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The season of little leaves was so far advanced that Liz had been feeling a thrilling in the trees as she passed them, roiling cascades of energy that felt to her like a soft sizzle. It was lovely, although sometimes it did trouble her to realize that plants everywhere must be giving off perceptible energies this way, and only on this tiny island were human minds developed enough to notice.

Her climb through the woods was becoming steeper. The opening onto the windmill hill was ahead. Then Liz was stepping from the forest path directly onto sheep-cropped grass that giggled softly in the sunlight. There before her was the big umbrella tree that Jack used to call their “bed with a view,” and the sight of it made her breath catch. When he was a boy, their son had slept on a pallet beside his parents’ bed whenever his father was on this island, so Liz and Jack had spent many private afternoons beneath that tree.

Liz walked up its little hillock to stand beneath their special tree, at the tallest spot on this island’s southern tip, and shaded her eyes against the sea’s overwhelming glittering. She was trying to spot the ships that she had been told were approaching the harbor. When Jack had first begun spending time here, back when their son was barely two, he had hired what Liz thought of as a mercenary navy to patrol the waters around this

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island in order to avoid having to bring ashore the disruptive nuisance of security staff. And apparently, even after years away, Jack still cared enough about protecting his family and also protecting this pure island culture that his mercenary navy was there to this day. For two ships to have been allowed to come past the patrols and approach the harbor now was an event so unusual that a friend living in the village of Darakan, at the island's southern tip, had sent his daughter running inland to let Liz know about those ships.

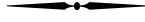
And there they were.

A gunship was out beyond the Darakan promontory, looking flat black against the ocean's glittering, heading for the harbor just below the village. But what was horrifying was what was behind the gunship. Jack's yacht had been white and stately and lovely, as sweet to behold as the man himself, but there behind the gunship was a considerably smaller and racy-looking black-hulled yacht. And the fact that a yacht so different from Jack's was being allowed to approach the harbor, and maybe the fact that it was black besides, made Liz know for certain that this was the message that her husband had long ago promised to send. She would never be able to remarry here unless it was known that he had died, and Jack was careful in all that he did. He wasn't going to leave her with that trailing end.

Liz dropped to the grass where she and Jack had sat and talked and laughed and made love and felt so united that they used to say that now they finally understood the Atlantican creation story, and they were indeed a single person split so they could have the joy of reuniting. Thinking of that, Liz clapped her fingers to her mouth. She was trembling but, oddly enough, not crying. What would have seemed impossible when she first got up this morning was seeming now to have been inevitable. Of course Jack had died. He had had a heart attack on this island at the age of only thirty-eight, and his father's first heart attack had been fatal at the age of fifty-five. Liz would have to figure out how old Jack must be, time being

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such an elusive thing here, but surely a great deal of time had passed. And now Jack had died. He was never coming back.



This little island in the South Atlantic, less than twenty miles from south to north and roughly eight miles wide, was populated by fewer than five thousand people who now were uniformly tall and brown, but whose ancestors from all over the world had been shipwrecked here over thousands of years. Listening to their island's oral history recounted in dozens of children's stories, Jack and Liz used to marvel at the fact that what had been millennia of bloody warfare had led to a way of life so joyous that this island's culture had been stable for what was now going on five hundred years.

Liz had first arrived here as a teacher for the children of Jack's island staff. Having grown up in a clumsy poverty that had made her always an outsider, she had come here at the end of her twenties because when you have nothing in your life, even taking a dead-end job at the edge of the world seems like something. And Liz had been cynically reckless enough, fearless enough and smart enough to interest a man so wealthy that the odd piece of work she had been at the time had seemed to him to be a refreshing change.

