

Boom, Like That!

Low tide, dark night. Lucky thing, it allows Jeton to walk the half mile across the reef to Kwajalein. The short cut. He's got to walk fast, watch for Security Patrol, and get across before the Security boat motors by with its sun-bright spot. He has to walk careful too, watch that he doesn't slip and cut himself on the coral, which is sharp like fish knives. Salt water will ruin the leather Nikes he borrowed from Cousin Mike. But fuck it.

He watches the lights of the 9:00-PM ferry on its way back to Ebeye. The last boatload of *ri-Maje!* returning for the night to their little lump of sand. And curfew begins now.

It takes a long time, this careful walking in dark water.

As he sloshes through tide pools, slipping every other step, cursing the reef, he almost wishes a rogue wave would reach over from oceanside and pull him into the depths--then Nora would be sorry, drowned Jeton washed up on Emon beach where Nora takes her morning swim.

They met at a soccer game when his high school played the American high school. Ebeye boys run fast and play barefoot--they know this scares the American boys. They beat the Americans 5/2. Jeton plays goalie. He is good at diving for the balls. And he is unafraid of players rushing the goal. He has lost one tooth already from a crack-up at the net. "You could win a scholarship playing the way you do," Nora told him after the game. "You're damned reckless, you know that?" She was flirting, he knew right away. He offered her a cigarette and she said, "Are you crazy?"

"Yes," he said.

That's all it took. Boom, like that.

She loves him. She has said this many times. But she must fly home tomorrow. Four thousand two hundred miles east, back to the States. She will attend college while he finishes his last year of high school on Ebeye—if he can get back into high school. Nora does not know that he has lost his seat in class. He has been absent too much.

What is four thousand miles to Jeton? He has flown to Guam twice. One thousand three hundred miles. That was far enough. Nora says maybe he can go to college in the States. Win a scholarship. They could see each other, she says

Jeton knows she is lying, trying to make everything OK.

Nothing is OK anymore. This morning he called her on his cousin's cell phone. When she answered he said, "I'm gonna die if I don't see you, **bellen**."

He heard her sigh the kind of sigh he hears his younger sister make when she looks at the mail-order catalogue from the States, at all those things she knows she can't ever buy.

"I know, it's hard," Nora said.

He held that hot little bit of plastic phone to his ear and listened to the static. It sounded like rain splatter against wet sand.

"I own a fourth of that island," he said, desperate for justification.

"You mean your grandmother does," Nora corrected.

"Same thing, **bellen**."

Bellen: "partner," "mate," "wife" in his language.

“You know you can’t come over now,” she said, sounding weary—because he’s been banned from Kwajalein. Everyone has heard about how Nora’s parents caught him and Nora fucking on her patio.

When Jeton passes the boys on Ebeye, they cluck their tongues and grin. Some show him the thumbs-up. When he was younger—last year--this might have made Jeton proud. Now it just makes him shake his head sadly. He wishes he could tell the others how painful every thought of Nora is.

Jeton’s grandmother gets a check every few months for her part of leasing Kwajalein to the Americans. It’s been enough to buy her a condo on Guam, a new Nissan Altima LX every year, a pork farm in Manilla, but not enough to give to her huge family, every one of them with an empty hand held out. Still, she offered to buy Jeton a used Sentra and set him up in the taxi business on Majuro, the capital. Majuro island is one mile wide and 34 miles long and 300 miles from here. They’ve got a couple of discos and a copra plant and five different churches. Big deal. Jeton pictures himself driving the dusty roads of Majuro all day for fifty cents a ride, living in a room behind the Ambassador Hotel, drinking beer on the pier with the other boys until the sun sets, spending his nights looking to hook up with a pretty **likatu**.

Fuck that.

"They can't keep me from coming over," he told Nora.

"They'll put you in jail, is that what you want?"

He laughed. Ebeye’s jail is a white-washed cinder block building the size of a boat house, surrounded by chain link fence.

"Jeton." Nobody has said his name like that, like it was a valuable secret. He imagined a lifetime of her saying his name, her lips inches from his ear. He could smell the strawberry shampoo of her hair, the flowery scent of her body lotion--she sunburns easily. He wanted to touch her. He imagined the two of them lying on the beach after curfew, the half-moon bright on her knowing face: she pulls down his shorts, nibbles at his belly to make him laugh, kisses him until he aches with impatience.

