

Four Days on the Equator Saturday Night

Saturday night. Tonight is my last night on the island. There was a buzz in the afternoon that hung like a layer of salty humidity, hovering in the otherwise sedate island sun. As the setting sun dipped below the ocean horizon, the yellow street lights began to turn on one by one. More locals were milling about than I had seen all week. They were dressed nicer, but still looked bored as they hung outside of the same 5 bars watching those who weren't habitants of the island. The divide still existed between the tourists and those people whose broken homes were the center blocks of the island.

I hung out on a picnic table by the beach, watching as the locals lazily eyed the tourists who always seemed like they had some place to go. I ordered shrimp kabobs from a lady who rolled out an old grill to a random spot between the road and the beach. She had her food in a cooler and was serving on paper plates with rice and beans, coleslaw and cornbread. I took my meal and ate alone at a table near the shore. The wind was blowing heavy off the water, the breaking waves were lit by the moon as they stumbled over the reef hidden just below the surface more forcefully than previous nights.

I finished eating and headed to the bar with a wooden dance floor built over the sand and the NBA finals on the TV's hanging in the corners. People were sitting around on picnic tables drinking Belikan beers and occasionally looking up to check the scores. I sat at the bar alone, trying to fit the part of world traveler with a bandanna headband tied around my long hair and a ragged beard from not shaving for several days. As I watched the strobing commercials for cars and allergy medicine, I overheard the conversation of an Irishman living in San Francisco and a young, Australian lawyer who recently resigned so she could travel Central America for a month or two. In her thick Australian accent, she was asking him what America was like. *America is an intense place.* He said San Francisco is a great place, but people work very hard to maintain their lifestyle and work long hours and don't see their friends and family as much as they do in other countries.

I was bored and half considered buying a bottle of rum to drink by myself down on the beach with the stray dogs and

maybe the Rasta artists who hung out in the darkness after doing drugs. But the bar was slowly filling with people wandering in off the street. I drank a few Belikan beers and watched the end of the game. I noticed the first beautiful girls that I had seen all week. A few of them were sitting at the end of the bar right underneath the TV, surrounded by three European guys who seemed ridiculously dressed up for a night out on this laid back island. One of the guys came over next to me and sat down to talk to the bartender who was probably the owner, too. The bartender had a sun-hippy smile and bleached blond hair and seemed like the type of guy that came down as a tourist and just never went back home. He poured two shots for himself and the European. They clicked shot glasses and then downed the contents. *Was Amsterdam as decadent as everyone says?* He's always wanted to go. The bartender then asked about the women at the end of the bar that he and his buddy were talking to. They both looked over and the bartender held his shot glass to his lips and smiled and told the Dutch guy that these girls are gorgeous- especially the blonde as he nodded towards the corner. I looked over just as a blonde girl, who I hadn't noticed before, got up to head for the dance floor.

We all watched in silence as she began to move her hips to the music. She was pretty, but it wasn't her beauty that captivated us. It wasn't her body or her clothes. It was the way she walked. The way she took a drink. The way she moved on the dance floor. She was dripping with sexual energy and desire. She could make any guy in the bar blush if they made eye contact with her. Her blonde hair was braided and pulled back in tight rows, her eyes were an intense light blue, and she wore a tight tank top and hip-hugging pants. She wasn't hard to look at, but it was her attitude that every guy in the bar noticed. She had attitude.

The bartender smiled and winked and went to mix more drinks for the customers pouring in. The Dutch guy went back to the corner. I turned back towards the bar and ordered another Belikan. The night was coming alive now that the basketball game was over and people from the tiny island were beginning to wander in and out of the bars.

The girl with the dark hair who had been sitting next to the blonde had been making eye contact with me. I didn't know what to make of it, so I smiled and kept drinking. I

probably looked like a crazed vagabond compared to the way she and her friends were dressed. I hadn't shaved in more than a week and I was wearing cargo shorts, an old polo-style shirt and sandals. Not exactly dressed to kill, but it must have made her curious.

Bored, I turned and struck up a conversation with a girl who was leaning on the bar next to me, trying to order a drink. She seemed cool, but couldn't speak much English. She introduced me to her boyfriend who spoke only slightly better English. Both from Amsterdam. Both tall. Even though he didn't speak the best English, we managed to order each other a couple of drinks as we talked a bit about diving. Our conversation was interrupted by the barrier of language like the reef interrupting waves, and I was watching the dark haired girl slowly drift our direction as she made her way to the bar. The Dutch guy and I kept smiling politely at each other and ordering drinks, but couldn't think of much else to say. I was standing now and found myself in a crowd. He told me that quite a few people from the Netherlands were on the island, but none of them knew each other. It was just coincidence. The conversation stalled again when I couldn't think of anything else simple to say. I noticed now that the dark haired girl was standing alone at the bar just as my conversation with the Dutch guy was officially ending and we were slowly backing away from each other after saying *cheers* and *maybe see you in Amsterdam someday*.

I found myself standing in the middle of the crowd. She was leaning with her back against the bar watching me. We made eye contact and I smiled as she walked right up to me and told me her name was "Wenda."