Liz had always known it couldn't last forever. Jack Richardson was already famous as the richest American under the age of forty, on the cover of *Time* when he was twenty-six, and seldom out of the news thereafter until eventually the fun of being famous wore off, and by his mid-forties he was routinely suing anyone who dared to publish his name. Jack was still unmarried in his mid-thirties when Liz began to work for him, but eventually he was going to marry. For that he would want someone prettier than Liz, someone used to being rich, someone much more suitable. So, feeling certain that whatever they had together couldn't last for long, Liz

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had broken up with Jack repeatedly. How many times had that happened? Three times? Four? Her need to protect herself from being hurt had made her ditch this man she adored whenever she suspected she was soon to be ditched. That he had calmly accepted such treatment and always come back to try again still astonished Liz, as she thought about it. A man who so carefully controlled every other aspect of his life had graciously allowed her to control their relationship.

After the first time Liz broke up with Jack, he abandoned her here. He thought he was leaving her with his staff so she could have the clean break that she seemed to want, but without him here she felt more secure in moving to one of the native villages. Neither time nor distance mattered on Atlantica, but Jack had been the sort of man who liked to time things, and he had told Liz that Morakan was exactly one hour's walk north of Darakan. Samitkan was another three hours beyond Morakan. So Liz had glumly trekked out to Morakan on that long-ago dismal morning when the man she had been trying not to fall in love with had unexpectedly left without her. And she had been living in Morakan ever since.

It was during those early months long ago that Liz first became entranced with this place. Atlanticans had stumbled upon the fact that when people have perfect freedom of mind, they can develop such spiritual unity that they have no need for governments. No need for ownership or money or laws. No aspect of civilization is necessary.

And what was most extraordinary to Liz was the way that living as Atlanticans lived allowed people to develop hitherto unsuspected mental powers, as if living in any other way put shackles upon the human mind. People here became aware of plant and animal energies, and especially aware of other people's emotions, so living as Atlanticans lived produced an extraordinary deep-seated joy. Liz had long thought of it as "the Now," this pleasure you felt here in simply existing, and it was continuously astonishing to her. It surprised no one else, since these people couldn't conceive of

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living any other way. Liz knew her mind-sensitivity was less than theirs. She was feral, while all the others here were wild. And her son had grown up as wild as they were, deeply and joyously free from all the bonds that would have been forced upon him if he had grown up in the United States.

Liz refused to give in to crying now. There was no point. She and Jack had tried so hard to make their life together work, and then they had resolutely made what had felt at the time to be their best decisions, so of course living rich was going to kill him and he was going to die too young and there never could have been a different outcome. Liz was feeling their umbrella tree's old familiar energies the way most people felt individual trees, as if perhaps her body were the tree itself. But Jack had never managed to feel plant-energies with any consistency. He was never here for long enough to develop much mind-sensitivity at all, and then he would be right back in the States, and whatever progress he had made here would be gone.

One of the peculiarities of this island was the fact that time passed differently here. That highly pleasurable Now seemed somehow to suspend time in people's minds, so there was not the daily awareness of its passage that people felt in civilization. People here had no concept of time, no verb tenses, no linguistic way to transform the blissful Now into anything linear. Children grew up, true, and people aged, but somehow you didn't notice that here. This morning, Liz was seeing that as a trap. She hadn't noticed the passage of time, but years had gone by since she had last seen her husband. Years had been stolen. Hadn't they been stolen? If you don't even notice the passing years, then have you really lived them at all?

As she had walked their path up toward Jack's "bed with a view," Liz had been trying to figure out how many of what she was calling earth-years had gone by since she was last here with him. She could measure time most easily in the fact that Jack had kept track of Relandela's age, and he had told her their son was twelve years old on that last awful day that Jack ever spent with them. Twelve. And now Relandela was married and a father.