She gave him everything.

When they were loving each other in her narrow bed in the cold air-conditioned darkness of her room—after he had sneaked over while her parents were at work--they both made promises he believed they would never break.

She said, "You're the one, Jeton, you're the only one."

Other girls-- *ri-Maje!* girls--have said this to him. But *ri-Maje!* girls say whatever comes into their heads. American girls are different. They believe in "going steady," they believe in having one man for life.

Jeton promised to make Nora happy always.

Now she says she has to leave. And he believes her. She says she will write to him once or twice a week. And he believes her, even though he has no computer for email. She says their time will come. And he wants to believe her. But he suspects that once she flies away, he will never see her again. He could tolerate this if only she could convince him that the separation sickens her the way it has sickened him.

Is he **baka** for having believed her? There is a term American boys use to describe this:
pussy whipped.

"How was the party?" he asked her over the phone. Her going-away party.

"It wasn't the same without you," she said.

He knew she was telling him what he wanted to hear. He knew she had a good time, though she said she danced only with Britt, her girlfriend.

"I've got to see you," he insisted.

She said nothing and he knew that in her head--in her *ettōnak*, her awake dreams--she was already on that plane, already back in the States, going to college, dating other boys and thinking of a "major" and a life Jeton can't begin to understand.

"I will write," she promised.

"Sure," he said. "Long letters."

When he handed the phone to his cousin, his cousin was looking at him like the time he got a big fish hook pulled through the palm of his hand. He said, "Jeton, you know, the phone--your voice--it goes up into space, hits a satellite, then bounces back, a hundred thousand miles, man, your voice is traveling just to get from here to there." He pointed across the reef to Kwajalein, which they could see from the dock: a flat stretch of green in the distance.

A hundred thousand miles.

Now: something stutters and skips past his feet. A shrimp scuttering to safety.

Americans like to come out here with flashlights to hunt for shells at low tide. Some aren't careful and the high tide catches them, sweeps them out and they are never found. All of this is a mystery to them, the water, the reef, the life the *ri-Majel* used to know. The *ri-Majel* used to be great navigators, great canoe builders. They knew how to read the waves and they made secret charts with sticks and cowries shells that enabled them to travel anywhere they pleased. No one

knows how to do that anymore, except at the Allele Museum on Majuro, where two old men work year-round hacking out ceremonial *tipñōls*, sailing canoes, for tourists to see.

Jeton once took Nora to Pikeej in his uncle's speed boat. Pikeej is uninhabited, an overgrown coconut plantation with many hidden ruins from the World War Two, Japanese bunkers and huge oil tanks rusted orange. "Oh, God, Jeton, this is so cool," Nora said as they combed through the jungle. Jeton had a machete, wasps bobbed over their heads, the air was sweet with the scent of *kōno* blossoms. They found a grassy mound that could have been a grave site or a buried ammo dump. There they slipped off their clothes and looked at each other in the filtered light. Then they kissed and kissed until their lips were raw and there was nothing left to do but exhaust each other another way.

Why can't she see that life for them could be like this always?

Jeton comes ashore at last, wet up to the knees of his khakis. As he walks, his borrowed Nikes sound like soggy mops against a tile floor.

Nora lives in one of the new pre-fabs at this end of the island. They all look alike and, for a moment, Jeton panics, hidden in the shadow of someone's central air. He doesn't know if he can remember the right duplex.

If they catch him what can they do?

Last night, while drinking, one of the older men said to him: "Loving American **likatu** is no big deal. Everyone has a story of loving American girls."

This is what he fears, he realizes, that he is not special, that there is nothing in him that will make him different from anybody else. Doesn't matter if his grandmother owns one fourth of

Kwajalein. Doesn't matter if he would've been a prince in another life. What is he now, right now? Maybe this is what Nora wonders.

Here comes the Security pickup with its big light. Lucky thing there are no dogs on Kwajalein, all that barking. Jeton scrambles farther into the shadows just as Security shoots its light where he was crouched. Truck slows to a stop, engine grumbling, light snaking through the dark stubbled yard between the pre-fabs, back porches, bamboo fence, gas grills, locked-up bicycles. Jeton pants, sucking air through his mouth, balled up behind a low fence. Shameful to be caught this way, like a shrimp curled under a rock.

Then the light is gone suddenly, the truck rumbling on.