She had brown hair and matching eyes. Her skin was dark, and she wore tight black pants and a tank top. For a moment, I had no idea what to say. I couldn't reason why this beautiful Dutch girl who was obviously dressed for a night out would approach a wild, scraggily looking guy in a bandana and old sandals. She was holding two drinks- I asked her if she needed another. Her English was pretty good because she laughed- or she was just polite. Either way, she introduced me to the magnetic blonde who happened to be her sister-in-law. Up close, she was still goddessly attractive. She swayed back and forth to the music while sipping on her drink with a straw. Beads of sweat dotted her face and her eyes were blazing like a neon blue sign.

She smiled at me and was about to say something when another girl grabbed her and quickly dragged her to the bar to do a shot of Tequila. We both watched as she downed the clear liquid and then shot straight back to the dance floor.

Wenda and I kept talking for the next hour or so. I don't remember about what. We were stuck in the corner of the bar behind crowds of people, but it was the perfect excuse to keep drinking as we watched her sister-in-law dance between breaks in our conversation. At least half a dozen guys approached her to dance with her. But every single one would only dance for a short while before disappearing as they quickly realized that they were just fragments of her imagination, apparitions of the Caribbean night.

After several drinks, Wenda disappeared to the bathroom. I leaned up against a pillar between the bar and the wooden dance floor. I was buzzed from alcohol and conversation with strangers. I soaked in the scene. Wenda's sister-in-law of sex and mystery walked up with a fresh drink in her hand. She had a tight sleeveless shirt on that enhanced the slopes of her body, cargo pants that hung low on her hips and showed just enough skin to make you curious, but I couldn't stop staring at her mouth. I told her I never got her name. She said I never gave it to you, took another drink and waited for me to blink or look away. I couldn't think of anything but to finish my beer. She started to say something else, but I couldn't hear her over the music. I pointed to my ear and shook my head. Her English wasn't quite as good as Wenda's. So she put her arms around my neck and talked with her thick accent into my ear, asking if I thought her sister-in-law liked me. I shrugged my shoulders and told her I didn't know. She said something in Dutch, stared at me for a few seconds, laughed and turned to find the dance floor again just as Wenda was walking back.

Wenda wanted to sit. Talk. Drink some water. I said yeah, whatever. We found a booth close enough to the dance floor to watch but far enough from the speakers to hear each other. I found out that Wenda was a dancer and she was "supervising" her sister-in-law. She taught ballet and ballroom and mentioned that she was half Czech. She loves photography, listens to just about every kind of music but jazz- she doesn't get jazz, *do I like jazz?* Said she could teach me to dance, going scuba diving tomorrow or maybe

church, *would I like to come?* I told her I was leaving tomorrow and I need to be out on the dock by 10:30 to catch a water taxi back to Belize City for my 12:00 p.m. flight. She continued to drink her water. We both watched the dance floor for awhile. We were close enough to see more and more bumping and grinding as people became more and more intoxicated. We watched as the locals began to hook up with each other and the tourists began to thin out. I wondered if this was the typical Saturday night. The locals hit on the tourists until getting turned away too many times or getting too drunk or both to care about anything other than finding their way home to their shacks by the sea with the same person they went home with several times a month, with their sweaty and drunken moans being displaced by the cool Caribbean breeze. Every Saturday, the same ritual. It was a pattern of life on this tiny island that tourists rarely noticed because they were here for only a short period of time to dive or snorkel and the locals never noticed because it was the only life they knew.

Wenda began to yawn and wanted to go home, so she told her sister-in-law that she was leaving. I took one last look at the blonde, but she never made eye contact. She was sweaty and drunk and her body moved like waves crumbling over the barrier reef as drunkenness and exhaustion began to slow her down.

We stepped outside into the cool, moonless night. Stars were scattered across the sky like a school of spooked fish. We walked under the sporadic yellow streetlights. Half were broken, the other half buzzed constantly in the breeze. The road was empty. The thumping music receding behind us as we began to walk towards the other end of the island. Wenda walked closer to me as we passed a small two-story hotel that had never been finished. Its empty windows and doorways stood side by side in a failed attempt to stop the breeze from entering. It looked larger at night than it had when I passed it during the day.

We walked slowly. I don't remember what we talked about. Probably nothing. She stopped after a few minutes of walking and couldn't remember where she was staying. I turned around and we were standing in front of my modest ocean side inn. It crossed my mind to suggest going up to my modest room to lay together in the dark and listen to the wind and the ocean, but under the yellow streetlights,

she looked either more drunk than I thought or just sincerely tired. Either way, I said nothing. After a quiet minute or so, she seemed to remember and we continued to walk in and out of the shadows that covered the dirt road like puddles after a rain.

We reached her inn. It was a collection of cabanas on stilts surrounded by a gated white fence. We entered the small courtyard and stood in the center for a few awkward seconds. She dug in her pockets for her key and mentioned again going to church tomorrow; *sure I didn't want to come?* I leaned in, hesitated, considered and then just gave her a big hug. I held her for a few seconds, leaned into her ear and told her to go diving tomorrow morning instead. I turned without making eye contact and headed out again for the last time in the Caribbean night to write these events down before memory succumbed to time.