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Liz and Jack had learned early on that his wealth intimidated her. She saw being wealthy as a complicated dance that she couldn't even learn how to fake; she wasn't pretty, and a man so rich could afford and surely deserved much better. Jack had found her attitude so mystifying that after a brief, early time when he thought it had something to do with him and therefore it might be something he could fix, he just accepted it as part of the package he had bought when he fell in love with Liz. And it told you a lot about the man that for year after patient year thereafter, he respected her need not to see him as wealthy. He used to arrive in Morakan already dressed in the homespun woolen tunic and pants that the people here wore. He would stay with his family for a couple of Atlantican seasons, living exactly as these people lived, and let his hair and beard grow wild, so by the time he was ready to leave he would be adorably scruffy. Jack was never rich when he was here. And seeing how easily he could shed his wealth and go native, Liz had long cherished the hope that eventually he would be able to stay here. If he could just get into it enough, and perhaps develop his mind enough, he would see how little consolation there was in having money in that desolate world where money was even necessary. Without it, he had the chance to live in a place where people had the infinite wealth of never having heard of money.

The buildings of Steve's old Farm were right below the cliff that was a little to the south of where Liz was sitting. Having seen what personal freedom could do, Jack's childhood friend Steve Symington had long ago conducted an experiment in freedom using thirty-odd hippies and hangers-on. Steve had meant well, but he never had thought through the fact that just removing all constraints without grounding people in spiritual unity would leave them rudderless. So Steve's Farm had ended badly, with the men there turning on the natives in a way that had sealed in these folks' minds the certainty that the people of the rest of the earth were in every way inferior to the people of this little world. Surely the Farm's

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buildings would still be down there. Liz was glad that from where she sat, she couldn't see them.

Farther out on the promontory beyond Steve's Farm was Darakan, a village of a thousand people that looked from here like just a few roofs floating in a sea of branches. The harbor would be there beyond the village. When Jack was still coming here, he had used an Argentine company to maintain a manmade channel through the outer reef to the pilings where he moored his yacht. That he came and went in a yacht that was nearly three-hundred feet in length and required a crew of forty people had been something that never had mattered to Liz, although she later understood that perhaps it should have mattered.

Sunlight shimmered fiercely on an expanse of ocean so vast that from where Liz sat it seemed not even to meet the horizon, but the ocean eventually became the sky. There used to be a couple of dozen windmills maybe twenty feet tall on the sloping part of the cliff to Liz's right, but most of them were broken now. A few still clacketed slowly. Until the communications tower had been taken out by a storm, it had been important to maintain the windmills so Liz and Jack could stay in touch. Otherwise, electricity was useless here. And while he was here, Jack also had seemed to see electricity as useless. For a long time, there appeared to be a kind of switch in his mind that would let him come and go easily, so he lived with Liz and their son each spring and fall in a place so far beyond civilization that he had taken to calling it post-civilization. A place where human life finally worked. But then he would be able to step back on his yacht and spend each winter and summer in what he had been willing to admit was a civilization that really didn't work at all.

That gunship was slowly beginning to emerge from the shadow of the Darakan promontory, so close to the village that the nasty mind-energies of the men it carried must be troubling the villagers.

Liz and Jack had had such fun together! It wasn't only the friendly people

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and the healthy lifestyle that had made their lives together so perfect, but also it was the fact that everything that happened to them here was more or less funny. Jack used to say he never really laughed except when he was with Liz. One year they even wrote a book together. What was it called? *Strange Dogs and Their Masters*. That was it. It was a book about fixing failing businesses that was based on notes Jack had been keeping, and over a year's time when Relandela was tiny, he had dictated it to Liz in clipped sentences that she wrote out in more creative longhand.

Because everything they did together was more or less funny, their book had ended up humorous, too, and it had been a bestseller in fourteen languages. That someone so famous for being wealthy had finally been willing to tell some secrets would likely have dictated that it would sell well. But Jack had been sure that its success was due to what he called its "Lizzie voice," full of what read like a hard-won sense that life was so tough that our only rational approach to it was basic silliness. Even the cover was silly, with a ceramic Cerberus whose three heads displaying three different moods were arguing with one another. The title was above the dog, and below it was "Jack Richardson as told to Elizabeth Lyons beneath a tree" as the authors. It had surprised Liz to find her name there at all, and astonished her that their names were in equally large letters, with the rest of that foolishness in small script. Jack had told her at the time that there was a lot of curiosity about who this woman was, and he had variously answered questions about her by saying that she was his secretary, then that she was his business partner or his lover, and then finally—when he was tired of being asked—that she was his secret wife on a secret island where she was raising their secret family. The truth was the only answer no one believed.

