ended and the water began. But you could hear the surf constantly breaking on the tiny island. Its ragged waves moving like a drunken dancer moves with or without an audience as islanders lie in their beds trying to fall asleep.

Hey man, what are you doing Sunday? It was his wife's birthday and I was invited to come over. Pretty much every resident of the island was invited and he said I should come too. He was barbequing a whole pig and it was going to be a good time. I told him I would love to, but my flight leaves Sunday afternoon. *Alright man, no worries.* We sat in silence for a few minutes as I tried to think of something to say while awkwardly finishing my beer. Cal's wife stood up and smiled bashfully as she put a hand on my shoulder and walked up the creaking stairs to go inside. I could see their boy peaking out underneath the curtain in his bedroom window. His ball was resting near a light pole, his red plastic gun lying at my feet. He half-heartedly shot me as a goodnight gesture before being pulled inside and dropped it by my chair on the way. I wonder if he knew he would never see me again.

Cal wasn't talking much anymore, but he wanted me to stay. I told him I drank enough of his beer. I got up from my chair and put my hands behind my hips and stretched. Cal did the same. We both stood staring at the ocean one last time together. He stood next to me and pointed towards the darkness of ocean and sky and opened his mouth say something, but instead stood there motionless and in silence as if his thoughts got lost in the darkness of ocean and sky.