Jeton stands up, pushes the hair from his eyes, smooths it back. He can smell his sweat below his English Leather cologne. Nora says she likes his smell. *Ri-Maje!* girls want you sweet like flowers.

He finds the right duplex—Nora's mother put up a family name plate over the door bell, their name burnt into a slab of wood. Jeton leaves his Nikes by the back door, smells the warm-fishy odor rising from them. The door is unlocked. Nora explained that this is why Americans love Kwajalein--it's like a small town, she said, you can leave your door unlocked at night. Jeton smiles at this.

It's so cold inside Nora's house Jeton shivers. Her cat, Simon, greets him, curling around his leg. A blue light gleams from the kitchen counter like a buoy in the distance. The house smells of chocolate cookies and ginger spice. Even in the dark it all looks familiar. He could live here, though he wouldn't clutter it up with all these little things, baskets and glass and books.

Carpet is thick as grass. Two minutes and Jeton is up the stairs. The door is closed to the room of Nora's parents. Nora says, old as they are, her Mom and Dad still have sex. This makes Jeton smirk. It is something he would never say about his own mother and father.

He hesitates outside Nora's room, fingers pressed hard against her closed door. He does not want to scare her.

Slowly he eases the door open. Simon squeaks its birdlike meow behind him. He closes the door in the cat's face. Then the room envelopes him in Nora's baby-powdery, girlish-sweet smell. Tears burn at the corners of his eyes. Nora! The posters of pretty-faced rock stars on the wall, the crowd of stuffed animal toys on the bureau, and on the neat desk top the conch shell that Jeton gave her for Christmas. She uses it as a paperweight.

Her narrow bed, neatly made.

Her big suitcase on wheels stands next to it.

Jeton sits, nearly falls, into her desk chair and stares at her empty bed.

Gone!

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The difference between Kwajalein and Ebeye starts with the streets, Jeton decides. Here they are wide and paved and bright with electric light. The houses are neat, they all look alike, the yards are clear of motorbikes, scrap wood, trash, and chickens, and everything everywhere is green.

Jeton prefers Ebeye. Or Majuro. The haphazard houses and the sandy streets that curl and twist like vines and the animals that run freely and the children playing everywhere you turn and the cooking smells and the women singing and the laundry flagging from the lines over the dirt

yards--all of this feels good. The Americans' place seems empty and haunted like Japanese ruins on Jaluit.

Here it is, Britney's house. Plastic Chinese lanterns of many colors glow from the bamboosed patio. Jeton hears several girls talking, laughing. Sleepover.

Far from the patio fence, Jeton crouches at the trunk of a palm tree and listens. He can't make out what they are saying. Maybe talking about hot boys. Maybe talking about college. Who can tell with girls?

When there is a lull in the chatter, Jeton whistles. It is his special whistle, sounds like hissing and bird squeak at the same time. Everyone in his family does this whistle. Nora has teased him about it. "You think I'll answer *that*, like a dog or something?"

He whistles again. Now the girls whisper severely to one another. A wasp's nest. Then he hears his name, like a curse on their lips. *Jeton, it's Jeton.*

And he knows that he has made a mistake. He should run, he should leave Nora alone, he should give her space, something Americans are always talking about. He is making trouble. But he can't go, he won't go. Not now. He will take his punishment, whatever it is, like the day he reefed his uncle's boat, like the time he insulted his grandfather by patting him on the head like a child, like the night he got drunk and rode his brother's bicycle off the pier.

The patio door opens, a paw of yellow light leaps into the yard, and Nora--unmistakable silhouette--walks towards him. The pink of a nearby street lamp lights her face. It is the face of a smart woman. *Mālōtlōt*. Wide, round freckled cheeks, a nub of a nose, big eyes like his own, dark lashes and dark brow. The kind of woman who could live happily on an outlying atoll. Who would not cringe from cleaning fish. Who would not complain when the rains came.

She is popular, she has said, because she is not pretty like those models in the Nordstrom catalog who scare Jeton because they look so **mij**. Dead. "Who could love them?" he asked her. "Why do Americans think these creatures are **jouj**?" Questions like these delight Nora: he can make her smile. This is how it should be always.

Tonight she wears a rock band t-shirt--"Metallica," it says-- and white shorts and her white Birkenstocks. Tall, long legs, head up like she was walking at graduation. A woman who would sail with him through Toon Milu pass, north to Rongelap or Bikar or far-away Bokak.