2

Jack never learned to speak Atlantican, so Relandela started out bilingual. Whenever Jack was here, he and his son would spend a lot of time together, logging or working in the forge or fishing or otherwise following the Atlantican custom of doing just whatever they felt like doing. Liz would be going about her day and come upon them reading side by side in the childhouse, propped on sheepskins and chuckling together over some little-boy joke. Or, later, helping to re-roof a building, with Relandela sorting wooden shakes and handing them to Jack, and then Jack handing those shakes up to roofers, so tall that he didn't need a ladder. Or earnestly play-arguing, which was something they both loved to do, when one or the other would take a position on something trivial—why sea water was salty, or why the horns of Atlantican sheep varied so much in shape—and they would earnestly, creatively debate it.

So that had been their family life for a decade. Relandela grew up in Morakan perfectly free, a fact that for a long time had made Jack happy. He used to say that his son was growing up to look so much like him that if he were in the United States he wouldn't be able to live a little-boy life because of the kidnap risk. There came to be a rhythm to their year, with Jack here every spring and fall, but away from them every summer and winter and communicating with them almost daily. A kindly Atlantican

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named Desedala had long ago been trained to run Jack's communications equipment, and apparently he enjoyed the job so much that he had happily done it for years, until the storm that finally took down the tower. Jack and Liz were a husband and wife who were precisely attuned to one another, but preferred to live opposing lifestyles. Surely that must happen to other people? And probably no other couple had managed to solve the problem so neatly.

It all worked well for more than a decade, but then in the spring of the year when Relandela was twelve, it no longer worked at all. Their son was six feet tall by then, still shorter than his father at six-foot-eight, but rapidly acquiring the build of a man. Liz herself was just over six feet tall, with blond braids to her waist that were already graying. Jack's hair was dark-brown with considerable red, a color Liz thought of as mahogany, and their son had inherited his mother's blond hair with a coppery tinge that came from his father.

Liz recalled watching them walk across the bridge on the morning of that final day, as they headed for the Darakan trail to go and ready Jack's yacht for his departure. Jack didn't want his American crew to interfere with the Atlanticans' lives, so he would require them to live aboard his yacht for the couple of months that he would be here. Relandela never had liked those foreigners. He found the mind-energies of Americans to be so stressed, so aggressive and fearful that he would come back to Liz from his visits to Jack's yacht mildly irritated by them and complaining. But still, he always wanted to go and help his father prepare his yacht. Liz thought that the fact that Jack was about to leave him again made especially precious to Relandela those final few days when they were still together.

On that last day, Jack came looking for Liz as she was heading down the river street, after having spent the morning giving lessons in the pottery shop. Over time, she had taught herself to be a good potter, and by now she

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was making graceful bowls and pitchers to replace the wooden bowls and squat iron pitchers that people here had long used in their homes. Atlanticans had an aversion to anything that was easily breakable; but well-fired pottery that was thick enough was turning out to be pretty tough, so now lots of people were eager to learn how to shape it and glaze it and fire it as Liz could. Jack came striding back across the bridge, looking around, and he spotted her. He called, "Have you seen Rex, honey?" "Rex" was what he called Relandela.

Liz stepped out of the cheery group coming down to have their dinner, saying, "What's wrong, darling? Is something wrong?" But then as he approached her and she was able to feel the chaotic stress of his mind-energy, she blurted, "Jack! What's wrong? Tell me!"

She could see from his face how upset he was, but even more than that, she could feel it.

Jack caught her hand without saying anything and led her resolutely up the street to the house they shared opposite the pottery shop. Married people didn't live together here, but Jack insisted on living with Liz, so they shared a larger but still one-room house. He directed her inside and closed the door as he said, "Rex just told me to go to hell."

"He didn't say that. Tell me what he really said."

Jack's jaw was set. He was pacing, and now he looked at her sharply. His eyes were his most arresting feature, large and wide-set under heavy lashes, the color of a pale sea-mist. Even now, when he was angry, his eyes were soft and kindly. Sometimes Liz would have to remind him that no matter how annoyed he tried to sound, his gentle eyes always gave him away. As he looked at her now, he said, "It's time to come home. He needs to go to school. He thinks he's an Atlantan!"

Liz was never going back to the States, and the thought of inflicting America's culture on their child was inconceivable to her. She murmured, "What did he say, darling?"

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“This has been coming on for a year. He doesn’t understand my life. I never said anything. I didn’t want to upset you. But he asks me why I keep leaving—”

“I know. He’s been asking me, too.” Liz moved to sit down on the bed, hands folded. Now that she knew what this was, she could deal with it.

“Whatever you told him wasn’t helpful, honey. My only child just told me if I leave him today, he’s no longer my son.”

Liz winced internally. But she said, “He’s just sad. I’ll fix it.”

“I can’t do this anymore! I spend three months traveling or living here, then three months at home trying to manage my affairs so I can turn around and come right back. It’s insane! My life is a mess, and it’s getting worse. I’ve tried, honey. You know I’ve tried, but it’s too complicated now. I can’t do it anymore. I need you to come home.”

“But this is our home! We don’t need money. Please stay with us, darling—”

“I answered his questions honestly. I told him I’ve got to get back for a closing. So he asked me what a closing is. I tried to tell him. So then he asked me what a business is. Honey, he doesn’t have a concept of money! Money? Do you know how insane that is? He’s the heir to a fortune in the billions, and he doesn’t even know what money. . . .”

Jack stopped talking when he noticed Liz’s face. She was sitting there looking up at him. She looked away. Had he said “billions”? With a “B”?

“I’m sorry. It slipped out. You’re making my life impossible!”

“That’s more than millions, right?”

Jack came and drew her up into his arms and held her while she digested what he had just said. For all the many years that Jack Richardson had been the beating heart of her life, Liz had felt that she was fighting his wealth as her rival for his very soul. But she always had thought of him as a millionaire. Millions would be a lot. But now it was billions?

He said into her hair, “I’m sorry, honey. I’m really sorry. I’ve tried, but

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my life is too complicated for me to keep living it part-time. I want you and Rex to come back with me now.”

“Millions was bad enough,” she mumbled into his woolen tunic. Her eyes were stupidly filling. All she wanted was her husband to be here with her forever, never leaving her again. Even if it were millions, she always had known that his giving up his money for her was unlikely. But if she had all along been fighting not millions, but billions, then there never had been any chance.

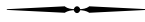
“Oh honey, don’t cry! It doesn’t matter—” Then he said wryly, “You would be surprised to know the percentage of the population that would consider the fact that it’s billions and not millions to be actually good news.”

But Liz was really crying now. She was crying for Jack, that he never could possibly free himself from so much money; and for Relandela’s impending loss again of the father that he so adored; and for herself. She might have beaten millions, but not billions. There was something about his inadvertent revelation that day that made her give in, without realizing it was happening until later. She gave up that day. She accepted the fact that whatever little bit in the future he might be willing to give her was going to be all that she ever could have of him.

So she cried off and on for hours that day. Jack held her, eventually lying down with her and holding her and letting her cry. By midafternoon Relandela was there, still angry with his father but frightened, too. Liz could feel his fear, which was so unaccustomed an emotion for him that she sat up and held him for awhile then, still crying. That whole afternoon was a blur of tears. But Jack really had to leave that day. It turned out that he had not one closing, but three, and two of them were having issues that he was going to need to work out in person. So eventually he stood and held his wife and rocked her in his arms and told her he loved her, and then he left them and walked alone to the harbor.