What can he say to make her smile now?

He remains crouched, out of respect. He wants a cigarette, something to do with his hands.

"Jeton, what are you doing?"

His listens for love in her voice, a voice so much lower than any *ri-Majel* woman or girl he knows. Americans talk deep in the throat with flat words.

"I die when I don't see you, Nora."

"How did you get here?"

"Walked."

"Across the reef? Are you crazy?"

"Yes."

"Jeton." Sighing, she kneels near him. Her freckles he can see now: a thousand islands he wants to inhabit.

He says, "I don't want you to go." The words hurt like fish bone in his throat, make his eyes sting. As he wipes at them, he sees the other girls peering from behind the patio door.

"What would I do here?" Nora says. He hears gentle goodbye in her voice.

He shrugs. "We could have fun."

He wants more than fun. He knows she knows that.

She sighs. "We have been over this several times."

"You and me could do it, **lijera**, we could live on a island, just like we dreamed. You'd like it."

"I'm seventeen, Jeton, what do I know about living on an atoll?"

"You could learn. You and me could learn. You *love* it here, you said so."

"I'm *seventeen!*"

He says nothing, only stares at her in a way he knows she finds charming. This is something she likes about him, how he will not argue, how he waits her out.

"Why does this make you smile?" she asks.

"Seventeen, Nora. You can do anything."

"And that's what I want to do--anything and everything. Things I can't do if I'm stuck on a tiny island out here in the middle of nowhere."

"Nowhere?" There is no equivalent for *nowhere* in his language. *Ejjełok* maybe: nothing.

"I didn't mean it like that," she says quickly.

He sees regret in her face, that sorry look he has seen after his mother loses a day's wages at cousin Amsa's weekly cock fight. *Gone*, her look says, *it's gone*.

Jeton weighs the American words of loss: *nothing, none, not, no*.

His **lijera** lays her hand lightly over his, brings him back abruptly, but he can hardly see her for the tide rising in his eyes.

She says, "Jeton, don't you have any plans?"

"College, Nora? I'm no good at school."

"You could win a scholarship to college, the way you play soccer. Maybe start with junior college."

"In the States? You don't want your *ri-Maje!* boy in the States with you."

"I didn't say we'd be together, Jeton. I'm talking about your future, not about us."

"You are my future."

"I am your girlfriend, that's all. And tomorrow I'm going fly away. That's a fact you have to accept."

"I don't want you to forget me," he says.

"Why would I forget you? How could I?" She lowers her head to meet his eyes.

Sitting in the half dark, palm tops clattering above them in the breeze, the girls spying on them from the patio, Security Patrol prowling somewhere nearby--Jeton understands that he wants more from Nora than she can give him. If only he could describe his feelings, he might change her mind. But there are not enough words and they are not the right kind of words.

"You will have other boyfriends," he says.

"And you won't ever have another girl friend? You want to mummify me or something? I've got my life, you've got yours. Maybe you'll find your way to the States and we'll see each other. Maybe I'll decide I'd rather be here and I'll come back. Who can say? Anything can happen, just like you and I happened. You can't hide from that, you can't stop that."

He wishes she could take his hand, kiss it the way she used to, lay her face against his neck.

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"You are right," he says. "I am just a boy, I don't know what I'm doing."

She smiles at him. This is what he wants, that softening, that kindness. But he is lying to her. He believes that she is making a terrible mistake, that she will be in her big, cluttered American house years from now and she will look out at her big empty yard with its green green grass and she will think of the life she could have had here with Jeton. But he knows that he cannot stop her. He knows that, as with certain lovely fish, he has to stay clear or risk great harm.

She says, almost in a whisper, "I'm not sorry for what we had, are you?"

"No, I am not sorry," he says. She will haunt him, he knows. He will see her always in his head: Nora running, Nora laughing, Nora waving to a friend, Nora's long fingers combing through his hair, Nora kissing him on the nose.

"Are you going to be all right?" she asks.

"I'm cool." Saying what the American boys always say.

"You're not going to do something crazy?"

"I will hang out till day, then take the ferry back, OK?"

"Why don't you sleep on Brit's patio--we'll go inside." She offers him her kindest smile.

"Please."

It is impolite to deny an offer of hospitality. And he wants to make her happy. And he would like to be near her. Maybe in the morning she will change her mind. He knows this is a slim chance but it is more than he had a few minutes ago.