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Liz realized long after the fact that at about the same time that she gave up, Jack apparently gave up as well. He sent his regular notes for awhile, but that was the winter of the great wind-and-ice storm that took down five windmills and crumpled the communications tower. Once the tower was down, his notes stopped coming. So then Liz began to count the seasons, making charcoal marks side by side on the top of their table against the wall. She stopped at twenty. Twenty seasons was two years in this place where people kept track of the cycles of the trees and the times for planting and growing and harvest by naming ten seasons. Not having seen or heard from Jack in two years, Liz understood that he had felt forced to make his choice. After the communications tower was gone, they never heard from him again.



That yacht offshore had been stationary for awhile. Perhaps it wasn't going to risk the old channel through the reef. And now it seemed to Liz as she shaded her eyes that they might have put a rowboat down off that yacht. The sun had moved to stand directly overhead, shining hot through the lace of infant leaves. She stood. Once she was out from under their tree, the grass beneath her feet was lightly bubbly with the joy of its being in full sunlight.

To avoid having to see the buildings of Steve's Farm, Liz set off walking directly to the east. The slope was gentler there, anyway. She passed through the forest of windmills that looked even more pathetic up-close, their gray paint flaking and their wooden supports beginning to rot out at the joints. But they would be old now, too. They had been built in the year before Liz arrived, and now Relandela was in his early twenties. Had she really been here for twenty whole years? But that would mean that she was in her fifties. And Jack could be as much as sixty years old, an old man, gray and balding now, when the last time she had seen

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him he had been in his virile latter forties and only barely graying at the temples.

Jack had suffered a heart attack when he was only thirty-eight, but fortunately it had happened here, and the Atlanticans' powerful connection to the unity of all things had saved his life. Some twenty years later, and having lived for so long in the rich American culture that had nearly killed him in his thirties, Liz could readily imagine that he must have had a second heart attack. She had just lost her mother, and now apparently she had lost the great love of her life as well.

Liz's mother had died of what was apparently pneumonia at the start of the season of greening twigs. She had been dead for less than two earth-months. So she would have been here for twenty years as well, lured away from Brooklyn and all her friends by a soft-spoken man with a fancy yacht who carried her halfway around the world because that man loved her daughter, and the daughter missed her mother. Myra hadn't meant to do more than visit. She hadn't planned to spend two decades here, and she certainly had never intended to die here. But Jack had also brought Liz's two orphaned nieces, so all Myra's grandchildren were growing up here; and then she even had found love here. And that insidious Atlantican illusion that time wasn't passing had likely kept her from noticing that her life was going by.

No one had realized that Myra was dying. She had, as usual, been scurrying about, devoting her life to caring for four disabled boys who lived on litters. She had a respiratory illness that seemed to be worsening, and still she had insisted on going out in the cold and rain from house to house until she was too weak to do that anymore. Liz had scavenged in the Farm's old clinic and found some long-expired penicillin, the only antibiotics left on an island whose people mistrusted foreign drugs. Here fevers were treated with teas and sweats, and since Atlanticans knew that human minds are eternal and they interacted easily with their dead, there

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wasn't the panic here to preserve each life that people felt in the civilized world.

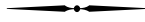
That old penicillin had seemed to be working. Myra was getting better, they thought. Her fevers had lessened. She was conscious and beginning to talk. Liz and Lucky, Myra's wonderful husband, had been taking turns holding her propped in their laps so she could breathe more easily. They had been softly talking, even joking a little, when Liz had heard and felt her mother take a long breath, then let it out slowly. And then that frail body sagged in her arms, so light that it seemed to have no weight, and there was a sense as if every vessel in it closed up, never to open again.

By the time Liz found a way down the cliff to the harbor road, she was running tears. The guilt she felt about her mother was tremendous, but pointless. Yes, of course she wished now that she had insisted that antibiotics be included on the list of things that the supply freighter would unobtrusively leave on the longest dock toward the end of every summer. She should have insisted! But nobody here ever insisted on anything, so for Liz to have done that would have felt unseemly. Every decision here was made by a consensus of nearly five thousand people, and usually all they could agree to order would be scrap iron, nails, tools and clay, scratch corn for the chickens, maybe twine, and probably thread and needles for their treadle sewing machines. Each order would be left in a leather pouch that was nailed to the end of the longest dock, to be conveniently filled for them whenever the freighter returned the following summer.