She does not kiss him when she says goodnight from the back door of Brit's house. He is sitting on the patio hammock, which swings slightly beneath him. The patio smells like candy sweetness. Girls. Jeton nods his goodnight to Nora, watches her close the door and disappear into the darkness beyond the kitchen. She feels sorry for him. That is not good. She will return in the

morning to find him curled on the hammock like a stray dog. And he will smell of tonight's hard walking. And she will be eager to get home because she is excited about her trip, her plane flying off tomorrow afternoon. She's going places. 4,250 miles. And he is going to Ebeye. He is not going to college. He is not going to the States.

He does not lie down; there is no sleep in him. He leaves the patio, the girlish sweetness still in his lungs. Sadness makes his heart feel like it is a piece of water-soaked wood. Sodden and sluggish. He stands in the street and stares up at the duplex, at the light in Brit's window. He imagines the girls will whisper all night long. They will give Nora advice, tell her how to dump Jeton in the morning.

He doesn't know how long he stands out here. A long time.

Then he hears a truck approaching. Security Patrol. But Jeton does not think fast enough to run. And suddenly it looks like morning, so much light around him.

He turns to the light. Truck light.

"Don't move, son."

It is the big-bellied black American officer named Ulysses. With a grunt of effort he steps out of the pickup. He reminds Jeton of his third uncle on his father's side. Except this man has no sideburns. The officer squints through the smoke of his cigarette which he keeps at his mouth. He has his right hand on the gun at his wide leather belt. His other hand holds a big flashlight. Truck's spot makes Jeton squint hard.

"You got I.D.?" the officer asks. He stands to one side of the truck. Garble stutters through the little black radio attached to his shirt pocket. Looks like the weight of him should pull him over.

Jeton slides his Velcro wallet out of his back pocket. Slowly. Everybody knows you have to move slow in front of Security.

The officer takes the wallet, flips it to the I.D. "Jeton DeGroen," he says. Flashlight on the I.D. "I heard about you. Your grandma owns half the island."

"A fourth."

The officer smiles, shakes his head like he knows something Jeton doesn't. "She gets a lot of money for that land. And I bet you see some of it."

Jeton wants to tell him that the land means nothing, it's always been here, it will stay here until the ocean decides to swallow it. He remembers what the teachers told him about how these atolls began. Coral attached itself to volcanoes and kept growing as the volcanoes sank. After a long time the volcanoes were gone, buried deep under water. But the coral remained, a circle of coral where the volcano used to be. That's what he feels inside him now, Nora gone but a deep crust left behind.

He says, "Grandmother wants to buy me a used Toyota so I can have a taxi business on Majuro."

"There you go."

"Taxi's not my style."

"Neither is obeying the law apparently." The officer flicks away his cigarette, turns his head to the radio at his shoulder and says, "Got a code 40. Bringing him in, ten-four." Then he says to Jeton: "What's your excuse for breaking curfew, little man?"

"I don't need excuse."

"You better think one up."

In another life he would've been a prince.

When Jeton doesn't answer, the officer says, "Man, in the States we'd send you to a work farm." He lights another cigarette with a silver Zippo lighter, like all the Security have, doesn't seem in a hurry to go. Maybe because Jeton is so relaxed. Late night like this makes some people want to stand around and talk. Always somebody talking late on Ebeye--Jeton hears them every night, two or three people off here and there, smoking and talking.

"Got a smoke?" Jeton asks.

"Take the pack, little man." The officer tosses the cigarettes to him.

Like a fish flying from a wave, Jeton leaps forward--not for the cigarette pack but for the officer's big waist. Tackle him, he tells himself. Tackle him, then run away. It's not a plan exactly, it just happens. Boom. It reminds him of soccer, of diving for a shot that saves the game, his reflexes so quick, his jump so surprising, that it makes the American girls on the sidelines cheer, even though they aren't supposed to cheer for the *ri-Maje!*, and then one of them, he notices, the tall, pretty one, flashes him her smile and Jeton knows he shouldn't give a second look, he knows that American girls are trouble, everyone says so, he really should leave them alone. Do not smile back! he cautions himself. But she is tall and freckled and beautiful, Miss America, and he is the center of her attention now--he remembers this so clearly, the cheering in his ears as loud as waves crashing over him. Of course he smiles back. Boom, like that.