And now, oh my God, Jack was dead as well! Jack and Myra, the only two people besides Relandela and her two lost babies that Liz had ever deeply loved, had both died, and she had been helpless to prevent either death. She even felt, in a way, that she had caused both deaths. What had Jack's life been like without her? She actually hoped he had found another love, but she knew him too well to believe that was likely. His problem was

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trust. He had trouble trusting women, and since his mother had sexually abused him, perhaps that wasn't so surprising.



There were hundreds of people milling on the little hillside above the harbor, watching as a rowboat made its deliberate way down the channel toward the longest dock. As Liz stood at the top of the hill above the harbor, flooded and swamped by memories, her beloved friend Jude came and slipped his arm around her waist and said, "I am reminded now of how painful it is to be near the beardless ones."

That looked like Ted in the rowboat. A crewman was rowing with his back to them, but seated facing him was what looked like Jack's old friend and longtime personal lawyer sitting primly in that old stiff way of his, knees tight together. Jack wasn't with him. Liz hadn't needed confirmation, but there in that rowboat was her confirmation that the great love of her life had died. Well, but at least he had died still loving her, for him to have sent Ted all this way.

Liz had never grieved Jack's loss because she was seeing it only in retrospect. She had long been used to sometimes being without him, and this had felt like just a longer separation: living here suspended in the perfect Now had kept her from noticing how much time was passing. But as Ted climbed the ladder out of the rowboat and began to walk up the longest dock, Liz could see that he was stooped a bit, and his hair was gray above a higher forehead. His face was softly sagged and ashen. Oh, how many years had passed!

People here seldom cried past toddlerhood, when they first gained a sense of how precious they were and how perfect was the Now in which they had their being. Not even children cried, so for Liz to be suddenly wailing and shrieking made people rush and stumble away from her in horror. She could feel the buzzing distress of their minds as Jude grabbed her. She

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barely heard him whispering. She blubbered, “He died, and nobody sang him away! How could he have known where to go?”

All Liz could think was that she hadn’t been there for him, hadn’t held his hand as he was dying, hadn’t made sure that the last thing he heard was how much she would forever love him. And then she hadn’t sung to him as Atlanticans always sang to their dead, to help them make it safely to the blissful village. But did the United States even have a blissful village? She had to make sure that he was all right!

Jude moved them to sit side-by-side on a sightseeing bench that was still there beside the old road. He hugged her and whispered to her, pointlessly. She couldn’t hear anything but her own lamentations. Then she vaguely heard Ted calling her name from somewhere down the hill. Here, English was a reading language. Liz hadn’t heard it spoken in years, but the sound of Ted’s old tentative voice that made her think of Jack in a bearable way made her stop crying as abruptly as she had started.

Liz stood up and watched Ted climbing the hill, all out of breath and with elbows akimbo. The harsh energies of his mind were clanging almost visibly on the air, so people were falling away as he approached. Liz had always thought of Ted as Jack’s evil alter ego, because whenever Jack had something unpleasant to do to another human being he would send Ted to do it. And the funny part was that Ted was a mouse. He just was one of the very few people on all the earth that Jack thought he could trust.

“Oh. Good. Liz. Hi,” Ted called, out of breath, as he spotted her. He stopped at the top of the hill, bent double with his hands braced on his thighs as he gulped air. “It’s hot here,” he said as he straightened. “I forgot. Are you Jude? I hardly recognized you. Hello. Good to see you.” He reached and shook Jude’s hand. Liz could feel her friend laughing internally at this foolish intrusion of American stuffiness in a place where minds were so densely connected that no formalities between people were needed.

Ted drew a long breath and said, “Can we talk privately, Liz?”

LETTER FROM MONEY

“There’s no need.”

“We’ve got to—”

Liz was able to put her arms around Ted and hug him, but she stepped back quickly.

“Please don’t say it. I can’t bear to hear it. But thank you for coming. He’s kept his last promise.”

Ted gave Liz a startled look. He swiped at his sweaty brow with his shirtsleeve. He was wearing the same dark pants and dress shirt that he used to wear on Jack’s yacht long ago, but now minus the vest and tie. He ran the fingers of one hand back through his hair in his same old way, and he stepped and turned and sat down on the bench and patted the spot beside him. Liz sat down, but not close to him. Being so near the clanging tension of his mind was beginning to make her feel disoriented.

Ted glanced around. He said to Liz under his breath, “Look, I do aggression badly. I’ve got to take Rex. Don’t make it hard. Please.”

“What?”

“We’ve been attacked. It’s not safe here now. You can come, too. Your whole family can come.”

“What? There’s a war?” Liz was straining to think clearly.

“Remember the World Trade Center towers? Last month they took them both down. Flew planes into them. Terrorists.” Ted was still breathing unevenly. He sighed a catch-up breath and added, “Jack wants Rex where he can protect him.”

What, Jack? You mean, he’s not dead?

“Is he all right?”

“Is who all right? Jack?” Ted paused in his face-wiping and looked at Liz. She could feel his little rush of anger as he grumped, “You wrecked his life, and now you wonder how he is?” Ted’s fingers were in his hair again.

“We don’t need to leave. We’re fine. We’ve always got warships out there protecting us.”

THE LETTERS FROM LOVE SERIES

“Do you see that gunboat?” Ted lifted his head and looked at it as he added, “Aboard that ship are a thousand Argentine mercenaries. Rex is coming with me.” He added wearily, “Please don’t make this hard.”

Liz had just been deep in grief, but now abruptly not only was Jack not dead, but he was trying to steal their son away and wreck his life. She was struggling to catch up with herself.

Ted said conversationally, “I never understood why he put up with you for all those years. He could have had anyone. He picked you. Why?”

“Is he really all right?”

“No, he is not all right. He’s sixty-one years old. *Forbes* says he’s worth nineteen billion dollars, and now he has nobody to leave it to but a kid who has never been off this island. Would you be all right with that?”

“He’s how old? What year is it?”

“Two thousand one.”

Liz sank into that reality. She had come here in April of 1976, just before the American Bicentennial celebration. A quarter of a century had passed while she had lived here suspended in a blissful Now. So she would be, what? Fifty-five? Good grief! And Myra had died at seventy-eight. As gloriously happy as Liz had been, this island had taken so much of her life of which she now would never have awareness. What had happened during all those years? Only bliss? And could that have been enough?

Ted was looking at Liz. She had to say something. She sputtered, “But he’s not a kid! He has a wife and baby. And he . . . the whole reason Jack stopped coming here was they couldn’t get along.”

Of course, that wasn’t true at all. Rex and his father had been intensely close, and it was only Jack’s attachment to his wealth that had destroyed his relationship with his family. But Liz wouldn’t say that. It was none of Ted’s business.

Ted said patiently, “We can’t protect Rex here anymore. He has to come with me. He can bring whoever he wants.”

LETTER FROM MONEY

“You think it’s really not safe here?” Liz asked as she gazed at that warship out beyond the reef, like a wart on a beautiful face.

Really, Jack? Mercenaries?

“It’s never been safe here. The world is too small. The only reason you’ve been left alone is he pays off everybody. But the older he gets, the more he wants his heir, or what was any of it for?”

“Relandela has no idea what money is!” But even as Liz said it, her mind was turning. She realized only in that moment that Ted was right. Their precious little world wasn’t safe, since whenever Jack died his naval protection of this island was going to die with him. It wasn’t so much a military attack that she and Jack had long been fearing, but it was more the intrusion of well-meaning fools who could corrupt and destroy what the two of them had come to see as this extraordinary experiment in what it means to be human. And if the home he loved really were at risk, then Relandela would want the chance to protect it.